ENGAGING WITH VIDEOGAMES:

PLAY, THEORY AND PRACTICE

EDITED BY **DAWN STOBBART AND MONICA EVANS**

INTER - DISCIPLINARY PRESS

Engaging with Videogames

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The Cyber Hub
'Videogame Cultures and the Future of Interactive Entertainment'

2014

Engaging with Videogames:

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Inter-Disciplinary Press

Oxford, United Kingdom

http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/publishing/id-press/

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Inter-Disciplinary Press, Priory House, 149B Wroslyn Road, Freeland, Oxfordshire. OX29 8HR, United Kingdom.
+44 (0)1993 882087

ISBN: 978-1-84888-295-9
First published in the United Kingdom in eBook format in 2014. First Edition.

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Introduction

Dawn Stobbart and Monica Evans

The chapters in this volume reflect the discussions that occurred during the 5th Global Conference on Videogame Cultures and the Future of Interactive Entertainment, held as part of Cyber Hub activity within the Inter-Disciplinary.Net Critical Issues research hub at Mansfield College, Oxford, United Kingdom in July 2013. This edited collection of chapters provides a snapshot of the inquiries, discussions, and conclusions drawn at this conference.

Game studies remains a highly interdisciplinary field, and as such tends to bring together scholars and researchers from a wide variety of fields. This conference included experts in literature, visual art, history, classics, film studies, new media studies, phenomenology, education, philosophy, psychology and the social sciences, as well as game studies, design, and development. Additionally, twelve nationalities were represented at this conference, which included scholars from Austria, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, New Zealand, Poland, Qatar, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States (including an unusually large delegation from the state of Texas).

Throughout the conference, numerous topics were developed among the presentations and discussions. The most prevalent conversation involved linking the practices of gaming to educational possibilities, particularly for adolescents and young adults. Discussions of identity theory and formation led easily to structural concerns about developing serious games to raise awareness, inspire change, and educate underserved or at-risk populations. Much discussion also surrounded the identity of 'gamers' themselves, from surveys of the habits and practices of gamer populations to individual and cultural perceptions of gamer-ness. Another series of conversations centred on the cultures of gaming, particularly as they relate to gender identity, racial identity and nationality. These discussions expanded to other cultural expressions, such as comedy, horror, political history and nostalgia.

Also pervasive throughout the conference were the presentation of new theories and models for understanding the videogame as a medium. Theories covered a wide variety of topics, including a controversial suggestion that the humanities be recontextualised as a subset of game studies. Other theories involved ideologies of gender, new forms of player agency and immersion, player progression and the categorisation of rulesets. Discussions of narratology and ludology were again present, although framed this time in wider questions of videogame history, games as art practice, and the evolution of narrative structures as a whole.

Much of the conference considered movement between theory and practice in the field of game studies as a whole. In-depth discussions, close readings, and analyses of games included the *Mass Effect* series, *Dishonored*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Deus Ex*, *Braid*, *The Walking Dead* and *World of Warcraft*. Delegates discussed games that spanned genres, platforms and history, from triple-

A games released only months before the conference such as *The Last of Us* and *Tomb Raider 2013*, to games nearly thirty years old such as *Raid over Moscow*, to obscure experimental games such as *Slave of God*. Close analyses were also influenced by the techniques and practices of numerous fields, from art history to true literary criticism, and many discussions centred on the potential translation of analytical techniques to game studies from other fields.

The conference included two workshop sessions, in which participants explored practical and methodological aspects of game development and design. *Tim Christopher* led the workshop 'Metagaming for Academics,' in which participants learned to rapidly prototype multiple sets of game mechanics, a widespread practice in both digital and analogue game development. *Monica Evans* led the workshop 'Digital Mobile Game Design,' which introduced participants to concept, pre-production, and design methodologies for digital games intended for mobile, social and handheld platforms. Two game prototypes resulted from these workshops, 'Tim's Game,' and 'Animal Regatta,' a competitive zoo-centric boat racing game.

To reflect the primary topics of the conference discussed above, the twenty-six chapters of the book have been organised into four parts:

Part 1: Gaming Practices and Education
Part 2: Gaming Practices and Culture
Part 3: Videogame Theory
Part 4: From Theory to Practice

The first part of the book presents six chapters focused on gaming practices as they relate to various forms of education. *Sara Mathieu-C.* and *Louis-Martin Guay* begin the section with their chapter 'Toward a Social-Constructivist View of Serious Games: Practical Implications for the Design of a Sexual Health Education Video Game.' Looking primarily at sexual health education programmes for adolescents, the chapter discusses how a social-constructivist educational paradigm might be leveraged to create innovative and impactful serious games in the field of sexual health.

Justina Gröber, in her chapter 'From Adventure to Education: Exploring Meanings of Scenario and Dimension in Video Games,' also considers the benefits of videogames for adolescents. By applying Foucault's concept of heterotopic spaces to interactive virtual environments, Gröber posits that videogames enable teens to explore and understand hybrid spaces, which may allow for new educational practices and possibilities.

Peter Wonica also addresses serious games for adolescents but from the standpoint of identity formation, in his chapter 'Exploring the Idealised Self: Avatars as a Vessel for Adolescent Identity Exploration and Growth.' Wonica's chapter explores the benefits that videogames might provide to adolescents in

terms of understanding, and thereby indirectly improving, one's self-identity, particularly in the age of digital natives.

The three chapters that follow present results of ongoing research in game studies. 'Situating Play Cultures: A Survey of Videogame Players and Practices in France,' by *Rufat Samuel*, *Coavoux Samuel* and *Hovig Ter Minassian*, presents findings from a 2012 survey of two hundred French adults. The study focuses on understanding players' choices as they relate to play life and play career, as well as how those choices are affected by family socialisation and other cultural norms.

'Where Is Life? Commitment and Micro-Interactions in Videogames,' by *Hovig Ter Minassian*, *Isabel Colón de Carvajal*, *Manuel Boutet* and *Mathieu Triclot*, presents an analysis of video recordings of game players. While the research is ongoing, the chapter presents the act of playing videogames as a bodily, social, and spatial experience, one in which videogame practice is difficult to separate from the physical act of playing games. The authors suggest that videogame practice meddles with everyday life in such a way that all participants, including spectators and players both in- and out-of-game, can be considered 'players.'

Finally, *Benjamin Čulig*, *Marko Katavić*, *Jasenka Kuček* and *Antonia Matković* present an analysis of gaming in Croatia, continuing a research project begun in 2011. In their chapter 'The Phenomenology of Video Games: How Gamers Perceive Games and Gaming' they analyse why and how gamers game, what they find appealing about game playing, and how critical a role sociability plays, while laying a foundation for further quantitative studies.

The second part of the book presents six chapters that focus on gaming practices as they relate to wider human experience. *Michael Andreen* begins this section with his chapter 'The Involvement of Mythology with Player Experience in MMOs.' Andreen examines the ways in which belief systems, particularly those that centre on an invented or fictional mythology, are tied to a player's investment in a game space. These systems are examined through the lenses of neuropsychology and literature, and approach a new understanding of how players become immersed in fictional interactive worlds.

Other aspects of massively multiplayer online games are presented by *Steven Billingslea II* in his chapter 'It's Just a Game, or Is It? A Study of Racism in Game and Character Design.' Billingslea indicts multiple influential games, notably *World of Warcraft* and the *Saints Row* series, for failure to address issues of prejudice, while pinpointing the difficulties with improving or even addressing issues of race and diversity with a defensive developer population.

Corné du Plessis moves the discussion to experimental game forms. His chapter 'Exploring Experimental Video Gaming as a "Body without Organs"' applies Deleuze and Guattari's theory to investigate whether experimental games can deterritorialise existing concepts and impel players towards new thought. *Du Plessis* argues in favour of unique gameplay experiences that use the full potential

of videogames as an art form, using the experimental game *Slave of God* as a case study.

In his chapter, 'Funny Games: Understanding Videogames as Slapstick and the Experience of Game-Worlds as Shared Cultural References,' *Ben Hudson* examines the inherent incongruity of videogame worlds as a potential source of humour. Hudson's examination spans player communities, experimental mods, fan creations and comedians incorporating gaming content in their acts. Hudson ends with a brief analysis of one of his own performances.

Tero Pasanen looks to a historical incident in his chapter 'Gaming the Taboo in the Finlandisation Era Finland: The Case of *Raid over Moscow*.' Pasanen explores the chain of events that led to the first politically motivated videogame controversy in Finland, documenting what was both a genuinely Finnish event and a unique moment in gaming history.

Piotr Kubiński rounds out this section with his chapter 'Immersion vs. Emersive Effects in Videogames.' Kubiński proposes a new term, 'emersion,' referring to the ways in which players might be broken out of an immersive state in videogames, both to find new forms of game expression and to better understand the concept of immersion in videogames.

The third section of the book presents seven chapters focused on videogame theory. *Dawn Stobbart* begins this section by reintroducing the narratology-ludology debate with her chapter, 'Playing with Fiction: Ludology and the Evolution of Narrative in Games.' Citing both Juul and Eskelinen, Stobbart ultimately uses both Gennette's *Narrative Discourse* and a case study of *Assassin's Creed 2* to place videogames in the historical thread of narrative evolution. She concludes by noting that videogames present both a coherent narrative and a ludological product, which traditional narratology does not account for, and suggests that the role of player identity is critically important to our understanding of the medium.

Nick Webber follows with an examination of the current state of videogame history in his chapter, 'What Is Videogame History?' Webber considers the videogame as economic object, cultural artefact and social environment, questioning whether videogame history as a field should be concerned with the history of the medium, the history of evolving virtual worlds – such as that of *World of Warcraft* – or the stories and mythologies of the players themselves. Webber's examination of the complexities of videogame history ultimately sheds light on the place and purpose of historical studies.

Roger Travis, in his chapter 'Text as Ruleset: How Games Precede Humanities,' takes the controversial stance that games not only precede the humanities, but that humanities as a field might be considered a subset of game studies. He considers that, if we accept text as ruleset, it follows that we should treat texts as games, rather than treating games as texts. Travis' bold statement is

supported by the history of humanistic study, including Homeric epic and Platonic dialogue, and considers both digital and analogue games throughout history.

Karen Mentz approaches the construction of gender in games in both the AAA and indie space, focusing on representations of femininity in *Braid* and *Tomb Raider 2013*. Her chapter, entitled 'Challenging Ideologies of Gender through Indie Games,' argues that the independent game movement allows for a more substantive subversion of the ideologies prevalent in mainstream culture, and notes that individual games successfully challenge these ideologies through ambiguity, narrative perspective and encouragement of an aware and questioning player.

Moving from theory to design, in her chapter 'The Backwards Progressional: Is More Really Better?' *Sarah Hope Scoggins* explores how game designers might reverse some of the more common aspects of flow and pacing to present new narrative experiences and new challenges to players. She also presents new design methodologies for creating these structures within digital games.

Agnieszka Kliś-Brodowska and *Bartłomiej Kuchciński* approach videogames theory from the standpoint of literary studies. Their chapter 'Videogames as Art: The Spirit of the "Literary Artist" in the Discourse of Game-Making' discusses whether game designers can lay claim to the status of a literary artist, based on an analysis of the dialogues and discourses in course books and available educational texts for game designers.

Isaac Karth presents a new model for understanding games in his chapter 'Ergodic Agency: How Play Manifests Understanding.' Karth suggests we can measure whether in-game choices are meaningful or interesting by redefining agency through an understanding of epiphany and aporia, a cycle that inherently moves players through a game experience. This ergodic agency gives us a lens by which we can reexamine player engagement in a multitude of digital spaces.

The fourth and final part of the book presents seven chapters that move from theory to practice, including in-depth analyses of specific games. *René Schallegger* begins this section with his chapter '"Get Over It!": Sexuality and Sexual Diversity in Video Games.' Schallegger focuses mainly on the controversies surrounding character sexuality and character choice in two successful BioWare franchises, *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*. His analysis of sexual diversity in gaming concludes with a case study of *Mass Effect 3*, in his view one of the few current games that approaches inclusive representations of sexuality and sexual diversity.

Thomas Morisset presents a different view of the franchise in his chapter 'The End of the End as We Know It: A Philosophical Look at the Narration in *Mass Effect*.' Morisset also examines a media controversy, in this case the players' reaction and BioWare's subsequent response to the ending of *Mass Effect 3*, as it applies to structures of narrative in videogames, and presents the history of the released and re-released ending as a potential resource for artistic endeavours in videogames.

Jakub Siwak also addresses this controversy in his chapter 'The Virtual Identities of Actual Gamers: An Analysis of Popular Response to *Mass Effect 3*.' Siwak argues that the complexities of the players' reaction to the ending, culminating in an $80,000 campaign to release an ending where the main character survives, makes it difficult to consider the game as a 'body-without-organs,' which has significant ramifications for identity formation in videogames.

Jamie Skidmore examines the relationship between games and film in his chapter 'Implicit and Explicit Video Game Structure in *Shaun of the Dead* and *Scott Pilgrim vs The World*.' By applying the theory of spectatorship, as well as a semiotic analysis of the morphological aspects of Wright's films, Skidmore explores the creation of simulated video game worlds as the setting for each film, concluding that Wright's use of video game motifs allows him to simultaneously question society as a whole.

Meaghan Ingram focuses on the intersecting subjects of gender, sexuality, and morality in her chapter 'Rewriting Morality: Women, Sexuality and Morality in *Dishonored*.' Using the neo-Victorian themes of the game, Ingram attempts to place *Dishonored* within the Neo-Victorian literary tradition, concluding that the juxtaposition of the 21st century morality and Victorian aesthetics allows the player to better connect with concepts they might otherwise find obscure or untouchable.

Radha Dalal looks at games as a representation of past history in her chapter 'Spaces of the Past: Nostalgia in the *Murder on the Orient Express* and *The Last Express*.' Dalal approaches a close reading of both games through multiple layers of nostalgia, proposing that they offers players a virtual form of mobility, both in the game space itself and in the players' ability to recontextualise and redirect historical events.

Finally, *Luke S. Bernfeld* applies literary theory to *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* in his chapter 'Constructing a Reality: A Post-Structural Analysis of *Deus Ex*.' Bernfeld's argument draws on the works of Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault to make connections between the slippery nature of truth in post-structuralism and the truth-less world of *Deus-Ex* co-created by the developers, the player's actions, and the game's changing mechanical state, and concludes by connecting the language of the game to the flawed languages of reality.

Part 1

Gaming Practices and Education

Toward a Social-Constructivist View of Serious Games: Practical Implications for the Design of a Sexual Health Education Video Game

Sara Mathieu-C. and Louis-Martin Guay

Abstract
Sexual health education is aimed to equip individuals and communities with the information, motivation and behavioural skills needed to enhance sexual health and avoid negative sexual health outcomes.[1] Currently, the majority of existing sexual health education programmes targeting adolescents are delivered via relatively passive classroom-based strategies. If the effects of those programmes are still uncertain, some strategies have been identified as promising, for instance the use of video games.[2] Serious (video) games are now recognised to provide individuals with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation during the learning process. They also permit an anonymous, interactive and individualised intervention in a safe space at a chosen time.[3] Despite those advantages, there is no theoretical or operational guideline to design serious games addressing sexual health. Starting from the assumption that a social-constructivist intervention is based on a situated and interactive approach to learning, this chapter aims to discuss how it could be useful to serious games design in the field of sexual health. This theoretical discussion takes place in the context of a broader project aiming to develop a theory-driven and evidences-based serious game for sexual health targeting Canadian youth.

Key Words: Sexual health, game design, serious game, social-constructivism, sexual education.

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1. Context

Adolescents' sexual health is a major public health issue in Quebec, Canada, and the rest of the world.[4] Many educational and preventive sexual health programmes have been conducted in recent years to deal with issues such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy among youth. While few of those programs were evaluated and fewer recognised to have significant effects on sexual behaviour, the diversification of pedagogical strategies has been strongly recommended and the use of computer-based intervention, including educational video games (serious games), was identified as promising.[5] Video games offer potential advantages over group-based and face-to-face intervention. For example, it can be anonymous, repeated and accessible at convenient times.[6] It can also provide highly interactive learning and individualised feedback in a safe space that allows trial and error and identity exploration.[7] Video games are very popular among youth, which still remains the

main justification when it comes to exploiting them for educational purposes.[8] Their potential and advantages for sexual health education are shared by a growing number of researchers.[9] This interest is consistent with the global popularity of serious games and their application in health sciences known as 'Game for health.'[10]

Despite those advantages and an increasing scientific recognition, there is no actual guideline to design serious games addressing sexual health issues. In fact, little literature currently provides theoretical or operational instructions for the design of serious games in a coherent manner.[11] Those guidelines are, as far as we know, absent in the specific context of sexual health education. Starting from the assumption that a social-constructivist intervention is based on a situated and interactive approach of learning, the purpose of the present chapter is to discuss how the social-constructivist educational paradigm could be used to design serious games in the field of sexual health education. This chapter briefly defines 'serious game' as a premise, and then situates social-constructivism in the fields of education, sexual health education and video game design. Finally, it discusses three main video game design recommendations inspired by social-constructivist assumptions.

2. A Definition of a Serious Game

In the past years, many computer-based and technological initiatives have been launched as a contribution to sexual health promotion among youth. Few were serious games, while most of them were gamified websites, mobile applications and edutainment. In the context of this chapter, serious games are defined as games that do not have entertainment, enjoyment or fun as their primary purpose.[12] Instead, serious games are the translation of educational goals into game forms.[13] They are computer applications that combine teaching, learning, training, communication, knowledge and game design.[14] In comparison, gamification only involves the application of game design thinking to non-game applications to make them more fun and engaging.[15] In the same vein, edutainment is characterised by an alternation of educational content and fun sequences of challenges (mini-games) and rewards.[16] It is based on a simple dynamic of content transfer while serious games should incorporate mechanics that have intrinsic value in a learning context.[17]

If digital technology and serious game offers potential for sexual health education, it is uncertain how they might work and whether they are cost-effective.[18] In fact, more research and understanding of the links between specific video game mechanics/dynamics and their effectiveness on learning are needed because it is unclear which attributes lead to which learning outcomes.[19] We still need to know if videogames really increase learning experience even though some studies are encouraging.[20] More specific studies have documented the effectiveness of games in improving health-related outcomes, but few elaborate on

the consequences of game design and pedagogical decisions linked to those effects.[21] However, those decisions seem central to whether games might be engaging and effective. Thus, there is a clear need for reflexion on the subject of serious game design guideline and their pedagogical foundation as a basis for the development of effective serious games including in the field of sexual health education.

3. Social-Constructivism: An Overview of Literature on Health Education and Serious Games Design

In this section, we globally define the social-constructivism paradigm and we present how it has been used both in the field of sexual health education and serious gaming based on recent literature. Constructivism is defined as an educational paradigm that mainly insists on the active role of the learner in the development of his knowledge.[22] Social-constructivism also focuses on the active process of knowledge development, but insists on the importance of interactions between the learner and his environment. Its origins are largely attributed to Vygotsky (1978) who applied Piaget (1963) constructivist assumptions taking into account social context.[23] As Gordon emphasised, Vygotsky's main contribution to constructivism in education is probably his concept of 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD).[24] The ZPD is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with peers. In other words, learning is the process of problem solving or adaptation when facing a new situation. This social cognitive conflict created by the proximity to the new situation is described as essential to the learning process.

Social-constructivism can be understood as a general framework that guides design, implementation and evaluation in a coherent way by giving a perspective on how knowledge is constructed, accumulated, refuted and developed.[25] In Quebec (Canada), social-constructivism has guided the development of the school curriculum from kindergarden to high school and was globally adopted in 2001.[26] Since then, recommendations about teaching and learning have changed according to social-constructivism assumptions and a competency approach. In brief, those major assumptions are that (1) learners construct their learning based on anterior knowledge and experience; (2) learners need to be involved and active through the learning process and (3) learners construct their learning by interacting with their environment. In coherence with Vygotsky's ZPD, competency can only be developed in action when adapting to situations. In this context, competency can be understood as the result of all the actions that a learner undertakes by mobilising and using a group of resources (information, attitude, skills, books, websites, etc.) in order to handle a situation in which he is involved and the critical reflection on those actions and their results.[27] According to a social-constructivist perspective of learning, interactivity, situational setting and social cognitive conflict are

fundamental. These reflect an essentially learner-centred approach that can be translated in different teaching methods and environments such as problem-solving activities and discovery and experiential focused learning.

3.1 Social-Constructivist Paradigm in Sexual Health Education

In the field of sexual health education, the development and the implementation of school-based curriculum have been influenced by social-constructivist principles even if a behavioural paradigm remains dominant in health promotion.[28] Indeed, some of the characteristics of effective curriculum-based and STDs/HIV education programmes according to Kirby and al. are similar to social-constructivist assumptions especially when it comes to activities and teaching methods.[29] For example, an effective program needs to create a safe social environment for youth to participate. It employs teaching methods that actively involved the participants and address multiple sexual psychosocial risk and protective factors (resources) that affect their sexual behaviour (ex. information, attitudes, skills, self-efficacy). Also, curriculum goals of those programs focus on specific behaviour (action), give clear messages about them and explicitly address situations that might lead to them.[30]

More recently in Quebec, the 'Healthy School Approach' promoted by the National Institute of Public Health (INSPQ) has clearly based their recommendations about sexual health education on a competency approach oriented by social-constructivist assumptions.[31] According to INSPQ recommendations, interactivity, active and situated-learning, repetitive feedbacks and individualised accompaniment through learning are recommended as exemplary practices when it comes to sexual health education.[32] That said, face-to-face interventions such as school-based programs and group-based sexual health promotion are hard to implement and have mixed success.[33] This partially explains the increasing interest for interactive computer-based interventions including video games.[34]

3.2 Social-Constructivist Theory and Principles for Video Game Design

Even if Piaget and Vygotsky have both recognised games as a natural vehicle for learning, very little is known about the explicit use of social-constructivism principals for video games design.[35] That said, already in 1991, Lave and Wenger identified social-constructivism and situated learning as the theories that best suit educational game design because of how it emphasis the active role of learners during an active learning process where doing is more important than listening.[36] Reinforcing this previous statement, Chee supported that realistic situations provide challenging problems and are a fertile avenue for video game design.[37] Moreover, he argues that first-person experimentation of concrete situations gives the opportunity to ground learning in reality. This integration of learning into

meaningful 'real-life' (virtual) situations is increasingly valued and mainly referred as authentic learning.[38]

A movement from a content-driven approach to a context-driven approach in the field of educational video games can also be assimilated to the acceptance of a social-constructivist perspective. Squire describe this transformation as a shift toward a new model that focuses less on content and more on designing experiences to stimulate new ways of thinking, acting and being in the world. According to this author, this emergent paradigm of game-based learning would be based on seven principles that can be assimilated to social-constructivist assumptions mentioned previously: (1) create emotionally compelling contexts for learning; (2) situate learners in complex information management and decision-making situations where facts and knowledge are drawn on for the purpose of doing; (3) construct challenges that confront and build on users' pre-existing beliefs; (4) construct challenges that lead to productive future understandings; (5) anticipate the users' experiences from moment to moment, providing a range of activities to address learners' needs; (6) invite the learner to participate in constructing the solutions and interpretations; and (7) embrace the ideologically driven nature of education and training.[39]

4. Three Concrete Recommendations for the Design of Serious Games for Sexual Health Using a Social-Constructivist Approach

Social-constructivist educational paradigm might represent an ideal framework for the design of serious game because of how it emphasises problem solving and situated learning.[40] With this in mind, there are still many unanswered questions when it comes to the pragmatic implication of those assumptions. Based on the brief literature review presented previously and by taking into account the specific context of sexual health education, we propose three main recommendations in order to contribute to the emergence of guideline for the design of serious games with sexual health education purposes.

4.1 The Designing Process Should Start by the Identification of Critical Situations That Youth Are Facing When It Comes to Their Sexual Health and Well-Being

As demonstrated, social-constructivist paradigm and competency approach focus on the importance of situated learning. In order to stimulate a meaningful lesson and to allow learning transfer in real life, those situations need to reflect the target audience reality.[41] To achieve this task, game designers, in collaboration with sexual health researchers and experts, should identify problematic situations that are specific to youth sexual experiences and use them as a starting point to design game challenges. This approach of design could be assimilated to an evidence-based approach of programme development that has already demonstrated its interest in health promotion and face-to-face intervention.[42] That

said, starting from situations rather than pedagogical objectives does imply an access to recent and valid data and a considerable analytic work. Without this analysis, developers would not be able to identify gameful and challenging elements intrinsic to chosen situations as well as essential knowledge that need to be transferred to handle similar situations in real life.

4.2 Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Should Be a Design Focal Point Allowing the Participant/Gamer to Mobilise and Use Different Resources in Context

We recognise that the complexity of youth sexual experiences is hard to translate into a video game. However, an intervention reduced to knowledge transfer, even in a gamified form, has been proven not effective when it comes to the modification of sexual behaviours and the ability to make reflexive choices. Therefore, as Squire recommended, we need to situate learners in complex information management and decision-making situations where resources (pre-existing as newly acquired) are drawn for the purpose of doing.[43] Taking this into account, certain types of games should be privileged such as role-playing and adventure games.[44] In addition, first-person games seem to favour engagement and positioning of the player in action and, therefore, are recommended for games for health.[45] From a game design point of view, this recommendation implies a reflexion on which mechanics will engage players into situations and push them toward the decision process. At this point, Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' could serve as a reference for game design by trying to maintain the player in this uncomfortable zone which motivates him to mobilised new knowledge and resources to progress through the game. In order to do this, recurent and integrated feedback should be a huge part of the gameplay, in reaction to every micro-decisions made by the player. Pushing further the social-constructivist paradigm endorsed, an ideal feedback should reflect internal cognitive conflicts as well as interactions with the (virtual) environment. This means a work toward complexity, the adoption of a systemic and fluid approach of game design and a development process highly iterative based on repetitive prototyping.

4.3 The Virtual Learning Experience Should Be Characterised by Authenticity Based on Gameplay, Not on Visual and Emotional Engagement

As we argued, the authenticity of the learning experience is one of the key concepts of a social-constructivist educational paradigm and is known as one of the recommended practices in sexual health education. In fact, authenticity and realism in serious gaming are essential to knowledge transfer in real life.[46] Some authors maintain that this authenticity reach is climax in a three dimensional virtual world.[47] We argue that rather than by counting on visual and emotional engagement or immersion that are associated with significant costs and no

assurance of achieving, authenticity should be achieved through gameplay. For example, the authenticity of the experience could be increased by open-ended quests and a highly responsive environment reflecting 'reality.'[48] Considering that sexual health education should be adapted and individualised to every adolescent characteristics and their psychosexual development stage, specific mechanics should allow a customisation of the avatar and, more importantly, an adaptation of the quest based on decisions that player had previously made. By favouring player's interactions with the game rather than the visual environment and the storytelling, we think that his engagement could be more strong and stable.

5. Conclusion

This chapter aimed to contribute to the theoretical reflection on serious game design in the context of sexual health education. However, some considerable aspects could not been addressed in the context of this chapter. Those aspects include challenges related to interdisciplinary collaborative work; funding and resources; dissemination through traditional and untraditional track or ethical issues for example. They must be address in further researches in order to complete the picture surrounding the design of serious games for sexual health education and to produce useful guideline that will allow the development of engaging and effective games.

In this chapter, we have proposed to discuss the implication of a social-constructivist approach of serious game design. Three concrete recommendations were presented. They must be seen as the beginning of a broader work and as a way to engage dialogue and collaboration between academics and professionals from the video game industry. There is very good assumptions that videogames could contribute to sexual health education, but in order to be a really effective learning experience, the game must be designed with a proper methodology constructed from a lot of complementary works.

Notes

[1] ASPC, *Lignes Directrices Canadiennes pour L'éducation en Matière de Santé Sexuelle*, Revised Edition (Ottawa: Agence de la Santé Publique du Canada, 2008).
[2] Douglas Kirby et al., 'Interventions to Prevent Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Including HIV Infection', in *Adolescent Health: Understanding and Preventing Risk Behaviors*, eds. Ralph J. Sales DiClemente, J. S. Santelli and R. A. Crosby (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 303-335.
[3] Julia V. Bailey et al., 'Interactive Computer-Based Interventions for Sexual Health Promotion', *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* (Online) 9 (2010): CD006483.

[4] ASPC, *Lignes Directrices Canadiennes Pour L'éducation En Matière De Santé Sexuelle*; OMS, 'OMS | Santé Sexuelle et Génésique des Adolescents', *OMS* (2013); Kirby et al., 'Interventions to Prevent Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Including HIV Infection'.

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Sara Mathieu-C. is a PhD student at the University of Montreal. Her research interest integrates youth sexual health education, serious gaming and theory- and evidences-based pedagogical design.
(sara.mathieu.chartier@umontreal.ca/ @SmathieuC).

Louis-Martin Guay is an assistant professor at the University of Montreal. His research and teaching are about game design system, systemic approach to game design and social games. (louis.martin.guay@umontreal.ca).

From Adventure to Education: Exploring Meanings of Scenario and Dimension in Video Games

Justina Gröber

Abstract
Place is often seen as central to creativity. In adventure-, mystery- or science fiction novels locations often present conundrums, from which storylines develop. Seeing video games as a privileged field of hybrid spaces that blend together mental, physical and virtual worlds, the main goal of this chapter is to show, how experiences of space emerge from videogame's interactions with Game situations. Although fictional by content, as mental spaces, adventure games engage through the metaphysical immensity of their settings that escape a player's actual reality. Video games have recently had a rapid uptake amongst adolescents and have diversified into an array of specific genres that are now a convenient commodity forming a definite part of young people's daily lives. Linking media space with geographical space, video games have the power to challenge conventional concepts of space, reinventing the role and meaning of location with respect to social interactions and digital networks. I shall apply Michael Foucault's concept of heterotopic space to reinterpret the meaning of locality in adventure games as re-embodiment of a long lost continuous space. Foucault explains heterotopias as real sites that simultaneously represent, contradict and invert reality. Such threshold situations portray adolescence as well as the contemporary condition of inhabiting a fractured and disembodied world that weaves together experiences of media- social- and geographical sites.

Key Words: Adventure games, information technology, graphical user interface, heterotopia, virtual reality, education, hybrid spaces, cognitive capabilities, embodiment.

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1. Space and Spaces

When playing video games, whose perspective is presented? Who is the subject in the game? And how does game space influence immersion and ultimately the psyche of the player? A player's relationship with game spaces is obviously much more complicated than the mental interactions occurring with visual texts in the traditional arts. Marie Laure Taylor argues that game spaces use linear perspective to construct three-dimensional virtual realities that allow the player to accurately gage distances and safely move the character through game locations. But she concedes that concepts of perspectival space are insufficient for articulating the complexity of experiential spaces that players simultaneously navigate in order to play the game.[1] Yet space is predominantly representational in many games. Game

scenarios aim to imitate the familiar experiences of physical space, sometimes even represent existing topographical sites and landmarks.

In contrast, postmodern theory refers to space more commonly as social sites or media sites rather than topographical locations. Televisual- and digitally mediated experiences of places stay with us after the actual experience and form a part of our mental reality. During most of our waking time we are 'simultaneously present in more than one spatial domain.'[2] It is quite normal for instance to be using the Internet, while making phone calls, chatting to friends on face book and be watching television. These simultaneous, hybrid spaces determine how we think and act. Michel Foucault explains: 'we do not live in a homogenous and empty space, but in a space that is thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps totally fantasmatic as well.'[3] Commonly 'spaces' are referred to as places, as multitudes articulating the post structural notions of simultaneity and of the disconnection between space and time that is characteristic of non Euclidean concepts of space.

Foucault notes the influence of phenomenological thought on current models of multi facetted space that can be applied to video games. These include Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, initiating an understanding of imagination as an integral part of real life.[4] Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space*, which specifies lived-, perceived- and imagined space, introduces the idea that space is produced rather than being a given. Edward Soja's 'Thirdspace' as mentioned by Foucault 'Thirdspace' describes the dynamic realities that integrate social, mental and topographical elements.[5] Above all Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia articulates an ambiguity or uncertainty, a being in between specific modes of reality.[6]

2. Heterotopia as Willingness to Play the Game

With the concept of heterotopia Foucault describes non-hegemonic places and spaces experienced as 'Other,' while being part of everyday reality. These are spaces that are simultaneously physical and mental, such as the space of a phone call or the moment when you see yourself in the mirror. Along with phone calls, exotic holiday destinations, adolescence, old age video game play may be heterotopic in the sense that players in videogames act in a double reality for which two sets of norms, values and expectations simultaneously apply. In Foucault's words, video games construct 'counter sites, in which all other real sites, that can be found in culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.'[7]

Foucault determines heterotopias by several principles characterising spaces that exhibit dual meanings: Crisis- and deviation heterotopias describe a separate space like schools, hospitals, prisons, rest homes or graveyards. Inhabitants of these spaces act in ways that are outside general norms. Crisis- and deviation heterotopias represent 'slices of time.' They are temporary, and particularly useful for understanding the threshold conditions of adolescents. Within one space a

heterotopic site may mirror and juxtapose a multitude of other real sites, like a garden, containing plants that are native to different geographic locations.

'Heterotopias of ritual or purification' are spaces that are isolated and penetrable yet not freely accessible like a public place. Rules and regulations apply to be able to enter these places. Heterotopias of illusion create spaces of illusion that expose every real space, and the heterotopias of compensation create a real space but yet a space that is other.[8]

Video game play exhibits these heterotopic principles in many aspects: rules and conditions apply to game play. Games mirror and juxtapose a multitude of real social and geographic sites. Conflict and deviation form the narrative content of many games and lastly: scenarios create a space of temporary illusion. Players can play video games at any real location, which is preferably one's home or other private space.

In addition video games are often associated with youth culture and seen as symbolic resistance to the norms of adult society during a person's transitional stages of adolescence offering a sense of freedom, a temporary escape from institutional controls and adult responsibilities. Or videogames may offer effective temporary escapes from personal limitations and restrictions. Forming a secret identify, identifying with one's avatar, that is brave, motivated, risk-taking and successful has been proven to have positive psychological effects and may lead to developing resilience mental agility, willpower in real life.[9] However, played on screens, the world we enter on video games is visual. If virtual scenarios articulate heterotopic threshold situations in the sense of Foucault, the question arises, how videogames may express conditions and experiences of digitally native adolescents?

Long before the rise of video games, fantasy themes, have prevailed in youth literature and film but virtual realities have boosted the persuasiveness of the supernatural and are contributing strongly to entrenching gothic and mythical themes in adolescent imagination.

3. Being Inside the Picture

As the three recipes of impressive spaces in the visual arts I want to suggest: *Being Inside the Picture*, *Piercing the Picture Plane* and *The Idea of the Sublime*. With these three categories in mind I aim to explore how representations of space prompt viewers to experience the image as a simulation of a three dimensional reality and how this experience may promise meaning.

Masaccio's frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel at Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence famously create a mimetic experience whereby viewers mentally enter the space of the image. In modern art history Masaccio's work has been considered as one of the foundational explorations in Renaissance painting aiming at lifelike-mimetic- imitation of three-dimensional reality on the flat surface of a wall or canvas.[10]

In the mimetic model of vision the viewer's gaze figuratively transcends the picture plane, as if entering the visual world through a window. The space behind the window frame thereby mimics reality or may even pretend to extend the actual architectonical site. Through the explorations of the Quattrocento, visual space became a homogenous isotropic whole, extending evenly in all directions, and thereby representing objects at apparently measurable distances from each other and from the viewer. Seen as part of Neo Platonic movement of the Renaissance these innovations in painting broke with medieval hierarchies of places that distinguished realms of the sacred and the profane. In contrast to the 'medieval paradigm of emplacement'[11] Renaissance art, by centralising space through one-point perspective, introduced the notion of a projective, representational vision. Through images, reality was now projected from a single focal point, juxtaposing the eye of the viewer of player. Familiar spatial parameters such as windows, doors stairways are an essential part of the illusionist strategy, temporarily suspend distinctions between real and fictional space and persuading viewers to accept the rules of the game of seeing something that does not exist. Vasari,[12] 16th-century art theorist and critique, considered Masaccio the best artist of his time due to his work's atmospheric truthfulness.

Just as lifelike appearance and proportions opened an entirely new narrative dimension in Renaissance Painting, mimetic qualities of characters and sceneries increased the immersive potential of action and adventure games. Persuasive game spaces seem to reconstruct spaces that appear measurable and have similarities to the actual world we live in. Spanish web developer and analyst of spatial organisation in platform games notes that it is 'through a pragmatic net of objects that spaces can be simulated.'[13] Very commonly games use heterotopic sites: tunnels, platforms, mazes, streets, abandoned cities and ruins to cliffs, towers, stairways, demolition places, etc., making elaborate use of thresholds situations whereby keys and locks hidden in these sites, allow entry to new stages of the game.

4. Piercing the Picture Plane

The second principle used in mimetic visual scenarios is to allow objects in the image to pierce the picture plane, and invade the physical world of the viewer. If one accepts that the world continues behind the picture plane as an illusion, a mental interaction happens between viewer and image whereby an image comes to life in a viewer's imagination. Canvas paintings by the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio are classic examples for this strategy. Caravaggio represented people with a combination of humanness and unsparing realism. Choreographed in his studio, with sharp directional light, people are set against an amorphous darkness that enhances the dramatic impact of gestures, postures and facial expressions. Instead of simulating depth, Caravaggio's spaces are shallow with figures and objects propped up against the picture frame to seemly pierce the divide between

illusion and reality. Through physical and emotional closeness people in these images feel real. In 'David Holding the Head of Goliath' for instance one feels empathy with David, the under aged boy, as he stretches out his arm to show us the giant's head at close distance and is lead to experience the situation from David's perspective.

5. The Idea of the Sublime

A third ingredient for impressive space is the idea of the sublime. A hero's small size can be pivotal, as demonstrated by Link in the *Legend of Zelda* and Wander in the *Shadow of the Colossus*, who convince us that courage, willpower and the intelligence can overcome seemingly impossible challenges. In Shadows of the Colossus the backdrops and sceneries in themselves impress by their emptiness and infinite dimension just as the colossus' gigantic dimensions evoke feelings of the sublime. As such *Shadow of the Colossus* appropriates romantic landscape painting of the 19th century where the sublime is associated most often with destructive forces of nature. In addition juxtaposing the minute and gigantic enhances the effectiveness of the sublime. This effect of reversing scales was famously noted by Bachelard in his 'Poetics of Space.'[14] Domestic small spaces, so Bachelard, hold a special potential for evoking imaginations of vastness, 'inviting the entire universe to come back to one's house…The more hermetic the chrysalis, the greater the expansion.' From the safety of their home game players can experience imaginary vast spaces and encounter precarious situations. Classic theories of the sublime note that in contrast to being in actual danger, horror or pain, the mental evocation of these feelings can be a source of pleasure.[15] Edmund Burke writes:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the idea of pain and danger conversant in any sort about terrible objects or objects in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime.

Thus the feeling of the sublime is a mixed feeling, described as a rapid alteration between pleasure and displeasure that insinuate rather than illustrate experiences of the abject, dangerous or terrible.[16] Haze and blurriness, objects seen against the light are classic sublime indicators and are common in game design. By diffusing the major part of images, by shrouding details such as rubble in dust clouds or mist, a city in ruins mentally transforms into a world in ruins. Visual ephemerality can thus diffuse feelings of fear evoking imaginations of epic or apocalyptic scenarios. Feature films use blur and soft focus in similar ways as art critique, Gilbert Rolfe notes: 'both beauty and the sublime play with or appeal to gravity's metaphorical connotations.'[17]

The topic of the sublime brings back the question about the meanings of dimensions in adventure games. This question implies that games' story spaces

create meaning irrespective of the game-play experience. By distinguishing discourse space from story space, game design considers settings as separate and independent from the interactive space that players navigate. Discourse spaces are functional and negotiated, rather than contemplated, while the visual enjoyment of the story space remains a separate layer, often considered an 'add-on' to the game experience. A more central role is attributed to game space by Henry Jenkins' concept of embedded narrative, where the game world becomes an evocative landscape that is charged with possible narratives. Sense of depth and distances are experienced emotionally and pragmatically in order to navigate and contest game spaces and become immersed in the game experience. For the purpose of evoking strong mental images, spatial structures of video games incorporate landmarks and topographic stereotypes to give visual stimuli to players to sharpen, release or direct attention in accordance with the need of the game.[18]

6. Sublime Heights

In questioning the impact of story space, certain extreme dimensions such as height directly advance game narratives and progression. Height literally drives game-play as it requires specific movements: climbing, jumping, holding on to surfaces, etc. In addition height has symbolic meanings: Looking up at towering cliffs may cause feelings of awe, looking down evokes sensations of power, lightness and freedom. Some game locations in *Assassin's Creed* and *Prince of Persia* featuring ancient cities, ruins and mountains bear striking similarities to sublime landscapes by Caspar David Friedrich and Friedrich Schinkel. Notions of the sublime may also be implied in higher levels game play, whereby ultimate challenges tend to occur at physically elevated places: cliffs, high rises or in the air. Typically heroes must 'fly high' in order to defeat an equal opponent, alluding to a character's 'high moral ground.' Acrobatic moves, more precarious jumps and higher risks at ultimate heights further advance the narrative climax as well as the game challenge.

7. Digital Games at Schools

Schools are prime heterotopic spaces as they embody the threshold reality of adolescence. As passageways between childhood and adulthood schools shape a young person's future and mark one's personality. School curricula include studies of myths and legends that nurture fantasies of heroism in young people's minds. Could therefore video game study be introduced into curricula as avenue to connecting young people with their cultural inheritance? It is yet unknown, if video games can qualify as popular continuations of the ancient legends, whether they glorify bravery, courage and altruism or whether they lead to increased youth violence.[19] In keeping with 18th-century ideas, one may believe that human beings have a seismographic sense of right and wrong and therefore can fine-tune their moral instincts by witnessing sublime images.[20] As, however, in real life the line

between good and evil is often blurry, images of heroism clash with everyday reality. By providing opportunities to play out one's fantasies of heroism, digital games have the power of modelling behaviour and attitudes. However, especially for teenagers the mental images implanted through game play need conscious interpretation in order to initiate critical reflection on the topics of morality, self-determination and social responsibility. Although during the game one is focussed on the operational aspects of the game, it is the images that linger in players' memory after the game and continue to engage the imagination. 'The meanings of cyberspace, virtual reality and communication networks cannot be reduced to technological prostheses, tools or sensory extensions.'[21] This is where schools can play a vital role through studying game spaces and spaces in the arts and human sciences. In order to provide new possibilities for social and environmental interaction a mixed method approach is needed that combines information technologies with developing critical awareness of game narratives and the messages they convey.

While digital classrooms are a fast growing reality, and many schools offer electives on game design, school policies tend to ban gameplay in the attempt of protecting students from the negative influences of violent games. However, in the age of Internet and telecommunication schools share young people's attention with a range of other influences. Online youth communities spanning around the globe not only engage but also mobilise young people to action in the real world. As an example of positive activism the 'Nerd fighters'[22] community, by rallying large-scale support for charity projects amongst teenagers, demonstrate Foucault's second heterotopic principle of 'slices of time' that fulfil definite functions in society. Opportunities for adolescents to make these transitions are crucial, and this is where schools need to fill a gap. Performing and visual art faculties at secondary schools are examples for such places of productive ambiguity where students can visualise fantasies and where teachers can discuss critically with their students. In such forums adolescents can connect with legendary heroes from the past. Schools are testing-grounds for life and as such open up a safe space where boundaries can be challenged without consequences and thresholds between fantasy and reality can be sounded out. This space has a sense of immensity, where personal passions can meet idealised aspirations fuelled by school mottos of 'reaching out for the stars.' These spaces may also host personal dramas, social conflicts that may be disguised within fantasy subject matter. Critically addressing game topics may give schools more power to integrate and neutralise some of the crisis of adolescence and help foster mutual respect, emotional intelligence, intellectual a play and the fundamental desire to make the world a better place.

Notes

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Justina Gröber is a German artist living in New Zealand. Justina has taught visual art programmes in Germany and obtained a Doctorate of Fine Arts from the University Auckland, New Zealand. Her work aims to articulate interrelationships between perceptions, imagination and representation.

Exploring the Idealised Self: Avatars as a Vessel for Adolescent Identity Exploration and Growth

Peter Wonica

Abstract
Video games allow people to assume identities through avatars, reducing the cognitive and environmental difficulties present in identity development. They also shape our perceptions of self and our sense of identity. The concept of self-identity is important in the education as it affects how students view frustration and difficulty in pursuit of complex tasks. Video games could serve as tools to enhance or repair an adolescent's self-identity through safe exploration, improving academic and/or emotional growth. Through interactions with an avatar, an adolescent can explore and develop their understanding of ideal behaviours. The avatar itself presents a unique topic in the development of serious games and identity. Current theories in pedagogy and identity, as well as research into the human-avatar relationship can better guide the development of avatars in serious games. The avatar can thus become an idealised self that an adolescent can project idealised characteristics onto in the process of creating a conversation between one's real life self and one's ideal self. Traditionally, self-identity is built through educational interventions and planned programmes, but it could be possible for technology to offer new benefits in making these programs more efficient and effective in teaching a new generation of digital natives.

Key Words: Serious games, educational games, identity exploration, human-avatar relationship, adolescent learning, self-identity, real-ideal self.

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1. Exploring the Idealised Self

The player-avatar relationship can serve as a focal point for the exploration of one's idealised self. Through the construction of virtual histories, individuals can begin a reflective conversation on how their real life self connects to their idealised avatar. Through these reflections, conflicts within identity can be negotiated and resolved, allowing digital interactions to assist in identity work and development. For adolescents especially, their concepts of self are often in flux as they negotiate different potential futures. During their youth, constructions of self are developed, yet these 'identities become sites of struggle at which various values and interests meet and are negotiated.'[1] While trends in educational gaming focus on behavioural change and content instruction, identity work is an equally important endeavour. Games can be used to foster the development of successful learner identities through the player-avatar relationship, allowing students to explore their idealised selves in a safe virtual environment. As players engage with their avatars,

a dynamic conversation between real and ideal self emerges, where conflicts can be negotiated and resolved. While previous cycles of experience and reflection create damaged histories, digital play offers the chance to enhance or repair one's concept of self through safe exploration and experimentation.

Identity is a crucial determinant in how people perceive themselves within their culture and environment and can become an important consideration in educational games. John H. Flavell, a psychologist specialising in cognitive development, worked on metacognition theory, studying an individual's understanding of their own cognition.[2] Within this theory is self-identity, an understanding of own abilities and their perception of efficacy within an environment. As young people progress academically, it is important for difficult instruction to be seen as a meaningful behaviour congruent to their identity. Educational games can benefit from the inclusion of identity-focused gameplay to help ensure that classroom instruction is actually meaningful to each student.

Adolescents are of particular interest due to their development stage, as argued by Erik Erikson, where they need to negotiate between different selves, an act complicated by modern media. Adolescents within the ages of 12 and 18 question their identity and require a safe means of exploring identity to develop a stable sense of self.[3] Yet, identity development is complicated because of the multiplicity of roles present for young students in modern times. Researchers have noted that the identities of children are influenced by their experiences with media and technology, yet, it is possible to leverage digital technology to positively impact experiences for youth.[4] Sherry Turkle, a researcher studying how adolescents interact with modern multimedia, connects the goals of psychotherapy with roleplaying in MUD's (Multi-user environments). In the research, she proposes that virtual environments can serve as a space for 'acting out behaviours' and 'working through unresolved issues.'[5] Just as games can be used to teach content information, they can also be harnessed to promote healthy perceptions of self in adolescent learners. As designers work to develop educational games, the avatar-player relationship can be a unique tool in the development of positive student growth.

Video games can be used for content instruction and behavioural change but are also capable of creating self-reflective conversations for students in an engaging way. Video games are motivating because they provide a context for exploration to try on ideal characteristics.[6] Interactivity and designed scenarios provide adolescents with accessible experiences and idealised identities, such as a successful scientist or mathematician. Instead of going through the cognitively demanding labour of constructing virtual identities, students can assume roles and engage in experiences designed to encourage positive growth. Through interaction, that child will be able to reflect on how their real life self connects to the ideals presented within the game world.

Yet, conflict emerges with a disconnection between real and ideal selves that can lead to stress and frustration in students, prompting the need for safe spaces to negotiate identity conflicts. Students often comprehend these conflicts and must reduce the differences to reach stability.[7] Video games can serve as a safe virtual space in which the real life pressures of identity negotiation are reduced, allowing players to experiment freely and seek resolution. While identity negotiation is difficult in real life, virtual avatars provide a means of practising ideal behaviours in a way that is inherently satisfying due to the ease of interaction and distance created away from real life. By making exploration and negotiation accessible, video games can foster the development of healthy adolescent identities, allowing young people to grow through digital action and reflection.

2. Games and Identity

Digital games provide a unique approach to enhance current practices in improving learner self-identity due to the medium's ability to explore identity. A learner's understanding of his/her own abilities is an important determinant to how they will react to frustration and difficulty. Technology offers autonomy through the avatar, empowering students to explore identity in a way that is difficult in traditional educational settings. Paulo Freire, known for his work in critical pedagogy, argued that traditional education results in negative self-identities due to the learner-teacher relationship that removes control from the student.[8] In a video game, the avatar provides agency to its user, allowing the student to explore and experiment freely with minimal pressures. For effective academic instruction and personal growth, it is important for learners to have healthy identities so that they can develop into successful individuals and reduce the stresses of identity conflicts.

Interventions have been demonstrated to be effective in bolstering self-identity, but it is possible for digital play to serve as a space for youth to negotiate and reflect on their own abilities. Interactive media offers people experiences to practice new roles, allowing young people to experiment.[9] Games provide planned and designed roles that can specifically target the needs of adolescents and encourage them to focus on developing an inner conversation about identity. Virtual worlds can thus serve as spaces for interpersonal exploration due to their focus on interactivity and experience. Researchers are even beginning to note that video games 'are ... fundamental tools for identity building … [and] also have a great educational potential.'[10] As developments into educational games progress, there is a great potential for exploring identity-based gameplay as a means of encouraging positive academic and emotional growth in youth. Research into identification is low in video games, but gameplay could narrow the 'perceived gap between ideal self and actual self ... [on a long-term scale, allowing for] … this mode of video game enjoyment [to] transfer directly into life satisfaction and contribute to positive self-development.'[11] As learners engage in a conversation to negotiate between their real self and idealised self, digital interactions could serve

as a new means of improving self-identity and making the process of identity resolution more effective and engaging than traditional classroom interventions.

Thus, it could be stated that serious games aimed at adolescents not to directly teach content information, but serve as tools in enhancing the abilities adolescents through identity exploration. Adolescents can become empowered in a low stress environment where they have agency through an avatar, an idealised self that they can project onto. Although traditional self-identity is improved through educational interventions and planned programmes, using technology could offer new benefits in making these programmes more effective in teaching a new generation of digital natives. Through interactions with their avatars, youth are able to negotiate different aspects of their identity and reflect on the conflicts between their real-life self and idealised self. Games are able to provide the psychosocial moratorium noted by Erik Erikson: a safe space where one can freely explore and develop an awareness of one's self. As developers create more educational media, the player-avatar relationship is important in its role in creating a self-reflective discussion in players on the differences between their real self and the ideals that they strive towards.

3. Avatars as a Vessel for Identity Exploration

The player's interaction with an avatar, a visual representation of self in the virtual environment, is an important aspect in creating meaningful play due to the avatar's unique connection between real and digital selves. Avatars work as a vessel through which the player performs, a relationship that becomes important in serious games.[12] James Paul Gee, a prominent scholar in game-based learning, theorized three major parts to identity in video games: the real life identity, the virtual identity, or the avatar, and the projected identity, the projection of real self onto virtual.[13] This connection between real and virtual identity is a crucial aspect behind the transfer of in-game knowledge and efficacy outside the digital realm. The relationship between the player and avatar, the projected identity, provides promise in exploring one's self, as well as a means of 'inviting reflection... [and rethinking how games] provoke us to think, feel, and choose.'[14] Through interactivity, the avatar serves as a focal point in a self-reflective conversation for a student as they reflect on their inner thoughts, feelings, and choices. As a critical element of gameplay, avatars become a powerful aspect of meaningful play that is important in our understanding of developing more effective educational games.

Although the studies into avatar design for educational media are limited, there is some research indicating the importance of having an idealised self in comparison to a projection of real life self, or no avatar at all. While there have also been studies on the human-avatar connection that have demonstrated that avatar appearance and/or behaviour can influence player interaction according to the Proteus Effect this chapter concentrates more on the aspects behind identification and not solely on behavioural changes.[15] Melissa Lewis Hobart, a

researcher working with efficacy in video games, studied avatars within educational games in an experiment, and noted that 'enjoyment of learning the material … [and] involvement were all higher when players were playing as their ideal selves.'[16] This study compared the ideal self in relation to different conditions of a projection of real life self and also no avatar at all when having students play an educational game.[17] While limited in scope, the study shows a promising trend in the importance of having adolescents engage as idealised selves. There is also research being conducted on the effects of fictional literature in causing pro-social behavioural change in people. While not directly connected to interactive media, the results reveal that people need to lower their concept of self in order to adequately experience the identity of another character.[18] Instead of direct recreations of one's real life self, avatars provide unique roles and characters to assume. Avatars operate on a spectrum of complete freedom to limited control over one's potential interactions with the digital environment. By providing too much freedom in avatar interactions, players might not explore identities intended by designers and educators. Yet, on the opposite end of the spectrum, avatars cannot be so limiting as to prevent players from projecting their own concepts of self, limiting their ability to explore and experiment. Avatars that serve as vessels allow students to explore different roles and identities for the purpose of growth and development.

While students are able to identify with their virtual avatar, the actions they take in the game environment are crucial in determining the identities they explore. When players perform through avatars, they build a concept of identity based on action and reflection. Current theories in pedagogy provide some answers on how the projected identity relationship is constructed and reinforced. David Kolb, a prominent educational theorist, proposed the Experiential Learning Theory, which presents learning as a recursive cycle of action and reflection that emerges from interactions with one's environment.[19] It is through this recursive cycle that a student builds a projected identity and can then analyse the connection between their ideal and real selves. When considering educational games for adolescents, Experiential Learning Theory is already present as a framework due to the emphasis on learning through play.[20] When harnessed properly, the cycle can be a compelling means of prompting introspection on one's preconceived notions on personal ability. A student's concepts of self can be modified with experience gained through digital interactions. Compared with traditional classroom interventions, digital games offer a new medium to enhance adolescent identity with play and interactivity.

4. Analysis of Identity-Based Play

An excellent example of a game with a strong sense of identity exploration is the recently developed game Quandary, designed for students aged 9 to 14 to develop critically thinking skills on ethical issues. Players engage in challenges as

the leader of a new colony on the recently discovered planet of Braxois where they resolve conflicts between in-game characters by sorting through facts and opposing viewpoints.[21] Quandary follows the experiential cycle, allowing players to develop experiences with critical thinking, but also provides learners time to reflect on their decisions through in-game prompts. Their in-game character becomes a vessel through which students can project themselves onto as they participate in the player-avatar relationship. The scenario presented provides the structure for freedom and exploration for players to explore different conceptions of an ethical self, not limited by an avatar that is too free form. Interactions are also not strict either, allowing players the capacity to develop a unique understanding of how they would respond and engage in critical thinking on ethical issues. For many adolescents, these interactions can become a unique way of acquiring new experiences and resolving conflicts in their ethical identity, allowing them to develop an idealised conception of self that they can apply to their real life self.

An additional example of identity-focused play is a game still in development called Futurebound. The game, developed by Collegeology Games, has middle school students guide an avatar from middle school to high school, exploring different career interests and using their passions to battle self-doubt and insecurity.[22] For example, within the game world, a student might use their artistic creativity to confront their doubt about themselves. One of the major aspects of importance behind the game is the ideology behind its design that makes it important in demonstrating an identity-focused gameplay. In a recent presentation at Games for Change, Elizabeth Swensen and Sean Bouchard described the game as not a game where it is 'about choosing, it's about dabbling,' echoing the desire to provide students with spaces for safe experimentation.[23] Games such as Futurebound are able to thus not only encourage identity exploration into different roles, but it is able to teach behaviours congruent to that identity as a model to students. Players seeking to overcome their self-doubts within the game world, for example, could draw on support from their peer groups and find success. While only presented as a virtual experience, the modelled behaviour of the avatar could help to further an adolescent's inner conversation about their own peer group and abilities, and steer them towards pursuing idealised behaviours within the real world.

Futurebound and Quandary both connect back to the concept of the psychosocial moratorium, by providing young people a safe virtual location in which they can sample and experiment with different identities and reflect on the connections between their ideal and real selves. Through the player's interaction with the game, they are able to project their ideal selves onto their virtual representation and sample new identities for the purpose of gaining new experiences and reflection. While serious games often have a focus on concrete educational standards and behavioural changes, the concept of improving learner

identities is abstract, but still can carry a significant impact on a student's educational endeavours.

As developers attempt to positively impact young people with video games, the role of identity is an important consideration in preparing youth for adulthood. The projected identity relationship is a crucial aspect in developing these new virtual histories. In real life, young people might have different histories of experiences. Within these histories might be negative events, such as frequently receiving poor grades, or encountering frustration when working in social situations. What unites these situations is they all present an opportunity for personal growth that can lead to better possibilities in the future. Having a strong identity is crucial to anybody's development, as it often determines how they will react to difficulty within that field, or even their engagement with such actions. The virtual realm can provide an opportunity to construct new virtual histories that can be then connected to one's real life experiences in the projected identity relationship.

Identity based play can have many practical implications in creating virtual environments that encourage active experimentation and exploration of one's idealised self. A student with difficulties in social interaction can enter a structured game environment where they can engage in social activities as an idealized avatar. Through such interactions, they can begin to reflect on their real life capacity to perform the actions demonstrated by their avatar, allowing for the growth and development of that individual. Play can also be used in enhancement of present identities as well. Considering the game examples presented, Quandary and Futurebound, both games aim to enhance the identities of students in their respective topic. Students playing Quandary can realise their own capacity to engage in critical debate while those in Futurebound can discover and explore different identities they might not have realised they enjoy yet. Avatars can serve as unique vessels through which young students begin these self-reflective conversations that help them realised their idealised selves.

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Peter Wonica is a graduate student pursuing a Masters of Fine Arts degree at the University of Texas at Dallas. His research interests are in identity in educational games, and how people can better understand complex real life systems through the collaborative creation of games.

Situating Play Cultures: A Survey of Videogame Players and Practices in France

Samuel Rufat, Samuel Coavoux and Hovig Ter Minassian

Abstract
The study of gamers and their actual practices still remains marginalised in the Game Studies academic literature. At an international level, studies and surveys have tended to spotlight the most spectacular and committed practices. As a result, large segments of gaming practices have long been neglected, introducing strong biases at the expense of less fashionable but far more standard, prevalent and everyday practices. Consequently, we advocate refocusing videogame studies on the players and moving from the fetishism of online gaming and spectacular play to the inclusion of all types of videogames and all forms of commitment and practices, without *a priori* expectations, in order to collect the full spectrum of practices and audiences. With this perspective, this chapter explores the preliminary results of a quantitative survey conducted in 2012, which is representative of the French population over 11 years of age (n = 2,542). The results highlight the diversity of playing practices in space and time, as well as the divergence between social practices and their articulation to 'play cultures.' Similarly, the results allow us qualifying the feminisation of the public, challenging the image of executives playing at work or clarifying the differences between rural and urban practices when it comes to videogames.

Key Words: Videogames, gamers, play cultures, play careers, lived space, social practices, environment, audiences, survey, France.

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Videogames have become a major cultural object. However, the study of gamers and their actual practices still remains marginalised in the Game Studies academic literature.[1] Existing quantitative studies are mainly carried out for the industry in order to legitimise the practice, hence they focus on the feminisation of players or the constant increase in their average age (often over 35 years of age). However, these numbers do not make much sense to describe a practice to the bursting public and the boundless different levels of investment in this practice.

Thus, the lack of knowledge of videogame players limits the consolidation of the research on videogames in France. This makes it is quite difficult to answer three basic questions for both academia and the industry: who is playing videogames in France? How are they playing? And in what social or spatial context or environment are they playing?

In addition, videogame studies have long remained focused mostly on MMO gamers and online gaming. At an international level, studies and surveys have

tended to spotlight the most spectacular and committed practices. As a result, large segments of gaming practices have long been neglected, introducing strong biases at the expense of less fashionable but far more standard, prevalent and everyday practices. Consequently, we advocate refocusing videogame studies on the players and moving from the fetishism of online gaming and spectacular play to the inclusion of all types of videogames and all forms of commitment and practices, without a priori expectations.

With this perspective, this chapter will explore the preliminary results of a quantitative survey conducted in 2012, which is representative of the French population over 11 years of age (n = 2,542). This survey was designed as part of the LUDESPACE[2] research project.

1. The Challenges of Refocusing on the Players

This focus on players seeks to transcend content analysis because are the same players who at the end, make the game as well. We know that people play differently in Seoul than in Paris.[3] But on a local scale, what are the demographic, social and environmental drivers of videogame practices? Videogames seem to have spread to all sections of society, but differences exist in the specific modalities of playing, principally due to the diversification of videogames' audiences (occasional vs. intensive play, solo vs. multiplayer, online vs. offline). As a result, it is important to describe how playing practices fit into gamers' lives, 'play cultures'[4] and in their 'lived space'[5] and to model their 'play careers'[6] in order to appreciate the relation between gamers' choices, their environment, and the emergence of scattered videogame practices and cultures. This requires us to explore the significant role of family socialisation and to reveal the links of those practices with other cultural consumption practices but also with the places of play and the everyday lived space.

The existing data on videogame practices face three main issues. Firstly, the surveys and academic studies carried out often relate only to players 15 years of age and older, even though we know that videogames are largely present among the younger population. More qualitative works attempted to describe and explain videogame practices,[7] but they are either older analyses,[8] exclusively qualitative works,[9] or exclusively focused on specific genres such as MMORPG.[10] In addition, a whole range of videogame products and practices are 'invisible.' Most studies do not include free Internet games or default games integrated into a machine (for example card games provided with the Windows operating system). Finally, videogame practices are typically self-reported. This introduces a bias by not including people playing only occasionally, rarely, or to games that are not usually considered videogames. For example, the last *Pratiques Culturelles des Français* survey, carried out every ten years by the French Ministry of Culture, asks: 'Over the last 12 months, did you play videogames?'[11] This is a broad question, so people failing to consider their daily practice of the *Solitary* as playing

videogames simply elude it. Thus, one of the main issues with reporting on videogame practices is that many people may not think about themselves as gamers or consider their actions as playing videogames. For all these reasons, it is of paramount importance not to base the study on an *a priori* definitions. In the tradition of Johan Huizinga[12] and Roger Caillois' anthropology of games,[13] the essentialist perspective defines playing and games by a limited set of features. However, this approach presupposes the existence of game invariance allowing to decide whether or not a cultural product is a game (i.e. is an educational software a videogame?) and to normalise the practice of videogame (i.e. so many hours spent in front of a screen, such corpus of software, etc). Nevertheless, these kind of *a priori* expectations are the ones that have been biasing studies and obstructing the reconstruction of the full spectrum of videogame players and practices. Consequently, refocusing studies on the players requires a survey collecting the data on the actual practices, asking about all the games that the respondent plays, not only videogames, and challenging the existing categories.

2. Design of the Survey

The survey was conducted by phone on a 2,542 person sample representative of the French population 11 years of age and over, in June 2012.

The heart of the questionnaire consists of questions about the kinds of games played. To facilitate the collection of data about practices, the survey begins with questions on cultural and sport activities in general. Then it collects data on household equipment such as TVs, consoles, phones and computers. And only then does it address games on computers, phones and consoles: 'over the past 12 months, have you played at least once, either on a phone, a touch pad, a computer or a console to games installed by default – for example *Minesweeper or Solitairy*?' The survey then breaks down the possible videogame genres, trying to avoid the commercial classifications. It begins with the genres that are more difficult to recognise as such: default games, adaptations of card games, adaptations of word and number games. 19 categories were selected, offering examples each time, starting from the games that are less often discussed in the literature and moving eventually to the most studied games (which match to the most committed practices).

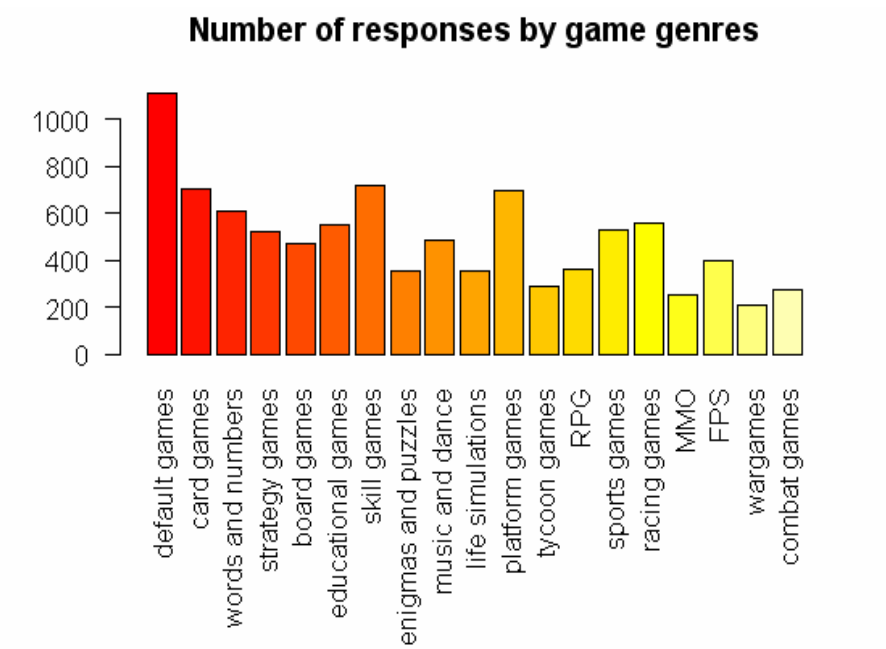

Image 1: Number of Responses to the Survey by Game Genres. 2013. ©LUDESPACE. Courtesy of the authors.

Those who reported having played at least one of these kinds of games in the last 12 months were considered players (n = 1,697). Those who reported having played any of these games, but not during the last 12 months were considered former players (n = 276). Finally, other people in the sample were considered non-players (n = 569). Data on the context and the game environment was collected by asking players about their playing frequency, locations, media and playing partners. These questions were supplemented for the entire sample by demographic and background variables.

3. Two-Thirds of the French Population Plays Videogames

This study shows that in 2012 videogame practices now include the whole of society: both men and women, college students and retirees, blue collar workers and executives, urban and rural dwellers. Almost 6 in 10 adults reported having played (at least once) in 2012 a videogame over the last 12 months. This is an opportunity to confirm certain trends: men are slightly more likely to play than women. But also to challenge some old beliefs: in contrast to academic publications which are focused on online games and the latest hits, the most played

games in France are *Solitairy* and *Freecell*, whereas MMOs are a minor genre.[14]

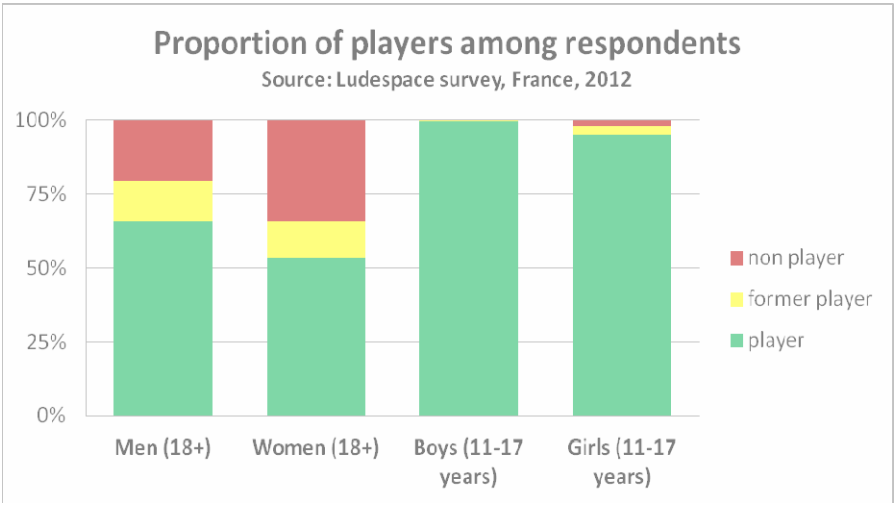

Image 2: Proportion of players among respondents. 2013. ©LUDESPACE. Courtesy of the authors.

But this generalisation may seem misleading: the majority of players play videogames only occasionally and real fans are less appointed. A little more than 1 in 10 adults play almost every day. This observation is not far from that of the cinema: many people go to the movies, but few are avid moviegoers. And as for other hobbies, men and women do not maintain the same ratio as for video gaming.

4. The Gamer Is a Teen Just Like any Other

In terms of videogames, age continues to be the main element of differentiation. While almost all younger people are players, including girls, the proportion is less overwhelming in older generations and decreases with age.

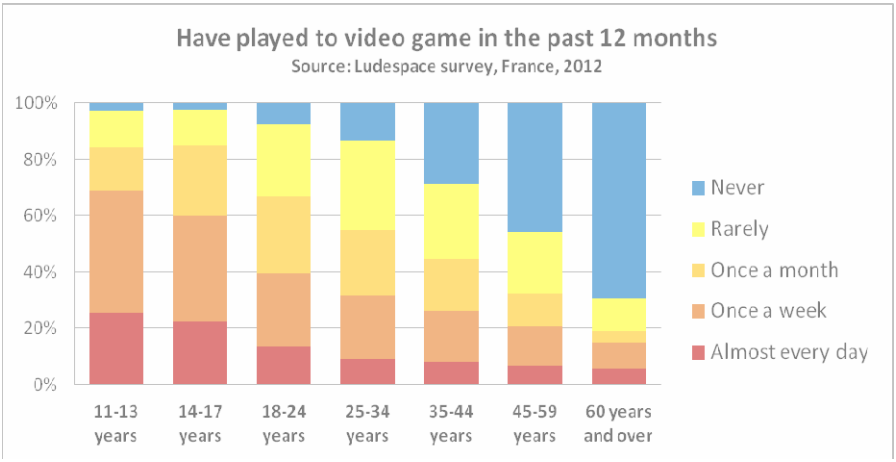

Image 3: Differentiation of Practices according to the Age. 2013. ©LUDESPACE. Courtesy of the authors.

Players ages 11 to 17 years olds play everything on any device and everywhere. Among them, boys are the more involved: at least 8 out of 10 boys play every week, compared to less than 5 out of 10 girls. In addition, they generally display a more eclectic practice.

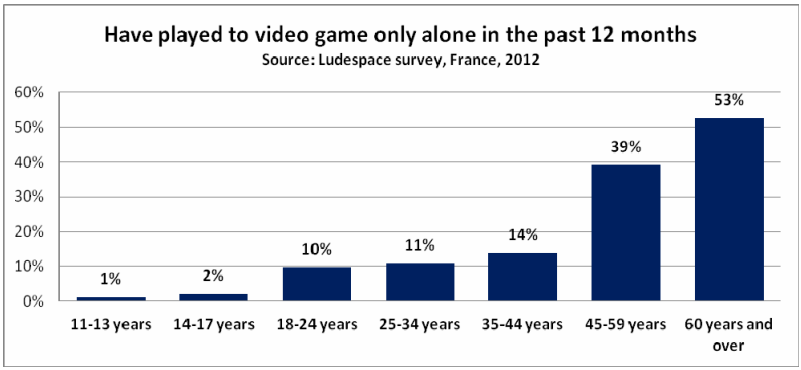

Image 4: Proportion of Gamers Playing Only Alone, by Age Categories. 2013. ©LUDESPACE. Courtesy of the authors.

Some genres of videogames are actually gendered: while girls play more dance, music and life simulation games, boys prefer skill games, platform games and

shooting games. Six out of 10 boys are playing FPS, compared to only 1 out of 10 girls. Moreover, the younger the player are, the wider variety of game devices they use. And for younger players, the practice of video gaming is an important agent of socialisation. Those who never played (or almost never played) with other players constitute a tiny minority of younger people. On the other hand, players who only play alone represent more than half of the retired players. These differences show differentiation in practices and audiences depending largely on age and gender.

5. Tell Me What You Play…

The practice of videogames has spread to all sections of society, but differences are emerging in the specific modalities of playing, principally due to the diversification of videogame audiences. These differences reinforce the scattering of videogame practices (occasional vs. intensive play, solo vs. multiplayer, online vs. offline). Among players, more than four out of 10 blue collar workers play racing games, and more than 3 out of 10 play FPS, while less than 3 out of 10 and less than 2 out of 10 players from the intermediate professions play these games respectively. Meanwhile, skill games (*Tetris*, *Angry Birds*, etc) are more sought out by highly educated players (more than 4 in 10 among graduates of higher education, compared to less than 2 in 10 people among non-graduates).

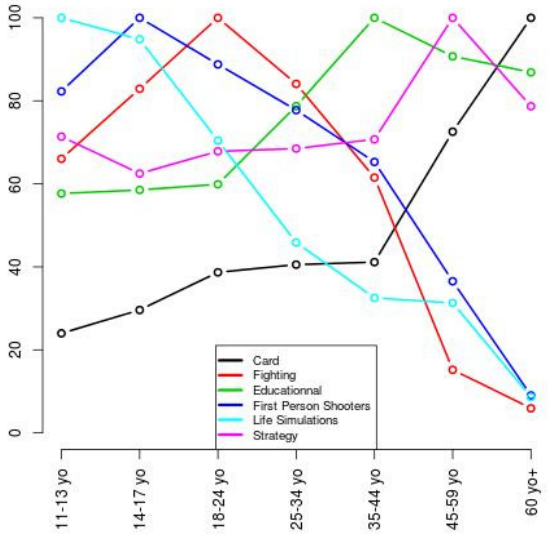

Image 5: Videogame Genres Practiced by Different Age Groups. 2013. ©LUDESPACE. Courtesy of the authors.

Videogame genres appear also very distinctive between age groups. The younger the gamer the more different game genres he or she plays. So it may seem more difficult to distinguish the genre practices of older groups by using only raw data. The previous figure shows genre practices by age groups, weighting the practice by the average number of genres practiced in each group (base 100 = maximum score within each age group). Older, younger, and middle-aged gamers seem clearly to focus on different game genres. Life simulation games (*The Sims*, animal breeding games, etc.) are almost exclusively popular among teenagers, and experience a sharp decline after 17 years of age. On the contrary, some genres actually increase with age, such as educational games, played mostly by 35 to 44 year old players with their children. Finally, card games (which include poker, but also traditional games, like belote or French tarot) are most popular among older players, aged 45 and over.

The different practices also mark the sociability the game requires. So when women play videogames, it is more often within the family circle, while men are likely to diversify the playmates and locations of the game. The distribution of videogames throughout society also promotes forms of socialisation around the game, which is presented in contrast to the current stereotypes of isolation and withdrawal by videogame players. More than 4 out of 10 players play with friends and this even constitutes a majority among the most regular players.

6. Exploring the Impacts of the Gaming Environment

The domestic space is the main venue for the practice of videogames: nearly 9 out of 10 adults play at home. But with the release of nomadic media games are accompanying players in their travels: at friends' homes (6 out of 10 players), but also in transport (3 out of 10 players). Generally, the more regular a practice is, the more it expands into different places, especially among younger players.

To explore the different gaming environments, a cluster analysis was performed on the places where people said they had played over the last 12 months: at home, at a neighbour's home, in the workplace, in transport, in public places, in a gaming centre. The number of different places where they played was then scored. The six resulting clusters are presented in graphical form, along with the specific profile of each cluster according to six different places and its score to reveal over-representations and under-representations and associations. The figures represent the relation between the mean of the cluster and the mean of the entire population of players (n = 1697). A higher number indicates a concentration of people in this cluster who answered yes to the question, a figure close to 0 indicates that the cluster has no specificity compared to the general population for that question, and -1 indicates that no person in this cluster answered yes to this question. All game genres that people have played over the last 12 months are presented for each cluster using the same approach for ease of interpretation, but they have not been taken into account to achieve the clustering.

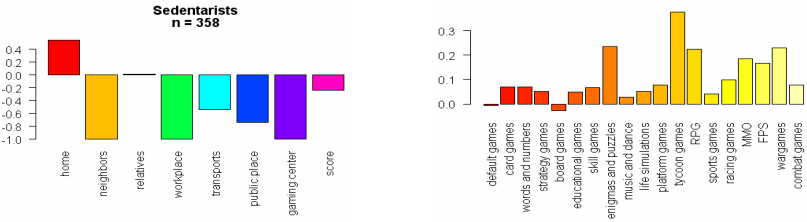

Image 6: Practices of the 'Sedentarists' (Cluster 1). 2013. ©LUDESPACE. Courtesy of the authors.

The 'sedentarists' (cluster 1, 21% of players) are people playing mostly at home, as much as the average with relatives, less than the average in transport or public places and nowhere else. In this cluster, people have played a few more game genres than the average. It groups people playing enigmas and puzzles, tycoon games, MMO, FPS and wargames. This cluster consists of two different populations, both those under 13 years of age and those over 35 years of age, with no gender difference, living with a partner and children or parents. The 'sedentarists' are the youngest players and parents who play mainly at home, they tend to be executives, people with higher education and those undergoing training.

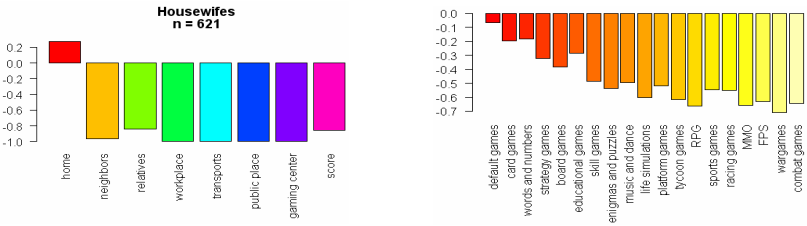

Image 7: Practices of the 'Housewives' (Cluster 2). ©LUDESPACE.

The 'housewives' (cluster 2, 36% of players) are people playing only at home. In this cluster, people have played considerably fewer different kinds of games than other players. They exclusively played games installed by default on their machines, cards, word and number games, educational games and strategy games. Women over the age of 35 living with a partner and children are over-represented

in this cluster. People with low academic or no other qualifications, farmers, pensioners and people with no occupation are also over-represented. The 'housewives' tend to live in individual houses or subdivisions with three or more rooms and travel mostly using their own personal car. This is the group that has the least spectacular practices and is almost never considered in the literature.

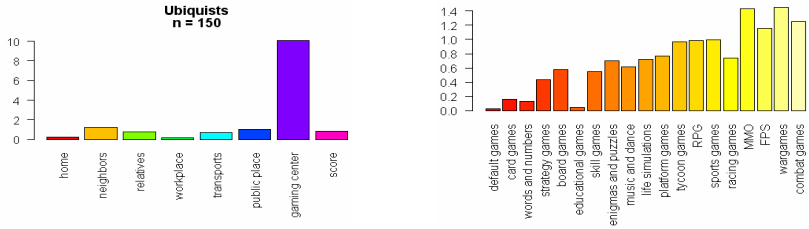

Image 8: Practices of the 'Ubiquists' (Cluster 3). 2013. ©LUDESPACE. Courtesy of the authors.

The 'ubiquists' (cluster 3, 9% of players) play almost everywhere and are the only players who play in gaming centres. In this cluster, people have played a far greater variety of different games than other players, while these people have played fewer default games, cards, word and number games, and educational games. In this cluster, men younger than 18 years of age in training and middle class workers are over-represented. The 'ubiquists' tend to live in urban areas and large metropolitan areas, often live with their parents, in flats of five rooms or more and moving on foot, by bike or skates.

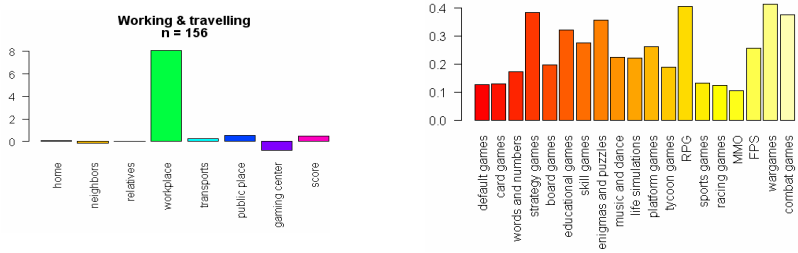

Image 9: Practices of the 'Working and Travelling' (Cluster 4). 2013. ©LUDESPACE. Courtesy of the authors.

The 'working and travelling' (cluster 4, 9% of players) are the only players who play at work. They also play slightly more in transport and public spaces, but not elsewhere. In this cluster, people have played a bit of all kinds of games, with a relative concentration of strategy games, puzzles and enigmas, RPG, FPS, combat games and wargames. In this cluster, youths 18 to 24 years of age, with no gender difference, and the working class, with low qualifications are over-represented. Far from the conventional wisdom, 'working and travelling' do not represent management and executives. These are young professionals from the most popular classes, who tend to live on the periphery of major urban centres, often with their parents and using public transport over long distances (train and metro).

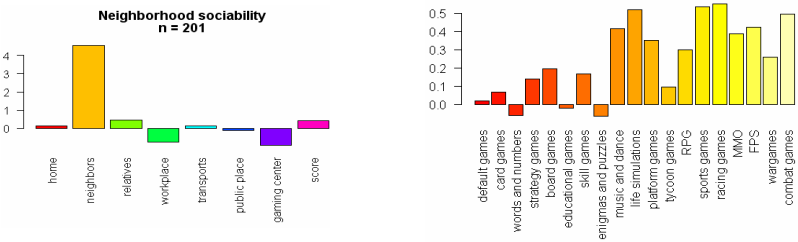

Image 10: Practices of the 'Neighborhood Sociability' (Cluster 5). 2013. ©LUDESPACE. Courtesy of the authors.

The 'neighborhood sociability' (cluster 5, 11% of players) are playing mainly at their neighbours' homes and to a certain degree at their relatives' place. In this cluster, people have played a slightly greater variety of games than other players. In particular it includes music and dance games, life simulation, platform, sports, racing and combat games. The 'neighborhood sociability' cluster consists of men under 18 years of age, with an over-representation of persons undergoing training, blue collar workers, employees and intermediate occupations. They live mostly in rural areas or on the outskirts of small urban clusters, often with their parents in small dwellings or at boarding school and travel more on foot.

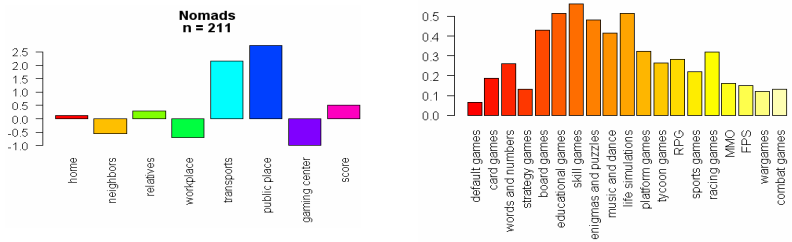

Image 11: Practices of the 'Nomads' (Cluster 6). 2013. ©LUDESPACE. Courtesy of the authors.

The 'nomads' (cluster 6, 12% of players) play both in transport and in public spaces, and to a lesser extent at their neighbours' or relatives' homes, yet in a greater variety of places than the average. In this cluster, people have played more different kinds of games than other players. In particular, it includes board games, educational, skill, enigmas and puzzles, music and dance games. The 'nomads' are young adults under 35 years of age, with a slight over-representation of women. They tend to be executives and people with the highest levels of training, or people pursuing their studies. So, intellectuals, managers and executives tend to play in transport and in public spaces rather than at their place of work. This cluster includes the inhabitants of large urban centres, especially Parisians, people who tend to live with their parents or other family members, either in small apartments or in very large houses, and moving both by public transportation (bus, tram, metro) and green transportation (bicycle, roller-blades).

7. Conclusion

This is a work in progress that is presently being expanded, but also supplemented by qualitative interviews. It highlights the importance of not using *a priori* definitions of players and videogames in order to collect the full spectrum of practices and audiences. These first results show the diversity of playing practices

in space and time, and allow us qualifying the feminisation of the public, challenging the image of executives playing at work, emphasising that videogames seems to promote integration and decrease social withdrawal, and clarifying the differences between rural and urban practices when it comes to videogames.

Moreover, the LUDESPACE study also shows that the practice of videogames does not compete with other cultural practices. In general, videogame players go to the cinema or the museum as much as their non-player counter parts, and at comparable ages they likewise share the same proportion of people practicing a sport or a musical instrument. Ultimately, videogames appear as a hobby among others within French cultural practices.

Notes

[1] Samuel Rufat and Hovig Ter Minassian, *Les Jeux Vidéo comme Objet de Recherche* (Paris: Questions Théoriques, 2011).

[2] This work in progress takes place as part of the broader LUDESPACE research project, which is funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR 2011 JSH 001 01) and led by the laboratory CITERES (CNRS 7324). Its main objective is to describe in all their sociological and geographical diversity videogame players and videogame practices in France.

[3] Chloé Paberz, 'Rendre compte d'un Ancrage Local. L'apport Original de L'ethnologie aux *Game Studies* Au-Delà de L'ethnographie', *Espaces et Temps des Jeux Vidéo*, eds. Hovig Ter Minassian, Samuel Rufat and Samuel Coavoux (Paris: Questions Théoriques, 2012), 236-259.

[4] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[5] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

[6] Howard Becker, *Outsiders. Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press of Clencoe, 1963).

[7] T. L. Taylor, *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).

[8] Pierre Bruno, *Les Jeux Vidéo* (Paris: Syros, 1993).

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[11] Olivier Donnat, *Les Pratiques Culturelles des Français à L'ère du Numérique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009).

[12] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

[13] Roger Caillois, *Les Jeux et les Hommes. Le Masque et le Vertige* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958).
[14] The importance of card games like *Solitary*, *FreeCell*, and *Spider* is confirmed when we look at the 'most played games in the last 12 months.' *Solitary* is the most mentioned game (it represents 2% of the most played games mentioned), followed by *Spider* (1.7%), *FreeCell* (1.6%) and *Poker* (1.3%) out of a total of 501 different references.

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Samuel Rufat, PhD in geography, is lecturer at the university of Cergy-Pontoise (France).

Samuel Coavoux is a PhD candidate in sociology at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon (France).

Hovig Ter Minassian, PhD in geography, is lecturer at the university François Rabelais of Tours (France).

‘Where Is Life?’: Commitment and Micro-Interactions in Videogames

Hovig Ter Minassian, Isabel Colón de Carvajal, Manuel Boutet and Mathieu Triclot

Abstract
This contribution presents a research work in progress based on the analysis of video recordings of people playing at videogames. The screen and the players are both recorded, and then the two video records are synchronised. This methodology allows observing precisely the immersive potential of videogame practices, according to the socio-spatial contexts in which they take place. The results of such analysis show that the videogame experience is not only immersive or intensive, but also actually characterised by the superposition of discontinuities: immersion/perturbation, connection/disconnection, pleasure/boredom etc. Thus, the limits between what is real and what is not, between what is play and what is not, are not given *a priori*, and are not the same according to the contexts of play. There are several interests of such work. Firstly, it allows putting in perspective the place given to the images in the analysis of videogame practices, and to focus on what we could name, in the continuity of Raymond Bellour’s works on the body of the spectator in a movie theatre, ‘videogame bodies.’ Secondly, such research allows taking account of spatial and social micro-interactions which occur during a videogame session, particularly between the videogame spaces and the players. Lastly, it gives us a glimpse of the ordinary life of a group of players engaged in a collective activity, in a context of leisure and friendship. The whole study shows that the limits between what is real and what is virtual are due less to the technological performances of more and more powerful videogame machines, allowing the player to be dived into always more immersive and realistic universes, than to the way the player is engaged in a videogame. Immersion in a videogame is not reducible to a unique formula, and the circumstances of videogame practices should be observed to be understood.

Key Words: Videogames, video recording, body, play, spatial interactions, social interactions.

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What does it mean to play at videogames? More precisely, what is the diversity of videogame practices and what are the different forms of socialisation which surround them? What place do these practices take in the everyday life, and particularly in the domestic space? Such are some of the questions we would like to try and answer here, by the analysis of videogame practices, recorded by several synchronised video cameras.[1]

Although it offers an interesting alternative to the narratology/ludology debate, this emphasis with regard to the study of videogame practices has been until now defended by a minor branch of Game Studies, which led to ethnographies[2] and micro-sociological analysis.[3] As there is a diversity of players and ways of playing online videogames, like *World of Warcraft*[4] or *Dark Age of Camelot*,[5] we can postulate a same diversity of players and ways of playing *Tomb Raider* or *Super Mario Bros Wii*. We make the strong hypothesis that the videogame experience is a situated experience, partly determined by the configuration of the place where the game is played and by the social and cultural context in which it takes place.[6] If we do not play the same way, according to where we play and to the people with whom we play, then studying videogame practices leads to take into account the spatial and social micro-interactions which take place during a videogame session. As such, we avoid using some pre-determined categories, such as 'casual gamer,' 'solo gamer,' or 'on line game,' which are, nowadays, more vernacular expressions than scientific categories.

In this chapter, we will put the emphasis on the different forms of socialisation which surround videogame practices, but also on the different ways with which these practices take place in everyday life and in the domestic place. Those interactions in the game and around the game show us that the blurring of the borders between what is virtual and what is real is less linked to the technological performances of the videogame machines – more and more powerful, able to dive the player into always more realistic or immersive universes – than to the commitment of the player within the game. By the different ways with which the players inscribe their videogame practices into their domestic environment and their ordinary life, they put the videogame worlds in continuity with the real world. Indeed, during a videogame session, the players are both within and out of the game, their position being different according to their commitment within the game and the pleasure they take from the videogame practice.

The first part of this text presents the hypothesis and the methodology of such work. The second part describes some results taken from the analysis of some case studies, which will be discussed in the last part of the text.

1. To Play Videogames: A Bodily, Social and Spatial Experience

One of the first interests of working on video recording of game sessions, is to put into perspective the more classical analysis of the images, and to put interest to what we could name, following the works or Raymond Bellour on the body of the spectator into a movie theatre, 'videogame bodies.'[7] The games, and the emotions which emerge from their practice, would not exist without those diverse forms of body movements, the observation of which allows us to underline the 'primal emotions of the dispositive.'[8] These primary affects are not taken into account by the classical psychological works, which only study already constructed affects of high intensity.[9] Thus, following the propositions of the anthropologist Albert

Piette,[10] the aim here is to attend to the futile, contingent or not particularly intense activities, on the hollow moments, or on the pauses which structure the activity of gaming. Moreover, such a work gives us a glimpse of the ordinary life of a social group committed to a shared, collective activity, in a context of leisure and friendship. In such situations, different kinds of informal conversation are identifiable, with their moments of tension, emotion or 'affects,' giving life to particular verbal expressions. There can be micro interactional events, which are generally not well – or even not at all – analysed in other case studies, for example cut off utterances, short turns, uncompleted turns or repeated segments.[11] Lastly, one of the aims of this study is to analyse the way videogame experiences occur into interrelated spaces: the player space, the in-game space and the space around the videogame practice.[12]

To analyse those videogame situations, we used a methodology usually associated to interactional linguistics, which consists in synchronised audio and video recording, with several cameras,[13] of one or multiple game sessions, in different contexts. The aim is to embrace the whole social and spatial events which can be observed during a videogame session. They are, in the most part, oral or body interactions (talking, gazes, gestures). The use of several video cameras allows having a broad view of the place where the game is played, but also more precise views of the player's screens, as much as of the controllers (mouse, keyboard or whatever else). Lastly, in order to preserve the spatial and social ecosystem of the game session, the video cameras must be put in the less intrusive way possible,[14] and the researcher goes out during the game session.

2. Differentiated Commitments to the Videogame Practice

The first analysis work of our corpus led us to identify the elements which shape the videogame experiences and contribute to the differentiation of their practice.[15] We present here three themes in particular, which show that the commitment to a videogame practice can vary according to the players and to the situations. These variations are due as much as to the proper characteristics of the videogame played as to the social and spatial contexts in which the practice occur. Thus, the videogame experience is firstly characterised by an alternation of tense moments and relaxing moments, which can occur at three scales of analysis. Primarily, it can be at the scale of the length of the situation (the whole afternoon or the whole evening), with alternating game sessions and discussion sessions, either related, or not, to the videogame practised. It can also be at the scale of a game session, with preparation sequences (building up the teams, selecting the rules or the map) and game sequences. Thirdly, at the scale of each of those game sequences, there can be alternating tense and relaxing moments, due to more or less intense or nervous action, according to what is going on within the game. The tension is usually expressed by physical gesture, body movements or shouts.

By paying attention to these tense/relaxing moments, one of the most surprising observations is the notable fragility of the game experience, the important part of boredom, or at least of moments of low intensity, without particular expression of pleasure. Thus, the idea along which videogames should be naturally fun, immersive or fascinating, does not fit with what we can actually observe. These characteristics appear to be more linked to the retrospective work, which takes place *ex post*, for example the afterwards discussion around the game session which has just finished. The tolerance to boredom, or playing by proxy, are significant phenomena in the situations we observed. Thus, the *Tomb Raider Underworld* player is constantly called upon by his girlfriend who wants to know 'how is going?,' if he's 'not too bored?,' as if it was necessary to protect a fragile situation of videogame practice, for a player who is not used to play those videogames. During the LAN party, there are some surprising commentaries such as 'we're playing while waiting...,' 'I begin an *Unreal* session in order to… well, make something while waiting'… All these commentaries are linked to a paradoxical, and yet common situation, which consists in playing without really being in the game, or playing while waiting the game to 'really' begin. These in between situations are favourable to low forms of commitment. They build the fundamental basis of videogame experience, although they are too rarely discussed in videogame studies. They show the fragility of the videogame pleasure (a recurrent bug, a part of the game which is too hard, a too strong adversary…). Then, the returns to 'reality' are numerous: we take time to discuss with the people who stayed in the kitchen (during the LAN party), to brush our teeth (the girlfriend of the *Tomb Raider Underworld* player) or to go and bring some food (during the *Super Mario Bros Wii* evening), which act as so many moments of temporary disconnections out of the game.

Finally, what can also characterise the videogame practices is the experience of orientation, or more precisely of disorientation. This experience consists, for the player, in localising and identifying his or her team-mates in the videogame space. This need of orientation is, thus, expressed by the different linguistics forms that players produce in order to bring reference to another player, or a character in the game. These linguistics forms can be, for example: 'who am I?,' 'where are you?,' 'who's the blue one?,' and 'where is life?' (referring to the power-ups or bonuses scattered in the videogame level). These expressions are linked to a need to identify or localise the different characters in the in-game space, rendered necessary as the players of a same team do not always play in the same room in the domestic space.

A good perception of space is also important in order to participate actively in the game. It allows localising oneself in maze-like levels of the game, to avoid wanderings which often mean boredom and, in the case of more competitive games, to take advantage on one's adversaries. The perception of space occurs through different modalities, which echo the distinction made by Abraham Moles

between the philosophy of centrality and the Cartesian philosophy of space.[16] The first one refers to a phenomenological 'auto-centered' perception of space: we can see it through the will of the players not to be lost in the levels of the game, or to evaluate the proximity of their adversaries with regard to themselves. Conversely, the Cartesian philosophy of space refers to an external perception of space, where the subject is not inhabitant, but an observer of that space, which he or she can delimitate, measure, or to which he or she can set attributes. We can see this in the will of the players to find where secret passages or items are located, or with which parts of the in-game space they can interact. Some kinds of games seem to favour one modality of perception of space more than another. The philosophy of centrality is dominant in games which propose a subjective view of the avatar and into which the action is conducted at a fast pace (for example *Unreal Tournament*). In platform games, like *Super Mario Bros Wii*, where the player has to visualise in one glance his or her position and at the same time the one of his or her team-mates and a part of the game level, it is more the Cartesian philosophy of space which dominates. At last, some games (like *CounterStrike*) propose both, alternatively, according to the game actions.

3. To Play Videogames: A Multiform Activity and of Blurred Contours

It arises from the whole analysis, that the practice of videogames is an activity which contours are fuzzy, and which can produce different ways of commitment, according to the game played and to the player committed.

Firstly, all the players are not connected in the game altogether: one of the players of the LAN party, Mika, devotes the major part of his time to try and configure the games, in order to make them playable on his computer, but in vain. He is, indeed, present: he takes part of the conversation, sometimes he even follows the course of a game on the screen of one of his friends, but he is also often out of the videogame space. Secondly, all the connected players do not necessarily play together: here again in the LAN party, some players play on a map of *Unreal Tournament*, waiting for the other to prepare for another map. Finally, in the case of multi-player games (especially during the LAN party), the distribution of the players in the videogame space does not always coincide with the spatial distribution of the players in the different rooms of the apartment where the LAN party takes place. If technology makes possible the spatial expansion of the players space (i.e. the possibility of playing in different rooms in order to play with more people), it complicates in the same time the discussions: some players of the same team have to speak loud in order to communicate from one room to another.

This entanglement of videogame spaces is accompanied by appropriation, and even diversion of space. The characteristic of the domestic space, compared to the space of the neighbourhood or of the city, is to be much more malleable for individuals.[17] During a game session, the everyday configuration of the domestic space is changed in order to fit to the needs of the videogame practice. Thus, in the

case of the LAN party, which takes place in an apartment, the configuration of the living-room is modified so it can host four of the eight players, the other ones setting themselves into the office room. The rooms also specialise themselves: during the LAN party, the kitchen becomes naturally the place for catering. Situated halfway between the office room and the living-room, it is where lively debates take place, at the end of each game session and, which, as we have underlined previously, are an important part of pleasure in videogame practices. Thus, at the scale of the time passed playing videogames, the domestic rooms acquire new 'characteristics,' which make sense both in the real and the virtual worlds.

Those appropriations and diversions of the domestic space show the absence of a clear limit between what is going on in the game and what is going on outside the game: the videogame practice meddles with the everyday space-time and the players enter the game with their skills, their previous experience of videogames, and the relationships they already have with the other players. Also, the players go, in turn, in and out of the 'magic circle' (following the famous word of J. Huizinga),[18] including Mika, who ends up using the computer of another player since he does not manage to make his to operate correctly.

Thus, in all our filmed situations of play, the videogame practice seems to take a major part in the leisure time of the players, for example, the *Tomb Raider Underworld* player who has difficulty to stop playing despite the late time, but also for the girlfriend, who recognises the game she has already played, remembers some of the puzzles and herself seems reluctant to turn off the console. It is also the case of the LAN party players, who remember how their previous multi-player videogames went on, ten years ago. Thus, for the players who appear in our study, the videogame practice seems paradoxical: it is a very futile activity but made very seriously.

Finally, what the study of videogame practice shows, is that the real world does not fade into the virtual world.[19] The players who were filmed do not lose their feet in the virtual worlds: they go out from them constantly in order to discuss about their game, to answer the telephone or to go and grab some food. There is a life outside the videogame (to take time with friends, to be gathered the time of an evening around a mutual activity), but which, actually, is rendered possible because of the videogame practice, both the aim and the pretext of those gatherings. It is not contradictory with the fact that the exploration of virtual worlds is indeed something else than a simple continuation of everyday life. It is a full activity, the rules (how to win) and the codes (how to identify ones adversary) which the player must know. Thus, there is no opposition, but continuity between the real world and the virtual world, and that is what contributes to blur the limits between them. Thus, the players identify themselves, in turn and according to the situations, by their pseudo (Darius, Cosette…), their character (Mario, Lara Croft…), or their first name.

To conclude, the alternation of in game/out of the game status, and the way the videogame practice meddles with everyday life make difficult to delimitate the videogame practice itself. Is the spectator who helps her boyfriend solving the puzzles in *Tomb Raider Underworld* also playing, even if she does not push the buttons? Are the LAN party players who are plugging in the cables and configuring the computer and in the same time discussing about the games which they should play, not already 'in' the game? At last, is Mika, who does not manage to make the games work on his computer, more a 'player' than his friends, reluctant to videogames, who are watching the end of the LAN party?

Notes

[1] This work is one part of a broader research project named LUDESPACE, which is funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR 2011 JSH 001 01) and led by the laboratory CITERES (UMR 7324). Its main objective is to describe in all their sociological and geographical diversity, the videogame players and the videogame practices in France.

[2] T. L. Taylor, *Play between Worlds. Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006); Manuel Boutet, 'De L'ordinateur Personnel aux Communautés en Ligne. S'orienter dans les Mondes Informatiques' (PhD diss. Université de Nice-Sophia Antipolis, 2006); Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008); Bonnie Bardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest. An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010); Celia Pearce, *Communities of Play. Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009); Vinciane Zabban, '"Ceci est un Monde". Le Partage des Jeux en Ligne: Conceptions, Techniques et Pratiques' (PhD diss., Université Paris-Est, 2011); Vincent Berry, *L'expérience virtuelle: Jouer, Vivre, Apprendre dans un jeu Vidéo* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012).

[3] Seth Giddins, 'Events and Collusions: A Glossary for the Microethnography of Videogame Play', *Games and Culture* 4, No. 2 (2009): 144-157; Manuel Boutet, 'Jouer aux Jeux Vidéo avec Style. Pour une Ethnographie des Sociabilités Vidéoludiques', *Réseaux* 173-174 (2012): 207-234.

[4] Vincent Berry, Manuel Boutet and Samuel Coavoux, 'Playing Styles. The Differentiation of Practices in Online Videogames', *Bourdieu and Data Analysis: Methodological Principles and Practice*, eds. Michael Grenfell and Frédéric Lebaron (New York: Peter Lang, 2014).

[5] Berry, *L'expérience Virtuelle*.

[6] Sylvie Craipeau and Marie-Christine Legout, 'La Sociabilité mise en Scène, Entre Réel et Imaginaire', in *La Pratique du jeu Vidéo: Réalité ou Virtualité ?*, ed.

Mélanie Roustan (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), 115-128; Mathieu Triclot, *Philosophie des Jeux Vidéo* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011); Manuel Boutet, 'Un Rendez-vous Parmi D'autres. Ce Que le jeu sur Internet nous Apprend du Travail Contemporain', *ethnographiques.org* 23 (2011), accessed 1 September 2013, http://www.ethnographiques.org/2011/Boutet.

[7] Raymond Bellour, *Le Corps du Cinéma: Hypnoses, Émotions, Animalité* (Paris: P.O.L, 2009).

[8] Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic Theory and the Videogame* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

[9] Daniel Stern, *Le Monde Interpersonnel du Nourrisson* (Paris: PUF, 2003).

[10] Albert Piette, *L'acte D'exister. Une Phénoménographie de la Présence* (Marchienne-au-Pont: Socrate Editions, 2009).

[11] Isabel Colón de Carvajal, 'Les Énoncés Choraux: Une Forme de Segments Répétés Émergeant dans les Interactions de Jeux Vidéo', in *Les Jeux Vidéo comme Objet de Recherche*, eds. Samuel Rufat and Hovig Ter Minassian (Paris: Questions Théoriques, 2011), 148-165.

[12] The player space designates the place where the videogame practice takes place; the in-game space is the space with which the player interacts within the game; lastly the space around the videogame practice designates all the spaces and territories which exist because of the videogame practices (videogame industry, retailers, but also conferences, dedicated websites etc.). For more discussion, see Samuel Rufat and Hovig Ter Minassian, eds., *Les Jeux Vidéo comme Objet de Recherche* (Paris: Questions Théoriques, 2011).

[13] Groupe ICOR, 'La Démarche Ethnographique', *CORINTE* (website), 2006a, http://icar.univ-lyon2.fr/projets/corinte/recueil/demarche_ethnographique.htm; Groupe ICOR, 'Enregistrement des Corpus D'interaction', *CORINTE* (website), 2006b, http://icar.univ-lyon2.fr/projets/corinte/recueil/enregistrement.htm.

[14] Eric Laurier and Chris Philo, 'Natural Problems of Naturalistic Video Data', in *Video-Analysis Methodology and Methods, Qualitative Audiovisual Data Analysis in Sociology*, eds. Hubert Knoblauch, Bernt Schnetler, Jürgen Raab and Hans-Georg Seffner (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006), 183-192.

[15] Three videogame situations have been used here for the analysis: a man playing in his living-room to a videogame on his Wii console (*Tomb Raider Underworld*) with his girlfriend watching him; four friends (two women and two men) gathered in a living-room during an evening in order to play to a multi-player Wii game (*Super Mario Bros Wii*); lastly, eight friends (one woman and seven men), gathered for a LAN party during the afternoon in an apartment, playing at several multi-player computer games (*Unreal Tournament*, *CounterStrike*, *Starcraft II*).

[16] Abraham Moles and Elisabeth Rohmer, *Psychologie de L'espace* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998).

[17] Jean-François Staszak, ed., *Espaces Domestiques* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2001).
[18] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1958).
[19] Anolga Rodionoff, *Les Territoires Saisis par le Virtuel* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012).

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Hovig Ter Minassian, PhD in geography, is lecturer at the university François Rabelais of Tours (France).

Isabel Colón de Carvajal, PhD in language sciences, is lecturer at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon (France).

Manuel Boutet, PhD in sociology, is postdoctoral scholar (LUDESPACE research project).

Mathieu Triclot, PhD in philosophy, is lecturer at the university of Technology of Belfort-Montbéliard (France).

The Phenomenology of Video Games: How Gamers Perceive Games and Gaming

Benjamin Čulig, Marko Katavić, Jasenka Kuček and Antonia Matković

Abstract
Throughout history, the game phenomenon has been observed by scholars of various profiles. Today, the research focus is increasingly narrowing down from classic concepts of game and play to the relatively recent global phenomenon of video games. Numerous studies have pointed to a multitude of different conceptions of gaming and video games; therefore, one gets the impression that it is difficult to unambiguously define this seemingly understandable phenomenon. Following the phenomenological tradition and adopting the idea that each definition arises from subjective experience, we decided to conduct qualitative research with the aim of identifying the elements of video games that are universal and essential. For this purpose, we conducted focus groups and interviews on a maximum variation convenience sample of gamers. Focus group transcripts were coded using the open coding method and analysed as a whole, and the results were used to draft questions for semi-structured interviews. In the first stage, the interview transcripts were analysed using the in-vivo coding procedure, attempting to accurately record the original meanings ascribed to the phenomenon by gamers. At this level of generality, participants cited that by entering into the virtual world, they became absent from the real world as well as that they saw gaming as a hobby, means of relaxation and entertainment and a training ground for competition against each other and against themselves. In the second stage of the analysis the data underwent open coding procedure, which resulted in three major aspects of the video game definition: video game as a richly developed world, video game as a rule-bounded set of tasks or puzzles, and video game as a means of social interaction. Due to specificity of this type of research, the findings cannot be generalised on a larger scale, but can serve as a theoretical basis for future quantitative research.

Key Words: Video games, phenomenology, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, virtual world, story, competition, immersiveness, social interaction, entertainment.

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1. Introduction

The game phenomenon has been analysed by numerous authors, ranging from classics who mainly dealt with a broader concept of play to modern era researchers, who have narrowed the focus to the contemporary issue of video

games and gaming. Video games have become a tangible part of reality; the gaming industry is rapidly becoming one of the largest in the world, and millions of players engage in gaming on a daily basis.[1] In that sense, one could say that gaming is becoming an increasingly important activity in human life. Therefore, a growing interest of researchers for studying various aspects of video games and gaming makes a great deal of sense. Researchers pinpoint topics such as gamer mentalities, socio-demographic characteristics of gamers, as well as connections between genre preferences and other aspects of life.

The study by Kallio et. al. points to the existence of nine substantively different gamer mentalities, primarily based on a variety of subjective experiences of gaming. The authors conducted a survey, as well as three sets of interviews – structured, in-depth and focus groups – on a national sample of Finland, focusing their attention on gamers' everyday lives and their specific gaming experiences, with a view to finding out what gaming meant to them and which gamer mentalities they possessed. The identified mentalities were established upon three components – intensity of gaming, sociability of gaming, and games played. Under the intensity feature, authors took into account the length of playing sessions, regularity of playing and level of concentration during the game. Sociability feature entailed various spaces of sociable playing: physical space, virtual space and space outside both physical and virtual gaming situations. Finally, the component of games played included the means of gaming (devices and games themselves, genres and access to games). The authors concluded that mentalities were not mutually exclusive, but overlapping and interconnected.[2]

However, there are a number of completely different approaches to games. For example, Malaby specifies three inherent features of gaming as an activity: it is detachable from everyday life, safe and non-productive as well as enjoyable or fun (in a normatively positive sense).[3] Montola observes games as social constructs, and therefore concludes that games can be viewed as an intersubjective phenomenon, constructed individually by each participant.[4]

Classic definitions of games, the majority of them being expressed in terms of a much wider concept of play, also reflect a multitude of different interpretations. Caillois mentioned four key features of play – freedom, detachment, existence of rules and uncertainty,[5] whereas Huizinga believed that play had existed before culture and that all human activities were imbued with it.[6]

The foregoing implies a multitude of mutually incomparable sets of criteria for classifying the game phenomenon, which raises the question: is it possible to uniformly define the concept of game, i.e. video game, and consequently classify all its forms unambiguously? Following the tradition of phenomenological philosophy, embracing the idea that phenomena cannot be defined objectively, but each definition stems from the subjective experience of the phenomenon, it can be concluded that in order to be able to define a phenomenon conceptually and operationally, and obtain a comprehensive understanding of it, it is necessary to

extract its structural essence from various subjective perspectives of the phenomenon.[7]

Since there are many other authors whose approaches differ from the mentioned ones to a greater or lesser degree, one gets the impression that it is very difficult to produce an unambiguous definition of the seemingly understandable phenomenon. In our opinion, studying the multidimensional and multifaceted phenomenon of video games requires no fixed definition, but rather a phenomenological classification that may be connected with the players' attributes, psychological profiles, personal beliefs, etc. We believe that all those differing motivations which lead players into preference of different video game genres contain some universal components – elements of game that appeal to each player. This research is an attempt to identify those essential elements, with the aim of gaining a clearer insight into the video game phenomenon.

2. Method and Data Collection

This study applies the phenomenological approach in qualitative research, as described by R. H. Hycner: apart from exclusion of the researcher's personal experiences and preconceptions of the phenomenon (so as to begin the analysis completely open), this approach requires detailed interpretation of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon as well as meanings they ascribe to it, and finding a mutual element essential to all the accounts.[8] Following those guidelines, the study was conducted via direct communication with the gamers and documenting how they themselves understood the video game phenomenon. Since gamers' experiences are vital to the phenomenology of video games, it is important to treat them as co-researchers.[9] To that end, in the first phase of the research, we carried out focus groups which included detailed group conversations about video games, thus covering as much different views and experiences as possible. In the second phase, all the various views obtained through focus groups were listed and used as a basis for the design of semi-structured individual interviews.

The sample used in the study was a convenience sample of maximum variation. Based on previous research; the aim was to include as wide as possible range of gamers, mutually differing in genre preferences and gaming intensities, in order to obtain diverse gaming experiences. In the first stage, a screening questionnaire was constructed and distributed via online gaming forums, in order to collect a large pool of respondents and choose the most appropriate ones for participation in two focus groups. Based on the questionnaire results; 14 participants were selected. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed, with an attempt to keep all the nonverbal elements of communication in the transcript. In the subsequent step, the focus group data were used to create clusters of activities connectible with games as well as concepts designated as structural game elements. Both were incorporated into the protocol of semi-structured interviews. The interviews included five open questions:

1. What is a video game?
2. What does gaming with other people mean to you?
3. We are going to show you a few cards with various groups of activities written on each. Could you identify the similarities and differences between these activities and video games?

3a Meditation and prayer, carnivals and parades, religious ceremonies, celebrations
3b Martial arts, competitive sports, amateur and recreational sports, adrenaline/extreme sports
3c Crossword puzzles and quizzes, board games and card games, gambling, betting and games of chance; amusement parks
3d Driving a car or motorcycle, hobbies, travels and fieldtrips, learning, work, surfing the Internet
3e Acting, artistic creativity (painting, writing, playing musical instruments); consuming art (viewing pictures, visiting theatres, watching films, visiting concerts, reading books)
3f Sex
3g War

4. We are going to show you a few cards with different concepts written on each. Could you relate these concepts to video games?
   - Strong feelings; tactics; elaborated worlds and stories; balance; logic; waste of time; challenge; design quality; need; learning; rules; competition; playability

5. After everything we have discussed, could you please try to compose your own definition of video games and gaming, similar to a dictionary or lexicon entry.

The idea behind the interview design was to use the activities and concepts previously associated with video games by focus group participants as guidelines to encourage the interviewees to identify meanings associated with video games, without affecting the formation of their opinion, which was assured by the lack of secondary questions asking for examples or comparisons, as well as the lack of verbal and nonverbal communication with the interviewer. Ultimately, the entire interview was supposed to deviate from the structure written on the cards, which proved attainable.

Interview participants were selected according to the criteria of covering the extremes of gamer categories identified in previous research papers – nine

participants were selected from the initial pool. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, with an effort to keep all the nonverbal elements of communication in the transcripts.

Interview transcripts were analysed in three stages. In the first stage, the in-vivo coding procedure was used, with an attempt to document the meanings as accurately as possible, exactly as uttered by the participants. Doing so, all the possible meanings were taken into account, regardless of whether they fitted into our preconceptions of video games and gaming. What followed was the attempt of clustering the meanings into various thematic units, using the open coding procedure. Analysing the documented thematic units, we tried to identify the most prominent topics in every individual interview (those that were most frequently discussed and stood out as important). Those topics were singled out to serve as a basis for writing structural and thematic summaries of the interviews, trying to remain as faithful as possible to the original gamer interpretation. The final stage included a joint analysis of all the thematic units, with the aim of determining the most prominent ones. The collected data were classified into three groups according to the degree of generality: 1) Meanings which are essential, shared by the majority of participants and constitute the bulk of the data collected; 2) Meanings which comprise large thematic units, shared by a significant portion of gamers, but are not comprehensive 3) Meanings which comprise individual experiences and separate thematic units, and as such are not included in the essential part of the phenomenology.

3. Findings

Essential meanings ascribed to the video game phenomenon by gamers are related to the experience of gaming, as well as to the purpose of gaming as an activity. Thus, gamers reported that with an entry into a video game, the real world ceased to exist, and the gamer became absent and relocated into another world, a world that exists while there is a game. It should be noted that, although all the gamers described the experience of disconnection from the world, the reasons for transition into another world varied from participant to participant. Some players said that their disconnection from the world was related to the level of attention and involvement required by the game:

> While I was playing, I was completely absent... I mean concentration and everything. I'm not sure what form of meditation that is, but let's say that a man is a little bit focused and everything, so I can connect it with gaming in this way, in my own case. Say, I was completely absent; I experienced nothing but the game.

In other cases, the world is abandoned in order to enter the virtual world which offers more than can be achieved in the real world:

> I mean we all started like that, there was at least one character in those MMO-s that we played in such a way that we pretended we were something else, but I think we actually, that we want, the same as when driving a car, to pull it off... something we otherwise cannot, or... it's not conventional, or we are ashamed, or it may be conventional but we are ashamed anyway, so it's easier this way, in the anonymity of our little rooms... to pull it off.

Finally, some were abandoning this world to become involved in and fully experience another one:

> For me it's extremely important to start this whole journey on my own and discover the world, to have something happening around me, to have an interesting story, to literally feel that I'm discovering something on my own, that I'm influencing it and so on.

In certain situations, transition into new worlds overlapped with another essential concept of video game as a 'break.' Video game is a break from everyday life and reality, something we need in order to minimise the impact of the existing world, but is also an activity belonging to the area of free time. As put by a participant:

> Video games can give you a good idea, they can relax you, isolate you, simply create that space all of us are more and more missing because somehow, I think, with this globalization which made us constantly accessible... And today we are so accessible, networked, that we sometimes really need, at least I do, to isolate ourselves from the world. You know, I want the whole world to leave me alone, to have my phone turned off, to be in another world all alone, I want all the characters I come across to be here simply to entertain me and nothing else, and to rest myself from that everyday obligation of dealing with problems, participating and, you know, being present in society.

Furthermore, video games are primarily a competition. In some cases, it is a competition against oneself – a challenge posed to an individual player:

> ...I mean apart from the idea of comparing ourselves with others, what games can provide is individual competition either with oneself or with a goal one sets for oneself and, looking from this perspective, I find it positive, I mean when you're watching your own development, that can be... the same like sport practices, hobbies or anything else where you can compete with yourself, and where in my opinion this is motivating, I mean – you're constantly seeing your own progress, in a level or something, I mean, never mind what.

In other cases, video games serve as a training ground for competition between gamers' skills. It is easier to get organised and compete in a video game which is available globally, than in real life.

To all the participants, video games first and foremost represent fun. Video games cannot possibly imply work or a job – gamers reported that had they been forced to play every day, it would no longer be a video game. Video games serve entertainment and were created precisely for fun. According to a participant:

> Now, we're talking about devices that are intended for play. So, these are not the devices that are prepared for one to work on them, but can be also used for play, but you know, these devices are designed for fun, for play.

Finally, the participants reported that video games were a hobby, a social activity they engaged in (because they chose to do so, and not because they were forced to), which represented a particular skill and enabled making objective progress. Video games are consumed in free time, for the purpose of achieving pleasure.

On the second level of generality three essential aspects emerged. One aspect treats the video game phenomenon as a world to lose oneself in, with the developed story being the key element. The world must be logical and structured. The gamer must be offered many choices and is emotionally involved in the world. The world needs to be interactive in order to deepen the gaming experience, and in certain cases, it is essential that the world can be passed through fluidly, without being challenging, but being immersive. Another aspect treats the video game phenomenon as a rule-bounded set of tasks or puzzles – it is a certain goal, which one can set for oneself or it can be set by the game, and which needs to be achieved in an optimal way. For the purpose of solving problems, it is possible to develop tactics and strategies, and pleasure arises from successful problem solving and victory over the game mechanics. Finally, the third aspect of the phenomenon concerns the social sphere; video games exist only as a virtual world which may include rules and stories, can serve solving problems or participating in the story,

but are primarily a world of social interaction, which enables us to socialise when otherwise we could not.

It is worth mentioning that, at this level of generality, the vast majority of gamers explicitly separated the video game phenomenon from small, casual games, the most important feature of which is that they can be played 'brainless,' but still contain all the basic video game elements.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this study can largely be related to those of previous research cited in this chapter. The key difference is in the definition of essential features that are present in the video game phenomenon regardless of the differing gaming styles and interpretations. Such perception of games is certainly limited to gaming experiences of the participants in this study and cannot be generalised on a larger scale, but provides an interesting basis for further quantitative analysis and confirmation. Particularly interesting are the three aspects of the phenomenon on the second level of generality, where participants began to diverge in terms of understanding the phenomenon. The differences between those aspects can be seen as parallels with two modes of play by Caillois: *paidia* vs *ludus* – uncontrolled fantasy, entertainment, freedom versus ingenuity, skill, effort and patience.[10] Additionally, it is interesting to note that it was precisely fun that was one of the essential aspects of the video game phenomenon, as well as that most of the players associated gaming with free time. This finding is consistent with previous findings of quantitative research that we conducted where it was shown that precisely fun and 'killing time' comprised the strongest dimension in gamers' motivational structures.[11]

It should be mentioned that this study, as well as qualitative research in general, has certain limitations. First of all, the essence of the phenomenon found here is restricted to the phenomenon as seen by the group of interviewed participants. Considering the depth of the interviewing process and overlapping of some issues with the categories established in previous research and theory, we can conclude that the findings are satisfying, but cannot possibly be generalised as a universal rule. This study analysed the phenomenology of the game on the structural level, by encouraging players to deconstruct gaming and give their view on what games mean to them. It would be interesting to approach the phenomenology of games from the position of interpretative phenomenological analysis, treating players as professionals, and analysing their recalls of specific gaming experiences and emotions while playing as well as situational factors in the course of gaming itself.

Notes

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Benjamin Čulig works at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Zagreb, Croatia. He is specialised in methodology and scientific research in all the main fields of sociology. He teaches statistics, all types of survey methods and multivariate analysis. Recently, he has been preparing a new course: Sociology of game and gaming.

Marko Katavić is a graduate student at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Zagreb, Croatia.

Jasenka Kuček is a graduate student at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Zagreb, Croatia.

Antonia Matković is a graduate student at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Zagreb, Croatia.

Part 2

Gaming Practices and Culture

The Involvement of Mythology with Player Experience in MMOs

Michael Andreen

Abstract
The roots of mythology lie in the formation of human understanding. We take our fears, our hopes, our losses and our victories and exalt them, weaving them into the tales we pass down through the generations. The final, structured set of these tales for a given culture makes up that culture's mythology, and as we look back on any given mythos, we gain a new understanding of its values and principles. As we learn more of these stories, we often take them and update or borrow from them in a manner relevant to our current society. We can see this in a variety of modern media, ranging from reinvigorated Norse gods in Marvel comics to Hollywood blockbusters such as *Troy* or *Beowulf*. These stories ring true to use despite their age, and we seek them out time and time again to be drawn deeper into worlds steeped in millennia of storytelling. This chapter will examine the incorporation of mythology and lore into the narrative structure of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMOs), and how the depth of lore contributes to the player experience. Specifically, the chapter will investigate developer lore building and player-drive lore participation as they pertain to the classical formation of human mythology. It will further seek to understand the role of lore in the successful launch and sustainability of MMOs by looking at several high-profile games with varying levels of depth and public exposure.

Key Words: Lore, mythology, MMORPG, MMO, roleplay, narrative.

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Mythology and lore are vital parts of human culture, contextualising the world around us for generations yet to come. Joseph Campbell says of the formation of lore that

> The "grave and constant" in human suffering, then, leads – or may lead – to an experience that is regarded by those who have known it as the apogee of their lives, and which is yet ineffable. And this experience, or at least an approach to it, is the ultimate aim of all religion, the ultimate reference of all myth and rite.[1]

The patterns we develop from the need to understand our world serve as a social foundation, and we naturally build upon that foundation. In the online space of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMOs), we see this same effect both in the creation of the space by the developers, and in the social space driven by the players.

1. The Neuropsychology of Belief

The framework by which we believe has a very specific structure that enables us to engross ourselves in our entertainment worlds. Literary analyst Norman Holland notes in his neuropsychological approach to narrative that:

> Without movement or the impulse to act on what we are sensing (the narrative), we need not check the reality of what we might act toward, and we don't. If we don't know that we aren't going to act on a narrative, it doesn't matter whether it's real or not.[2]

This principle is the opposite of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief. Rather than turning off our disbelief, we believe everything that we see, and must disbelieve when appropriate. This process seems to be evolutionary by nature.

Evolutionary psychologist Satoshi Kanazawa's explanation of Error Management Theory and its relationship to survival clarifies the matter of exclusionary belief. The theory states that there are two types of errors we can make when inferring the consequences of a situation: a Type-I false positive, or a Type-II false negative. A Type-I error might occur if we heard a rustle in the bushes, assumed it was a tiger, and it turned out to be something innocuous. A Type-II error would be the assumption that the rustling was harmless when in reality it was a predator lying in wait. As Kanazawa puts it:

> The cost of a false-positive error is that you become paranoid ... the cost of a false-negative error is that you are dead ... obviously, it's better to be paranoid than dead, so evolution should have designed a mind that overinfers personal, animate, and intentional forces even when none exist.[3]

Kanazawa and Holland's observations in conjunction explain that our dedication to the lore of a fantasy world comes from an inherent need to believe for survival. Our minds even come equipped with the faculties to reinforce these beliefs in spite of error.

Kevin Dunbar of the University of Maryland conducted several studies in regards to just such cognitive processing. In one experiment, Dunbar examined the responses of students to varying types of data on a theoretical anti-depressant medication, and then presented each student with twenty different trials that either conflicted or reinforced the original data. During this process, he used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to measure brain activity. In another experiment, he presented students of varying physics training with a classic physics cognition test. The students watched videos of different sized objects falling at

both different and the same rate, and they were then asked to identify the correct video. Both cases produced similar results.

Dunbar discovered that people who find information that reinforces their preferred theories show higher levels of activation in areas of the brain associated with learning. The brain fortifies learned processes when it encounters concordant information. When confronted with conflicting information, the anterior cingulate cortex (A.C.C.) – which is associated with error detection – activated. The non-physics students cited the correct video as erroneous, where as those with training accurately showed error detection when viewing the differently falling objects. Surprisingly, in an extended version of the anti-depressant experiment, students still showed A.C.C. activation even after 96 trials of data negated their original information. Furthermore, in the physics-based trial, he also found that a number of the students unfamiliar with physics answered the question correctly, but the error centres of their brains still triggered, indicating that they did not fully believe or understand why the answer was correct.[4]

The two most poignant conclusions of Dunbar's experiments are that, broadly, 'participants are treating data that are inconsistent with their plausible theories in ways that are different from consistent information,' and specifically that 'data inconsistent with one's expectations are treated as errors and thus not easily incorporated into one's knowledge representation.'[5] If our belief structure is rooted in our brain's propensity to compensate for error, and our brains assess reality by information exclusion, then it would seem we are predisposed to believing in narrative fiction by nature as Holland predicted. Kanazawa's explanation bolsters Holland's point if we view it from the perspective of survival. Even though we believe narrative innately, the fact that we need not act upon a novel or film for survival might preclude us from actively checking for errors.

As a final complement to the neuropsychology of belief, narrative media has its own neurological impact. In a 2009 study, researchers from Washington University in St. Louis conducted fMRI scans on participants as they read lines of short narrative. The participants read their respective stories one word at a time with controlled delays between each word. The researchers found that, as the participants read specific words, the subject matter of those correlated with the parts of the brain that activated. Regions of the brain related to the definition of visual fields and that process spatial location activated when characters moved spatially.[6] Not only do our brains help us to accept and believe in fictional worlds, but they even attempt to simulate the experience of the actions within those worlds.

2. Lore of the World

Humans have been creating lore for longer than they have been writing. Rooted in our beliefs and our metaphorical capacity, our stories have passed through many mouths and taken on many meanings. Even today, we still create lore with determined speed, with every new film or video game creating a trove of history.

An article by The Telegraph's science correspondent Richard Gray traces some of the variants of the Little Red Riding Hood tale, discussing its morphology from culture to culture. In Iran, the little girl is a little boy, where as in China, the wolf is a tiger. Fundamental to all of these stories, however, are the core themes of mistrust and lurking danger.[7]

In Gray's article, Jack Zipes from the University of Minnesota says that:

> Little Red Riding Hood is about violation or rape, and I suspect that humans were just as violent in 600 BC as they are today, so they have exchanged tales about all types of violent acts ... tales relevant to our adaptation to the environment and survival are stored in our brains and we consistently use them for all kinds of reference points.[8]

This coincides with notions addressed by the neuropsychological view of belief while operating on a more practically applicable level of a fable's morality. There is meaning in the story because of the consistency and persistence of its message.

The schema into which Red Riding Hood fits is local in nature, describing a single metaphor with a single lesson. When we look at an entire mythos of a culture such as the Greeks, we see that the larger narrative is composed of multiple stories offering explanations of both mental and physical phenomena. Helios pulled the sun across the sky in his chariot, while Poseidon conducted the waves from the deep. The richness of the Greek's stories comes from the depth of their lore, the inspiration that lore gave to artists, and the resulting social impact. Lore both drives and is driven by society, and that is exactly why MMOs seek out the construction of a world rich in history and magic.

In an interview with Oli Welsh, Chris Metzen, senior vice president of creative development at Blizzard, explains World of Warcraft's (WoW) magnetism, calling the game 'a study of societal breakdown and ... why does hatred persist generationally?'[9] Indeed, in WoW's setting and inhabitants we find the same themes that we might find in any mythology addressing conflict between groups. The war between the orcs and humans, for instance, is a war of mistakes and misunderstanding rather than of good versus evil, but these mistakes shape the stories of players fighting with other players, and colour the lens through which the player views the game.[10]

Angel McCoy, one of the writers for Guild Wars 2, reinforces Metzen's point from a technical perspective:

> Writing for a game differs from every other type of writing ... it serves a practical purpose and is rarely just creative. Even the dialogue between NPCs may be there to guide or inform players.

> It's all there to build a cohesive imagining experience for players.[11]

Everything about the construction of lore in games is built around driving the player forward through the world in a believable fashion. In order to progress, players must eventually pursue the destruction of major figures in the world's history. Without such direct interaction with history, the player is removed from the larger narrative.

The neuropsychology of belief provides more insight into why such careful crafting could produce greater connection. We favour information that supports known knowledge patterns. It is likely no accident that the most successful MMO launches have come from intellectual properties already steeped in history. Ultima Online was the first MMO to reach 100,000 subscribers.[12] WoW blazed past Ultima with 240,000 copies sold in its first day.[13] In 2008, Age of Conan, set in the world of Robert E. Howard's Cimmerian adventurer, again broke MMO records with its 700,000 subscribers.[14] Warhammer Online shortly thereafter surpassed Age of Conan with 750,000 subscribers.[15] In 2011, Star Wars: The Old Republic claimed the title for best launch with over one million copies sold.[16] Within the last eight years, the largest breakout successes have come from properties with which large groups of people are familiar.

Ultimately, the world must come together in such a way that the player's mental responses create a sense of realism. Successful worlds do not necessarily demand a total belief that the world is real, but rather the world must be consistent enough to appear as a functional reality. Fantasy author R.A. Salvatore held such consistency sacrosanct in his creation of the MMO world Amalur. In an interview with Laura Parker, the associate editor of gamespot.com, he addresses his methodology:

> Why did some cultures succeed and others fail? Why did one thing work in part of society but fail in another? I tasked my team of writers on Amalur to ask these questions and to research different mythologies from around the world and imagine what the world would be like if some of these stories were actually true.[17]

In order to create a believable world, he drew directly on real-world mythologies. Forging lore is just as much an appeal to the mindset of the player as it is an attempt to generate a cohesive world. In this regard, using elements from established patterns of thought and belief make sense when trying to generate a new world; that is the very nature of folklore's evolutionary process.

3. Lore and the Player

For as much effort as the developers put into their stories, the worlds would be nothing without the players. Agency is of great concern, especially in MMOs where multiple people often compete for the same items and prestige. Chris Metzen calls Blizzard a 'Hero factory,'[18] and the term is accurate. Everyone gets to play the hero. What results is an often-strange mixture of interesting new ideas and narrative discrepancies stemming from the interaction between the players with each other, the lore, and the game's systems.

Until video games, we were largely observers of stories. With some exceptions, stories in art were put on the canvas, stories in writing put into books, and films set on a screen to watch. Now, we have the capacity to participate. This is particularly curious in regards to Holland's earlier stipulation that we are able to believe so readily in fiction because we do not have to act in it. With games, we act within the fiction, and with MMOs we do so with thousands of others in the same world. The MMO is a simulacrum of life, only it is of a life where everyone is a hero who must therefore have access to all the heroic trappings.

In WoW, defeating the Lich King on the challenging Heroic Difficulty earns the player the title 'Bane of the Fallen King' and potentially a weapon unique to the Heroic fight. Narratively, this makes the player a hero. Complications arise, however, when another player with the same achievements and weaponry appears before the first. From a mechanical standpoint, this scenario is like two baseball teams each claiming separate victories over the same third team. From a narrative standpoint, this is like two baseball teams both winning the same World Series and getting the same trophy in the same year. The vast number of players and player types make such a scenario practically an inevitability.

Player type greatly affects interaction with lore, as well as the generation of individualised content. An experiment conducted by Nick Yee attempted to refine a breakdown of player categories while recognising that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Yee identified ten subcategories housed within three overarching classifications: achievement, social, and immersion.[19] With the understanding that crosspollination of player types occur, the three master categories can reveal how players might generally interact with the world, and how their personally generated lore thus differs.

Achievement players will generate stories of accomplishment, will carry titles like the aforementioned Bane of the Fallen King, and they will likely see the majority of game content. Their stories, therefore, will carry the weight of moving the world's history forward. Social players will build group relationships, seeking the thrill of cooperation. They embrace the behavioural elements that lead to teaching newer players in the same fashion that folk wisdom passes from elder to youth. The experiences the world has imparted on the social player will serve to augment or detract from those who enter their social sphere. Most deeply engaged with the world's history are the immersive players. These players draw heavily

from their virtual surroundings, sometimes even adopting a full persona informed by the game world. Those who choose to act out this persona are called role-players, and entire communities grow out of this sort of digital theatre. Again, all degrees of crosspollination are possible according to Yee, so an achiever might be equally accomplished in the world as he is immersed.

Perhaps one of the best games to examine for the intersection of player types and immersion is Champions Online. The game is set in a comic book themed world and focuses heavily on character creation. Subscribers can choose from twenty-four archetypes that dictate the character's skillset, or they can build a custom character out of all the skills in the game. Avatar creation provides a massive variety of customisations for the hero's unique look, and character creation also provides a section for the player to write a publically visible backstory for the character. Every piece of this process is engineered to help immerse the player in the role of a superhero.[20]

In the developer blog for Champions Online, one entry discusses an early idea in regards to the power archetypes where the developers considered implementing bonuses for staying within an archetype as a guide for new players, but community feedback resisted this notion. The blog states 'Many people pointed to the "total customization" experience touted for Champions Online, and how making archetype distinctions effectively restricted power choices.'[21] The player base recognised the potential for personal involvement in their characters and rose up when it seemed they would lose some of their agency.

Though Champions Online illustrates the points of player involvement well, it is not the only game that offers role-playing experiences. MMOs such as WoW and Star Wars both offer servers designated for role-playing. Mobile game developer Tony Ventrice says this of role-playing: 'I think the distinction is this: we role-play for the opportunity to feel what it is like to have a different identity; in a way, to let the adopted identity dictate our choices.'[22] Acting in a collaborative space provides the uncertainty and fluidity of natural reaction absent from interactions with computer-controlled characters. The downside to this narrative freedom, however, is that everyone in the social space has it, and just as the achievers might encounter others who have duplicated their achievements, the role-players might find other stories that contradict their own.

Players in MMOs are more than just participants in games; they are active members of vast social circles built upon years, often decades, of history building and personal investment. The landscape of the MMO is, in its own way, analogous to that of reality, producing its own historical events and lore that lodge themselves in the MMO cultural consciousness, acting as a collective framework that current and past players build, and within which future players will make their way. As such, these worlds must fit within our capacity to believe in them consistently because they are under the scrutiny of players not just as consumers or agents of

casual play, but as people with a broad spectrum of involvement in an ever-growing, virtual society.

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Michael Andreen received his B.A. in Literature from the University of Texas at Austin, an M.F.A. in Arts & Technology with a focus in sound in video games from the University of Texas at Dallas, and is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Texas at Dallas. His area of research involves the role of cognitive and sensory processes in the development and reception of immersive virtual worlds. He currently teaches Sound Design at the University of Texas at Dallas, and has contributed game design, vocal work, sound design, and musical composition to some of the university's grant projects.

It's Just a Game, or Is It?: A Study of Racism in Game and Character Design

Steven Billingslea II

Abstract
Prejudice in videogames can be an uncomfortable subject to deal with. The idea that such a detestable issue could taint not just the game, but also the medium itself, makes some gamers very uneasy. With today's current outlook on prejudice in America, some gamers prefer to ignore accusations of racism and stereotypical characters in games, telling critics that 'it's just a game' and that they are 'reading too much into it.' The view that prejudice in videogames is fake because it does not target real people can cause gamers to believe that representations of cultures steeped in negative stereotypes is just a part of their world and that others would just have to learn to 'deal with it' or decide to quit playing. While I believe this approach is harmful, it is not surprising to see a blind eye turned to the subject. Dealing with such an issue would mean taking a look at the cause, and in effect, possibly changing the way videogames and the characters within are developed. This chapter aims to look at where prejudice in videogames, most notably games centered on war, crime and battle, and character design comes from, why it is such an issue, what type of effects it has on players, and what possible solutions there may be to resolve the issue.

Key Words: Racism, gaming, cultural issues, experience, gaming, behaviour, social, game design, character design.

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1. Introduction

Before we can begin to analyse the issue of prejudice in videogame and character design, we should first find a foundation that most games are built upon. Games, at their core, are centered on conflict and achieving a goal. From the start of the game, a player is given a formal set of rules and a goal to achieve. In many cases, conflict arises when there is an obstacle preventing the player from reaching that goal. The conflict in videogames arouses player effort and works to keep the player immersed, forcing them to focus on the issue at hand. This conflict can be between a player and a computer/system or a player and another player. In both cases, the player and the opponent have conflicting goals and must work against each other to achieve said goals. To reinforce the idea that games are centered on conflict, I point to Dr. Jesper Juul's definition of *game* where he states that:

> A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values,

> the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.[1]

Dr. Juul also states that 'The notion of conflict entails (conflicting) goals; the notion of goals seems to entail the possibility of not reaching the goal, and thereby also a conflict.'[2]

In the case of modern videogames, especially those centred on virtual wars, crime or battle, conflict is war and the end goal is eventually winning the war, or at least gaining the upper-hand. For developers, and in turn the players that play their games, this can create a mindset where a human enemy is no longer a person and instead an obstacle to overcome. Enemies are usually stripped of most of their humanity (i.e. compassion, reason), made to look noticeably different than the player's avatar, and given motives and values that are foreign to the player. This serves to dehumanise the enemy character and thus make the player's task of killing them easier.

2. Deep Rooted Cultural Messages

This is where things start to become a bit muddled. If a developer is choosing to use another culture as a background for their enemy characters, dehumanising these characters can broaden the reach of negative racial stereotypes and shape how these cultures are viewed. While it may seem natural and harmless to place the Native American Apache tribe as enemies in the western themed game *Gun*, the role of the characters becomes slightly more uncomfortable when you see them portrayed as savage, animalistic men who attack without provocation. By portraying the enemy characters in this way the developers of *Gun*, whether consciously or not, reinforce the stereotype that Native American tribes were 'savage warriors, screaming throughout the game, as a sign of both an animal instinct and a determination to kill.'[3]

Of course, that is not to say that videogame developers invented the idea of dehumanising an enemy. No, that idea has existed as long as humankind, allowing cultures and communities to go to war and kill without mercy. It is a common tactic used by military forces and leaders to rally troops against other human beings. From the Crusades, to Nazi Germany, to the Cold War, every society involved in a conflict has used this tactic to motivate troops to kill opposing forces.[4] This tactic is not only used on troops; propaganda in the form of posters, movies and even videogames has been used to convince civilians that an opposing culture is the enemy. This type of speech can 'affect our thoughts and behavior' and cause 'hostility and aggression, not coexistence and compromise.'[5] Dehumanisation is a learned behaviour that is taught throughout our lives by our leaders and community and could have a direct influence on a development team's view towards outside cultures. Lessons learned, 'harmless' jokes heard, and

cultural ideals that were passed down while growing up definitely have an impact on how we view the world as adults and while they may seem 'harmless' or 'good natured' to one group, they can be totally demoralising to another.

This leads to the issue of understanding how deep rooted cultural messages can affect the development of a videogame. In the case of modern, American-developed videogames based on war, these cultural messages appear in the form of global policing, Caucasian-dominated casts, and an overwhelming desire to quash any enemy that would oppose American ideals. This is primarily due to the demographic that makes up development studios in America, which is predominately Caucasian and male,[6] and the willingness to pass along cultural ideals learned over their lifetimes. Seeing as these themes permeate our culture, especially during wartime when there is a national enemy to focus on, shaking them can be difficult. These cultural messages can become more visible when a predominately Caucasian development team is tasked with creating a game or characters centred on a culture they may not be inherently familiar with.

In such cases you can end up with titles like *True Crime: Streets of LA*, a game in which players assumed the role of Chinese-American police officer, Nick Kang, and were tasked with the order of taking down ethnic gangs and cleaning up the '"other" side of Los Angeles.'[7] While the game made strides by casting a Chinese-American character as the lead, Dr. Dean Chan noted that the game displayed 'Problematic sub-text of ethnic or diasporic community self-surveillance and self-disciplining.'[8] In a sense, it felt like the developers were saying that the idea of policing stereotypical ethnic groups is fine as long as it is carried out by a minority. The enemies you fight are either Chinese or Russian and one portion of the game even has you dealing with dark magic and dragons from Chinese mythology. Normally this would not seem out of place in a videogame but considering that the plot was centred on the more realistic approach of an undercover police officer trying to infiltrate a crime syndicate, it seems odd that the developers would waste their time trying to stuff an eastern themed dragon into the game. Scenes like this reaffirm the fact that you are not dealing with the 'normal' side of LA and you are not tasked with 'normal' police work. By including the mysticism that can stem from negative stereotypes, the game reinforces that this culture is meant to appear way different than the typical American culture. This sentiment is affirmed Dr. Chan, noting that the game 'pro-actively cultivates a sense of relative cultural "otherness" to the point of deleterious effect.'[9]

While I do not believe the developers of *True Crime* meant any harm, I do think a lack of cultural knowledge and sensitivity can have potentially harmful effects. A developer's genuine desire to accurately portray a culture in their game, while laden with good intentions, can result in the proliferation of negative stereotypes. In many cases, their 'accurate portrayal' is usually based on the developers' perception of that culture as opposed to culturally relevant studies. This perception is then relayed through videogames, as well as other forms of

media, to consumers who may take it as an accurate portrayal of another culture. This is the point where potential harm can be inflicted.

3. Negative Psychological Effects

Studies have shown that stereotypes portrayed by various forms of media have a substantial effect on people's views of other cultures. In a study on racial stereotypes, Caucasian participants were shown either images of aggressive Black males from videogames or images of positive Black role models. This was followed up by a study in which the participants were asked to evaluate a website for a political candidate. The candidate was shown as either Caucasian or African-American and participants were asked to grade the candidate's political capability. The study revealed that participants exposed to the images of aggressive Black males from videogames rated the African-American candidate as less favourable and capable than the Caucasian candidate. Those who were shown images of positive Black leaders did just the opposite of their counterparts.[10] Studies like this show that there is cause for concern when dealing with stereotypical characters in videogames, as these portrayals have the ability to affect a players outlook on other cultures.

Negative stereotypes in videogames can also have an effect on how a player sees their own culture. In fact, some players who identify themselves as not Caucasian actually prefer to play as Caucasian characters because it 'makes the game feel more normal.'[11] It would seem that by making most of the main characters Caucasian (84.95%) and placing the majority of minority characters in videogames in supporting roles;[12] videogames have built a scenario in the virtual world where it is more 'normal' to be White than anything else. That is, of course, as long as you are not playing a game set in a run-down, urban environment. In that case, the player character is much more likely to be a minority.[13]

Games set in urban environments can go a long way in reinforcing the idea that impoverished neighbourhoods are an unsafe place to be. Rundown areas filled with broken-down cars, busted windows, and accompanied by ambient sounds that include gunshots in the distance can offer the perception that simply going near this part of town can bring you harm. The fact that they are usually populated by African-American and Latino characters also does not help the negative connotations already associated with the people living in these environments.[14] On one hand, developers are looking to recreate a popular theme in media to tell a compelling story in their game. On the other, those same developers are reinforcing a negative image of a culture that has already been shown in a negative light by other forms of media. While the scenario may be perfect for the story that is being told, the danger lies in the setting being taken as an authentic portrayal of life in these environments. At that point, the game can become a source for negative ideas on race and culture.

4. Reaction to Criticism

The discussion and debate over these subjects in videogames certainly is not new, but it is worth noting the hostility that can arise when prejudice in games is talked about in a public space. Claims that stereotypes and prejudice could be an issue in games are generally met with a negative response from gaming communities. With comments on forums suggesting that players should not 'read into every stupid detail looking for a social issue that doesn't exist'[15] or insinuating that the member who brought the topic up is merely trying to stir up trouble, it becomes fairly obvious that the issue provokes defensive mechanisms as opposed to thoughtful discussion. Unfortunately, these defensive mechanisms seem more intent to brush the issue under the rug instead of attempting to deal with it. This brings up the question as to why the mere mention of the issue on gaming forums can incite such hateful responses.

It has been said that the current dominant view on prejudice, at least amongst Caucasians, is that it is not as big as a problem as it used to be and that overall Caucasians are more tolerant now than ever before.[16] The lack of public displays of prejudice is the basis for this belief, as the use of prejudiced language in private generally is not seen as a problem. With videogames, characters are represented by digital avatars and thus can present a disconnect for some players when it comes to prejudice. Because players generally play their videogames in a private space, they could see prejudiced language as harmless because they are not actually targeting a real person, just an avatar. In a sense, prejudice in the virtual space may not be seen as 'real' by players because they do not see actual people being affected. Unfortunately, the affects of this mindset can be seen in public discussions on gaming forums, where some go as far to say that prejudice in games is 'only obvious if you look for it.'[17] Because the issue is such a hot-button topic the defense of their favorite medium becomes more important than discussing the effects of stereotypical characters.

Of course, criticism is not always met with hate-filled vitriol, as some gamers paraphrase the videogame's story, or lore, as an explanation for why a certain character appears the way they do. In the case of *World of Warcraft*, the subject of stereotypical characters has been broached many times. The trolls, a playable race in the game, have been noted to 'draw upon modern Western stereotypes about Caribbean, South American, and African blacks'[18] while the human faction in the game features Caucasians as the primary race, with very few NPCs that represent other races. Defenders of these stereotypes note that in *World of Warcraft*'s lore, Humans were descendents of an ancient race known as the Vrykul. Due to this race living in the cold lands of Northrend, their skin was pale and thus their descendents skin was pale.[19] Because humans in Warcraft are a relatively young race at 15,000 years of existence, some gamers speculate that evolution has not had time to work towards different skin tones depending on environment. As for the stereotypes exhibited by the troll race, one player noted that 'Each race in WoW is based off a

Culture somewhere in the world we do live in, it isn't Racism it's just useing (sic) what is familiar without making everyone the same.'[20] While I do not think it was Blizzard's intention to harm anyone with characters rooted in cultural stereotypes, I think it is worth noting that it is a subject that has been brought up multiple times and that perhaps their choice of character traits and words for the descriptor of said races should have been more thought out.

5. Possible Solutions

With prejudice being rooted so deeply across many cultures, it is difficult to perceive a way to fix the issues affecting game and character design today. Solutions become cloudier when you consider that 88.5% of game developers are male; with 83.3% being Caucasian and all of them being between the ages of 20 and 40.[21] There is the theory that 'creators of media simply make media that reflect their own identity'[22] and if that is the case, diversification could be the answer to seeing fewer stereotypes in games. Game development camps for underprivileged children at an early age could sway them to choose game development as a career path later in life. Introductory game development courses in middle schools and high schools could also increase the likely-hood of a more culturally diverse game development environment. With fresh new faces and ideas, we could see a movement away from blatant stereotypes and towards more diverse characters in games.

Another possible solution is more cultural awareness in game development studios. If writers and developers spent some more time researching the cultures they were using as a basis for their characters and environments then I believe we would see fewer instances of stereotypes. This has been the case in several games already, with development studios calling in historical and cultural advisors to help with the development of their games. Titles like *Assassins Creed 3* benefitted from this by hiring Thomas Deer, a cultural liaison officer at the Kahnawake Language and Cultural centre. Mr. Deer's job was to judge the 'overall cultural sensitivity of the game to ensure that nothing is culturally offensive or inappropriate.'[23] This practice turned out to be effective as Deer was able to help make some changes to the game to increase its historical accuracy all the while making the game less offensive to its Native American users. More instances of this practice could have a positive effect on the industry and make games as a whole more appealing to minority groups.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the issue of prejudice in games and character design is not an easy thing to fix. Not only is it difficult to pinpoint instances of actual prejudice, it is also hard to argue against the idea of free speech. Videogames, while more widely accessed now than ever before, are still a creative medium and deserve the freedom to tell the stories they would like to tell without restriction. However, as

the industry continues to grow and reach more and more people and as demographics morph, it will become increasingly important for developers to avoid stereotypical characters and game environments. My hope is that eventually there will be more diverse characters that a broader range of players can connect with on a personal level, more diverse environments that represent cultures in a more positive way, and ultimately, there will be better gaming experiences for a larger group of people.

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Steven Billingslea II is an independent developer and adjunct professor from Dallas, Texas. When he is not spending time with his wife and their three dogs, he is working to improve his skills in game development, writing and making craft beer.

Exploring Experimental Video Gaming as a 'Body without Organs'

Corné du Plessis

Abstract
In *A Thousand Plateaus*, among other texts, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari advance the value of producing a 'body without organs' which can offer a domain in which deterritorialisation of existing concepts can occur. Accordingly, the latter process can potentially lead to the formation of new experiences, which open up new possibilities for thought, by differing from those of tradition, insofar as they are active and creative instead of merely descriptive or representational. In this regard, Deleuze valorises certain experimental aesthetic products – such as the paintings of Francis Bacon – for their capacity to impel us toward new thought. Although experimental video gaming often employs comparably innovative features, it is potential to approximate a 'body without organs' has seldom been investigated. In the interest of addressing this deficit, this chapter will explore the extent to which certain experimental video games may operate as deterritorialising works of art that break free of the tropes of representational art, and pursue new 'lines of flight' toward spaces of radical creative alterity. Increpare's *Slave of God* will be focused upon as a 'body without organs' that affects players at multiple levels, not only by rending old assemblages in relation to video games, but also through problematising the familiarity of a dance club, via an interrogation of the associated concept of shared or universal experience. This will be done with a view to appraising the potential of such experimental video games to provide a space for creative and complexity thinking, thereby affecting life itself.

Key Words: Body without organs, affect, deterritorialisation, experimental gaming, Francis Bacon.

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Video games, like all forms of art, have the ability to produce 'affects,' which should not be interpreted as mere feelings, but rather as new experiences that are presented as 'open' domains of exploration, requiring active participation and creative thinking.[1] In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981) Gilles Deleuze explores the manner in which Francis Bacon's art produces affects by approximating a 'body without organs,' which, in relation to art, can possibly be understood as a loosely organised, 'deterritorialised' body (it is important to note that Deleuze's use of the word 'body' includes not only living bodies, but also non-living material things, such as works of art). The body without organs is undoubtedly one of Deleuze and Guattari's most complex concepts, thus I will attempt to explain it through the analysis of specific paintings and video games,

simultaneously showing how this concept might invigorate video games as a form of critical art. Initially, I will examine Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1650) – a work of art that can be viewed as a 'body of organisation,' which denotes the opposite of a body without organs, since it employs rigid organising principles based on predetermined concepts. Not only will an analysis of a painting that manifests as a body of organisation help to understand the body without organs as a concept, but it will also clarify why such works of art, which include the majority of mainstream video games, fail to direct the mind towards *new* thought. Subsequently, I will analyse Francis Bacon's *Study of Velázquez's 'Portrait of Pope Innocent X'* (1953) – a response to Velazquez's painting – which, according to Deleuze, is an apt example of a painting manifesting as a 'body without organs,' which problematises existing concepts, while simultaneously producing affects that encourages critical and creative engagement. Finally, this analysis will be extended to a particular video game, Increpare's *Slave of God* (2012), which could be viewed as a possible 'body without organs' that displays many of the affective qualities that are present in the paintings of Bacon, and could point the way for a form of gaming that opens up domains for new thought.

Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* is an oil on canvas portrait that is viewed by many artists and critics as one of the finest portraits ever painted. However, Velázquez's painting is an example of a body of organisation, since it assumes the form of representational art – the attempt of reflecting the 'real' as perceived through generalised human perception. According to historical accounts by Velázquez's contemporaries, this portrait is an extremely accurate representation of the Pope, capturing not only his features, but also his posture and facial expression. Furthermore, the Pope is represented in a position of great power – seated upright on the Papal throne (a symbol of religious sovereignty), garbed in the symbolic Papal attire, with a stern, almost regal, expression and a determined look in his eyes. Each symbol has a largely predetermined meaning that can be understood in relation to a specific context, and merely reproduces established conceptions concerning the particular Pope and his disposition. Throughout his project Deleuze undermines this kind of representation, since it 'cannot help us to encounter the world as it appears in the flow of time and becoming.'[2] Representation such as this relies on general and homogenous concepts, fixed identities and a stable reality. Thus, not only is it a surface-level portrayal of reality, but it also inhibits the creation of the uniquely 'New.'

As I suggested earlier, the majority of mainstream video games can also be classified as representational art. Similar to Velázquez's painting, these games merely reflect established conceptions of reality, thereby perpetuating the dominant discourses of society and reducing the affective quality of the art. Perhaps the best example of this can be found in Maxis' *The Sims* series (2000-2012) – a video game series that practically mimics the contemporary consumer lifestyle. *The Sims* employs a graphical approach that attempts to re-present reality as experienced

through human perception. From the virtual characters, to the buildings and even the consumer products, the graphical style mirrors the 'real' world that we experience on a daily basis, with literally no attempts at artistic experimentation. In terms of gameplay, the gamer is tasked with maintaining the happiness level of his/her virtual character, or Sim, by balancing work, social life and consumption in the appropriate manner. If the player manages to achieve the appropriate balance, the Sim stands a chance of gaining a promotion at work and, in turn, receives a higher income that can be used on social activities and the consumption of virtual products. This is the extent of the gameplay in *The Sims* – not only do you purchase and consume the game itself, but you also replicate these patterns of consumption by controlling the virtual characters' mundane lives. A very important implication to note is the extent to which members of Western society are imbricated within consumer culture: *The Sims* is the bestselling computer game of all time, with over 119 million copies sold in the franchise, arguably due to its surface level re-presentation of consumer discourse – achieving autonomy and happiness through mindless consumerism.

According to Deleuze, a body without organs can oppose bodies of organisation by deterritorialising the commonly accepted homogenous values and meanings that would usually be perpetuated through a body of organisation, and, in turn, it can offer new 'lines of flight' that range from new concepts and experiences to complete new modes of living. Thus, a body without organs replaces fixed meanings and values with potential meanings and values, thereby encouraging creativity, experimentation and complexity thinking over mere interpretation. In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari provide the following suggestion on how to produce a body without organs:

> Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialisation, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there… have a small plot of new land at all times.[3]

In this relatively complicated quotation Deleuze and Guattari are essentially proposing experimentation as the means to approximate a body without organs. This means that in order for the artist to create a body without organs, he/she will have to experiment with new assemblages, determined by the materiality and internal-laws of the particular art form, that aim at pushing the art form towards its potential, rather than merely reproducing the tried and tested. In many ways, the paintings of Francis Bacon exemplify the manner in which to approach experimentation as an artistic process. Central to Bacon's approach is 'chance,' a feature that is integral to experimentation itself. To start with, Bacon's unique tendency to use the 'unprimed' (backside) side of the canvas not only gives the

colours a coarse texture, but it also prevented him from cleaning or washing off any of the paint. Once a line was painted, or a colour used, it remained on the canvas, forcing Bacon to work with it or to scrap the painting completely. This also meant that the direction his paintings followed were not always determined by him as the artist, but were often dictated by the chance of a brushstroke.

However, the most important feature of Bacon's technique is that he moved beyond figuration and representation. Instead of representing surfaces and painting recognisable subjects with fixed meanings – a task that has practically been perfected in photography and cinema – Bacon paints 'Figures,' which Deleuze describes as 'the sensible form related to a sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system... Sensation is the opposite of the facile and the ready-made, the cliché, but also of the "sensational", the spontaneous, etc.'[4] For this reason, Bacon's paintings cannot accurately be described in words – being pure sensations that can only be experienced, they are beyond the intelligible. In *Study of Velázquez's 'Portrait of Pope Innocent X,'* Bacon paints his own version of Pope Innocent X, which, at first glance seems almost nothing like Velázquez's masterpiece: A ghost-like, translucent figure being pulled down into what seems more like an electric chair than the Papal throne. The stern, regal features of the face are replaced by a mostly featureless head that is clearly screaming – the mouth more of an abyss than an orifice. The passionate reds that represent life in the original have been replaced by purple and black.

Deleuze provides two reasons why this painting can be viewed as a body without organs. Firstly, instead of painting the sensational – a representation of the horror at which the Pope screams – Bacon paints the sensation, which, in this case could arguably be horror, frustration, or the scream itself. Not only are the eyes of Bacon's Pope severely deformed, but the curtain that appears in the background of Velázquez's portrait has now moved to the front of the Pope. This is not only a means of isolating the Pope, but also 'the way in which the Pope himself sees nothing, and screams *before the invisible*. Thus neutralized, the horror is multiplied because it is inferred from the scream, and not the reverse.'[5] Secondly, instead of representing reality on a surface level, Bacon attempts to paint the unseen forces that shape and affect bodies. Hence the wraith-like body and distorted features of the Pope. This is also the reason why the torturous chair seems to be pulling the Pope down and inwards, as well as the reason for the isolating curtain – they represent forces instead of everyday objects. Importantly, there are no fixed meanings to be discovered; 'as a spectator, I experience the sensation only by entering the painting, by reaching the unity of the sensing and sensed,'[6] or, put differently, the spectator can only sense and make sense of the painting by creatively and experimentally engaging with it. In other words, Bacon's *Study of Velázquez's 'Portrait of Pope Innocent X'* operates as a body without organs that can, potentially propel the mind towards new and creative thought, since the observer is forced to make sense of the painting him/herself.

While it may be argued that certain mainstream video games can be considered, at least during certain moments, as bodies without organs, the most practical examples can be found within the genre of experimental games. Increpare's *Slave of God* (2012) presents a 'scrambled' simulation of a dance club – arguably constructed as forces rather than representations – in which the player is required to experiment with semi-recognisable objects and contorted human figures in order to progress. In terms of graphical design, *Slave of God* resembles Bacon's paintings in multiple ways: deformed stick-like bodies, featureless faces, an intense use of colours that seem to shift and change as the player turns the camera, etc. Integral to the visual style is the sound, which consists of different overwhelming songs that share a rhythm with the shifting colours, objects and figures. Thus, as was the case in Bacon's painting, instead of re-presenting a dance club through a lucid perspective in which all the figures and objects are clearly identifiable, *Slave of God* presents it as forces and sensations. In many ways the senses, especially sight and sound, are bombarded, undoubtedly causing a sense of disorientation. Through the shifting colours and writhing figures the music becomes not only audible, but also visible, almost felt, as a penetrating force. Numerous other sensations also become visible and audible, such as the sense of isolation, presented through a change in music accompanied by visibly encroaching walls, which is experienced when the player moves to a solitary corner; or the sensation of physical attraction, presented as an intense play of colourful lines and heart beats, when the player 'connects' with a figure on the dance floor. One of the most dominant forces present in the game is the force that keeps the player confined to the club. At first there is a sense of freedom and exploration while moving about the colourful environment, with corridors and open spaces trailing off on all sides. However, the illusion is quickly shattered when you discover that this is merely a 'trick of the senses,' and that each corridor and open space leads to a dead end of changing colours. In fact, the only objective in the relatively short game seems to be to somehow escape the pervasive space of the dance floor.

Furthermore, in terms of gameplay, instead of giving you specific tasks and instructions, *Slave of God* requires you to experiment with the environment and its objects in order to 'progress.' Employing typical first-person camera controls, you have to move around the club and interact with specific figures and objects. For example, in order to eventually bring the night to an end, you need to establish a 'connection' with one of the figures on the dance floor, which entails moving about the dance floor while continuously keeping the said figure in your line of sight. Although this sounds fairly straight forward, it is the sensations presented by the game that affects you during this activity – a change in music and a spiralling of scenes, accompanied by lines (possibly presenting sight) and a beating heart that phases in and out of view. After finishing this 15-20 minute game, and being greeted by the rising sun as you finally escape the club, you almost feel a sense of fatigue, as well as relief, probably brought about by the constant sensual

bombardment. There are many more sensation-based encounters such as these, but due to the limited scope of the chapter, they cannot be explored.

The parallels between Slave of God and Bacon's painting are quite apparent, but how can a game such as this propel us towards new thought? Although there are multiple answers to this question, I will focus on the way in which it can affect our conception of shared or universal experience. Think of a popular representation of a dance club in which all meanings are immediately clear, such as in a film or mainstream video game. Such a representation can create the impression that we all share a universal experience of a dance club, thereby not only denying the direct sensation, but also denying different, unique and singular experiences. On the other hand, *Slave of God* provides us with exactly the opposite – instead of representing the universal experience of a dance club, it gives us a direct, singular experience, which is open to interpretation, thus turning the very concept of shared or universal experience on its head. One only needs to turn to the public's reception of the game to see how true this statement actually is: some gamers describe it as 'a night at the club on acid,' or 'being drunk or high at a club,'[7] others as 'a déjà vu experience in which you can touch the vibrations and bass of the music,'[8] while others describe the experience as 'weird,' 'unsettling' and even 'nauseating.'[9] All these examples point to the same conclusion: for each gamer *Slave of God* is a unique experience that they are forced to grapple with, in terms of both gameplay and content.

In conclusion, I am not suggesting that all video games should mimic *Slave of God*'s extreme visual and gameplay approach, but that they should attempt, if only at times, to approximate a body without organs and experiment with the digital landscape that is on offer. Not only can such a movement rejuvenate video games as a form of art, but it can also allow it to achieve its potential as a power that can affect thinking and, in turn, life itself.

Notes

[1] In *Negotiations* (1995) Deleuze defines affects as 'Becomings that spill over beyond whoever lives through them.'

[2] Deleuze posits that life is in a perpetual state of becoming, which should be understood as becoming as all there is without ground or foundation – it does not mean valuing becoming over being, but completely doing away with the opposition. Adrian Parr, ed. *The Deleuze Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 227.

[3] Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: University of Minesota Press, 2005), 161.

[4] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Baon: The Logic of* Sensation, trans. Daniel W. Smith (New York: Continuum, 2004), 34.

[5] Ibid., 38.
[6] Ibid., 35.
[7] 'Slave of God Comment Section', Increpare Games, accessed 9 May 2013, http://www.increpare.com/2012/12/slave-of-god/.
[8] Carla Ellison, 'Wot I Think: Slave of God', Rock, Paper, Shotgun, 4 January 2013, http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2013/01/04/slave-of-god-review/.
[9] 'Slave of God Comment Section'.

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Corné du Plessis is a lecturer and Doctoral student in Philosophy at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. His current area of research is radical hermeneutics and digital art.

Funny Games: Understanding Videogames as Slapstick and the Experience of Game-Worlds as Shared Cultural References

Ben Hudson

Abstract
Videogames can be comedies that are amusing as a result of artistic choice, but they can also be seen as artifacts: objects (or virtual objects) that have their own intrinsic man-made qualities that are often unintentionally funny or can be exploited for comic value. Players experience videogames by interacting with an imperfect simulation – virtual worlds pre-defined by rules and boundaries that govern the player's ability to express their ideas and individuality. The virtual environment is therefore immersive, yet incongruous with the experience of reality. This chapter will examine this incongruity as a potential source of humour. By embodying avatars and inhabiting virtual realities, it will be suggested that individuals must confront what Bergson terms a '*mechanical inelasticity*... where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliableness of a human being.'[1] This chapter will look at examples of online gaming culture, from shooters such as Valve's Counter-Strike (2000) to experimental modifications such as Dean Hall's *Arma 2* 'mod' *DayZ* (2012), where communities of players have found comic ways to utilise artificially limited ranges of expression and draw on the game world as a shared reference-point for humour. Fan-made internet memes and 'Machinima' proliferate videogame-based humour, lampooning videogame tropes and logic for an audience familiar with their subjects, but discussion will also include the impact of videogame slapstick in popular culture, looking at the work of comedians such as Dara O'Briain and Seann Walsh who have recently parodied videogame content in their acts. Lastly, with reference to the practice as research presentation Ben Hudson, Live in Virtual Reality (2009), a Stand-up Comedy performance hosted in Sony's online social network PlayStation Home, this chapter will examine the potential for virtual spaces to act as venues for comedy performance.

Key Words: Slapstick, videogames, machinima, technology, stand-up comedy, humour, internet, meme, virtual reality.

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1. Tripping over Slapstick Theory

Why is a man slipping on a banana skin funny? In his essay *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Henri Bergson argues that it is because the man is forced into behaving in an inelastic, automated manner.

> Through a lack of elasticity, through absent-mindedness, and a kind of physical obstinacy: *as a result, in fact, of rigidity or of momentum*, the muscles continued to perform the same movement when the circumstances of the case called for something else.[2]

In Bergson's view, for the survival of our species, human beings have evolved to remain flexible and adaptable. Machines are rigid, dead, objects that cannot adapt to their circumstances in the same way as a living creature and therefore, when people act in a mechanical fashion, it is somehow *against nature*. Not threatening, but anomalous. In order to make a social gesture acknowledging a behaviour that should not be encouraged, laughter is the body is chosen response. This explanation would seem to chime with Mary Douglas' assertion that joking is a 'temporary suspension of the social structure;' an act of establishing 'consensus'[3] in a social group by pointing out some recognisable folly. In addition, Douglas categorises Sigmund Freud's notion of jokes being a release of repressed libido or anti-social emotions as harmonious with Bergson's claims. For both, writes Douglas, joking represents an 'attack on control.'[4]

This type of gag-structure is typical of slapstick performance. The banana peel slip is used as the opening pratfall that instigates the infamous pie fight in Laurel and Hardy's *Battle of the Century* (1927),[5] though the pratfall itself has been attributed to 'Vaudeville comedian "Sliding" Billy Watson.'[6] In fact, the act of falling, or the 'pratfall,' was itself practiced as an art-form. Lupino Lane, the Music Hall, theatre and film performer, dedicates a chapter to 'Funny Falls,' in his book *How to Become a Comedian*, writing 'the "business" that makes the fall funny also makes it dangerous, for the fall must give the appearance of hurting the performer.'[7]

Lane's advice introduces another element crucial to the understanding of slapstick performance; the idea that something painful or malevolent must befall the subject of the joke. Consequently, it is worth remembering that some of the very earliest attempts to understand comedy attribute it to an aggressive impulse or a feeling of superiority over another individual. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle describes comedy as 'an imitation of people who are worse than average.'[8] In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes suggests that laughter is a 'Sudden Glory...' caused 'by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another,' making us feel empowered in comparison.[9] And, as a recent example, Keith Johnstone, in his book *Impro*, counters Bergson's assertions about automaton behaviour with his suggestion that 'the man who falls on the banana skin is funny only if he loses status, and if we don't have sympathy with him.'[10]

The original term 'slapstick' is derived from the prop carried by Arlecchino (later known as Harlequin), a stock character of the Italian, 16th century comic art-form Commedia dell'Arte. Arlecchino's '*batocchio*,' was made of two 'thin pieces

of wood... kept apart at the handle' so they would 'slap against each other' imitating the sound of an impact as pretend blows were thrown.[11] A comic routine comprised entirely of one person being hit by someone else certainly plays with the idea of one-upmanship, if not aggression. Indeed, The Three Stooges depicted acts of brutality that, outside of the context of a slapstick skit, could have been considered gratuitous.[12]

Nevertheless, though violence and slapstick go hand in hand, the idea that sadism is at the heart of all humour does not ring true. Pain, loss and suffering are not inherently funny. For this reason, video compilation shows such as *You've Been Framed*, and popular 'Fail' compilations on YouTube always cut away a few seconds after a painful incident has occurred.[13] It is the chaotic of out of control element that remains. Carr and Greeves write that 'laughter is a response to a conceptual shift, a change in our perception of the state of the world around us.'[14] The man slipping on the banana peel is not amusing because it is painful, but because it is *incongruous*. There has been a shift: control to chaos, organic to mechanical, upright to collapsed.

2. Interacting with the Inelastic Game-World

To understand game-worlds, it is necessary to explore the concepts of simulation and virtual reality. Benjamin Woolly, in *Virtual Worlds* explores the origins of simulation in Link flight trainers – early, mechanical flight simulators built to mimic air-craft systems. On the Link trainer, he writes 'It could imitate flying, but it could not *simulate* flying,' suggesting that in order to simulate an experience 'You need a working model.'[15] With computers, mathematical models can be made that allow realistic simulations to occur. But the level of simulation is, logically, tied to the ability of the computer to process these calculations. For videogames, this presents a limitation. While simulating physical properties for a two-dimensional ball might be simple enough to compute a working, life-like model, ambitious scenarios like the virtual battlefields and cities found in many modern action and role-playing games present an insurmountable computational (and practical) challenge for available videogame systems to model in their entirety. A surface level of modelling provides a balance of simulation and imitation, leaving the mechanical artifice of the game-world exposed.

However, simulation is only one part of creating a virtual reality. Pimentel and Teixeira write that 'a virtual reality system should have the three following characteristics: response to user actions, real-time 3-D graphics, and a sense of immersion.'[16] Players need an interface that provides them with a way of performing actions inside the game-world – the more sophisticated the interface, the greater the sense of immersion. Here again, the limitations of technology are quite apparent. Most players interface with games by way of a hand-held controller (or keyboard and mouse), speakers and a screen. The player's level of immersion is related to the fidelity of their interactions and quality of their interface with the

game. As of the time of writing, these are still significantly neutered from the human experience of reality.

And yet, despite clunky controls and robotic in-game simulations, millions of people still enjoy videogames, and the numbers are growing. In 2011, videogames outsold video products for the first time in the UK sales market.[17] Immersion in, or at the very east engagement with videogames, is a simpler task for individuals than the sophistication of the technology would suggest. Videogames are, after all, a type of drama, and humans, as imaginative and creative beings, have little trouble suspending our disbelief. Evoking ancient Greek theatre, Pimentel and Teixeira go as far as to say, '…engaging the audience's attention and immersing them in the sights and sounds of a performance, these creative simulations weren't unlike the way we use computers today...'[18] Man-kind also has a long history of extending itself through media. Marhsall McLuhan, writing before the advent of the personal computer, states that with 'the arrival of electric technology, man extended, or set outside himself, a live model of the central nervous system itself.'[19]

Players live out a paradox in their virtual exploits, feeling an immersion and embodiment in the game-world and their player avatars, whilst contending with and confronting a mechanical and inhuman simulation. It is here that the potential for videogame slapstick resides.

3. Slapstick in Counter-Strike

Online multiplayer games, such as team-based shooter *Counter-Strike* (2000) and popular *Arma 2* modification ('mod') *DayZ* (2012) places players in simulated 3D environments where individual users share the same virtual space via an internet connection and interact with each another by manipulating their in-game characters. In *Counter-Strike*, for instance, humour has arisen from players attempting to communicate and interact as they would in real-life, using only the limited set of animations and actions that the game-world allows. Players will 'greet' each other at the start of a match, but, given the lack of a 'wave' animation, resort to the few options available to them. Actions include jumping on the spot, spinning, looking up and down as if to wave, flicking their flashlight on and off, or mischievously shooting each other in non-lethal body-parts. Bergson's 'mechanical inelasticity' is manifest in the model of a man jumping on the spot to say 'Hello!' – it expends too much energy and is far too overstated a gesture to be appropriate on a human-level. But the most amusing action, unsurprisingly, is the shooting of another player; an act that is too violent to be appropriate for 'teammates,' and too serious to walk away from unscathed in real-life. Status also shifts, with the shot player being the 'subject' of the joke. More often than not, this player will shoot the first player in retaliation, causing a tit-for-tat altercation in which both players do damage to each other until one or other has had enough. These actions present parallels with slapstick acts, such as The Three Stooges or Laurel and Hardy, in the

sense of the inappropriateness of the violence, the lack of serious consequences to violence, and the escalation of violence between parties.

I can identify two factors that explain the overwhelming similarities between social behaviour in *Counter-Strike* and slapstick comedy. The first is immersion, or the suspension of disbelief. This theatrical convention of imagination overtaking reality is what allows players to project human or emotional qualities onto 3D avatars in virtual space. It explains the phenomenon that 'people tend to stand more or less the same distance apart in virtual worlds as they do normally in real life.'[20] Without this suspension of disbelief, players would not ascribe human qualities to their avatars and the mechanical inelasticity of their actions would represent no deficiency in adaptability or awareness. Second, is the notion that joking is 'an attack of control'?[21]

> The character of the joker or trickster is so consistent a part of every separate mythological system that pioneering psychoanalyst Carl Jung identified him as one of the archetypes or central symbols of our collective unconscious.[22]

The 'trickster' is an ever-present character, and in online game-worlds where anonymity is assured and there are no *real-life* consequences to their actions, the power of this archetype is undeniable. Hence, the twisted humour of the team-killer (or 'Tker')[23] or cheater who chooses inopportune moments to cause chaos and go against the rules of the game. As Carr and Greeves describe, 'There's nothing funny about a lot of the practical jokes he plays, which leave a trail of destruction and pain.'[24] But on a less malicious level, it is this anarchistic desire to use the tools that the game-world provides to perform actions that were 'unintended' by the developers, that lends the subsequent tom-foolery its sense of fun. The 'fool,' after all, is cousin to the trickster and 'expresses himself through selfless play. Beyond that there are no rules and the options are endless – it's playtime.'[25] And what are videogames for, if not for play?

Results of this 'play' can be seen in videos across the internet. YouTube contains millions of *Counter-Strike* videos and many thousands of them are described as humorous. These include compilations of 'funny' slapstick moments from matches – players blowing themselves up by accident, failing to avoid obstacles, friendly-fire, unlikely 'kills' and players sneaking up on or failing to see other players.[26] Moreover, players have even experimented with creating comedy content that does not involve traditional gameplay and instead is entirely made up of 'improvised' in-game actions, such as creating awkward, robotic dances or attempting games such as Red light/Green light with their avatars and then shooting each other when they lose.[27]

4. Videogames as Shared References

Dean Hall's *DayZ*, a sandbox, survival simulator, has built a loyal following of fans. The official website for the free mod lists over 1.7 million players at the time of writing.[28] This community, according to stats tracking, has spent over 2.9 thousand collective years in-game since the mod was released in 2012.[29] Players know the game-world, the design features and quirks of the mod, and the behaviour of other players very well. As such, the community has created its own series of 'in-jokes' based on shared references to the game.

The phrase 'Anyone in Cherno?' has become a recognised *meme* from the game, with its own cartoon logo appearing on official merchandise.[30] Referring to a particular type of 'new player' behaviour, the phrase has no comic value outside the *DayZ* community. The repeated phrase only found relevance in the shared experience of multiple players interacting in the game-world and the organic situations that arose from the mod's design. As Double writes, 'extraneous variables are the very stuff of what makes us laugh,'[31] whether it be the setting of a comedy club or the apocalyptic, wasteland of *DayZ*.

Proliferating these shared references are video uploaders and 'streamers,' hosting live events where people can watch them play the game online. YouTube uploader 'PewDiePie' achieved over 2.3 million views for a recording of himself and a friend playing *DayZ*.[32] The video starts with PewDiePie and his partner 'Cry' running towards each other along a beach to the theme tune from *TopGun*, mocking a movie-style romantic reunion – 'it takes forever to find each other in this game' reads an on-screen subtitle. Reunited, Cry performs a 'vaulting' animation to make it look as if he is jumping for joy, then both fall to the ground and 'combat roll' as if tumbling in the grass with each other, laughing at the slapstick humour of the their avatars' mechanical expressions of emotion and the incongruity of their actions in the context of a zombie apocalypse.

Likewise, references to games, gaming and game worlds is an essential part of 'Machinima,' a hybridisation of the words 'machine' and 'cinema,' referring to 'the process of creating real-time animation by manipulating a video game's engine and assets.'[33] Machinima is 'generally considered as started by fans making demo movies with the game Quake in the 1990's,'[34] but today web-series such as *Red vs. Blue*, 'filmed' inside the game worlds of the *Halo* franchise have garnered an online viewership extending into the hundreds of thousands.

Now, experiences of game-worlds have increasingly become accepted references in popular culture as well, relatable to audiences of various ages. Performing on *Live at the Apollo* in 2010, stand-up comedian Dara O'Briain describes his experiences playing *Metal Gear Solid*, acting out his inability to control the game's hero Solid Snake.[35] In a similar routine, Seann Walsh adopts the physicalities of player characters in *Mortal Kombat* in order to demonstrate the difficulty of trying to perform a finishing move.[36] By using their own bodies to

assume the physical qualities of videogame characters, both comedians lay bare the mechanical and inelastic way in which videogames interpret human input.

5. Conclusion

Slapstick is a difficult style of comedy to categorise, describing an effect as much as it does a genre. It is a non-literary, non-narrative form that would rather convey 'attitudes, emotions, and experiences than ideas.'[37] This is perhaps why slapstick has become associated 'with children...' and '...with anarchistic and subversive tendencies...' as opposed to 'established power relations.'[38] As a medium of play, videogames have taken on similar associations. And humour, particularly slapstick humour, is an inescapable product of play within mechanical game worlds, creating shared experiences of the bizarre or incongruous in player's virtual adventures.

Even so, despite the ability to recreate and make reference to the slapstick experiences of videogames in real-life (the *Counter-Strike* parody, 'Counter Struck,'[39] is another excellent example of this) the conveying of real-life experiences in game-worlds is much more difficult. *Ben Hudson, Live in Virtual Reality* (2009), combined a performance in a real theatre, with a virtual performance taking place in Sony's *Playstation Home*.[40] As the performer, I controlled my avatar from the stage in the theatre, talking to the in-game audience via microphone. While distractions and comments related to what is happening on screen provide constant amusement for the theatre audience, the virtual audience seem oddly static. The formal audience seating is somehow inappropriate for the virtual crowd. All they have to look at is a relatively static avatar of a comedian whose performance is largely delivered via voice, with only a limited pre-set of animations as a means of physical expression. Used as a mediation of real-life communication alone, the virtual world, acting as a prosthesis or conduit, becomes an awkward, dull space. It is only when one participant places a bubble machine – an in-game item – at their feet, making it look as if they have their own foot-Jacuzzi, that the abstractness of the virtual world is turned into something humorous. The item is being used out-of-context. It is another 'attack on control.'

In 2007, British comedian Jimmy Carr performed a similar 'virtual gig' inside *Second Life*.[41] Once again, confronted with Carr's usual gags, the virtual comedy club appears a very sterile and unresponsive venue. And yet, Carr's comments on events *inside* the virtual world, on avatars in the virtual audience, or at the moment when Carr's own avatar 'glitches' and falls face-down on the stage, are much more successful in provoking laughter. Without reference to, or exploitation of, the virtual stage, comedy inside videogames can feel rather prosaic. An imperfect simulation of real-life comedy, much like the virtual comedy club in *Grand Theft Auto VI* (2008), featuring motion-captured recordings of Ricky Gervais, among other stand-up acts, highlights the disconnectedness of the experience and longs to embrace and respond to the *here and now* of the game.

Videogames are media, extensions of ourselves. Players are always on the outside looking in. Conversely, immersed in a game-world, the real world is less contextually relevant as a shared point of reference than the virtual experience of the game itself. Therefore, interfacing with videogames is an opportunity to forge a creative relationship with the media object and to see game worlds as a place of refraction, rather than reflection.

Notes

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[2] Ibid., 9.
[3] Mary Douglas, 'Jokes', in *Implicit Meanings (2nd Edition)* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 158-159.
[4] Ibid., 149.
[5] 'Battle of the Century – Laurel & Hardy', accessed 10 May 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDgnqfepRfI.
[6] 'How Did Slipping on a Banana Peel Become a Comedy Staple?', accessed 10 May 2013, http://mentalfloss.com/article/31135/how-did-slipping-banana-peel-become-comedy-staple.
[7] Lupino Lane, *How to Become a Comedian,* 'Funny Falls' (London: Frederick Muller, 1945), 32.
[8] Aristotle, *Poetics, Chapter 5, 1449a,* quoted in John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State of New York Press, 1987), 14.
[9] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, reprint (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 45.
[10] Keith Johnstone, *Impro, Improvisation and the Theatre* (London: Methuen Drama, 1989), 40.
[11] John Rudlin, *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994), 77.
[12] 'Three Stooges Most Violent Sequence Ever YouTube', accessed 10 May 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ha0h4ReHy7M.
[13] 'Fail Compilation of the Month April 2013', accessed 10 May 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-zac0SYjks.
[14] Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves, *The Naked Jape: Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 21.
[15] Benjamin Woolley, *Virtual Worlds, A Journey in Hype and Hyperreality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 44.
[16] Ken Pimentel and Kevin Teixeira, *Virtual Reality: Through the New Looking Glass*, 2nd Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1995), 11.
[17] 'Game Sales Surpassed Video in UK, Says Report', accessed 10 May 2013,

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-17458205.
[18] Pimentel and Teixeira, *Virtual Reality*, 26.
[19] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media, The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964), 243.
[20] Mark Meadows, *I, Avatar: The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second Life* (Berkeley: New Riders, 2008), 50.
[21] Douglas, *Implicit Meanings*, 149.
[22] Carr and Greeves, *Naked Jape*, 41.
[23] 'Definition of Tker', accessed 10 May 2013, http://onlineslangdictionary.com/meaning-definition-of/tker.
[24] Carr and Greeves, *Naked Jape*, 45.
[25] Tony Allen, *Attitude: Wanna Make Something of It? The Secret of Stand-Up Comedy* (Glastonbury: Gothic Image Publications, 2002), 52.
[26] 'CS 1.6 Top 10 Funny Moments', accessed 10 May 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2nrJMiMWR8; 'Counter-Strike Funny Plant', accessed 10 May 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DaWsI3XbRs.
[27] 'Counter-Strike: Dust 2 Muck Around', accessed 10 May 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_KL4LQwbADA.
[28] 'DayZ Official Website', accessed 10 May 2013,http://dayzmod.com/.
[29] Ibid.
[30] 'DayZ Official Store', accessed 10 May 2013, http://joystickjunkies.com/dayz/.
[31] Oliver Double, *Stand-up! On Being a Comedian* (London: Methuen Drama, 1997), 247.
[32] 'Day – Two Girls on a Zombie Survival Quest – DayZ – Part1', accessed 10 May 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKoR6PAIbjc.
[33] 'About Machinima', accessed 10 May 2013, http://www.machinima.com/overview.
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[35] 'Dara O Briain Live at the Apollo – I Love Videogames', accessed 10 May 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKIiUsbOO24.
[36] 'Mortal Kombat – Live from the Apollo', accessed 10 May 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4B9F1uCVks.
[37] Alan Dale, *Comedy Is a Man in Trouble, Slapstick in American Movies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 27.
[38] Peter Kramer, '"Clean, Dependable Slapstick": Comic Violence and the Emergence of Classical Hollywood Cinema', *Violence and American Cinema* 102 (2001): 103-116.
[39] 'Counter Struck High Definition', accessed 10 May 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxq2QbMg-H8.

[40] 'Ben Hudson, Live in Virtual Reality (April, 2009) – Part One', accessed 10 May 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=MdUpljRc7JI.
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Ben Hudson is a PhD Practice as Research student at the University of Kent, researching and conducting practical investigations into liveness, presence and immersion in mediatised stand-up comedy performance.

Gaming the Taboo in the Finlandisation Era Finland: The Case of *Raid over Moscow*

Tero Pasanen

Abstract
The present chapter examines the first politically motivated computer game controversy in Finland, stirred by the release of *Raid over Moscow* and its subsequent review published in *MikroBitti* magazine in February 1985. The game's open anti-Sovietism and certain utterances used in the review trespassed on the most notable taboo in the Cold War era Finland, and thus the case quickly gained both interest and notoriety in the Finnish media. The events took a political turn when a communist MP proposed a written parliamentary question concerning the distribution of the game. The USSR responded with an entreaty that demanded the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) to restrict the marketing and sales of the game. The Soviet officials considered *Raid over Moscow* as war propaganda that advocated a space war against the USSR, whereas the review was perceived as an intentional provocation against the Finno-Soviet relations. The MFA conducted an enquiry about possible restrictions, but outdated legislation concerning digital games prevented the ban. The USSR objected the result of their entreaty and responded with a political protest concerning recurrent anti-Soviet expressions published in the Finnish media.

Key Words: Cold War, Finlandisation, Raid over Moscow, game controversy, self-censorship, propaganda.

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1. Introduction

An isometric action game *Raid over Moscow*[1] was the best-selling Commodore 64 (C64) game on the Finnish game markets in 1985. The game unapologetically flirted with anti-Sovietism, which was one of the most fundamental taboos in the Cold War era Finland.[2] The USSR was depicted as deceitful aggressor that attacks the United States without a warning with ballistic missiles carrying nuclear warheads. The game ends with the symbol of Soviet power, the Kremlin, being reduced to a pile of ruins by the American forces.

In February 1985 a review of *Raid over Moscow* ignited the first politically motivated computer game controversy in Finland.[3] The debate concentrated more on the deviancy of the subject matter than on the medium of digital games or gaming as an activity. The unique aspect of the controversy was the unofficial diplomatic arm wrestling that took place behind the political scenes between the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Soviet officials. Their dispute concerned restricting marketing and sales of the game, as well as recurrent anti-

Soviet expressions in the Finnish media. This chapter is based on a series of declassified MFA documents that became open to public in 2010, after their 25 year confidentiality period expired under the freedom of information legislation (621/1999).[4]

2. The Political Context

Finlandisation, which can be defined as 'process or state of affairs in which, under the cloak of maintaining friendly relations with the Soviet Union, the sovereignty of a country becomes reduced,'[5] determined the Cold War zeitgeist in Finland.[6] Adaptation of such policy meant conversion through conciliation rather than military force. The Finns considered the term pejorative as it undermined the country's non-alignment. The Finlandisation has been strongly personified to the presidency of Urho Kekkonen (1956-1982).[7] Its heyday was between the late-1960s and the early-1980s. Finlandisation has a threefold meaning: it can be perceived as a Realpolitik doctrine, as a strategy motivated by the domestic power politics or combination of both. To maintain its sovereignty under the Soviet influence Finland could not challenge its stronger neighbour. On the other hand the boundaries between the Finnish internal and foreign policies were blurred during the Cold War. Fawning towards the Kremlin and the so-called 'east card' offered Finnish politicians a way to advance their careers.

Self-censorship i.e., censorship practiced by the publisher and/or author, was one of the central tools of Finlandisation. Salminen[8] has divided self-censorship of the Finlandisation era into categories of passive and active. The former refers to self-censorship that stemmed from the actual Soviet threat, whereas the latter refers to a practice motivated by internal power politics. The seeds of self-censorship were sown during the Danger Years (1944-1948). During the 1970s the practice became endemic. Self-censorship completely saturated the Finnish media field from broadcasting to newspapers, from non-fiction to fiction literature, and from music to cinema. However in the early-1980s the Finnish media culture became less constrained. Critical opinions about the USSR and Finnish politicians, which were not tolerated during the Kekkonen era, were now being published and broadcasted.

3. The Controversy Commences

The actual flashpoint of the controversy can be traced to a review of *Raid over Moscow*, published in the February -85 issue of *MikroBitti*. The magazine was one of the early Finnish periodicals to focus on computers and gaming. The reviewer, 15-year-old Aki Korhonen, praised the game as 'an exciting national defence game where you must attack the USSR before their missiles reach their targets in the United States.'[9] Korhonen had accidentally trespassed on a national taboo with his remark.

On February 13th magazine programme A-Studio introduced *Raid over Moscow* to the general public. The host Kari Mänty concluded the show by summarising: 'it shouldn't be a big surprise where this game was developed, but must Finland always try to act as Europe's Little America.'[10] On February 20th *Tiedonantaja* (English: The Informer), a newspaper affiliated with the Taistoist movement,[11] published an article 'Teaching the Children – Knocking Down the Gates of Kremlin,' which harshly criticised the review. *Tiedonantaja* described the game as high tech anti-Sovietism and demanded distribution restrictions on such computer games. On February 21st Ensio Laine, a MP of the communist Finnish People's Democratic League (SKDL), proposed a written parliamentary question that reflected similar sentiments:

> What measures does the government intend to take on certain imported American CMB-games that are targeted against our neighbour Soviet Union and children's peace education efforts?[12]

4. The Political Course of the Controversy

The controversy took an unofficial political course on February 22nd as Embassy Counsellor Konstantin Kosatshev urged Charles Murto, Director of the Office of Socialist Countries, to meet him at the Soviet embassy in Helsinki, because of 'a pressing and serious matter.'[13] The choice of venue was quite exceptional as meetings between Finns and Soviets were normally held at the MFA premises. Kosatshev emphasized that Ambassador Vladimir Sobolev had personally requested the visit. Murto declined at first, but agreed after consulting his superiors.

At the embassy Kosatshev underlined the seriousness and sensitivity of the case at hand before presenting Murto a copy of the *Tiedonantaja* article. The Soviets considered *Raid over Moscow* as war propaganda that advocated a space war against the USSR. The *MikroBitti* review was perceived as 'one of the most blatant anti-Soviet provocations to occur in Finland in the post-war decades.'[14] Should its marketing and sales should continue, the USSR would heed the attention of the Finnish government in the gravest diplomatic manner. As an example of possible resolution to the matter Kosatshev mentioned an American anti-Soviet film that was banned few years earlier with the help of the MFA.[15]

At the end of the meeting Murto offered some observations on the matter. He stressed that *Raid over Moscow* was targeted for international markets, and therefore it was unlikely that it was designed specifically to weaken the Finno-Soviet relations. He also doubted that there were no juridical means that could be applied to cases like this. Murto estimated that any attempts to ban the game could actually increase its publicity and demand. On a more personal note Murto considered it regrettable that such war games were even designed for children. Kosatshev understood these concerns, but reiterated that the USSR found the

matter particularly serious and reprehensible. He thanked the MFA for paying attention to the matter unofficially and confidentially.

In the early March the MFA officials conducted a series of enquiries. In a memorandum, dated March 6th, Antero Viertiö, a negotiating official for the Department for External Economic Relations, examined the case from a commercial policy perspective. Viertiö pointed out that the measures to control computer games and other software were extremely challenging to implement. The aforementioned products not only played integral part in the growing computer markets and general shift towards information society, but their illegal private copying thrived due to the outdated legislation. Furthermore games were declared to custom under several tariff headings. The commercial policy means to restrict the importation were also rather limited. Although the commercial treaties included a clause that enabled imposing restrictions based on moral arguments, such actions could have unintentional and counter-effective results. In addition appealing to this clause could open a larger public debate on whether war games were more harmful than pornography or other violent entertainment. Viertiö was also quite sceptical whether an embargo would have desired ramifications. Restrictions could create an international controversy and in the process increase the popularity of such war games.

Viertiö recommended the MFA to distance itself from the decision-making process, suggesting the Ministries of Justice and/or Education should handle the matter, as 'Star Wars was the problem of the coming generation.'[16] Scandinavian cooperation was also thought over. Viertiö suspected that some Swedish politicians could swallow the bait set by the Finns and sponsor regulation of deviant computer games in the Nordic Council. Viertiö also proposed investigating whether Korhonen had quoted the phrase 'exciting national defence game' from other source or if it was his own personal musing. He reproached Korhonen for undermining the efforts to uphold friendly Finno-Soviet relations and causing such a provocation with his inconsideration. Viertiö ended his report with an Orwellian notion: 'game developers probably have – or at least should have – some sense of ethics and morals. But what happens in the imagination of players is completely a different matter. At the time being it is a place beyond laws and regulations.'[17]

Holger Rotkirch, Assistant Director of the Department of Legal Services, mapped out the juridical grounds to restrict the marketing and sales of *Raid over Moscow*. In a memorandum, also dated March 6th, he concluded that there were no existing legal regulations or binding treaty obligations that could be applied to resolve the dispute. Rotkirch mentioned the chapter 14 of the Finnish Criminal Code, which handled offences of treason. Its section 4a stated that a person, who publicly and purposely insulted a foreign nation with mediated material, and by doing so damaged diplomatic relations to that nation, could be fined or imprisoned for the maximum of two years. However Rotkirch doubted its applicability to this matter. The act was clearly public, but proving its deliberateness would be

difficult. Furthermore prosecution under the section 4a was reserved for the most egregious cases and required a specific presidential diktat. A protracted legal process could also attract extensive public interest and pose even more strain to the diplomatic relations.

The larger political context of the controversy started to take shape in March 7th, when the MFA received a dispatch from Finnish Ambassador to Moscow Aarno Karhilo. He reported on a meeting with G.N. Farafonov, Director General of the Department of Scandinavia from the Soviet Ministry of External Relations (MER). Farafonov had handed a non-paper, which included a démarche[18] concerning recent anti-Soviet expressions published in the Finnish media. The paper listed mainly written publications, including the *MikroBitti* article.[19] The MFA was reprimanded for allowing the marketing of 'the space war game' to continue unhindered, regardless of the previous entreaty. According to the USSR these publications were provocations designed to disseminate distrust towards its politics and attempts to weaken the Finno-Soviet relations. Such material was also in conflict with the spirit of the Paris Peace Treaties of 1947 and the Finno-Soviet Treaty of 1948. The USSR expected appropriate measures from the Finnish authorities to restrict these types of publications.

On March 13th Seppo Pietinen, Director General of the Political Department, briefed the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MCI) about the findings of the MFA enquiries. The MCI had requested a statement from the MFA concerning the parliamentary question. Pietinen noted that albeit the game content was regarded offensive towards the USSR there were no juridical grounds or commercial policy means to restrict its marketing and sales. He suspected that the developer had utilized the theme of anti-Sovietism for promotional purposes in the US. Pietinen deplored that the international political tensions were exploited in computer games for children.

On March 14th, Minister of Foreign Trade Jermu Laine (Social Democratic Party) gave his answer to the parliamentary question. The minister stated that the MCI could only restrict and ban products that posed physical danger to children. The ministry lacked legal grounds to intervene with the possible psychological impact that war toys and games might have on children's mental development or world view. Laine referred on the Act on the Previewing of Video and Other Audiovisual Programmes (697/1987), which was being drafted at the time, as a possible solution to cases like this.[20]

The political arm wrestling came into a conclusion on April 11th, as Minister for Foreign Affairs Paavo Väyrynen gave response to the Soviet démarche to Ambassador Sobolev in Helsinki. Väyrynen emphasised that all the noteworthy political parties and societal organisations, as well as the Finnish people in general, supported friendly relations to the USSR and the official foreign policy line i.e., the Paasikivi-Kekkonen line.[21] He apologised for publications that depicted the USSR in negative light, but denied that they were deliberately targeted against the Finno-

Soviet relations. Furthermore the Finnish people were critical and could tell apart agenda-driven and prejudiced writings from objective ones. The minister noted that peacetime freedom of expression offered no legal grounds to interfere with such utterances, but assured that the government paid attention to the matter and strived to influence the media. For his part Sobolev thanked Väyrynen for the reply, hoping that the mutual fostering of friendly relations between the two countries would continue in the future. Not even a small group of dissidents should be allowed to harm them. Lastly the ambassador returned to the case of *Raid over Moscow*, urging the Finnish authorities to take appropriate measures to deal with the matter. Sobolev quoted the general secretary of the Finnish-Soviet Society (SNS) Erkki Kivimäki, who had enquired in a recent televised interview: 'how would the Finns feel, if a computer game where Helsinki is destroyed, would be marketed and sold in the USSR?'[22]

5. Conclusions

The first politically motivated computer game controversy in Finland occurred amidst a larger domestic societal change. The unitary culture that evolved from the hardship of Winter War was fundamentally fractured in the mid-1980s. The old faith towards socialism did not resonate with the younger generations, who rather identified themselves with American popular culture and the values it conveyed.[23] However the open anti-Sovietism depicted in *Raid over Moscow* was still a taboo and politically incorrect subject matter. From this perspective a reaction from the USSR was quite expected, but its intensity and loose interpretation of Finland's treaty obligations confounded even the most experienced MFA officials.[24]

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the declassified MFA documents was the differing perspectives on *Raid over Moscow*'s objectives. The Soviets underlined the external aims of the game, whereas the MFA considered them to be autotelic. The USSR perceived the game as war propaganda with three-fold objectives: 1) to advocate a space war; 2) to create mistrust towards its politics, and 3) to weaken the Finno-Soviet relations. In turn the MFA perceived the anti-Sovietism as a mere marketing ploy and questioned the claims that *Raid over Moscow* was designed to harm the diplomatic relations.

But how justified was the Soviet vantage point? Unquestionably *Raid over Moscow* included propagandistic elements, but to label it as war propaganda was quite far-fetched. The claim was based on the obvious notion that the game reflected the reality of Cold War. It was clearly inspired by the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) aka Star Wars programme and the confrontational attitude of the Reagan era politics. However *Raid over Moscow* had no political objectives and it harnessed the theme of anti-Sovietism to boost sales.[25] Furthermore there were no even slightest indications that the game was directed specifically against the Finno-Soviet relations.

The Soviet zeal to define *Raid over Moscow* as war propaganda can be perceived as an attempt to indirectly affect the Finnish media by pressuring the MFA. The USSR had also interests in hindering the spread of American popular culture in its sphere of influence. The Finnish tradition of censorship and self-censorship had deep roots. *Raid over Moscow* was meant to act as a precedent for the medium of digital games. Eagerness to label the game review as 'the most blatant anti-Soviet provocation to occur in Finland in the post-war decades' also supports this reading.

The controversy treated in this chapter exemplifies the truism that legislation always drags behind new emergent forms of media. In this case the outdated law provided the MFA with a reasonable cause not to comply with the Soviet démarche. The valid Film Previewing Act (299/1965) was not applicable as it did not even recognise interactive media as audiovisual programmes. Had the legislation been up-to-date the Board of Film Classification (VET) could have banned *Raid over Moscow* on the grounds of explicit violence and anti-Sovietism, as it did with Finnish director Renny Harlin's film *Born American* (1986) a year later. This would have removed the MFA from an awkward situation as the now defunct VET was subordinate to the Ministry of Education. Prosecuting 15-year-old Aki Korhonen of treason was also a ruled out possibility as it would have surely brought the unwelcomed discussion on Finlandisation back to the news headlines.

After the incident had calmed down politically various Finnish talking heads appeared in the media and warned that private citizens should not disrupt the existing status quo between Finland and the USSR with their careless comments. Idolisation of America could impair their foreign policy judgements. The freedom of expression was acknowledged, but the Finns were urged to consider what the benefits of such comments were.

The *Raid over Moscow* controversy was genuinely a Finnish phenomenon. It merged concerns over new media and morality with conventions of Finlandisation. Finland's geopolitical location and its special status between the Cold War blocks, as well as the erstwhile tensions between the superpowers made the case unique in the history of popular culture.

Notes

[1] Access Software Inc., *Raid over Moscow* (Access Software Inc., 1984).

[2] The definition of anti-Sovietism was all-comprehensive, basically including all critical expressions and opinions about the USSR.

[3] The case has been discussed earlier by Jaakko Suominen in 'Mentaalihistoriallinen Katsaus Digitaalisuuteen', in *Johdatus Digitaaliseen Kulttuuriin*, eds. Aki Järvinen, and Ilkka Mäyrä (Tampere: Vastapaino, 1999), 75-

94; Petri Saarikoski, *Koneen Lumo: Mikrotietokoneharrastus Suomessa 1970-Luvulta 1990-Luvun Puoliväliin* (Saarijärvi: Gummerus, 2004); and Juhani Suomi *Epävarmuuden Vuodet: Mauno Koiviston aika 1984-1986* (Helsinki: Otava, 2006). Finnish gaming press also briefly covered the case after MTV3 News reported on the declassified MFA documents in January 2010. Thus far the only article treating their content has been published in Finnish (Pasanen 2011).

[4] All translations by the author.

[5] Walter Laquer, *The Political Psychology of Appeasement: Finlandization and Other Unpopular Essays* (New York: Transaction Books, 1980), 7.

[6] The term itself was coined by German political scientist Richard Lowenthal in 1966. Rinna Kullaa, *Non-Alignment and Its Origins in Cold War Europe: Yugoslavia, Finland and the Soviet Challenge* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012).

[7] Timo Vihavainen, *Kansakunta Rähmällään: Suomettumisen lyhyt Historia* (Helsinki: Otava, 1991); Jukka Nevakivi, *Miten Kekkonen Pääsi Valtaan ja Suomi Suomettui* (Helsinki: Otava, 1996).

[8] Esko Salminen, *Vaikeneva Valtionmahti?: Neuvostoliitto/Venäjä Suomen Lehdistössä 1968-1991* (Helsinki: Edita, 1996).

[9] Aki Korhonen, '*CMB-Pelejä*', *MikroBitti*, February 1985, 67.

[10] 'Little America' (Finnish: pikku-Amerikka) was a Finnish pejorative term to describe countries that excessively emulated and admired American politics and/or way of life.

[11] Taistoism was the radical wing of the Finnish Communist Party with extreme pro-Soviet tendency.

[12] Ensio Laine, written parliamentary question 40/1985.

[13] Charles Murto, *Memorandum no. 196* (Helsinki: The Archives of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 1985), 1.

[14] Ibid., 2.

[15] Kosatshev could not specify the film, but probably referred to John Milius' *Red Dawn*, which was banned by the Finnish Board of Film Classification on October 15th, 1984.

[16] Antero Viertiö, *Memorandum no. 167* (Helsinki: The Archives of the Ministry for the Foreign Affairs, 1985), 3.

[17] Ibid., 4.

[18] A protest or statement delivered through diplomatic channels.

[19] Other sensitive topics mentioned in the paper were the Russification of Estonia, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the internal state of Red Army and the Terijoki Government.

[20] The Act on the Previewing of Video and Other Audiovisual Programmes (697/1987) excluded digital games from the preview process on the basis of content and purpose.

[21] The Paasikivi-Kekkonen line refers to a foreign policy of neutrality.
[22] Taisto Tolvanen, *Memorandum 417* (Helsinki: The Archives of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 1985), 3.
[23] Saarikoski in *Koneen Lumo: Mikrotietokoneharrastus Suomessa 1970-Luvulta 1990-Luvun Puoliväliin* argues that rebellion against the Finnish politicians was a major factor behind *Raid over Moscow*'s popularity, although the sale figures were not infallible indicator of their political attitudes.
[24] Juhani Suomi, *Kohti Sinipunaa: Mauno Koiviston aika 1986-1987* (Helsinki: Otava, 2008).
[25] John Jermaine, 'Carver Gang at Large', *Commodore Magazine*, July 1987, 74-77 and 118-119.

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Tero Pasanen is a graduate student at University of Jyväskylä, Finland. His dissertation (in progress) examines how games reflect their surrounding reality.

Immersion vs. Emersive Effects in Videogames

Piotr Kubiński

Abstract
Author of the chapter approaches the concept of immersion from a philological perspective and concentrates on those mechanisms and effects, which weaken the phenomenon in question. All those mechanisms – described collectively as 'emersive effects' – are considered in terms of their influence on the game structure, on the cohesion of the game world, and on possible interpretations. Occurring on various game levels, the emersive effects are sometimes a result of creator's mistakes, other times they are embedded in the convention of a game. The effects in question might also be achieved deliberately – for artistic or humorous purposes.[1]

Key Words: Immersion, emersive effects, emersion, videogames, irony, ironic distance, ludology, digital humanities, palimpsestic attempt.

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1. Introduction

According to many gamers, game-reviewers, and researchers immersion is often considered to be one of the most desired effects a game can cause: calling a game 'fully immersive' is probably one of the greatest compliments one could pay to its creators. But at the same time there is no universal consensus on what in fact immersion is. As Gordon Calleja summarises,[2] terms such as (tele)presence, absorption, incorporation, and immersion are still under discussion. The purpose of this chapter is neither to arbitrate this dispute, nor to propose its final solution; but since the main topic of this chapter is the phenomenon of 'emersive effects,' it is necessary to outline the category of immersion that serves as their necessary background. The definition adopted in this chapter states that immersion is an impression of a non-mediated participation in a digital world generated by the machine, a sensation of a direct presence, which makes players lose sight of the physical world surrounding them. Without intending to induce anyone to adopt such a definition, it is should be pointed out that this understanding of the term is related to the one coined by Janet Murray:

> A stirring narrative in any medium can be experienced as a virtual reality because our brains are programmed to tune into stories with an intensity that can obliterate the world around us. […] The experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place is pleasurable in itself, regardless of the fantasy content. We refer to this experience as immersion. *Immersion* is

> a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus.[3]

It is worth noting that, according to Murray, immersion is not a term inextricably linked to videogames and might also appear in non-digital media. However, virtual realities (and within them especially videogames) provide their unique techniques and possibilities that deepen immersion and players' *presence* in fictional world; that is why the debated term gained its popularity in the context of electronic entertainment.

2. Emersive Effects

Academic researchers who examine this matter tend to analyse how immersion works and what techniques, used by game developers, help players to immerse into the game's world. The aim of this chapter is to analyse this problem from the opposite perspective and to present the techniques and strategies, which (intentionally or not) reduce or even preclude the effect of immersion.

To examine that problem, one should start from indicating what conditions are necessary to create the sense of immersion. Alison McMahan, a prominent researcher of immersion in video games, points to three of such conditions:

> (1) the user's expectations of the game or environment must match the environment's conventions fairly closely;
> (2) the user's actions must have a non-trivial impact on the environment; and
> (3) the conventions of the world must be consistent, even if they don't match those of "meatspace".[4]

That third condition (consistency of fictional world's conventions) seems to be the most interesting in the context of my research, as creating and choosing between those conventions are the game creator's textual (and in some cases: artistic) choices. Before concentrating on various examples of deviations within conventions, a general term should be proposed, which could embrace the whole phenomenon in its many aspects. Keeping in mind a Latin root of the word 'immersion' (lat. 'immergo' – to dive, to submerge), the term *emersion* or *emersive effect* (lat. 'emergo' – to rise up from water) will be used here to describe opposite strategies, i.e. those which reduce the sense of immersion, bring players back to the meatspace or – if one follows Murray's metaphor – forces that pull player out from

a swimming pool or ocean (e.i. from digital environment) back to his primary reality.

3. Shock

Emersive factors may affect players on many levels of their contact with a videogame. McMahan writes about bugs and errors in videogames, which she calls *shocks*:

> Shocks are poor design elements that jar the user out of the sense of "reality" of the VRE, such as the "end of the world" shock – the user can see where the environment ends; "film set shock" – buildings are incomplete; polygon leaks – seeing through cracks; and latency and motion sickness caused by poor design or overlong use of the hardware.[5]

One can say that shocks are elements which reveal *mediated character* of the virtual reality: its dependence on electronic devices such as computers or gaming consoles with their illusive technical nature. Rather than deliberate designing strategy, shocks are mostly the result of mistakes during the development of a game, or imperfections arising from the nature of digital medium. On less frequent occasions, however, game creators use *the structure* of such a startling element in a meaningful way. The eminent example of such a technique is Batman: Arkham Asylum.[6] In a scene where Batman is captured by Joker and Scarecrow, there is a moment (after a few Batman's hallucinations), when the game looks as if it had crashed and the screen freezes for a few seconds – long enough for the player to think that his gaming device has been broken.

Of course we can find more examples of games pointing to their screen-mediated nature. Murray underlines the importance of identifying an equivalent of the 'theatre's fourth wall,'[7] which is a symbolic, conventional border between spectators of a theatre performance (gamer) and the scene with actors performing on it (virtual reality). The sequence from Batman: Arkham Asylum can be compared to an act of breaking the fourth wall and pointing to the user that all what has been experienced is just a videogame with all its conventions. One might (quite reasonably) conclude that the concept of 'breaking the fourth wall' is not quite accurate in the context of video games, it is still hard to deny that such an event wrecks the feeling of immersion. Nevertheless, although it *pulls* the player *out* from the fictional world, it also gives something in return. The refreshing and amusing effect of astonishment might be even a bigger reward and could compensate for being knocked out of the in-game presence.

4. Ironic Distance

Similar surprise and playfulness may be achieved (again: at the cost of reducing immersion) by populating the in-game world with references that point outside the game's context. An example is provided by the second part of the Witcher series, The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings.[8] Half-way into the storyline, the player encounters a group of Elven rebels who use a secret password. The password shouted by one of the characters is 'Kier-ke-gaard.' Countersign to that turns out to be 'Hei-de-gger.' This is an interesting example at least for two reasons. Firstly: the joke is constructed in such way, that if player does not understand it (if he does not recognise two famous philosophers' names), he will probably think that 'Kier-ke-gaard' and 'Hei-de-gger' are just another Elven words and it is completely normal not to understand them. Additional argument for such a reading is that the notation of those words uses hyphens (as it is indicated by the in-game manner of transcription of the Elven language). But on the other hand the situation of the player who recognises the reference is even more interesting. To understand the joke, the gamer needs to use his cultural knowledge. As a result the player is in fact provoked to leave the on-screen fictional world, to remind himself of the actual reality of which he is supposed to forget by the means of immersive mechanisms of the game.

Situations similar to the described above create an ironic distance, which is yet another way to achieve artistic effect using an emersive factor. The element of irony is crucial, because through this mechanism, the authors of the game wink at the player and send him a second, hidden meaning. It is not, however, a classic literal or verbal irony, within which the actual meaning of the text is opposed to that one expressed in the primary one (or, as Søren Kierkegaard, great theoretician of irony, would put it: 'phenomenon is not the essence, but the opposite of the essence'[9]). In the cited example, one does not find such an opposite content. Instead game creators develop a different, whole new meaning functioning somewhat *over* the literal text.

Of particular interesting in this context is the division of ironic roles proposed by David S. Kaufer, according to whom there are three roles within an ironic situation: 1) ironists, 2) observers of irony, and 3) the victim of irony.[10] The triad can be expanded by a fourth element: 4) tools of irony. In the situation described above, the role of such tools is taken by the characters who pronounce the two names of philosophers. There is no doubt that Zoltan (the dwarf who says 'Kier-ke-gaard!') is not an ironist in this situation – he is oblivious to the additional meaning of his own words. Exactly as in the Polish version of the first Witcher[11] – a game, where a bard named Dandelion was singing songs of the popular band Kult, much recognised in Poland. Of course Dandelion could not known that he was using *someone else's words*, to borrow Bachtin's terminology. In both situations it is not the characters, but the creators of the game, who are ironists. The role of a (co-)ironist is taken by the player who recognises the duality of the message.

If one consistently draws conclusions from this scheme, the victim of irony is a user who is not able to recognise the ironical signal that was being sent, and who is not able to become one of the two subjects in this communication scheme. After all, irony puts a clear requirement: it must be identified. As Michał Głowiński, a Polish theoretician of irony, puts it:

> If the irony is not recognized, significant misunderstandings arise. Sometimes such confusion shows that the participant of the communication process is not able to go beyond his literal understanding of the words. As a result, his perception is lacking a particular factor of expression which is crucial to understand the statement in accordance with the nature and intentions of the speaker.[12]

5. Palimpsestic Attempt

Last emersive form, which is to be taken into consideration in this chapter, is connected to the very core mechanisms of games. Some of those mechanisms decrease the level of player's immersion, and yet they are constantly used. A good example is the well-known option of saving/loading a game status, provided by e.g. some cRPGs or strategy games. This means that player sometimes (rarely or in every moment of gameplay) is able to create a checkpoint that remembers all the settings of the game – including the exact story time. With the option of loading the game, you can always go back to the past events and experience them again or make them completely different than the original.

It is possible to name four structural reasons for implementing this option into a game:

> 1) it enables players to return to the game at any time without losing the progress of it (otherwise we would have to finish the game in one sitting);
> 2) in case of a failure (e.g., death of a protagonist), players can repeat a selected stage of the game without having to start anew;
> 3) players who feel dissatisfied with their actions (e.g. fight brought too much damage, business transaction turned out to be insufficiently beneficial), may want to repeat them to achieve better results;
> 4) players may want to know the alternative version of a co-created history.

It is definitely more beneficial to concentrate not on the motivations, but on the textual results of this mechanism. For example, in a cRPG game, such as The Witcher 2, the main protagonist may face an unexpected danger (e.g. enter the

place full of enemies). If the result of such action is a failure, the player might want to load the game, then prepare for the 'unexpected' fight and eventually achieve success. As a result, we end up with two (or even more) alternative versions of the story. Note that the player can return many times to once saved game. All those imperfect attempts have an undisputed influence not only on the player's experience (in fact: they are part of that experience) but also on the in-game's world cohesion and therefore: on player's immersion. One of the factors which contribute to fictional (not only digital) world's cohesion is *psychological realism*. That means that all character's actions and all other diegetic events: (1) must be subject to the rule of Cause and Effect; and (2) must be possible to be explained by in-world's (diegetic) factors and motivations. If this psychological realism condition is not fulfilled, then a game (but also: a film or a novel) is less believable.

However, while analysing the above-mentioned example from The Witcher 2, one will face a certain dissonance. If the main character dies in the first attempt because he was taken by surprise by his enemies, then the player loads a game. In the second attempt the gamer will start preparations before entering the dangerous spot (e.g. the witcher will drink some strengthening potions). But then one could ask about a psychological realism of the situation: why did the witcher Geralt really drink his potions? The first (failed) attempt showed that he had not in fact expected any enemies. The obvious answer is: Geralt did not know but the player did and it is the player's knowledge that determines Geralt's actions. Their real motivation lies in an *abandoned (failed) attempt*. Therefore if we want to analyse the course of events in all their complexity (i.e. including motivations, causality etc.), we need to take into consideration not only the 'final version' of events but also those failed attempts. This has a crucial importance especially for the theory of narrative or theory of interpretation. In traditional media the reader/viewer always faces a finite version of events – of course there are texts that are open for interpretations[13] and texts that play around with the narrative frames (e.g. films like *Memento*, where time of action is reversed and consecutive scenes reinterpret each other), but generally interpretation of a traditional-media's plot is usually linear, because the *text itself* is not fluid. Meanwhile in those digital texts which involve user's participation (especially in plot-concentrated videogames) interpretation of events very often needs to be as *non-linear* as the gaming experience itself.

To describe these versions of fictional events, which mutually influence each other, I submit the term, which refers to Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality. Genette compared literary hypertexts to medieval *palimpsests*. Palimpsests were manuscripts written on material, in which the previous text was wiped or scraped out; as Genette describes it: '[o]n the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through.'[14] This Genette's metaphor is surprisingly adequate when considered in

the context of player's various attempts which *superimpose* one on another and need to be interpreted as a whole. That is why I call them *palimpsestic attempts*.[15]

6. Summary

As shown in this chapter *emersive effects* – that is moments or mechanisms that weaken player's immersion – appear in many aspects of game's structures. *Shocks* (which are the result of game's technical imperfections), *emphasising game's mediated nature* (which sometimes is unintended side-effect), creating *ironic distance* (e.g. as a result of a joke referring to the outside of the game's cultural contexts), or breaking the rule of *psychological realism* (according to *palimpsestic* nature of some games' course of events) – these are just a few meaningful examples of mechanisms triggering the concept in question and they surely do not make a complete list of emersive factors. Given samples bring several significant conclusions: Firstly, immersion does not need to be the most important or the most desired effect delivered by videogames, and player may get pleasure from other in-game elements, which may be contrary to the immersion and may pull the player out of felling of presence. Secondly – and that is a result of the first statement – video games as a medium are torn between two opposite tendencies (one is their immersive potential, but the second is *emersion* with all its various – and not yet well-discovered – potential). Thirdly, axiological status of emersive effects is not unequivocal. Sometimes emersion might be a result of designer's or programmer's mistakes or of game's frailty as a medium (which has rather young tradition and still coins its language and conventions). But on the other hand sensible and meaningful use of emersion (like in the scene quoted from Batman: Arkham Asylum) should be considered as a proof of maturity of the medium. Using mediality to create a meaningful message is a very strong postmodern artistic technique (similarly as in other forms of cultural expression, such as literature or films), which may cause various effects – e.g. user's reflection on the character of in-game's experience. Therefore understanding of those effects should be developed and deepened in further researches, and they definitely should not be omitted or ignored in game studies, as they play an important role in comprehending the specificity of videogames as a medium.

Notes

[1] This chapter is part of the research project NN 103398340 with funding from the Polish National Science Centre (Narodowe Centrum Nauki) in Kraków.

[2] Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2011).

[3] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 98-99.

[4] Alison McMahan, 'Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A Method for Analyzing 3-D Video Games', in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003), 68-69.
[5] Ibid., 76.
[6] Batman: Arkham Asylum (Rocksteady, 2009).
[7] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 103.
[8] The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings (CD Projekt RED, 2011).
[9] Søren Kierkegaard, *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 247.
[10] David S. Kaufer, 'Irony, Interpretive Form and the Theory of Meaning', *Poetics Today: The Ironic Discourse* 4, No. 3 (1983): 451-464.
[11] The Witcher (CD Projekt RED, 2007).
[12] Michał Głowiński, 'Ironia jako Akt Komunikacyjny', in *Ironia*, ed. Michał Głowiński (Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2002), 5-16.
[13] Concept of open text/open work (it.: 'opera aperta') was developed by Umberto Eco in Umberto Eco, *Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
[14] Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).
[15] I presented this concept for the first time during in the paper 'Kategoria "Próby Palimpsestowej" jako Narzędzie Badania Narracji w Komputerowych Grach Fabularnych' ('Category of "Palimpsestic Attempt" as a Tool in Narrative Studies of Computer Role-Playing Games') at the conference 'KULTURA POPULARNA – CZĘŚCI I CAŁOŚCI. Narracje w Kulturze Popularnej' which took place at Warsaw University, 7-9 of October 2010.

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Piotr Kubiński, PhD student at Warsaw University (Institute of Polish Literature, Section of Comparative Studies). While interested in many aspects of videogames, new medias and digital humanities, currently his research is concentrated on poetics and semiotics of videogames. Observations made in this chapter are abbreviated version of one of the topics in author’s doctoral thesis, which is in progress.

Part 3

Videogame Theory

Playing with Fiction: Ludology and the Evolution of Narrative in Videogames

Dawn Stobbart

Abstract
Although videogame scholars have argued that ludology and narrative are at odds, for example Juul[1] and Eskelinen,[2] this chapter counters this perceived difference, showing instead that the partnership of narrative and ludology has produced an evolution in narrative. Since Juul's critique, ludology and narrative have co-evolved to produce increasingly complex narrative modes, many of which are found only in videogames, not in other media. In order to identify and adequately comprehend the evolution of narrative in videogames, it is essential to engage older narrative theories as well as older narratives. This allows us to probe ways in which videogames support and go beyond older narrative theories as well as older narrative structures and to test older theories against contemporary practice. Using the popular videogame *Assassin's Creed 2*[3] as a case study, this chapter will show the contributions and limitations of Gerard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*[4] for addressing narrative in videogames and the ways in which narrative practice has outstripped traditional narrative theory and to further show the videogame as part of the evolution of narrative.

Key Words: Videogames, narrative, ludology, gaming, theory, *Assassin's Creed 2*, Narratology, narrative evolution, Genette.

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1. Introduction

As a fairly prolific gamer, I know that it can be harder to maintain attention in a videogame that can take many hours to play than it might be to read a book, or watch a film. Equally, I understand that there is a fine line between gameplay and narrative content, too much of either and I could lose interest (think about *Final Fantasy XIII*, for example – whilst the graphics and story were amazing, the lack of gameplay made me give up within a few hour of playing!) But videogames are a complex medium, able to carry both gameplay and narrative simultaneously, adhering to ludological standards as well as traditional literary rules, such as the much debated Narratology, ideally creating what has been coined 'ludonarrative,' the presence of a narrative that a player can both interact with, and influence.

Briefly, for anyone not familiar with the term, Narratology is 'the study of the structure and function of narrative' with prominent narratologist Gerard Genette defining it as the

> succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subject of […] the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell an event or series of events' [...]without regard to the medium, linguistic or other, through which knowledge of that totality comes to us.[5]

Although to some extent this branch of narrative theory has been debunked by the theoretical turn, the original Ludology versus Narratology debate is predicated on such theories and it is essential to look back and to investigate how such theories operate in contemporary videogames, a task that has not yet been extensively undertaken, and while there is not enough time today to fully explore the status of narrative in contemporary videogames, I shall primarily concentrate on a small, but vital, aspect, that of temporality, one of the contested elements of narrative using *Assassin's Creed 2* as a case study. Temporality has been an issue when incorporating narrative in games; the now of the game, the time passing within the virtual world is concerned with the events taking place in the game, while narration is 'about something that happened at some other time,' which involves the player 'exert[ing] effort in order to influence the outcome' and following rules which make playing possible; this is in conflict, according to Juul, with the presence of narration in a game. At the time of publishing both Hamlet on the Holodeck and Half Real, there were issues which made this relevant; whilst technology made home computing and gaming possible, they were relatively simplistic in comparison to similar equipment in 2013.

Assassin's Creed 2 is the collective name for three instalments of the videogame franchise *Assassin's Creed*, all of which follow the same narrative and gameplay structure. These are known individually as *Assassin's Creed 2*,[6] *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*,[7] and *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*.[8] The series was selected for a number of reasons: it is a successful videogame, both in economic and critical terms, has a strong narrative, and contains a variety of gameplay tropes. The franchise also uses traditional narrative tropes in its construction, which allows the ludic and narrative facets of the game to become merged, instead of being at odds with each other, such as the use of the framing narrative.

2. Narrative Frameworks

Genette regards framing narratives primarily in terms of temporal levels and anachronies, which is defined as a discrepancy between the chronological order of events and the order in which they are related in a plot. In *Narrative Discourse* he explains that 'every anachrony constitutes, with respect to the narrative into which it is inserted – onto which it is grafted – a narrative that is temporally second, subordinate to the first,'[9] by which he means that there is a primary narrative timeframe, and a secondary, or subordinate one that relies on the first for its delivery. In *Assassin's Creed 2*, this is found in the 'Desmond' and the 'Ezio'

narratives, two temporally distinct but related part of the game. Centred on the character Desmond Miles in the early twenty-first century, the Desmond narrative overarches the franchise, whilst the Ezio narrative focuses on the Renaissance character Ezio Auditore da Firenze. The Ezio narrative takes up the majority of the game, but is framed by, or 'grafted onto' the Desmond narrative. Mieke Bal explains this in terms of fabula relationships (Bal uses fabula to refer to 'a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors;'[10] she explains that 'often the primary fabula is hardly more than the occasion for a perceptible, character-bound narrator to narrate a story.'[11] This is found extensively throughout film and literature; a character in a narrative recounting a story to another character constitutes a frame, for example. In *Assassin's Creed 2*, the Ezio narrative is constructed from a series of memories found in Desmond's DNA, relayed to player via the Animus, a virtual reality machine. The time spent on the Ezio narrative might lead to an understanding that this is the primary narrative, then. But, without Desmond's interaction with the Animus, there can be no Ezio narrative for the player to uncover. Narratalogical analysis, therefore, shows the Ezio narrative to be subordinate to the Desmond narrative, making Desmond's temporality in Genette's terminology, diegetic; that is, set in the primary fictional universe of the 21st century. Continuing this analysis, the Ezio narrative is metadiegetic, 'a narrative within the narrative.'[12]

This traditional narrative structure has adapted well to the videogame format, becoming an integral part of the immersive construction of many games, able to explain and justify features that typically appear as non-narrative aspects of videogame play, such as the Heads up Display (HUD), maps, character death and reanimation and to overcome the knowledge that the player is not part of the game world. It furthermore maintains interaction with the narrative, allowing a level of immersion and interaction with the game world as a believable diegetic space that transcends that of other media. Usually, user interface (or UI) information is available only to the player and is therefore outside the game world; incorporating the UI information into the diegesis allows a higher level of what Murray terms 'immersion – actively creat[ing] belief […] to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience.'[13] As already mentioned, in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, Desmond is accessing ancestral memories via his DNA, through interaction with the Animus. The Animus controls what the player can and cannot do throughout the game, and therefore has a veneer of authorial control over the narrative, as well as revealing it. Functioning much like the holodeck of Janet Murray's utopian ideal,[14] the Animus allows Desmond to directly interact with his ancestor – to become Ezio and relive his memories. The player takes control of Desmond, and by extension Ezio, to interact with the memories and complete the game, and to uncover the narrative. In addition to combining ludic and UI information for the player, the Animus is the primary method of linking Desmond to the secondary narrative in all the *Assassin's Creed* games, although this is more

readily apparent in *Assassin's Creed 2* through the introduction of the upgraded Animus 2.0. This new Animus allows any non-player characters of the Desmond narrative to communicate with Desmond as he is immersed in Ezio's memories and to relay information, such as maps and historical facts to Desmond (and by extension the player), as well as to impart quest information that would typically be non-diegetic.

The primarily sandbox structure of *Assassin's Creed 2* allows individual memory fragments to be considered as separate entities, permitting what Genette calls the anachronic extent of each narrative fragment to be variable. Genette uses this term to describe 'duration of story that is more or less long.'[15] In practice, this means that the memories last a particular length of time within the game. This is a sophisticated temporal structure in any medium; these memories are woven together to create a character complex enough to rival literary models and the ability to interact with the memories of Ezio is a significant factor in understanding his character. The memory fragments (which function much as chapters in a novel) are spread throughout its entirety, taking a relatively short time (within the game diegesis) to complete each one. There are a number of memories that have to be completed in a specific time, for example, such as fighting or racing; the time taken to play through these memories can be measured in minutes, making the anachronic extent of the fragment this short, within a diegesis that covers many years. Alternately, there are larger memories which are measured in days, or even weeks – and while the anachronic reach is this long, ellipses and an exaggerated timeframe within the scene that comprises each specific memory allows them to be completed in minutes or hours, rather than the extended timeframe necessary if the game were to be completed in real time.

3. Building the Picture

One of the primary narratological functions found in *Assassin's Creed 2* is the use of analepsis, 'an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment.'[16] Genette sub-divides analepsis into two categories, internal and external, which are differentiated by the narrative level at which they occur. An external analepsis is one which takes place outside the diegesis, providing narrative information to the player, whereas an internal analepsis is one which takes place within the same diegesis, albeit at an earlier time, with the same function. Structurally, the entire Ezio narrative is a series of external analepsis, as it is dependent on and occurs within the Desmond narrative. Other videogames also feature external analepsis to carry the narrative forward; *Bioshock*,[17] for example, features a series of ghostly scenes, which take place earlier than the fictional time of the game, providing information to the player, which helps to construct the narrative, whilst *Heavy Rain*[18] and *Uncharted*[19] both allow the player to control past versions of characters to relay narrative information.

Analepsis is used in *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, when playing as Ezio, to further the narrative, with no direct relevance to the game's plot. One set of these missions are known as The Cristina Memories. Rebecca Crane, an NPC character tells Desmond 'as you raise your synchronization by executing events the way Ezio lived them, you might discover some... repressed memories.'[20] These repressed memories, dealing with Ezio's lover and their ill-fated relationship, are analepsis within an analepsis, a meta-analepsis. They are also an internal analepsis; that is, the memories are part of the fictional world of Ezio, which the player is already part of, rather than external to the memories being played out, as with the Desmond/Ezio structure. These analepsis take the form of five memories, which result in small cut scenes; these cut scenes are based on the novel of the game *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* and chart the interactions of the lovers throughout Ezio's life, from his first meeting her in 1476, to her death in 1489. These memories, while expanding on Ezio's past, bear no relation to the game's progression and so are a purely narrative insertion, providing the player with information that allows her to understand the character she is controlling, and the bearing this character has on events in the game, rather than any ludic functions.

4. Only a Game?

So far, the analysis of the *Assassin's Creed* games shows that the temporal structure of the games adheres to the rules of Narratology, with Genette's thesis being visible when considering the games construction. However, videogames have unique properties that allow the player to become intimate in a narrative not available to traditional media. Game franchises such as *Assassin's Creed* can take over 100 hours to complete, with the player gaining insight into the protagonist, the diegesis, and the narrative through direct interaction, rather than description. For instance, the player becomes aware of the moral character of Ezio through interacting with him and controlling his actions; for example, if the player kills another character that is not prescribed by the structure and narrative of the game, a message will flash on the screen: 'Warning: Ezio Auditore did not kill civilians' and subsequent innocent deaths result in the player being 'desynchronised' – expelled from the memory by the Animus. The player becomes aware of the protagonists characteristics through interaction, rather than interpretation; making the wrong choice brings the player to awareness of the moral, rather than being shown the incident.

Playing a videogame with a sophisticated diegesis brings an insight into setting, allowing the player to place the narrative within a specific context; *Assassin's Creed 2*, for example, is set in the Renaissance period, and the Italian landscape is historically represented within the game to allow the player an insight into this time period through the architecture and without directly referencing these (although this history is simplified). The mastery of space in quest narratives has featured throughout videogame history, with early games Adventure[21] and The

Hobbit[22] drawing heavily on the literary tradition of the quest. In a similar vein, modern videogames such as *Skyrim*[23] and *Fallout 3*[24] have evolved from earlier Dungeons and Dragons type games, which in turn evolved from fantasy fiction such as *The Lord of the Rings*.[25] Already, we are in narrative territory, inflected by narrative genealogies. All make mastery of and progress through game space the basis of both narrative and ludic videogame structures.

Yet unlike traditional narratives, videogames are not limited to using game space as a setting for narrative and play, nor are players simply viewers or readers of this space. In order to make ludic or narrative progress, players must interact with and navigate the game space, the game cannot progress without mastering it; neither can the narrative. This creates a new relationship of narrative consumer to narrative space, an accepted factor in videogames, but one that some literary scholars are resistant to. Direct interaction with the setting, rather than observation also heightens the immersion of the player into the game and the narrative, just as character interaction allows identification and involvement in a game. Whilst technology has progressed and allowed game designers to create more complex video games which allow multiple layers of content, the issue of whether a game should include narrative is still valid. That the games DO contain narrative cannot be denied by anyone who plays; games contain stories, even if these stories are simple by literary standards. However, game study scholars are correct in asserting that games should be considered as a separate entity to other forms of literature; their structure is unlike any other form of narrative delivery and as such needs to be explored and considered as a medium in their own right, not 'just interactive bits and pieces tacked on to narratology or dramaturgy.' However, to wholly insist on this is to ignore some fundamental aspects of how video games present narrative, such as using cinematic sequences, *mise-en-scene* and atmospheric music; these are established within the analysis of other media, and are as relevant to videogame analysis as the study of gameplay mechanics and rule sets.

One of the issues facing the narrative analyst in videogame media is that the constituent elements of a videogame present a coherent narrative *and* ludological product when taken in their entirety, even if those elements appear to be mutually exclusive at first glance, of which traditional Narratology does not account for. The interaction the player has with the game is an important part of the videogame experience, and influences how the player views the narrative. Future studies of videogame analysis need to consider the role that this interactivity plays on the narrative and the way the player interprets narrative when it is delivered in this manner. To further understand the unique immersive qualities found in videogames, the analyst needs to consider the role of identity in videogame narratives and how videogames allow the player a specific perspective and understanding of characters and methods in which the videogame brings about new ways of presenting characters and information to the player (and viewer) of

videogame narratives alongside the more traditional methods such as film and literature.

Notes

[1] Jesper Juul, 'A Clash between Game and Narrative' (Masters Thesis, Copenhagen, 1999); Jesper Juul, *Half Real: Videogames between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005); Jesper Juul, 'What Computer Games Can and Can't Do' (JesperJuul.net. 2000), accessed 27 August 2011, http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/wcgcacd.html.
[2] Marrku Eskelinen, 'The Gaming Situation' (Gamestudies.org 2001), accessed 19 March 2012, https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/.
[3] Ubisoft Games, *Assassin's Creed 2* (Montreal: Ubisoft Montreal, 2007-2011).
[4] Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (New York: The Cornell University Press, 1980).
[5] Ibid., 24.
[6] Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed* 2 (Montreal: Ubisoft Montreal, 2009).
[7] Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (Montreal: Ubisoft Montreal, 2010).
[8] Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* (Montreal: Ubisoft Montreal, 2011).
[9] Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 40.
[10] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 5.
[11] Ibid., 58.
[12] Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 228.
[13] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 110.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 48.
[16] Ibid., 40.
[17] 2K Games, *Bioshock* (New York: Take 2 Interactive, 2007).
[18] Quantic Dream, *Heavy Rain* (London: Sony, 2010).
[19] Naughty Dog, *Uncharted* (London: Sony, 2008-2011).
[20] Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* ingame quote by Rebecca Crane to Desmond Miles.
[21] Rick Adams, *The Colossal Cave Adventure Page* (Colossal Cave Adventure, no date), accessed 27 April 2012, http://www.rickadams.org/adventure/index.html.
[22] Martijn Van der Heide, *The Hobbit* (Sinclair Infoseek, 2012), accessed 12 August 2012, http://www.worldofspectrum.org/infoseekid.cgi?id=0006440.
[23] Bethseda, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (London: Microsoft Games, 2011).
[24] Bethseda, *Fallout 3* (London: Microsoft Games, 2008).
[25] J. R. R. Tolkein, *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* (London: Harpercollins, 2007).

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Dawn Stobbart is a PhD candidate at Lancaster University's English Department, focusing on the way that videogames function as a carrier for narrative and its role within this medium. She has an interest in contemporary Literature, and especially the way this translates to the videogame.

What Is Videogame History?

Nick Webber

Abstract
When we refer to 'history' in the context of videogames, what do we mean? At first, this seems a simple question: taking, for example, *Space Invaders*, we could focus on the design of the game, its arcade release and its ongoing remaking. Yet as games become more complex so do the answers to this question, and scholars have explored not only the history of games as economic and cultural objects but also the ways in which games both present and represent the history of the world around us. Further complexity is added, however, by multiplayer games, particular massively-multiplayer online games (MMOGs) such as *World of Warcraft* and *EVE Online*. Should the historian of such games narrate the story of their creation, or of the way they have changed over time, or of the in-game mythologies that set the context in which their players play? Or, perhaps more interestingly, should they recount the stories of the players themselves? This chapter seeks to examine the way in which history is constituted and understood in and around videogames, as economic objects (things made and sold), cultural artefacts (things experienced and emulated) and as social environments (things inhabited and shaped). It considers the ways in which games are historically interesting and the extent to which historicity (historical accuracy) is important in constructing game histories. In closing, it poses questions which may help us to understand more about the social importance of MMOGs and about history itself. Can the most socially developed game worlds be thought of as having credible and complete histories of their own? And if, as Carr observed, our answer to the question 'what is history?' reflects our position in time and our view of society, what are the implications of this 'videogame history' for the world of 2013?

Key Words: Gaming history, history, MMOG, culture, mythology, lore, *EVE Online*, True Stories.

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1. Introduction

The history of videogames, gaming, and the games industry has been told and retold in various media formats. Most of these histories are aimed at a non-academic audience, written by non-historians, and intended to convey compelling stories. We are told, for example, how Sony or Nintendo 'conquered the world' and regaled with tales of the 'Golden Age' of gaming. Iconic game names index particular points in time – *Pong*, for example, features prominently – and interviews with 'industry luminaries' are widely employed.[1] Alongside this popular recounting sits a smaller number of works for a scholarly audience, which

declare themselves to be investigations of some aspect of videogame history, situated in a variety of disciplines: electrical engineering, business studies and cultural studies, among others. As with so much else in game studies, then, videogame history presents us with a mixture of perspectives and priorities.

This variety suggests that concepts of history are important in our attempts to understand videogames and their culture, and the study of games and history have long been connected: Huizinga, originator of the much maligned 'magic circle' idea, was a historian first and foremost. In addition, a large number of games include historical content, either explicitly (games set in World War 2, for example) or thematically (as in the pseudo-medieval settings of many RPGs), and discussions of games also engage with this material and other 'historical' ideas, like nostalgia and tradition. In what follows, I will explore and try to make sense of some of the ways in which the relationship between games and history is articulated, and offer some thoughts and ask some questions about that relationship and its meaning.

2. History

So what do we mean when we talk about the *history* of videogames? Historians and philosophers have long sought to establish just what history is and what the term history really means. A distinction is typically made between two common meanings of history: between the sequence of past events and the inquiry into those events conducted by the historian:[2] the notion of history is thus divided into an object of study, and the discipline of studying it. For Carr, writing in the early 1960s, history was thus 'the process of enquiry into the past of man in society;' for Oakeshott in the '70s, it was 'a distinct kind of enquiry,' clearly different 'from an inconsequential groping around in the confusion of all that may be going on.'[3] More recently, recognising that history is not only practised in universities, it has been suggested that history is a discourse as much as a discipline,[4] and increasingly the importance of public history – the public understanding and communication of history – has reshaped how we think about historical work.[5] Also important is the increasing breadth of approaches to the practice of history, drawing on ideas from sociology, anthropology, philosophy and literary studies, to name a few.[6] So, functionally, we can conceive of history as a term to describe things which have gone before – the past – and also the discourses and practices that surround the study, communication and memorialisation of that past.

For games, then, we can see that the notion of history has broad implications. We can talk about histories *of* games, and also history *in* games, both reasonably falling under the banner of videogame history. Videogames, and the context in which they sit, can be objects of historical study, not only in the sense that they exist at a particular point in past time, but that they can be explored from a variety of viewpoints in order to allow us to better understand the society which produced and consumed them. To take the so-called 'three basic kinds of history,'[7] games

have political, economic and social pasts, and corresponding histories that might be written about them. Politically, we might approach the history of videogames as one of regulation, say, or of power relationships between government, industry and players. Economically, we can explore the continuities and changes in the ways games have been developed, produced and sold; socially, we might focus on game communities and the environments in which they might be found.[8] And it may also be productive to add a fourth category of history here: cultural history, reflecting such things as the consumption of games, their emulation and tradition, and notions of nostalgia.

3. History *of* Games

The game histories we have, however, do not necessarily echo such an imagination of what history might be, and certainly do not address all aspects of what we might think of as videogame history. Even in academic work, the term history is often used quite imprecisely, leaving the reader wondering what exactly is meant.[9] We are left to come to our own conclusions, and to realise for ourselves the distinction between, for example, a notion of game history that we can 'protect and preserve' (one imbued in some way with physicality),[10] and one which is written down or which is experiential. The idea that a history of games is articulated by a collection of the games themselves, and the platforms on which they are played, seems common.[11] This conception of games as devices is closely related to another prominent trend in game histories – the narrative of technological innovation. Working backwards from the present to seek a 'cause' in the past, many writers produce game histories designed to illustrate a progression, either from innovative historical games such as *ADVENTure* to modern incarnations,[12] or through developments in the technology used to deliver games.[13] And while *chronology* is the principal structuring device for many gaming histories,[14] it is this *narrative of progress* which really stands out. Henry Lowood notes similarities between the disciplines of game studies and the history of science, and these can perhaps be reiterated for the history of games. But it appears that, unlike the history of science, the history of videogames has thus far failed to reach a point where new games and technologies can be thought of as 'intellectual disjunctions ripe for contextualization rather than a linear progression of discoveries.'[15]

If Lowood's observation rings true, so too does James Curran's critique of media history.[16] Curran observes three failings in the history of the media,[17] and parallels can readily be drawn – we might in fact think of videogame history, in it's 'of games' form, as a history of a medium. For Curran, media history often separates the object of study from its broader context, both in media and in society, and it tends to become parochial, problems which together result in the alienation of the very media scholars it is intended to inform; and these are potential problems for us, too. A focus on the games themselves tends to result in histories which seek

connections with pre-computer games – board games, card games, etc. – ignoring the relationship of gaming to other media consumption, even though scholars elsewhere in the field are working to explore those relationships in the present. Equally, the limited attention to the social history of gaming is problematic given the hugely social nature of much modern videogame-playing.[18] Of course, the history of videogames is yet young, but there is clearly much to learn here from the practices of history in other, related fields.

4. History *in* Games

If that summarises in some way the history *of* games, what of history *in* games? Here games present us with a number of interesting problems and opportunities. Games offer a context for historical knowledge, and scholars have engaged with issues surrounding historical games, with *Medal of Honor* and *Civilization* drawing particular attention. Games such as these have been criticised for 'presentations of history that are stereotypically masculine, highly systematic, and focused on spatially oriented interactivity' and 'aggressive power;'[19] and commentators have expressed concern that the line between videogame and historical fact is becoming blurred, particularly in cases where historical videogames are used to illustrate television history documentaries.[20] Yet some historians are eager to participate in the development of historical games as educational platforms,[21] and Adam Chapman has made plain his view that games such as *Civilization* and *Assassin's Creed* constitute history.[22] There is no doubt that games that deliberately communicate history produce a discourse about the past; their engagement with a mass audience, therefore, would qualify them as texts of public history. But as Chapman notes, many historians approach historical games much as they approach all attempts to move history beyond the traditional monograph; games are not 'proper history' because, ultimately, they are not books.[23]

Of course, many games draw on conceptions of the past which are unconcerned with historical accuracy or authenticity, and are thus less likely to convey historical knowledge. Fantasy games in particular employ historical tropes – the knight, perhaps, or agrarian society – to create a medievalised imaginary space in which heroic deeds may be done. And even when a game setting has little to do with the past of the world in which we live, it will often incorporate historical ideas, providing a backstory to contextualise the events of the game and inviting you to imagine a prehistory before, to use Juul's example, the Space Invaders invaded.[24] This imagined past can be extraordinarily detailed, using inter-textual references to enhance player engagement, and providing extensive historical information which has no direct bearing on gameplay, but adds 'thickness' to the world.[25] *World of Warcraft*, for example, incorporates an extensive mythology, played out in part through regular game events tied to real world holidays and festivals.[26] Players can demonstrate tremendous engagement with this seemingly 'irrelevant' information,

some using the term 'lore' to describe their understanding of, and access to, information about the perceived history of these worlds.[27]

5. Players as History

And it is important to remember that history of any kind is dependent upon people. In terms of videogames, 'people' overwhelmingly means 'players,' and player histories offer a rich and rather underexploited source for those writing videogame history. The gaming history of players is clearly important within game culture, and is communicated in a variety of ways, through gamertags, achievements and badges, for example.[28] Player *experiences* are less well recorded, but they are prominent in discourses around practices like retro-gaming – where nostalgia drives a compulsion to play specific games to try to recapture historic experience. As mentioned above, however, popular histories often rely heavily on interviews with 'industry luminaries,' seemingly in the belief that they offer an incomparable insight into gaming history. But such practices create a privileged history, akin to Victorian histories of great men, decision makers whose acts changed the world.

So what *is* videogame history? Is it a combination of all these ideas, the political, social, economic, cultural and technological history *of* games as objects, the portrayal of the past *in* those games, and the experiences of their players? Or might it be something more than that? It is clear that many of these notions of history are complicated and extended by MMOGs, Massively Multiplayer Online Games, especially those which are persistent and thus might be said to have an existence over time,[29] rather than a 'moment' of existence in which they are played and experienced. Given that, in the most developed online game worlds, there are thriving economies, intricate social networks, organised groups with political agendas and huge numbers of players engaging in a broad range of cultural activities, might these worlds be thought of as having credible and complete histories of their own?

6. EVE Online True Stories

To try to address that question, I will draw on the example of EVE Online, a space-based MMOG celebrating its tenth anniversary this year (2013). EVE is of particular interest here: unlike many MMOGs in which players are divided across a number of servers, in EVE all players play on a single 'shard.' EVE has more than half a million subscribers,[30] who come together to socialise, to play and, predominantly in EVE, to fight. While EVE uses a backstory and fictional past to explain basic game structures and contextualise player vs. environment content, the majority of activity in EVE is player vs. player in nature. Thus the majority of player experience is contextualised not by the history provided by the game, but by relationships with other players. EVE is not a game you play alone; it is renowned for its difficulty, and as a consequence is intensely social.

The basic social unit in EVE is the corporation. As the game has developed over time, however, corporations have come together to form alliances, the largest of which boasts over 12,000 members[31] and, more recently, alliances have come together to form coalitions, which are even bigger. One aspect of the game is the ability to control space, and a map of sovereignty in EVE looks much like any other political geography. The largest coalitions hold huge areas of space, punctuated by smaller territories of less powerful alliances. These are organised and often extremely hierarchical communities, and coalition and alliance members conduct diplomacy with other polities. And EVE has economics, too: to build spaceships in which to fight, you need materials and equipment, and these goods are traded on an open market, managed by an economist employed by CCP Games, EVE's developer and publisher.

In EVE, then, we have an environment of shifting sovereignty, diplomatic relations, extensive social networks and practices, and free-market economics, all set against the cultural activity of play over a period of a decade. And the players are *real* people, creating rich histories in fictional places, the consequences of which can reflect into society more broadly – in relationships between players, say, or through the connection of game assets and real world money arising from the purchase and sale of subscription extensions. In EVE, there are very clearly two kinds of history: the history the game presents, and the history players make for themselves. How do we disentangle this complexity? Is this *really* history at all?

CCP certainly seem to think so. To celebrate EVE's ten years online, in April they launched a site entitled 'True Stories from the First Decade,'[32] 'a place where people can read the history of our Universe, as told by those that inhabit it.'[33] The site heralded a competition: players were invited to submit stories about their EVE experiences, and these were posted publicly. Readers could add comments in the 'debate' section, and vote for the stories they liked. The contest closed in early June, with 757 stories submitted, but CCP intend to continue to maintain the site.[34]

Although a PR and marketing activity at heart, 'True Stories' offers a fascinating resource for the historian. The discourse of the site is saturated with contested and complex ideas: not only does the title proclaim the possibility of truth, but commentators remark on the 'importance' of stories,[35] and on their biased or propagandist nature.[36] The winning story, written by The Mittani, leader of one of the largest alliances in the game, represents an event in which his alliance was directly involved, on the winning side: history, then, being written by the victors. In many ways, The Mittani plays the role of politician; and politicians often do write histories, sometimes among the most contentious – Alan Clark's *The Donkeys*,[37] for example. It is difficult to see how these practices could *not* be compared with history outside the game and, in reality many historians would be overjoyed to have this level of rich engagement with a historical problem. So, again, is this history? I do not think we can answer that question with any certainty.

7. Conclusion

It seems, in fact, that videogame history provides us with a *more* complicated problem than the history of the world around us, especially when we consider the interrelationship between real world actors and fictional histories in persistent multiplayer games, and that games represent the discourses of history which societies produce when they communicate historical knowledge. If our answer to the question 'what is history?' reflects, as Carr observed, our position in time and our view of society, what then are the implications of 'videogame history' for the world of 2013? Many scholars, Benedict Anderson prominent among them,[38] have considered the importance for a community of a shared sense of history, and the intricacies of videogame history seem to support more general ideas that our concept of community has been reshaped by online activity and modern cultural practices. When we look at EVE Online, we can see how the communities within the game have arisen in response to struggles for power and control, producing histories to underwrite this activity which can then form the basis of identities – 'It's important for us, to know where we came from,' as one True Stories contributor remarks. Games seem, in the construction of their history, to stand at a cusp of development, where there is now an increasing drive to make them genuinely educative, rather than to make games about education; to take the complexities of history out of books and convey them through games with expertise and skill. The rapidly increasing number of histories about games, and the large public market for such histories, demonstrates that our society sees videogames as important: our histories of their production, regulation and consumption in some way index our notions of human 'progress,' whatever that might mean, over the last 50 years. And finally, and perhaps fundamentally, the difficulty of clearly answering the question of what *videogame* history is suggests that we are perhaps no longer able to be clear about what *history* is.

Notes

[1] I take the phrase from Daniel Pargman and Peter Jakobssen, 'Five Perspectives on Computer Game History', *Interactions* 14, No. 6 (2007): 27.
[2] For example, Edward H. Carr, *What Is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), 20-21; Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 1-3; Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 6-7.
[3] Carr, *What Is History*, 48; Oakeshott, *On History*, 2.
[4] Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, 31-32.
[5] Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 2nd Edition (London: Hodder Education, 2006), 126-149.
[6] Ibid., 63-80.
[7] Ibid., 41.

[8] For example, the arcade: see Van Burnham, *Supercade: A Visual History of the Videogame Arcade 1971-1984* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
[9] See, for example, Timothy Burke, 'Can a Table Stand on One Leg? Critical and Ludological Thoughts on Star Wars: Galaxies', *Game Studies* 5, No. 1 (2005), accessed 11 July 2013, http://www.gamestudies.org/0501/burke/. Is the history of the game distinct from the developmental history of the game here?
[10] Joanna Barwick, James Dearnley and Adrienne Muir, 'Playing Games with Cultural Heritage: A Comparative Case Study Analysis of the Current Status of Digital Game Preservation', *Games and Culture* 6, No. 4 (2011): 374.
[11] E.g. Ibid., 373-390; Diane Carr, 'Game On: The Culture and History of Videogames (May-September 2002, London; October 2002-February 2003, Edinburgh)', *Visual Communication* 2, No. 2 (2003): 163-168.
[12] E.g. Bruce Damer, 'Meeting in the Ether: A Brief History of Virtual Worlds as a Medium for User-Created Events', *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* 1, No. 1 (2008): 1-17; Maeva Veerapen, 'Where Do Virtual Worlds Come From?: A Genealogy of Second Life', *Games and Culture* 8, No. 2 (2013): 98-116.
[13] E.g. Stephen D. Bristow, 'The History of Video Games', *IEEE Transactions on Consumer Electronics* 23, No. 1 (1977): 58-68; Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, 'Random and Raster: Display Technologies and the Development of Videogames', *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 31 (2009): 34-43.
[14] Pargman and Jakobsson, 'Five Perspectives', 27.
[15] Henry Lowood, 'Game Studies Now, History of Science Then', *Games and Culture* 1, No. 1 (2006): 78.
[16] James Curran, 'Media and the Making of British Society, c.1700-2000', *Media History* 8, No. 2 (2002): 135-154.
[17] Ibid., 135.
[18] There are exceptions, of course, such as Dmitri Williams, 'A (Brief) Social History of Video Games', in *Playing Computer Games: Motives, Responses, and Consequences*, eds. Peter Vorderer and Jennings Bryant (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006), 229-247.
[19] Kevin Schut, 'Strategic Simulations and Our Past: The Bias of Computer Games in the Presentation of History', *Games and Culture* 2, No. 3 (2007): 214 and 222.
[20] Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History* (London: Routledge, 2009), 144.
[21] E.g. Kevin Kee et al., 'Towards a Theory of Good History through Gaming', *Canadian Historical Review* 90, No. 2 (2009): 303-326.
[22] Adam Chapman, 'Privileging Form Over Content: Analysing Historical Videogames', *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, No. 2 (2012), accessed 11 July 2013, http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-2/privileging-form-over-content-by-adam-chapman/.
[23] Ibid.

[24] Jesper Juul, 'Games Telling Stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives', *Game Studies* 1, No. 1 (2001), accessed 11 July 2013, http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/.
[25] Tanya Krzywinska, 'World Creation and Lore: *World of Warcraft* as Rich Text', in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, eds. Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg (London: MIT Press, 2006): 123-4.
[26] Ibid., 134-137.
[27] See, for example, Eric Hayot, 'Interview with Chris Lena', *Game Studies* 9, No. 1 (2009), accessed 11 July 2013, http://gamestudies.org/0901/articles/interview_lena.
[28] Mikael Jakobsson, 'The Achievement Machine: Understanding Xbox 360 Achievements in Gaming Practices', *Games Studies* 11, No. 1 (2011), accessed 11 July 2013, http://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/jakobsson.
[29] Burke, 'Can A Table' and Hayot, 'Interview' demonstrate some of the problems of talking about history in terms of MMOGs.
[30] CCP Loktofeit, 'EVE Online Surpasses 500,000 Subscribers Worldwide', *EVEOnline.com*, last modified 28 February 2013, accessed 11 July 2013, http://community.eveonline.com/news/news-channels/press-releases/eve-online-surpasses-500-000-subscribers-worldwide/.
[31] Daniel Hoffend, 'Alliance Ranking: Sorted by Number of Members', *DOTLAN EveMaps*, accessed 11 July 2013, http://evemaps.dotlan.net/alliance/memberCount.
[32] CCP Games, 'True Stories from the First Decade', *EVEOnline.com*, accessed 11 July 2013, https://truestories.eveonline.com/.
[33] Torfi Frans, 'Can You Help Us Find the True Stories of The First Decade?', *EVEOnline.com*, last modified 3 April 2013, accessed 11 July 2013, http://community.eveonline.com/news/dev-blogs/true-stories-of-the-first-decade/.
[34] Torfi Frans, 'The Circle Is Complete: Voting Finished for True Stories', last modified 5 June 2013, accessed 11 July 2013, http://community.eveonline.com/news/dev-blogs/the-circle-is-complete-voting-finished-in-true-stories/.
[35] For example, Spike Spiegel-XI, 'History of the Creation of Goonswarm', 21 May 2013, accessed 11 July 2013, https://truestories.eveonline.com/points/1741-history-of-the-creation-of-goonswarm: 'It's important for us, to know where we came from'; Burseg Sardaukar, 'Hulkageddon Is Important in EVE History', last modified 23 April 2013, accessed 11 July 2013, https://truestories.eveonline.com/points/851-hulkageddon-is-important-in-eve-history; Jiggle Physics, 'Cornerstone of Eve', last modified 18 May 2013, accessed 11 July 2013, https://truestories.eveonline.com/points/1695-cornerstone-of-eve: 'Probably the single most important thing to happen to EVE'.
[36] Peter Powers, 'one sided view with a stretch on what really happened', last modified 8 May 2013, accessed 11 July 2013, https://truestories.eveonline.com/po

ints/1570-one-sided-view-with-a-stretch-on-wh at-really-happend: 'the author of this story presents a one sided propaganda view on what happend, stretching the truth in actual events that where happening by exaggerating the role of his own corp/alliance in the events'; Assistant Stone, 'Poorly written, bias, no objective', last modified 20 May 2013, accessed 11 July 2013, https://truestories.eveonline.com/points/1716-poorly-written-bias-no-objective: 'its a bias political piece to belittle CVA, not to tell a real story'.

[37] Alan Clark, *The Donkeys* (London: Pimlico, 1991).

[38] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition (London: Verso, 2006).

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Nick Webber is Senior Researcher and Research Developer at the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research, Birmingham City University, UK. His current research includes contemporary popular music consumption, online archiving and public history, and the culture of massively multiplayer online games.

Text as Ruleset: How Games Precede Humanities

Roger Travis

Abstract
In this chapter I argue that the unavoidable conclusion that text is ruleset, arising from the analogy of oral epic with narrative games, allows us to understand the humanistic study of games as both imperative and foundational for the humanities themselves. When we realise that texts are rulesets, participation in the *Iliad* and in Plato's dialogues and in *Skyrim* becomes legible both as performances within rulesets and as iterations of those rulesets. In turn, reading these performances as commensurable allows us to see that games, as play-practice, precede and condition the humanities themselves. The role of humanistic study, going back to the Renaissance and even to the culture of Athens to which the Renaissance humanists looked, is from a text-as-ruleset perspective to enable human beings, performing in culture, to become aware of the way their performances are shaped by the rulesets that have come before, and the way in turn that their performances function as rulesets for performances that come after. Plato gave us a wonderful image of that awareness in the prisoner getting up from his seat in the cave and getting a good look at what is really going on; what is going on is that culture is being transmitted through the shadow-puppet play – what I call the cave-culture game, since the prisoners have contests to name the next shadow. As that game precedes the humanistic reflection of the prisoner, as the works of the homeric bards (the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) precede Plato, so do games precede humanities. Instead of treating games as texts, we must treat texts as games.

Key Words: Games, humanities, text, practomime, Homer, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, Plato.

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In this chapter, I try to open a new direction in the humanistic criticism of play and art, based on a new way of establishing the relationship between the two. I see games and other works of art as part of a continuum of *mimesis* – or, in my own terminology, of practomime: that is, literally, the doing of playing pretend. In this chapter I formulate the radical hypothesis that in order to put the humanistic criticism of games on a secure footing, we must see the texts that humanists study as rulesets and our study of them as play. We must, I argue, begin to understand how games condition humanities and how the players of games are themselves humanists.

I start with an example that is irreverent but arresting. For a period of about six months, two years ago now, I was engulfed (not to say 'immersed') in the audiobook versions of G. R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. It may well have been a consequence of listening to them rather than materially, textually reading

them that I became fascinated by the way Martin plays with medieval history on the one hand and high fantasy on the other, for what I was listening to when I listened to those books was a performance of the actor Roy Dotrice of a performance by G. R. R. Martin of materials afforded by historical and literary tradition.

The relationship between Martin's performance, Dotrice's performance, and my own receptive performance seems to me to be made much clearer when we think less in terms of literature and more in terms of play, especially when there are also such things as HBO series to work into a growing transmedia tapestry (tapestries, as you will see below, being good to think with).

I want to suggest that it can be interpretatively helpful to see Martin as the designer and first player of a mod of a game called 'fantasy fiction' and Roy Dotrice as the player of that game designed by Martin. The text of the novels is the ruleset of Martin's game; the nearly infinite texts of medieval history and fantasy literature are the rulesets of the undesigned one Martin modded and then played to create it. As Martin's scope for creativity was vast, a literary sandbox of almost unlimited dimensions, Dotrice's scope for creativity and virtuosity was by comparison very narrow – yet at the same time infinite, in the same way that the performance-scope of a 2D sidescroller – or of a level of *HALO*, or of a given book of the *Iliad* – is both limited and infinite.

Call it the great chain of practomime: from Tolkien and the Bayeux Tapestry to Martin to Dotrice to me, just as we might draw it from *Beowulf* to Tolkien to Turbine to my students playing *The Lord of the Rings Online* in my Homer course. Socrates proposes something very similar in Plato's Ion: the rhapsode is the final link in a chain of magnetic rings that begins with 'Homer.' Rulesets and game-mechanics are perhaps not exactly what we think they are: perhaps, like more traditional forms of metaphor, they both constrain and release our creativity, and give us in that double-motion the opportunity for immersive, transformative virtuosity that can enliven us and connect us to our communities.

If this idea has merit, not only may it be possible to read transmedia artefacts both as discourse and as game, and to read them across their various media while preserving both their totalising pretensions and the individuality of their component practices (that is, we could for example read graphic *Batman*, the film *The Dark Knight*, and the game *Arkham Asylum* isomorphically both separately and together), but it may be possible to find the essential complementarity we have been searching for between player-experience and game-design in a corresponding complementarity between literary criticism and game-design criticism. Among other things, this complementarity would put behind us the distinction between content and rules forever, since we would at last be able to see that content is a form of rule, as the Bayeux Tapestry is a part of the ruleset of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, given that it controlled the relation between Martin's input and the text he produced; as the text of *A Song Ice and Fire* is a part of the ruleset of *A Song of Ice*

and Fire, given that it controlled the relation between Roy Dotrice's input and the audiobook he produced; as the sound of the audiobook is a part of the ruleset of the audiobook I listen to, given that it controls the relation between the state of mind I bring to it and that state of mind in which I leave it.

It would in short mean that we could on the one hand read rulesets as literature and on the other critique the design of discursive artefacts like texts. It would mean that we could find new ways to appreciate and to critique the playfulness of novels like *Ulysses* and epics like the *Iliad*, and new ways to appreciate and to critique the lapidary literary qualities of games like *Skyrim*.

Martin titled *A Song of Ice and Fire* advisedly, I think, with reference to the bardic traditions of European culture that gave us also the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, and the *Song of Roland* among many others. As I have demonstrated,[1] those bardic traditions worked like games. That we call them 'oral improvisatory traditions' rather than 'games' is a historical and semantic accident no more remarkable than the one that has us calling *Skyrim* (or *Mass Effect*) a 'game' rather than a 'tale.' For the truth is that as the homeric bards played the stories of Achilles and Odysseus, Martin plays the stories of the Starks, the Lannisters, and the Targaryens, and I play *Skyrim*. And, in each case, our play is bounded by a ruleset that controls the choices we make and the effect those choices have on the state of the performance in which we are currently engaged. Moreover, I want to suggest, those rulesets may be read comparatively in the way they specifically allow the player to play a mythic past.

As I proposed above, I want to go on along this line of inquiry to argue that once these performances produce a more fixed kind of artefact – a recording of a bard's performance, the text of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, a gameplay video of *Skyrim* – those fixed artefacts themselves function like games, as rulesets for performances by the players in their audiences.

The first step, however, is to put the isomorphism among these various kinds of mythic constraints (game-rules, bardic conventions, literary genre) on a solid footing. The world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a pastiche of medieval Europe; that much is clear from the opening paragraphs of *A Game of Thrones*, and nothing changes at least as far as the closing paragraphs of *A Dance with Dragons*, except that over the course of five enormous tomes and/or hundreds of hours of audiobook we move from a world bounded by the limits of a historical reality we recognize (perhaps there used to be dragons, and magic, but there is no evidence of it in the world) to a world bounded by the much wider limits of high-fantasy (queens riding dragons into the sky). Martin, that is, gradually changes the mythic rules on his audience, and to wonderful effect.

That world created by those rules is a performance of the past in which Martin takes events from our world – notably the Norman conquest, figured as the dragon-enabled conquest of Westeros by Aegon – and projects them into the playspace of his imaginative performance, leaving us the record of the text of *A Song of Ice and*

Fire as the rules of our own performance within that world. For comparison's sake, it's worth noting that J. R. R. Tolkien did much the same thing in constructing what he called the *Quenta* – the mythos behind *The Lord of the Rings*. Of course all composers of fiction do something similar when they create their fictional worlds, even in realistic fiction like that of Austen or Steinbeck.

But just as there is a continuum of usefulness in talking about games as occasions of narrative (useful for *Skyrim* and *BioShock*, less useful for *Tetris* and *Temple Run*, though no less true), there is a continuum of usefulness in talking about textual performance as playing with the cultural materials of mythic history (useful for *The Lord of the Rings* and *Ulysses*, less useful for *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, though no less true).

The comparison between *Skyrim* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* helps because when we read Martin's saga as a play-performance in which he chooses and transforms the elements of the Norman conquest and chooses and transforms elements of Tolkien, and combines them as a bard combined the themes he had from his professional forebears to create a mythic past, we gain the ability to analyse the affinity between the experience of reading Martin's work and the experience of playing *Skyrim*, and, just as importantly, the affinity between the cultural effects of the saga and the game, as demonstrated by such parergic player-performances as *A Wiki of Ice and Fire*[2] and *The Elder Scrolls* Wiki.[3] One need only compare the *Jane Austen Wiki*[4] to see that there is something in Martin's world that corresponds better with *The Elder Scrolls* than with Austen.

In fact, despite the appearance of futurity, the same is true of *Star Wars* ('a long time ago') and of *Battlestar Galactica* ('All this has happened before') and of *Mass Effect* ('A myth common to several cultures in the galaxy, Reapers were imagined to be space monsters who consumed entire stars'). The advent of reliable records of the past (curse you, written culture!) has gradually robbed us of the ability to imagine dragons and heroes in our past; the homeric bards' mythic ruleset is therefore no longer playable exactly as they played it, but with the imaginative tweak by which the past of a fictional world becomes our own past while we inhabit that world, we can keep playing by the rules of mythic archetypes and keep fighting dragons whether those dragons have scales or titanium armour.

If a rule, in general, is a constraint placed on an agent by the agent's cultural situation, then in a cultural zone understood as appropriate for play that general sense of 'rule' transfers nicely to a sort of constraint that allows a player to make choices (cf. Sid Meier's famous definition of a game as 'a series of interesting choices;'[5] it is also worth noting that 'metaphor' means 'transfer,' etymologically speaking). The constraint of such rules of play at the same time creates what we can call a practomimetic possibility-space – what many critics of games would call a 'gamespace.' A game-rule constrains players of a game in such a way as to create a range of possible play-actions; a game's ruleset is the sum total of those play-action-defining constraints in a given instance of game-play.

In this chapter I thus argue that that same understanding of what a ruleset is applies equally well to a literary text, and that this application is worth making because 1) it allows us to critique games and literature commensurately, and 2) it allows us better to locate both games and literary texts both in current cultural experience and in relation to older cultural experience.

Above, I used the audiobooks of *A Song of Ice and Fire* to illustrate this idea; it's very instructive now to consider the HBO version of the same work, entitled *Game of Thrones*, and to make the same illustration by means of that masterly performance of Martin's ruleset. Even better, a comparison of Roy Dotrice's audiobook performances of the books, John Lee's audiobook performance of one of them – *A Feast for Crows* (Book 4 of the *Song*) –, and the HBO team's production of *A Game of Thrones* (Book 1 of the *Song*) as Season 1 of *Game of Thrones*, will help me make my point much clearer.

The seeming pedantry of enumerating the exact titles, formats, and book and series numbers of the above works (all equally instructively viewed as a single work, as the *Iliad* is viewed as a single work despite being a patchwork-quilt of lays sung by different bards) is actually quite germane to my point: each of these instances of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is its own playing out of the ruleset established by the text – which, as we also saw above, is itself a playing out of a ruleset established by the set of cultural materials GRR Martin drew, and then elaborated, upon in composing it. They must all both be seen as a single work, and seen as separate works or, perhaps better, as separate instances of the single transmedia work. Defining art in terms of rulesets can lead us, that is, to a new understanding of how what we now call a 'work' organises itself in culture apart from the individual agency that we used to think of as the province of the author.

This notion of what a work is when seen in terms of its rulesets is very well illustrated by tabletop RPG's like *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). Tabletop RPG's, in which a group of players together craft a narrative performance within a multiply-determined ruleset (multiple in that some of the rules come from the game-rules, others from the game-master, and still others from the players themselves) demand to be seen along different, though parallel, lines when we discuss the relationship of works of art to game-rules. The tabletop RPG based on the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* helps greatly here:[6] this ruleset (including of course such content-driven and -driving constraints like choice of character-class, choice of origin, and narrative geography) allows players (in which category I would include the gamemaster) to create performances that stand as individual instances of the work, analogous to e.g. HBO's *Game of Thrones*.

My notion of a 'Great Chain of Practomime' is as a theory on which to base a critical methodology that can ignore the false border between games and literary texts, and by extension between those things and other kinds of practomime like film and painting. According to that schema, the *A Song of Ice and Fire: The RPG*'s ruleset is one link in the Great Chain, while *D&D* would be another; their

positions in the chain, though, are crucially, though also deceptively, different. I close with a glance at this deceptiveness, which points a way forward for my theory.

D&D organises many of the same performance materials Tolkien organises in *The Lord of the Rings* (indeed, some of its performance materials, like halflings and rangers, come directly from The Lord of the Rings) and Martin organises in *A Song of Ice and Fire*; in that sense *D&D*, as a ruleset, 'hangs' on the chain from multiple dependencies, while *Song of Ice and Fire*: *The RPG* seems to hang directly from one – the text of the *Song*. But the *Song of Ice and Fire* RPG hangs also from *D&D* itself, just as Roy Dotrice's performance hangs both from Martin's text and from the incredible range of dramas he has performed in, and which he both uses to shape his reading of the audiobook and evokes in his listeners' memories. Just as HBO's version hangs also from the films on which its visual style draws (notably Ridley Scott's period work and HBO's own *Rome*). My chain is becoming a web, or perhaps a hauberk.

Each link, each knot (*nodus*, a Roman would say), is a performance – that is, a re-compositional enactment. When we read the records of such performances as *A Song of Ice and Fire* – even when we read such records silently – we are ourselves performing such a re-compositional enactment: the text is enacted in our imaginations, and because we are individual agents, unique both as individuals and also even from ourselves the way we were the day before, we must re-compose the text as we enact it.

The ruleset of our performance is first and foremost the textual record left by a performer like Martin, but just as Roy Dotrice re-composes that ruleset when he records the audiobooks, just as a dungeon-master re-composes the ruleset of *D&D*, allowing his players to do the same; just as a bard re-composed the *Wrath of Achilles*, and allowed his audience to do the same – just as all those performances draw on uncountable numbers of other performances –, our own re-compositional enactments of Martin's *Song* play by a ruleset that is itself determined by our performance, in the moment of that performance.

That last formulation seems to me to imply that rulesets are bigger than we usually give them credit for; one benefit of analysis across the text/game boundary may be that it allows us to read game-rulesets (that is, what is there in the code – or the box – and only what is there in the code, or box) as occasions for performances that complete those rulesets, rather than as artefacts usefully analyzable in themselves. In subsequent work, I try to demonstrate the usefulness of this approach to the humanistic criticism of games.[7]

Notes

[1] Roger Travis, 'Achilles Phat Lewtz', *The Escapist* 166 (2008), accessed 9 May 2013, http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue_166/5230-Achilles-Phat-Lewtz; Roger Travis, 'Epic Style: Re-Compositional Performance in the BioWare Digital RPG', *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens*, eds. Voorhees et al. (New York: Continuum, 2012), 235-256, with reference to Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).
[2] *A Wiki of Ice and Fire*, accessed 9 May 2013, http://awoiaf.westeros.org/index.php/Main_Page.
[3] *The Elder Scrolls Wiki*, accessed 9 May 2013, http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/The_Elder_Scrolls_Wiki.
[4] *The Jane Austen Wiki*, accessed 9 May 2013, http://janeausten.wikia.com/wiki/The_Jane_Austen_Wiki.
[5] Andrew Rollings and Dave Morris, *Game Architecture and Design* (Scottsdale, Az: Coriolis, 2000), 38.
[6] Robert Schwalb, *A Song of Ice and Fire: The RPG: A Game of Thrones Edition* (Seattle, WA: Green Ronin Publishing, 2012).
[7] E.g. Roger Travis, 'Ritual Immersion in *Papo & Yo*', *Play the Past*, 1 May 2013, accessed 9 May 2013, http://www.playthepast.org/?p=3697.

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Roger Travis is Associate Professor of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages, at the University of Connecticut. He works on connections between ancient culture and contemporary digital culture, digital games in particular.

Challenging Ideologies of Gender through Indie Games

Karen Mentz

Abstract
The 'innocent' way in which video games are situated as entertainment render them very successful media for the construction and maintenance of normative myths and ideologies regarding gender. The emerging indie video game market provides a solid platform for game developers to challenge and subvert ideologies perpetuated in mainstream games. The main argument put forward in this chapter is that contemporary indie games can and do, in subtle ways, subvert the naturalised dominant ideologies circulating in mainstream popular culture. Laura Mulvey's contention in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) that independent cinema can be seen as a possible means to subvert ideologies in mainstream cinema is applied in this chapter to indie- and mainstream video games.[1] The indie game *Braid*[2] and the mainstream game *Tomb Raider* are analysed to explore the extent to which *Braid* in particular is directly challenging widely accepted patriarchal structures perpetuated in *Tomb Raider*.[3]

Key Words: Indie games, femininity, ideologies.

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1. Introduction

The main aim of this chapter is to analyse the ways in which patriarchal structures presented in mainstream games are challenged by indie games. By comparing different elements of mainstream and indie games, this chapter attempts to clarify the important role that indie games play in providing a challenge to dominant hegemonic systems and the binary coding of masculinity and femininity as can be seen in a variety of mainstream games.

This chapter analyses and compares the representation of femininity and dominant patriarchal structures in the mainstream game *Tomb Raider* video game series and indie game *Braid*. These representations are compared and critically analysed in relation to each other, to conclude whether or not indie games can be seen as a medium or genre that operates in a subversive way and thus create a space where stereotypes and hegemonic ideologies can be contested and even altered.

2. What Is an Indie Game?

Defining an indie game proves to be quite challenging. A popular definition prevalent in the indie development community insists that for a game to be considered 'indie' the developer must experiment with unique ideas, technologies and gameplay.[4] According to this definition, the artistic value of the game is

therefore considered crucial to its categorisation as an indie game. Others argue that any game that is not published by a big corporation can be considered indie.[5] This definition of an indie game focuses more on the anti-corporate attitude that many indie developers assume. According to PC Gamer magazine journalist, Rob Zacny, mainstream games on the other hand can be seen as games that are made to please the masses.[6] These games provide entertainment and pleasure rather than meaning and the opportunity to reflect on philosophical questions. For the purposes of this chapter, an indie game is defined as a non-mainstream game that consciously aims to subvert mainstream games and that which they represent.

By analysing certain structures that already exist in society, Mulvey explores the visual manifestation of these structures in mainstream cinema. This chapter is interested in examining the visual manifestation of similar social structures as represented in games. These representations in mainstream games are then compared to the way in which indie games represent social structures. Of particular interest in this regard is *Braid*, an indie game that consciously aims to overthrow the *status quo* in order to present an alternative to dominant ideologies concerning women and the role of women in society.

According to Roland Barthes since myth is a type of speech, anything within a specific discourse can be a myth.[7] Furthermore, a myth is a system of communication that conveys a specific message. These myths or messages form the foundation of certain social structures, beliefs and dominant ideologies. Video games play an important part in the naturalisation of these myths. One often thinks of a video game as a 'toy' or an innocent pastime. This positions the video game in such a way that the myths that they create and sustain can become naturalised for the player.

Mead states that roles are used to define the self, and that they form a basis on which action is based.[8] Media messages, such as those portrayed in video games for example, can serve as teachers of values and beliefs.[9] These messages can also influence the way in which the player interprets the world, as well as the expectations that the player develops of him/herself and others.

According to Danny Cowan, many indie game developers make the deliberate decision to avoid addressing political and social issues in their games.[10] This is because of the possible implications this might have in terms of the financial success of the game, and also the challenge that it represents. Cowan argues that the few indie games that do challenge traditional game content, are 'certainly impactful, if not commercially viable.'[11]

Pedercini explains that games are more likely to reach people who might normally not be very receptive to political messages.[12] Complex systems are easily explained through visuals and participation in a game. The disadvantage of using video games as a medium to broadcast one's message often means that it is very difficult to implement a good narrative as well as good gameplay. Another disadvantage to developing a game for a digital device that embodies a more

meaningful message is the fact that a computational device describes elements inalgorithms and numbers. This means it is challenging to add human emotions and experience to the video game.[13]

3. Tomb Raider

Tomb Raider (Core Design & Crystal Dynamics) was first released in 1996 by Eidos Interactive.[14] Lara Croft, the main character in the video game, has since become a household name. Schleiner notes that until 1996 mostly only male avatars or characters appeared in 'shooter/adventure' roleplaying games.[15] The only female characters in this genre were previously the 'princesses offered as battle trophies'[16] in games such as Prince of Persia and the like.

The appearance of Lara Croft thus embodies a very important shift in computer games. She signifies a change where female lead characters start to feature and star in video games. The obvious question this raises is how this female character is represented and what possible meanings this representation facilitates. Schleiner is of the opinion that Lara Croft is a 'monstrous offspring of science: an idealized, eternally young female automation, a malleable, well-trained techno-puppet created by and for the male gaze.'[17] She argues that the third-person view the player has of Lara fragments Lara's Barbie-like proportions. This mechanism illustrates Mulvey's notion that women's bodies are fetishised and presented as objects to be consumed by the male gaze.[18]

Jansz and Martis refer to the increasing appearance of female characters in a competent and dominant position in video games as the 'Lara phenomenon.'[19] These female characters are not portrayed as simply competent, but competent in a traditionally masculine way as well as in traditionally male activities. She is also overly sexualised and portrayed in an unrealistic manner.

Martti Lahti states that the representation of an avatar's body forms an important part of the desire for immersion that the player will have.[20] Even though the player is able to choose their avatar in many video games, in games such as *Tomb Raider* (Core Design & Crystal Dynamics) the gender boundaries are clearly drawn. While the player is asked to merge with the female character, at the same time the player is also encouraged to disassociate him/herself from the character and instead of identifying with the character, to rather take visual pleasure in her excessively eroticised feminine features.

As previously discussed, Mulvey[21] states that a film audience takes part in a voyeuristic fantasy when watching a film. A video game player on the other hand does not *only* take pleasure in looking at the character portrayed on screen, but is also in control of it. When the character on screen is female, one might argue that this creates a different meaning than when the character is male. Lara is portrayed as a physically strong woman, and yet the player is controlling her actions and the way she moves. This form of domination can possibly strengthen the scopophilic pleasure that the player derives from watching Lara.

On the other hand, Salen and Zimmerman argue that a player is never merely 'immersed' within a representation and that the player is always aware that the avatar has been constructed digitally.[22] The avatar is both a subject and an object simultaneously – the player uses the character as a mask but the character is also an object to control and manipulate. In *Tomb Raider* the player views the overly sexualised figure of Lara, but at the same time the player is also taking on an 'empowering female role.'[23]

The original representation of Lara Croft is quite unrealistic and her physical proportions are exaggerated. The most recent *Tomb Raider* instalment was released in March 2013. The narrative of the newest *Tomb Raider* adventure focuses on Lara's first adventure – her initiation into becoming a tomb raider. In this game Lara is represented as a remarkably ordinary and frightened young woman that finds herself in tough situations. She is forced to embrace her tough (depicted in the game as masculine) side to survive. In the 2013 version of *Tomb Raider*, Lara is no longer wearing her trademark shorts and boots, but is dressed in what could be considered a much more practical manner.

This radical change in Lara's appearance also marks an important change in video games and the representation of women. While Lara is no longer overly sexualised, and her physical proportions appear more realistic, and not as stylised as her previous version, this Lara may have an even more powerful impact on the player and their ideas of femininity. Lara may appear more realistic and natural, but she is still represented as a kind of 'super' woman. The stunts and tasks that she performs in the new *Tomb Raider* game are still unrealistic and might contribute to and influence the ideological perception of femininity.

The 'new' natural and realistic looking Lara might set out to close the gap between reality and the video game world thereby creating a more immersive environment. As previously mentioned, however, this immersion might also create an even greater potential for the strengthening and perpetuation of normative femininity. One can argue that because the original Barbie-like representation of Lara is exaggerated, the figure almost becomes comical, thus potentially reducing its power to influence the audience. The current representation of Lara on the other hand might serve to perpetuate the same stereotype her previous-version Lara was accused of, but in a much more subtle and covert way.

Genz argues that the female action adventure hero is mostly portrayed in one of two ways: either as being semi-tough but ultimately too feminine to keep up with her male counterparts, or alternatively, she is portrayed as a totally de-feminised male impersonator.[24] Ultimately, both scenarios reinforce the link between masculinity and toughness. Moreover, both representations are apparent in *Tomb Raider*'s Lara. For, in the original *Tomb Raider*, Lara was portrayed as a de-feminised hero, while in the 2013 version she has metamorphosed into a feminine, strong, yet vulnerable character.

Steven Poole argues that video game players are generally more attracted to lifelike, realistic characters.[25] When this is the case, however, argues Poole, the player becomes attached to the character as a friend, rather than projecting themselves into the character. This might imply that the more realistic Lara's appearance becomes the more potent and credible the underlying message also becomes.

4. Braid

In contrast to the mainstream game, *Tomb Raider*, Jonathan Blow's indie game constructs femininity rather differently. *Braid* tells the story of Tim, who travels through six unique worlds searching for his 'princess.' Tim has the ability to control and manipulate the flow of time to solve puzzles. In each different world, the laws of nature and time are different, and the player has to adapt to be able to use these unusual situations to solve the puzzles.

Braid can be considered an indie game, as it was developed almost entirely by Blow. David Hellman provided the environment artwork for *Braid*. At first glance *Braid* might seem like a typical video game, perhaps reminiscent of *Super Mario Bros* (1985). But the plot becomes dark, symbolic and open to interpretation according to *Rolling Stone*'s Alex Vadukul.[26] In the beginning of the game, the player is led to believe that Tim is trying to rescue a princess from an evil knight, but as the game progresses it becomes unclear whether Tim is a rescuer or an unwanted pursuer.

Vadukul describes *Braid* as a game that leaves 'players rethinking what video games are all about.'[27] The art was done by web comic artist David Hellman. Hellman explains that he chose a painterly, handmade style for the environment in *Braid* which refer to Tim's thought experiments and the questions that the game asks. The dreamlike backgrounds therefore strengthen the notion that reality is ambiguous in this world and that the laws of nature are not as they seem.

In a 2012 interview with Jonathan Blow, he explains that many gamers expect a game to be 'fun.' But since the term fun is relative and ambiguous, he argues, it is unrealistic to set out to produce a 'fun' game. Blow insists that the main aspect he focuses on when developing a game, is not necessarily the entertainment value, but rather the message. Blow admits that he did not design *Braid* to be fun, but rather an interesting experience that provides difficult mental challenges for the player. Blow respects the player as an intelligent being that wants to discover new things and be stimulated mentally.

Blow argues that when watching a film of a specific genre, the viewer has certain emotional expectations of the content of the film, but this is not necessarily the same when it comes to video games. According to Blow, many gamers have the expectation of all games to be enjoyable and entertaining (in other words, fun). This is something that Blow specifically wants to challenge with his indie games. By developing games that have a deeper meaning and purpose than to just entertain

an audience, Blow believes that video games can play an important part in shifting certain social paradigms and structures.

One of the final levels of *Braid*, shows the princess shouting for help. An all-consuming fire wall starts moving towards the right side of the screen. Tim and the princess are on different, parallel levels, and it seems as if the princess is helping Tim to stay ahead of the fire. As they reach the end of the level, the firewall catches up to them and there is suddenly a flash and the princess is alone and asleep in her room. When the player reverses time, a whole other story is told. It becomes clear that the player has been playing the whole game in reverse mode. Tim started out by scaring the princess while she was sleeping, and then started chasing her. While earlier it seemed as if the princess was helping Tim escape, it now becomes clear that she is creating obstacles to slow him down.

This unexpected ending defies the stereotypical, mainstream ending that one usually expects from a video game. The player is made aware that everything is not always as it seems, and that they were actually controlling the antagonist during the game, and not the protagonist. Even though the princess is eventually rescued by another male character – strengthening dominant patriarchal ideologies – this ending shows that it is possible for an indie game developer to create an unexpected ending and still be successful in selling copies and reaching players. Indie games can thus provide a platform on which developers can attempt to shift dominant ideologies and notions.

5. Conclusion

Both *Tomb Raider* and *Braid* tend to perpetuate traditional and stereotypical ideas. In the earlier *Tomb Raider* games Lara was portrayed as a hyper-sexualised femme fatale that displayed characteristics that are traditionally considered to be masculine. The more recent version of Lara is a more vulnerable character that needs to be 'protected' by the (male) player. *Braid*, on the other hand, makes the player aware of the ambiguity of known storylines and encourages the player to view the narrative from an entirely different perspective. Even though *Braid* also makes use of patriarchal ideas, emphasis is placed on the fact that the viewer should question everything they see and experience.

Indie games can therefore be considered a viable platform from which to challenge and subvert otherwise accepted ideas and ideologies. Even though indie games have only recently begun to compete with main stream video games, it is already a respected form of gaming. This creates the opportunity for developers to convey more subversive and even controversial messages.

Notes

[1] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen Autumn* (1975):6-18.
[2] *Braid*, Jonathan Blow, 2008.
[3] *Tomb Raider*, Core Design and Crystal Dynamics, 1996.
[4] Mike Gnade, 'What Exactly is an Indie Game?', accessed 9 June 2012, http://www.indiegamemag.com/what-is-an-indie-game/.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Rob Zacny, 'Skill, Abstraction, and the Complications of Mainstreaming', 2011, accessed 3 July 2012, http://www.pcgamer.com/2011/10/20/skill-abstraction-and-the-complications-of-mainstreaming/.
[7] Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Woods (Cornwall: Blackwell, 2003), 693-698.
[8] Tracy Dietz, 'An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games: Implications for Gender Socialization and Aggressive Behavior', *Sex Roles* 38 (1998): 426.
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[10] Danny Cowan, 'Ask IndieGames: Are Indie Developers Censoring Themselves?', accessed 1 October 2012, http://indiegames.com/2012/09/ask_indiegames_are_indie_devel.html.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Patrick Dugan, 'Hot Off the Grill: La Molleindustria's Paolo Pedercini on the McDonald's Video Game', accessed 1 October 2012, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/130980/hot_off_the_grill_la_.php.
[13] Ibid.
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[15] Anne-Marie Schleiner, 'Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygons? Gender and Gender-Role Subversion in Computer Adventure Games', *Leonardo* 34 (2001): 221-226.
[16] Ibid., 222.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Jansz and Martis, 'The Lara Croft Phenomenon', 1.
[20] Martti Lahti, 'As We Become Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games', in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, eds. Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron (London: Routledge, 2003), 157-170.
[21] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', 8.

[22] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), 526.
[23] Ibid., 526.
[24] Stephanie Genz, *Postfemininities in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 154.
[25] Mia Consalvo, 'Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances: Studying Sexuality in Video Games', in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, eds. Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron (London: Routledge, 2003), 177.
[26] Alex Vadukul, 'What Made "Braid" a Punk-Rock Video Game? A Look Back at the Innovative Title', accessed 5 September 2012, http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/what-made-braid-a-punk-rock-video-game-a-look-back-at-the-innovative-title-20090904.
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Karen Mentz is an MA Visual Studies student and part-time visual communications lecturer at The University of Pretoria in South Africa.

The Backwards Progressional: Is More Really Better?

Sarah Hope Scoggins

Abstract
The purpose of this chapter is to examine player progression and how difficulty and pacing affect player experience and overall development in a roleplaying game (RPG). In an RPG, a player is presented with a challenge to which the player responds based on the rules of the system. If the player is successful, the player is rewarded and advances. Progression requires a challenge for the player to overcome in order to progress. Games use story to pace and dictate these challenges. A story is linear, while a game is nonlinear. The combination of story and game determines the player experience. Story-based games develop characters through progression and leveling. The majority of leveling systems use an upward curve in which the player gains abilities as they progress through the game; the player gains new abilities as they overcome challenges. By building games in this fashion, designers run into problems. Because a player is always leveling a character upwards, there is no diversity in gameplay from one game to another. Essentially, the player is playing the same game type over and over. Another common problem with this method appears when it comes to sequels. In the first game, the player overcomes challenges and builds a top-level character. When the second game emerges, the player is forced to rebuild the character due to them arbitrarily losing the abilities acquired in the previous game. If standard progression is an upward curve, what if players progressed in a downward fashion? Instead of building a character upward, the player would start with a fully developed character. This chapter will explore this type of progression and what would be needed to make this type of progression work in terms of story and mechanics.

Key Words: Progression, roleplaying, leveling, XP, character development, difficulty.

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1. Introduction

In his book, Bob Bates expresses the goal of a designer when crafting challenges, 'A game should be easy to learn, but difficult to master.'[1] In order to create a memorable experience for the player, a game needs to balance difficulty and pacing. Like most people, players do not want to attempt difficult feats without some hint that their efforts will be rewarded. Hence, the designer must strive to make challenges in a manner that is not overly difficult but is not too easy to overcome. Many great games come from series consisting of multiple games, a few examples being *God of War*, *Assassin's Creed*, and *Final Fantasy*. Many of these

fantastic games are long, treacherous journeys in which the player overcomes difficult challenges in order to progress. How the players respond to these challenges affects not only the players' progression, but their overall experience of the game.

A technical definition of a game given by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in their book *Rules of Play* is 'A system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, which result in a quantifiable outcome.'[2] From this, one can infer that a game's rules define the action the players can take. This concept is nothing new; however, what it does point toward is that games have tendencies as systems, thus, an upward progressional systems exhibits specific tendencies that need to be analysed and weighed against alternative systems and their tendencies. For the purposes of this chapter, I am going to focus on player progression as it relates to difficulty and how pacing in turn affects the player experience and overall development in a roleplaying game (RPG). As an area of exclusion, I will be focusing primarily on digital game franchises in which the players in some aspect build or improve a specific character over multiple games.

2. What Is Progression?

Jesper Juul writes in his book *Half Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, 'Playing a game is an activity of improving skills in order to overcome challenges.'[3] In an RPG, players are presented with a challenge to which they respond based on the rules of the system. If successful, they are rewarded and advance. Thus, upward progression requires a challenge for players to overcome in order to advance. For most games these challenges present themselves in a pattern of increasing difficulties: each challenge is more difficult than the last. Progression is the experience players undergo as they journey through the game. As a player progresses through the game, the player gains new abilities, rewards, information, or new challenges to overcome. Overall, the player moves in a forward direction towards unlocking new content.

In order to progress, the player must encounter an obstacle. The obstacle can be as simple as a lock-and-key mechanism that controls access to parts of a level or a complex AI-driven series of boss battles. No matter how the obstacle is presented, this method of gameplay allows the player to pursue goals and develop abilities. As the difficulty level of the game curves upward, the new skills and stats the player accumulates help the player overcome the difficulty of the challenges further in the game. Progression in games is one of the main mechanisms that designers use to interact with the player.

Two crucial elements of progression are difficulty and pacing. These elements dictate how and when challenges occur as well as the results of overcoming the obstacle presented in the challenge. Difficulty can be further divided into actual and perceived. Actual difficulty involves the relationship between character abilities and game mechanics or environment; it revolves around system attributes

and the inherent abilities the designer has made available to the character. On the other hand, perceived difficulty is driven by the player's skill, mind-set, and overall gaming literacy. Unlike actual difficulty, perceived difficulty is about the player's skill in overcoming challenges and exists independently of the character's abilities. Perceived difficulty has to do with how quickly the player can learn the system and process its rules to solve the challenge presented by the designer.

An example of difficulty is the indie game *Antichamber*, a single player puzzle platformer in which players must learn the rules of an unfamiliar world in order to overcome challenges and find tools that will help them beat the game. *Antichamber* has a specific set of rules that the mechanics follow in regards to solving its puzzles. The actual difficulty varies from puzzle to puzzle in regards to how many steps the players must take in order to reach the desired outcome, while the perceived difficulty pertains to the player's skill in grasping what steps need to be taken. Accordingly, all players are presented with the same actual difficulty; however, a player who can grasp the mechanics of the game will progress faster than a player who does not, and each will have a different overall experience because of the variation in perceived difficulty. For this reason, players can theoretically beat *Antichamber* in seven minutes with a little luck and intuitive knowledge of the system; or they could be going through the same puzzles for hours if they do not sufficiently and quickly grasp the mechanics of the world.

The other part of progression is pacing, which works hand in hand with difficulty. Pacing is how quickly or slowly a player advances through the overall game. A designer must understand that the player has relative freedom within the system. Because of this, the designer can only indirectly influence the player's pace. For instance, difficulty, both actual and perceived, establishes how long the player will spend on an obstacle: a player spends more time on a more difficult task than an easier one. Therefore, in many games the designer will place smaller obstacles before a larger one in order to keep the player motivated to progress, and subsequently reward them for advancing. However, as is also the case with perceived difficulty, ultimately the designer has neither complete nor direct control over the pacing experienced by the player.

3. Pros and Cons of Traditional Progression

As discussed prior, traditional progression is an upward curve in which the player gains new skills and rewards as they advance in the game. This system works well on many levels. Over time, players have become accustomed to building characters in an upwards fashion. By building characters in this manner, players can build the character in a way that they prefer. By encouraging personalisation, the player becomes more invested in the game and attached to their character. Overall, the attachment to the character enables the player to become immersed in the character, the world, and the narrative. This principle is

exemplified by series with one or multiple player characters such as *The Elder Scrolls*, *Mass Effect* and *Final Fantasy*.

Although largely effective, this prominent system of progression is not without flaws. Because a player is always leveling a character upwards, there is no diversity in gameplay from one game to another. In essence, the player creates a character that they journey as and complete quests to gain experience to cause their character to level. Yes, one game has a crafting system while another has dialogue options, but the player is still building a story through his character's ever-increasing abilities.

Additionally, in some games when players grow stronger, the game fails to adjust the difficulty curve. Players then become over-powered, and have to exert little effort to overcome the ostensibly most difficult challenges of the game. In the *Kingdom Hearts* games, players have the option to grind to raise their level. Players can then over-grind, meaning that their characters have greatly surpassed the intended level of the challenges in the game. The players effortlessly progress through the game, making it feel too easy. For example, the final boss for both games is designed for players to be around level 45-50. If the players over-grind while trying to beat side quests and players' characters are at level 60-70, they defeat the boss with little effort which can cause them to lose interest, feel short-changed, or see the culmination of their efforts as anticlimactic.

Another problem with upward progression systems are the contrived and arbitrary feelings of sequels. In the first game of the series, the player works to attain abilities, learn combos, gain equipment and achieve overall mastery of the character. In the sequel, players mysteriously lose what they earned in the first game and are forced to work to regain them. The *Metroid* series is well known for having Samus lose her abilities at the beginning of the game for various seemingly arbitrary reasons. In *Metroid Prime*, Samus loses her abilities via an explosion; in *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes* they are stolen; and in *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption* she gives them up. In *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, Ezio loses all his gear because he has to flee quickly to escape from capture. All of this is to say players spend an entire game building a character to an amazing point, only to have the developer take away what they have earned simply in order to make the players gain them all over again in a similar fashion. Many designers use these methods for sequels in order to compensate for players who may not have played the first game.

Although the current models can lead to redundancy and problems with sequels, they are not necessarily bad systems. This system is familiar to players, and overall it works. However, there is room for improvement and experimentation.

4. The Backwards Progressional

Although many great games practice traditional upward progression and are successful games, I think it would be interesting and fruitful to explore this model

in reverse. There are few, if any that use backwards progression, and it would be beneficial for both player and designer to explore this method of progression. For the remainder of this chapter, I will explore what I am calling the Backwards Progressional, a progression model in which the player starts as a fully developed character who over time loses abilities and stats. This model was inspired by Ben 'Yahtzee' Croshaw who, in his article 'What If We Leveled Backwards?!,' raises the issue of backwards progression. Yahtzee comments in the article that his interest in a backwards leveling system arises from the redundancy and lack of difficulty present in the majority of games.

The backwards progressional would be revolutionary for game design. Specifically, this model taxes the player's skill in adapting to challenges. Players start with the best weapons, abilities, and skills available in the game. As players progress through the game, their weapons will wear down, their stats will diminish, and what abilities they can perform and how they are executed will be affected. In addition, the player would occasionally need to combat their growing fatigue and any wounds or illnesses as well.

The main objection to this model is that taking away abilities from the player will upset and anger the player. Players are not accustomed to losing, and they will react negatively. Players do not like to lose things because losing is not fun. The answer to this argument lies in giving the player choices. If players feel they have more choices or a say in how things will affect their characters, they will be better able to accept losses. By doing this, players will not see themselves as losing abilities but rather as overcoming a new challenge.

In *Rules of Play*, Salen and Zimmerman write: 'Meaningful play occurs when the relationships between actions and outcomes in a game are both discernible and integrated into the larger context of the game. Creating meaningful play is the goal of successful game design.'[4] According to these authors, games are about making choices and taking actions. Discernablity is whether players can reasonably tell what will happen when they choose to take an action, while integration is the designer's choice of how player choices are used by the game world. While character's abilities diminish, the actual difficulty of the game will stay the same. This type of difficulty curve will excite the player by engaging them in a way that most games do not by presenting new challenges in a unique way and allowing the player to form new strategies, emerging in meaningful play. Even though their characters will be losing abilities, the players will be in control of the outcome.

I believe players will be better able to cope with loss if they have a choice over what exactly their characters are losing.

5. Designing a Backwards Progressional

In order to build a backwards progressional system, a designer needs to be aware of how the challenges and characters are presented. Half of backwards progression is the challenges. How the player experience the obstacles will be

affected by the abilities their characters have when they encounter them. A player could experience the same obstacle with different abilities. A linear progression – an extremely directed path – would be the easiest to design; but laying out obstacles in a way that players could choose which one they approach would be a more interesting experience. The real question is how to deal with difficulty. Difficulty is problematic because of how the challenges have to be built. An obstacle needs to be interesting but still demanding. Challenges have to be all these things, while at the same time preventing the player from getting stuck. Because the character is losing abilities, there is greater potential for game-breaking challenges. One aspect that does not change with direction is pacing. The pace players take is still dependent on the obstacles they must overcome.

In terms of character building, players should have some control over their character's stats during the character-building process. If players are going to play a fully developed character, they should be able to personalise that character to fit their own needs. This step is important because the character will not be able to gain abilities after this point. In order to establish the immersion and connection that an upwards progression provides over the entirety of the game and in order to establish this level of player interaction in a backwards progressional, the player needs choice and control, or at least the feeling of it with respect to how the character is built.

The core element of a backwards progressional system is losing abilities.

For example, a character may have the ability to do a combo that has run, jump, and slash in one quick movement so: Run + Jump Slash = Combo

However, over time as a result of choices made, the character loses speed and has to separate the combo in run and then jump and slash so: Run triggered, then Jump + Slash = Combo.

The abilities should be organised in a manner which can stack and be broken down into components. Players will be learning how to take on more as they level downwards. In addition to the physical stacking of abilities, the user interface (UI) will have to be organised in a manner that the player can understand as visual stacking. The abilities of a character built in a backwards progressional will have several moving parts that start merged and later separate into components.

There are many ways one could arrange how the character loses abilities. One way to organise how abilities are lost is the character starting with a pool of abilities. Over time as result of choices the player makes, the player would lose points in this pool, as these points would relate to what state the character's abilities would be. It would be best to arrange these points and their results using a bell curve. Which pool the character loses points from should be decided by the player. Players would be more receptive of loss and want to continue if they choose what their characters lose.

6. Conclusion

The goal of building a backwards progressional is to give the player a greater sense of control that many players do not get to experience. This greater sense of control comes from creating different types of challenge through the use of choice. In order to give the player this freedom, the designer will have to balance character-building and difficulty, while encouraging players to keep a pace that will motivate them to continue through the game even in the face of loss. A backwards progressional uses loss as a motivational tool instead of as a deterrent.

Notes

[1] Bob Bates, *Game Design* (Boston, MA: Premier Press, 2004), 4.
[2] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), Amazon Kindle, Loc 1282.
[3] Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), Amazon Kindle, Loc 75.
[4] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), Amazon Kindle, Loc 535.

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Sarah Hope Scoggins is a graduate student in the Arts and Technology programme at The University of Texas at Dallas, specialising in the design, theory, and production of games.

Videogames as Art: The Spirit of the 'Literary Artist' in the Discourse of Game-Making

Agnieszka Kliś-Brodowska and Bartłomiej Kuchciński

Abstract
For a scholar versed in literature studies, 'art' may at times sound somewhat unequivocally like 'books.' And not 'just' books, but books possessed of literary merit, whatever it may be. It is true that postmodernism undid the distinction between 'high' and 'low' literature to a large extent, exchanging it for 'interesting' and 'uninteresting to analyse.' Still, upon hearing the phase 'Videogames as art,' one may envision a medium which would have to be, somehow, comparable to 'good' literature in order to claim the status. As Lee Sheldon states, '[t]o ignore the fundamentals of storytelling found in other media is to create work that fails to touch our audience, the players.'[1] Be as it may, speaking of videogames as art does seem to invite comparisons with literature, at least for the reason that, according to a course book on game level design, 'When you begin to design a game, it usually starts with a story.'[2] Interestingly, comparing the place of story in games to the place occupied by safe-actualisation needs at the top of Maslow's pyramid, the authors state some players will never reach that stage.[3] What arises as a result is the question: Can we speak of artistic merit of games' stories? Or perhaps game-making business constructs its own status as external to the discourse of 'artistic merit' present in literature studies? Looking at a number of course books written for game designers, and available texts approaching games from the literary standpoint, this chapter looks at the status of a designer as a 'literary' artist as constructed by the very discourse of game-making, hoping to contribute to the discussion on videogames as art.

Key Words: Videogames, designer-as-writer, artist, art, story, discourse.

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In 2012 the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures at the University of Silesia, Poland, launched its Interactive Entertainment Design and Localization programme. The objective of the programme is to train graduates who are to be experts in game and software localisation, the cultural and theoretical analyses of interactive entertainment, and who could work in game design industry as writers, designers and translators. To that effect the programme comprises both the usual elements of an English career, such as the study of literatures, cultures and history of the English-speaking world, the study of literary theory, poetics, narratology and all the other subjects found in the English curricula, as well as a set of subjects directly related to game design: drawing, 2D and 3D graphics, storyboarding, game level design and GDD composition, among others.

This turn towards interactive entertainment entails a number of problems, both practical and theoretical. We could say that almost any aspect of literature and literary theory has been analysed, challenged and debated. There exists a plethora of interpretive strategies and methodologies for cultural and literary analyses, and certainly no shortage of professors with expertise to try to teach and explain these subjects. It is relatively simple to establish the status of literature or film as art. Likewise, when teaching students creative writing or translation theory, it is relatively simple to establish the status of a writer or a translator. In the worst case, there is a number of already established perspectives to choose from. In practice, this means (for us, the lecturers) that teaching theory and literary and cultural analysis is a routine activity. It is not so with regard to computer games where we discover that the 'traditional' approaches are either non-applicable or insufficient. The situation is aggravated by the fact that we aim to train people actively creating cultural content instead of being 'mere' analysts of it. To create that content one requires an impressive set of technical skills, yet we teach humanities. So, who are we teaching the students to be? Engineers? Philosophers? Writers? Artists? No matter how we look at it, perhaps those people will be called artists one day, which makes the situation truly unique for us. This is our problem, then: What is the status of a game designer, in relation to our Institute? What is the status of a computer game? What are the students *told* their status is? Speaking of students being told, or taught their status: How is the discourse of game-making manuals, the textbooks that our students (and us) work with, shaping that status, explicitly or implicitly? These are the points which we attempt to raise in the present chapter.

Our analysis focuses on a set of textbooks available to our students. Our observations are as follows:

> 1) it is almost never the case that the designer-as-writer is discussed in terms of being an artist (and sometimes the writer is not acknowledged at all);
> 2) if they are, the attitude towards that kind of status is most often negative;
> 3) if any status of the designer-as-writer is discussed as positive, it is that of a storyteller-craftsman.

One could perhaps conclude already at this point. Is it not obvious? While humanities have eradicated the figure of the author from scholarly discussions, it may seem justified to discuss whether games are art or not, but considering the status of the author, in this case a designer, may seem to be a dated approach. However, as Michel Foucault makes it clear, when we stop speaking about the author but continue to speak about the work, or writing – without changing our understanding of the concepts – the spirit, or perhaps we should say the ghost of the author continues to haunt us.[4] That is one thing. Another one is that not all of

the textbooks we examine dismiss the question of the maker's status. Some of them do pay a lot of attention to it.

Let us start with examples of those textbooks that pay the least attention. Tracy Fullerton's *Game Design Workshop* is almost dismissive of the storytelling aspect of games. Fullerton assumes a structural approach, heralded in the foreword by Eric Zimmerman stating that '[t]here is magic in games[...] The magic in games is about finding hidden connections between things, in exploring the way the universe of a game is structured.'[5] Thinking of games in terms of system dynamics of goals and objectives leaves Fullerton little room to devote to considerations of storytelling and game narrativity. Thus, she only focuses on presenting the exposition-build-up-climax-resolution dramatic arc and the conflict which lies at the heart of it, recognising that its presence is crucial to engage the player emotionally in the plot of the game. At times Fullerton slips into banality as when recognising that 'it is very difficult to integrate traditional storytelling methods into games'[6] or when recognising that the story in Jaws is more developed than in Donkey Kong.[7] This dismissive stance is highlighted by the omission of writers from the description of the basic structure of the game design team.[8] By removing the figure of the designer-as-writer from the game design process, Fullerton obviously avoids the need to assign them a status, be it that of an artist or a craftsman.

Rafael Chandler's *Game Writing Handbook* insistently situates the writer and the game writing process as subject to the general considerations of gameplay. To that effect Chandler focuses mainly on the practical dimensions of game writing such as formatting dialogue and the pragmatics of voice acting. Much like the game writing is subject to gameplay, so the writer working in game design is assigned a craftsman role. As practical advice Chandler quotes Chris Avellone:

> [i]f I were to start to boil down the most important lessons for a game writer entering the field, I'd start with the simple premise that you're working on a game first, and everything else, including the narrative, is secondary to the game […] The game mechanics, the gameplay, the fun factor is the meat of the game, and the story needs to complement it and cater to it, not override it.[9]

With that in mind, Chandler recognises that 'the core vision of a game is determined by numerous external factors'[10] and that sometimes the 'writer's job is simply to fill in the blanks with dialogue and to submit the work for approval.'[11] Thus, he assigns the writer and their role a secondary position.

The Computer Game Design Course, by Jim Thompson, Barnaby Berbank-Green and Nic Cusworth, states that while looking for inspiration, it is useful for a designer to research into 'cultural activities such as literature, art, philosophy, and

history.'[12] The book is explicit about 'defining' the designer team as responsible for the game's 'concept, story, gameworld, and mechanics,' noting that designers can be subdivided into game designers, scriptwriters and level designers,[13] but does not in any way expand on their artistic status. It does, however, deliver many practical insights into what determines the story in the game, pointing out that deciding to minimise the story 'will save you millions on your budget.'[14] Future game designers are advised to consider current fads and Zeitgeist,[15] or to stay cautious when it comes to brand new ideas, for novelty rarely ensures commercial success.[16] At the same time, however, the authors are not 'uneasy' about stories within games. As they state, 'there are a large number of players who enjoy story-based games. Like them or loathe them, stories in games are here to stay.'[17] Still, the degree to which the designer is to be occupied with the story is determined here by the sales figures and not by artistic ambition.

David Perry's *Game Design* is aptly subtitled 'A Brainstorming Toolbox.' Perry devotes a considerable portion of his book to storytelling. Nonetheless, he devotes not a single passage to the direct consideration of the artistic status of the designer-as-writer. His representation of the designer seems to be that of a storyteller but he never refers directly to designers as storytellers – which is perhaps not that surprising.

As in many accounts, the person of the designer is here removed from the discussion of storytelling, in spite of being present at all times. Perry addresses designers continuously, as when he defines the relationship of traditional storytelling techniques to the videogame context:

> It is important to keep in mind that even when electronic games are based around stories, they may not always follow conventional storytelling structures. This is partly because in games, the hero is always the player, and the player is always faced with the challenges of the game interaction. In more passive media, it is necessary to take the audience through a hero's journey in such a way as to entertain and absorb them, to focus the audience on identification with the hero of the story. In games, this focus is automatic.[18]

We may easily assume that it is a designer who is supposed to 'keep in mind' all that is being said. However, Perry simultaneously removes from the designer the central position of a storyteller as the one who performs the act of telling a story, which can be seen in the rhetorical layer of the text: in interactive media, nobody needs to take the audience on a hero's journey – the medium itself does it. What is more, this central position can be taken over by the player:

> Today, people often watch other players. There are now game audiences – people who enjoy the unfolding of the game story passively, just as people used to gather around campfires and listen to storytellers or, later, gather around radios, TVs, and in movie theaters to watch stories unfold.[19]

Importantly, in this passage, the displacement of the act of storytelling is extended also to the non-interactive media – the radio, TV and film become 'storytellers.' The speaker, the presenter and the director simply vanish. The medium becomes the message.

Jesse Schell's *The Art of Game Design* focuses on the player's experience and it is this element which trumps all others. According to Schell, a game designer must possess a broad set of competences ranging from the knowledge of anthropology to visual arts. An essential supplementation to this broad technical knowledge is a set of introspective and reflective strategies[20] of thinking about the game experience in relation to the implied player. At the same time, Schell recognises that 'interactive storytelling is similar to traditional'[21] and that games generate their own stories.

Yet, while locating the process of game design very close to that of artistic creation and recognising the games' great potential, Schell distances himself from the term 'artistic': 'We can create games with powerful themes right now. But why? Why do this? Out of a selfish need for artistic expression? No. Because we are designers. Artistic expression is not our goal. Our goal is to create powerful experiences.'[22] What is interesting here is that 'artistic expression' is immediately codified as 'selfish,' and opposed to creating 'powerful experiences' of the player. It is players and their experiences that are stressed – the designer is here clearly placed in the position of delivering a service.

In *Beginning Game Level Design*, John Feil and Marc Scattergood speak about the designer as taking up the role of the artist (in general terms), but immediately refute this role as highly undesirable. Their basic rationale for such a position is the subordination of the designers' 'hubris' to their role of the entertainers, the service-providers. Their representation of the artist implies obsessive selfishness. As they state, the game designer

> often suffer[s] from hubris, or excessive pride and presumption. […] he begins to feel that he is an *artist*, who is allowing others to play in a world of his own design.[23]

In this account, being an artist means being obsessed with owning the creation, which manifests itself through hostility towards the players, criticism, and 'un-authorised' ways of handling the game.[24] The description aims to 'demonize' the artistic ambition as leading one straight into being 'a bad game designer.'[25] The

artist is castigated for being convinced that they *allow* others to play. We could bring this down to a simple conclusion: players are to do in the game what they want (at least seemingly), and if they criticise, they criticise the game. But on the other side, there seems to be a designer who becomes displaced as a non-owner of the design (copyright considerations notwithstanding obviously), or an owner who hands their ownership over to the player.

Proceeding form the assumption that the narratological and ludological perspectives are complementary, *Challenges for Game Designers*, by Brenda Braithwaite and Ian Schreiber, includes a clear recognition that video games can and DO function as art. Their section on games as art includes articles by Patrick Dugan, Ian Bogost and Clint Hocking who all raise the issue of games functioning as art. Hocking writes:

> if a game creator does have something specific he is trying to communicate, and he designs his game well, and the mechanics and dynamics are coherently supporting the aesthetic, and providing the player […] with insight into that meaning, then yeah… it's art.[26]

The figure of the game designer here is not expressly referred to as an artist, but can implicitly be understood as such, for it is the designer who creates the game (which is art). However, whatever artism might there appear in the game, whatever artistic qualities and possible meaning can be expressed by it, is still subject and subjected to the consideration of the game mechanics, the quality of which becomes the means to enable the artistic expression.

Rules of Play by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman represents a theoretical account rather than a guide or a course book, but it still addresses the prospective designers. The basic assumption that Salen and Zimmerman make about play is that it combines two dimensions, that of rules and that of experiences, the former subordinated to the latter. Their definition of gameplay is 'the formalized interaction that occurs when players follow the rules of a game and experience its system through play.'[27] Designers are here represented as 'craftsmen' engaged in crafting a meaningful experience for the player,[28] and their status is described as follows:

> Game players inhabit that wonderland space where the frame of the game intersects the frame of the real worlds. Game designers have the supreme pleasure of creating their own rabbit holes, hoping players find their way down inside, in order to create their own meanings. Game designers are the architects, the meaning-makers, the storytellers that make the play of wonderland possible.[29]

This description seems to resolve the tension observed in other accounts mentioned here. Due to the adopted perspective of craftsmanship, the designer is not forced into oblivion, or displaced as the owner of the game world. Being a skillful craftsman is ennobling while it does not entail rejecting the function of service, and this is clearly visible in the passage. Designing for the players' freedom of self-creation becomes 'the supreme pleasure,' but at the same time the status of the architect, meaning-maker or the storyteller is achieved and relished. In a similar way, Salen and Zimmerman seem to resolve the tension arising when the game is spoken of as a narrative. They treat the game as narrative play, posing the question not about 'whether games are narrative, but how they are narrative.'[30] This is a utilitarian approach, disclosed overtly as they state: 'using literary theory to argue that all games are (or aren't) narratives ultimately doesn't offer much utility for game design,'[31] and 'as game designers we must ask how can we use such an understanding to generate meaningful play.'[32] Generating meaningful play, obviously, in this case means as much as 'crafting narrative experiences' for the players.[33] What emerges here is, therefore, a basic opposition between artistry and craftsmanship; between selfish ownership and service.

So, what are our students told – by their textbooks? As far as the textbooks we have considered are concerned, they are mainly told that being an artist is not desired. That is because artists are selfish individuals who create mainly for themselves and for their art's sake. Who suffer from hubris and want to make their themes powerful, but are incapable of communication with the audience. Who fail to generate powerful experiences. Who do not understand that games are first and foremost about the player. But then, we – as tutors – are trained to expose our students to art, no matter how one defines it. And, while it is perhaps the matter of fact that many artists in the history of the world suffered from incurable hubris, it is also difficult not to notice that such a representation of the artist is a construct – a defence mechanism.

The situation is as much a conundrum as it is immensely interesting. One the one hand, if we do not wish to speak of designers as artists since we find such a status undesirable, why is it impossible for us to simply let the author – and simultaneously the artist – die by eradicating them from the discussion, and focusing on the game instead? On the other hand, if we feel 'resurrecting' them is necessary, why should we represent them through a construct which is at least partly based on a ruse: if an artist's role is not to create powerful experiences then what is it?

The fact that the representation of the designer (not only as writer) is structured against such a negative representation of the artist is an important one. There are, of course, some immediate explanations of why such a representation has been structured. For one thing, it is functional: e.g. games are expected to make profit. If they fail to engage the player as the central figure, they will not make it – this is what e.g. Thompson tells us, more or less directly. Yet in such a case it is

somewhat curious that the more theoretical the considerations of the designer's status get, the less is said of the market factor. Salen and Zimmerman, for example, give the designer the right to be a maker-as-a-craftsman, but still subordinate their role to the ultimate ends of crafting meaningful experiences. And it must be noticed that even if the authors of the textbooks agree that games are about fun, generating meaningful, or powerful, experiences sounds better that 'being fun to play.' It also sounds larger. But if it does, what is to fill the space left after fun has been catered for?

Notes

[1] Lee Sheldon, *Character Development and Storytelling for Games* (Boston: Course Technology, 2004), 14.
[2] John Feil and Marc Scattergood, *Beginning Game Level Design* (Boston: Course Technology PTR, 2005), 138.
[3] Ibid., 139-140.
[4] Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 103-105.
[5] Eric Zimmerman, Foreword to *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games* by Tracy Fullerton (Boca Raton, London and New York: CRC Press, 2008), xiii.
[6] Ibid., 100.
[7] Ibid., 105.
[8] Ibid., 350.
[9] Rafael Chandler, *Game Writing Handbook* (Boston: Course Technology, Cengage Learning, 2007), 17.
[10] Ibid., 26.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Jim Thompson, Barnaby Berbank-Green and Nic Cusworth, *The Computer Game Design Course* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 78.
[13] Ibid., 76.
[14] Ibid., 59.
[15] Ibid., 84-85.
[16] Ibid., 75.
[17] Ibid., 59.
[18] David Perry and Russel De Maria, *Game Design: A Brainstorming Toolbox* (Boston: Course Technology, Cengage Learning, 2009), 69.
[19] Ibid., 83.
[20] Jesse Schell, *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses* (Boca Raton, London and New York: CRC Press, 2008), 14-21.
[21] Ibid., 204.

[22] Ibid., 48.
[23] Feil and Scattergood, *Beginning Game Level Design*, 21, emphasis added.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Clint Hocking in *Challenges for Game Designers* by Brenda Braithwaite and Ian Schreiber (Boston: Course Technology, Cengage Learning, 2009), 241.
[27] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Games Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 303.
[28] Ibid., 302.
[29] Ibid., 372.
[30] Ibid., 378.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 379.
[33] Ibid., 381.

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Agnieszka Kliś-Brodowska is a PhD Candidate and Teaching Assistant at the University of Silesia. She is interested in the contemporary criticism of Gothic fiction and the history of Gothic studies, which she analyses in her doctoral thesis from the perspective of Michel Foucault's notion of discourse.

Bartłomiej Kuchciński is a PhD Candidate and Teaching Assistant at the University of Silesia. He is interested in theory of narration and science-fiction and is currently working on a doctoral thesis on science fiction from the perspective of Darwinian Literary Studies.

Ergodic Agency: How Play Manifests Understanding

Isaac Karth

Abstract
How do we measure meaningful choices? If a game is 'a series of interesting choices' how can we determine if a choice is interesting? What do we do with un-games that look like video games but don't have clearly meaningful choices? The usual metric is agency. Agency, in Janet Murray's definition, is 'the satisfying power to make meaningful action and see results of our decisions and choices.' By Mateas' definition, the player experiences agency when taking action balances the allowed actions (material affordances) with the player's motivation (formal affordances). Strong agency occurs when the player's motivation and means of action are in balance, resulting in player advancement. These definitions lack a clear metric for advancement. If we combine agency with Aarseth's ergodic cybertext, we can produce a clear metric to gauge player agency. Advancing in an ergodic system occurs when the player enacts an epiphany that resolves a problem or gap in understanding (aporia). This resolution reveals new problems and continues the cycle. This sense of agency breaks down when the actions the player wants to take do not lead to epiphanies that advance the player's understanding. Maximizing ergodic agency does not mean that the player can do anything. Rather, when the player's motivated actions also cause advancement, the player feels a sense of agency. Therefore, ergodic agency is the player's feeling of meaningful control that facilitates the player's transition into a deeper understanding of the ergodic system. Using this new model of agency, we can analyse wildly different works using a common metric. It gives us a lens to measure player engagement; a guideline for what kinds of actions and affordances designers should focus on; and suggests an explanation for linear experiences that still give the player a sense of agency.

Key Words: Agency, ergodic, play, aporia, cybertext, meaningful choice, causes, affordances, video games.

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1. Introduction

We lack a widely-known model that explains agency in both video games and the larger context of interactive media. The recent debates about the existence of 'not-games' highlights this.[1] Though this debate is partially cultural, a central division is the place of agency as an intrinsic interactive property.

One pre-existing model, Aarseth's cybertextual ergodic literature, covers both traditional games and the new interactive artworks, as well as print media examples such as *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes*.[2] Since video games are ergodic

systems, we can use ergodic agency to explain radically different works, such as *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* and *Depression Quest*.

Ergodic agency is the process through which the player's sense of control facilitates a transition to a deeper understanding of the underlying system. Ergodic agency starts with the affordances between the rules, the virtual system that the rules describe, and the player's understanding of that system. The affordances create aporias, gaps in the player's understanding. These gaps are resolved by epiphanies, which alter both the material cause and the efficient cause, linking back to the aporia at the start and advancing the player's eventual understanding of the meaning behind the system.

This use of the word 'ergodic' comes from Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext*, which defines ergodic literature as a text that requires active effort (*ergon*) on the reader's part to experience the path (*hodos*) through the text itself.[3] While agency has been much discussed, it is best defined as: 'a phenomenon, involving both the game and the player, one that occurs when the actions that players desire are among those they can take (and vice versa) as supported by an underlying computational model.'[4] This model is partially based on Michael Mateas' neo-Aristotelian interactive poetics.

One drawback of this definition of agency, compared to earlier but less precise definitions such as Murray's 'meaningful action,' is the perception that Mateas' affordances are harder to measure when compared to Murray's player-centric definition.[5] Since ergodic agency applies Aarseth's ergodic model to Mateas' agency model, we can use Aarseth's aporia and epiphany structures to build an analysis of the player's interaction with the game.

2. Affordances

In Mateas' model, 'A player will experience agency when there is a balance between the material and formal constraints.'[6] Applying this to the ergodic framework where it does, with a formal cause and a material case. These arise, respectively, from the underlying system the rules create – the formal cause – and the interface and associated virtual world which acts as the player's interface for control and feedback – the material cause.

The affordances created by these causes provide the player with both motivation and a means to act on the motivation. The sense of agency is increased when the causes are in balance. If the player is unable to act on the motivation, the sense of agency is harmed.

Further, unlike Mateas' model, ergodic agency explicitly considers player's changing knowledge of the system as the efficient cause. The player's knowledge sets the expectation for future interaction. If a video game is about pirates, the efficient affordances lead the player to expect to be a pirate, not a gardener, hedgehog, or space marine. If, additionally, the material affordances give the player the means to act like a pirate and the formal affordances simulate pirate

things, the player will experience a sense of agency. The player will experience an even stronger sense of agency if the material affordances anticipate the efficient affordances, such as including something that would be expected in real life but the player does not expect in a simulated world, such as being able to play basketball in the original *Deus Ex*, an example of agency highlighted in reviews.[7]

The affordances must be in balance. Without a connection between the material actions and the efficient player knowledge, the player will miss the affordances, and the system will fall into Wardrip-Fruin's *Tale-Spin* effect, where the lack of actionable affordances means that player fails to see the complexity of the system,[8] or the *Eliza* effect, where the affordances make promises that the system does not live up to.[9]

But even when the player is a strongly motivated to take an allowed action, it can fall short of agency if the action does not result in a meaningful response that advances by deepening the player's understanding and altering the state of the system. These causes, and the conflict between them, create a desire for agency in the player.[10] By themselves, they are not advancement. While they create the affordances, they do not resolve them.

3. Aporia

We can identify the interactive affordances – the opportunities for meaningful action – with Aarseth's aporia. The term 'aporia' originally arises from philosophy, where it is used by Socrates to describe a perplexing difficulty that can serve as a catalyst to new understanding.[11] For ergodic literature, Aarseth uses the word as an absence because something is inaccessible, not an ambiguity 'but, rather, an absence of possibility – an aporia.'[12] An affordance creates a negative space in the text, a gap that allows for the player's input. Aporias invite exploration and exist within a system that responds to the player's actions.

In Aarseth's ergodics, an aporia is not a positive goal but rather a negative block to the player's advance that can be resolved with a deeper understanding of the system.[13] The affordances imply that there is a whole that can be composed from the available fragments, 'even if,' as Aarseth points out, 'there is no evidence that the fragments ever constituted a whole.'[14] The player's exploration may even be based on a faulty understanding of the system, or a false sense of the affordances,[15] as discussed below.

4. Play

The player's response to an aporia is to explore and interact: to play. While the player can be working towards a particular end, the player's moment-to-moment play is improvised rather than planned, often involving momentary failure.[16] The failure of the player's plan spurs experimentation, which is short-circuited if the player is forced to reload and try again.[17] While common at the limit of the

design's abstraction, such a design forces the player to solve a single aporia at the expense of the rest of the system.

The player's central experience with the game is play. The act of play mediates the gap between the player's knowledge and the system. The player uses play to explore a cybernetic feedback loop where the system reacts to the player's actions. Since the feedback is a 'perceivable consequence,'[18] it increases the perception of interactivity, making this cycle vital to giving the player a sense of agency.

Note that this cycle can exist entirely within the player's head, such as in a solitaire card game where the player performs both the action and the feedback within the magic circle. It include other players, as in Aarseth's discussion of MUDs.[19]

5. Epiphany

Play is important for moment-to-moment interactivity but the play must eventually resolve into an epiphany for the aporia. That is, the play must result in an advance, in either the game's event plane or the player's progression time.

For Aarseth, an epiphany includes both the discovery and execution of the resolution.[20] This explains why the feeling of agency persists if a player replays a game: the question is not how to solve this aporia, but how to solve this aporia *this time*.

The epiphany does not have to be correct. It only needs to satisfy an aporia, any aporia. A wrong turn in a maze is still advancement for the player. If the epiphany is based on a false understanding, it may resolve the current aporia and require revision for future aporia. Wardrip-Fruin et al. consider this to be a common part of the process:

> In fact, many players actively misunderstand aspects of the games they play and their experience oscillates between agency and the illusion of agency (and even moments of minor breakdown) in very successful games. But the phenomenon of agency, however partial, grounds the success of these experiences.[21]

An epiphany changes the system in two ways: by deepening the player's understanding of the underlying system and by altering the state of the game. The player's knowledge of the system is the efficient cause. Altering the material cause via the game-state gives the player access to new parts of the system.

By definition, ergodic literature requires reader effort to access parts of the text, and therefore there are barriers in the text. The barriers can be mechanical (material) or conceptual (efficient). For example, in *Skyrim*,[22] a locked door is a material barrier, while mastering the lock-picking minigame is an efficient barrier.

Either way, the epiphany produces a change in the system, the player, or both. The experience of the game is no longer the same.

The alteration forms another feedback loop. The epiphany (and resolution of the aporia) changes the material cause through the altered game-state. It changes the player's perception of the formal cause. Changed understanding alters the efficient cause. The altered causes complete the cycle by presenting new aporias to the player. New aporias advance the system, and the player's experience of that ergodic advancement gives the player a sense of agency.

6. Closing the Loop

The complete cycle is necessary for the player to experience agency. If the affordances are not in balance, the player will be unable to find the aporia. Lacking the ability to play with the aporia, the player will fail to perceive the interactivity. If the epiphany does not occur, the system does not alter – meaning that it does not affirm the player's proposed resolution, which leaves the player without a new aporia. No new aporia means that, while the player's new interpretations may continue to hold the player's interest, the player does not perceive the actions as having an effect and therefore does not feel a sense of agency.

However, even an illusion of agency can temporarily work. An example is how *Façade*'s opening establishes dramatic possibilities, which then carry the player through later, less clear interactions.[23] The player's sense of agency can coast on previous epiphanies, since epiphanies create a mental model that allows the player to predict future epiphanies.

Further, the expectations from the efficient affordances inform the player's motivations. An ergodic work that sets the player's expectations at the start gives a stronger sense of agency than one that does not. This expectation persists:

> ...audience expectation is still active even after system understanding begins to develop. Agency becomes part of the expectation, so that even when agency is not occurring, the audience seeks it and can be more fully engaged than if the experience did not support agency at all.[24]

For example, at the start of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*[25] the player is exploring the safe space of Serif headquarters while a hostage crisis unfolds elsewhere. Because most other games will only advance when the player takes an action, inaction is expected to be meaningless. However, if the player delays this time, the game reacts, causing some of the hostages to die. By giving the player's inaction an unexpected consequence, this disrupts the player's prior low-agency expectations and sets an expectation of strong agency for the rest of the game.

Because agency is not free will,[26] and Aarseth considers forking to be only one of many 'syntactical' devices,[27] ergodic agency can also be applied to mostly

linear experiences, such as *Dear Esther*,[28] whether or not they are classified as games. It also explains agency with limited plot branches, as in *The Walking Dead*,[29] or games such as *Kentucky Route Zero*[30] that lack significant puzzles.

For an example of applying ergodic agency to an art-game, consider the game *Depression Quest*.[31] *Depression Quest* uses 'Choose Your Own Adventure' tropes to explore the experience of clinical depression. To convey its meaning, the designers severely limited the player's available actions. While this would normally inhibit agency, the work's presentation uses this as part of its message, priming the player with the expectation that depression puts some choices out of reach. Establishing efficient affordances that match the system's processes allows the work to create a sense of frustrated agency that still allows the player to advance.

7. Advancement

Advancement happens when the player has an epiphany that closes the loop with the aporia and the cycle repeats. The change caused by the epiphany can either be a change in the game's state (material cause) or in the player's knowledge (efficient cause). These can be expressed in terms of Aarseth's categories of the 'event plane' and the 'progression plane,'[32] corresponding to the game-state's timeline and the player's timeline, respectively.

Aporia/Epiphany structures can be linked in two ways: through an aporia's resolution leading to a new aporia, or through aporias being nested within each other.[33] Chained aporias mostly affect the event plane, and nested aporias mostly affect the progression plane.

In 'The Open and the Closed,' Jesper Juul defines two models for how games present new challenges to the player: games of emergence, which consist of 'a number of simple rules combining to form interesting variation' and games of progression, 'separate challenges presented serially.'[34] These operate as 'open' systems and 'closed' systems, respectively.

Advancing in a closed system includes things like winning a scenario in *Age of Empires*,[35] unlocking the hyper levels in *Super Hexagon*,[36] delivering the quest object to the right NPC in *Skyrim*,[37] or triggering the next cutscene in *Psychonauts*.[38] Advancing in an open system includes winning a skirmish by selecting the right mix of units in *Age of Empires*, understanding the patterns in *Super Hexagon*, and seeing the metapattern behind a particular opening in chess. Chained aporias correspond most closely to closed games of progression, while nested aporia correspond most closely to open games of emergence.[39]

Few games are exclusively built out of progression or emergent structures.[40] An open system will have many nested aporias and be primarily concerned with advancing the player's understanding of the system in the progression plane, while a closed system will be gated by chained aporias and be primarily concerned with

advancing the state of the game in the event plane. In practice, most systems interconnect all of these elements.

8. Finding the Aporia in the Four Causes

Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* provided the background of Mateas' neo-Aristotelian dramatic theory.[41] Aarseth critiqued Laurel's theatrical metaphor as having too limited a view of the user's capabilities.[42] Mateas' use of Douglas Norman's affordances addresses this critique[43] and enables us to take it one step further, dropping the theatrical metaphor and using the neo-Aristotelian model to consider the virtual ergodic system in light of Aristotle's four causes.

The formal cause is the virtual form behind the mechanics, an elaborate multi-layered machine that only exists within the magic circle. Aarseth supports a metaphysical interpretation of the ergodic system: 'the cybertext is a game-world or world-game.'[44] While discussing the existence of variability in ergodic structures, he points towards 'an objective level beyond the text, a primary metaphysical structure that generates both textual sign and our understanding of it, rather than the other way around.'[45]

The cybertextual rules create interactions that have strategic implications. The state of the game is a complex multi-dimensional mathematical space – a simulated game-world. Ergodic agency demonstrates the process by which the material affordances change the player's understanding of the system and therefore the player's understanding of the formal cause.

The player has an imperfect, virtual model of the system created by the affordances of the rules. Epiphanies apotheosise the rules, translating them into virtual mental space, sometimes unconsciously:

> Successful play requires understanding how initial expectation differs from system operation, incrementally building a model of the system's internal processes based on experimentation. This is how agency happens.[46]

As agency deepens the player's understanding of the system in fits and starts, the player's imperfect model approaches the unchanging formal cause behind the rules. Rules give way to meta-rules, as the player ascends toward the ideal Aristotelian/Platonic form.

Without a player, a game is just a set of rules; therefore the efficient cause includes the player. From the material cause expressed in the ergodic rules and interface, the player creates a virtual model of the system. But Aristotle's efficient cause is not just the acting person but the knowledge that enables the action.[47] Therefore, a person is a player because the person has a player's knowledge of the system, and the player's virtual mental model is the efficient cause. The final cause of an ergodic system is reached through advancing the player's understanding of

the system toward the actual, virtual form of the system. The final cause of the game is the player's comprehension of the meaning behind the system.

The player's mental model is an imperfect one. There are gaps between the player's accumulated knowledge and the system's ideal form. A gap in knowledge is an aporia. The gaps between the efficient knowledge and the final model make up the aporias, and each epiphany brings the two models one step closer. This brings us back to the beginning: Ergodic agency is the ergodically-mediated process through which the player approaches the meaning behind the system.

9. Implications

Ergodic agency provides an explanation for how games became categorised by shared mechanics rather than literary characteristics. The player's familiarity with previous epiphanies means that the player's model starts with assumptions. The efficient knowledge crosses to the next game, as new games build on previous systems. This is similar to the learning process described in Koster's game grammar[48] and his explanation of the evolution of 2-D shooters.[49] Koster's skill atoms[50] may be the smallest possible aporia.

10. Conclusion

Ergodic agency captures the important of response to the player's action and affordances in the design, while demonstrating how they enable the player's advancement. Because agency is a property unique to interactive works, understanding agency is necessary to fully understand interactivity. Balancing the affordances of the four causes create harmony between the play and the meaning of the play, guiding the player from the first tentative assumptions to eventually see the meaning behind the system.

Notes

[1] Raph Koster, 'A Theory of Fun 10 Years Later', GDC Online 2012, video.
[2] Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 10.
[3] Ibid., 1.
[4] Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al., 'Agency Reconsidered', in *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory: Proceedings of the 2009 Digital Games Research Association Conference*, eds. Barry Atkins, Helen Kennedy and Tanya Krzywinska (London: Brunel University, 2009), 1.
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[7] Kieron Gillen, 'Deus Ex', Kieron Gillen's Workblog (blog), last modified 20 May 2005, accessed 20 March 2013, http://gillen.cream.org/wordpress_html/assorted-essays/deus-ex/.
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[9] Ibid., 25.
[10] Ibid., 344.
[11] Plato, *Meno*, 80c-d, 84a-c.
[12] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 3.
[13] Ibid., 92.
[14] Ibid., 91.
[15] Wardrip-Fruin et al., 'Agency Reconsidered', 5.
[16] Ibid., 7.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 2.
[19] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 142-161.
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Isaac Karth holds a Master of Fine Arts in Arts and Technology from the University of Texas at Dallas. He is currently an independent game developer researching the possibilities of interactive narrative and procedural generation.

Part 4

From Theory to Practice

‘Get Over It!’: Sexuality and Sexual Diversity in Video Games

René Schallegger

Abstract
In recent AAA video games, a growing tendency to include romance options for all sexes can be stated. This chapter takes a closer look at the representations of gender, sexuality and sexual diversity in these artefacts, identifying resulting problems in the aesthetics, mechanics and socio-cultural context of video games, as well as possible solutions for them. Following a review of established theoretical approaches and critical opinions, a closer look at BioWare’s *Mass Effect* series is taken as a practical example for a mostly successful implementation of a very inclusive design premise on both levels, content and form. But even in so carefully balanced a text, an implicit gender bias, especially against male-male romance options, can be identified. Market forces, the unwillingness to acknowledge shifting player demographics, and self-censorship in reaction to various political and cultural environments still prevent a free exploration of alternative identities and patterns of behaviour in the medium, and thus the full development of video games as an art form.

Key Words: Gender Studies, sexuality, sexual diversity, sexual identity, video game aesthetics, LGBTQ identities, BioWare, Canadian Studies.

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1. Romance, Gender and Sexuality in Gaming

The trend in mainstream video games seems to be towards an increasing inclusion of romance content. James Leach notes that the use of romance as a universal, noble and strong motivation for the player has a long tradition in Japanese gaming, but western gamers tend to see it as more problematic.[1] There are basic experiential and conceptual problems to be considered: More dialogue and cut-scenes shift the interaction from a configurational towards an interpretational one, and even cleverly designed romance sequences simply cannot make players feel the emotions their characters would go through, resulting in an emotional disconnect endangering immersion. Addressing these dangers, Leach puts together a To-Do-list for game designers:

> Romance must not be forced or highlighted in games, it should be discovered.
>
> Romance must be optional, and the player must be able to end it at any time.

> Relationships must be directly meaningful to the narrative.
>
> Accept that including sexual relations in games will always be awkward.[2]

The immersive aspect of video games together with their separation from primary reality and any detrimental effects such behaviour might have in real life promise a way to live out sexual fantasies without fear. Yet players must not underestimate the emotional feed-back between player and character generated by the combination of immersion and agency at the heart of the medium. Richard Bartle defines the irreducible emotional risk: 'Players are real, characters are virtual. Immersed players are their characters – they're personae.'[3] Even though virtual characters do not have bodies, immersion affects the mediated and seemingly safe experience, overcoming the distancing effect and creating real emotional, sometimes even physical effects in primary reality.

When we look at representations of sexuality, the industry still has to come to the realisation of their potential. Steve Swink demands they move beyond 'big-bosomed vixens, babes with guns and cutie-pie anime girls,' grow up and stop catering to the sexual fantasies of teenage boys.[4] He also identifies another problem inherent to the medium: Sex in games can never be sexy. Since video games cannot simulate the physical act of intercourse, they must find other ways to convey a sense of intimacy and sensuality, focusing on the simulation of interpersonal relationships. Advances must be well timed, Swink argues, control mechanisms related to eye contact, body position and language implemented. Decisions about proximity and awareness of clues for interest or lack of such must be part of the simulation.[5] Only by respecting this complex set of factors and by successfully translating them into a playable experience can video games establish a sense of real emotional attachment. The only solution to 'do' sex in games, following Swink's argument, is to focus on what *can* be simulated, offloading the sexual interpretation to the player's mind.[6]

Tynan Sylvester sees video games as engines of experience driven by what he calls the 'primacy of emotion.'[7] In order to be meaningful, events must provoke emotion, and that in turn means they must change a human value, i.e. 'anything that is important to people that can shift through multiple states.'[8] Examples provided by the author include [life/death], [victory/defeat], or [friend/stranger/enemy]. The emotional relevance of an event is directly proportional to the importance of the human value concerned and the extent of change it goes through. As human beings are hardwired to respond to sexual stimuli, Tynan argues, using them makes for an effective and easy strategy, which has led to ruthless abuse in hyper-sexualised games.[9] However, gratuitous sex harms the atmosphere and believability of the game experience, and the use of sex generally runs the risk of alienating a large potion of the audience: those not

interested in the sexual signals on display. Tynan therefore concludes that using sex is a risky strategy for any broadly targeted game and better restricted to more niche-oriented titles.[10]

In spite of all of these problems with representations of sexuality in video games, James Portnow claims that it has been around almost as long as the medium itself.[11] Going back to Atari's *Gotcha* (1973) and Mystique's infamous *Custer's Revenge* (1982), Portnow defines the still dominant representations in video gaming as hyper-sexualised.[12] Even though a mature exploration of sexuality is essential for games to be accepted as a fully-fledged form of art, the immature style, commercial deliberations, as well as the perception of games as a medium for children have made this impossible so far. The solutions Portnow suggests to this problem closely resemble Leach's approach: Sexuality must not be limited to physicality and cheap titillation, instead it should be used to help define characters, explore relationships, and colour character interactions by desire. The simulational limitations of the medium must be respected, and sex must not be included in every game, only those that aim to push the boundaries of public expectation.[13] The desired result is for sex in games to no longer be shocking or gratuitous, but meaningful.

2. Sexual Diversity in Gaming

All of the caveats concerning sex in games are even more critical for the inclusion of sexual diversity. Diane Carr argues that gaming has pervaded the popular imagination 'to the point where it can accommodate differently zoned, and differently defined, spaces – and this expansion creates room for diversification.'[14] This potential of play to deconstruct norms and values immediately raises the question of ethics and responsibility.

Bartle points out that game design can and will often promote specific gender performances.[15] The exploration of identities possible should result in an extension of the emotional range of players, as well as increasingly fluid gender roles, but unfortunately most AAA games resort to stereotypical patterns of gendered behaviour. And yet, there is a strong deconstructive potential in the dominance of cross-gender play: According to Kathryn Wright's research, 57% of straight male players prefer female avatars, and among them the top reason given is that it adds to their roleplaying experience (25%).[16] Within the security of the confined narrative architecture of a game, male players seem to be willing to experiment with other gender roles, even though they might be more hesitant to do so in primary reality. Decision-makers in the industry, however, still resist any adaptation of their design and marketing strategies geared towards young adult, heterosexual males only.

Representations of sexuality in games directly touch upon questions of gender politics and oscillate between objectifying victimisation and idealised liberation. Bartle's preferred position sees contemporary developments as the first steps

towards empowerment: Players can use games to question their own needs and expectations and to explore them critically, developing a better understanding of themselves in an individual learning process and transferring it to a process of political emancipation.[17] This model of how games can affect personal and socio-political change is applicable beyond questions of sexuality and gender, reaching into philosophical, ethical and even political areas of players' lives. Video games emerge as effective tools for personal and social learning.

Including potentially problematic issues in a video game design must therefore be seen as a conscious artistic statement, not just an element of play. Richard Bartle's warning is clear:

> Designers of virtual worlds carry a responsibility for the consequences of their designs. Real people play these worlds, and the effects that a design has on them are real.[18]

Even though this might seem to absolve players of responsibility for their actions, Bartle develops a sense of shared responsibility, encompassing both designer and player. The censorship the gaming industry faces in western societies is largely self-censorship: Marketing decisions are made to maximise sellability, and even if the creative team has daring ideas, IP-owners might not give their consent. The ethics of representation in a game are also influenced by other factors: the purpose of the game, the politics expressed, as well as diachronic and synchronic variations in the socio-cultural context of reception. Possible strategies to react to those are ignoring the context and losing sales, implementing switchable content and accept higher costs, or to avoid sticky issues altogether, which results in the prevalent stance of self-censorship.

Players implicitly project their expectations into the narrative architecture of a game, so designers need to make a decision whether they want to confirm or frustrate these expectations. Challenging preconceptions may lead players to rethink their positions, or, as Bartle puts it, 'Designers can influence ways in which people change in virtual worlds.'[19] In order to get there, a design must be internally consistent, deepen immersion to maximise transfer between secondary and primary reality, and it must also be flexible enough to allow a player not to reintegrate a challenge experienced with his personality. The responsibility of the designer is limited and shared, as they only design a system while the use the player makes of it is entirely up to them, but the distribution of authorial power is unbalanced:

> When all is said and done, the ethics of a virtual world reflect those of its designer. […] *Your* beliefs, *your* attitudes, *your* personality – they're all reflected in your virtual world. *You* have to take responsibility, because (at least initially) you *are* the world.[20]

Marsha Kinder sees video games as intrinsically connected to identity politics in how they create awareness of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, giving players the ability to enact and experience other roles to promote personal change.[21] Recent psychological research provides evidence that players unconsciously conform to their avatars and their behaviour: The so-called Proteus effect describes a direct transfer between the secondary – and the primary – reality personalities a player enacts.[22] It is therefore essential to be able to represent oneself accordingly in games, and marginalised gamers rightfully feel under- and misrepresented in most contemporary AAA video games. Even though alternative sexual and gender identities have arrived in the public awareness of most western societies, self-censorship still upholds an unrealistic status-quo in games. New approaches are needed to empower young adults about their gender and sexual identities.

Kinder formulates the steps necessary to deconstruct the rigorous gendering of AAA games: Omnipresent hyper-sexualised gender representations must be denaturalised, choices beyond the traditional framework of gender offered, and a fearless play with gender and sexuality possible.[23] This challenge of cultural stereotypes must, however, be part of an entertaining narrative to create immersion. Eventually, Kinder argues, games will have to leave behind all structures of domination and subordination based on categories of gender and sexuality,[24] in order to become what Henry Jenkins calls 'spaces to imagine alternative roles.'[25]

In his analysis of diversity in games, Portnow identifies the central shortcoming in how the issue has been handled so far: Token characters are not the solution; they are part of the problem, since stereotypes alienate marginalised players.[26] In the history of mainstream gaming, he only identifies five LGBTQ characters before *Mass Effect*, and only one of them, Kanji Tatsumi in *Persona 4* (2008), is explored in a realistic and serious way.[27]

What are then the suggestions Portnow offers to produce more convincingly written LGBTQ characters? First of all, a character's sexuality must only be included to create an interesting and multi-dimensional personality. Symbolism, psychology and empathy should be used to talk about sexuality as one aspect of identity and to think about the creation and contextualisation of identity *per se*. All players, irrespective of their own gender or sexual identities, should be invited to learn from the experiences of a character, to explore narratives otherwise unavailable to them. Sexuality, Portnow concludes, must not define a character, but it must be shown to be an essential and integral aspect of their human condition.[28] In AAA gaming, I would argue, *Mass Effect 3* has so far gotten closest to Portnow's suggestions, and it can therefore be seen an example of how to successfully provide inclusive representations of sexuality and sexual diversity in gaming.

3. A Case-Study: *Mass Effect*

The *Mass Effect* game series has become a major IP in popular culture since the release of the first game in 2007. The complexity and richness of its narrative and its socio-cultural impact have singled it out as 'the next big thing' in sci-fi. It has by now dispersed into other media, so there are iOS-apps, novels, comics, an animé and even an upcoming life-action movie. *Mass Effect* must also be seen in continuation of the outstanding work BioWare have been doing in video game design since they were founded in 1995: After a series of highly successful adaptations of *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Star Wars*, they started their own IPs with *Jade Empire* (2005), *Mass Effect* (2007), and *Dragon Age* (2009). Most of the BioWare games since *Baldur's Gate* (1998) have also included same-sex romance options.

BioWare has frequently been under attack from right-wing conservatives for its liberal treatment of sexual and gender diversity in their games. *Mass Effect* (2007) was described as a 'porn simulator' by Fox News,[29] heavily criticised in the US, and forbidden in several Asian countries. Even with their impressive track record, BioWare decided not to take a risk: they stopped the development of m/m romance content and locked the existing assets in the game, while the f/f option remained intact. This unfortunate pandering to the straight male gaze might also be connected to the influence of EA on BioWare's creative decisions after the take-over in 2007.

With *Mass Effect 2* (2010), BioWare resorted to the self-censorship typical of the anticipatory obedience to the supposed target audience in the gaming industry. There are no m/m options in the game, and all three possible romance options for MaleShep are straight ones, but three out of the six romance options for FemShep are f/f. Already the fact that the female avatar is given twice the romance options smacks of gender bias, but the utter exclusion of all m/m content led to fierce criticism by the liberal media in North America and Europe. To add insult to injury, BioWare decided that f/f-romances would not give a player the 'Paramour'-achievement, an extradiegetic reward for the completion of a romantic relationship. The message was clear: m/m-romance was unwanted, and f/f-romance was not real romance anyway. This was in utter contradiction to the utopian setting of the series, depicting a humanity that has moved beyond issues of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or class. It also reproduced the dominant conservative perspective on same-sex relationships: ignore and repress the males, sexually fantasise about and belittle the females.

And then BioWare's did something unprecedented in AAA gaming with *Dragon Age 2* (2011): For the first time, a character not controlled by the player initiated a m/m romance. The result was uproar in the gamer community, as many straight male players felt threatened in their sexual identities by the unwanted advances. Even though BioWare took great care in the game design so that the player still remained in control of the situation, the offended players considered

themselves the majority and wanted only their desires and expectations to be represented in the game.

The majority argument must be seriously questioned, as according to US statistics, in 2011 42% of gamers were female, which together with gay and bisexual men would most certainly add up to a majority of non-'straight males.'[30] But BioWare did not resort to statistics to reply to the demands: They issued a bold statement by the game's openly gay lead writer, David Gaider, telling the offended players to 'get over it,'[31] refuting the attack on fundamental (gender-) political and ideological grounds: All players, Gaider argues, have a right to be equally represented in the games they play, and privilege always lies with the majority, so it is not used to representations of minority or marginal positions. This results in the naturalisation of their expectations and the false claim to sole representational authority. Like all romance options, he points out, the offending m/m content is purely optional, providing equal opportunities for all players, and he makes it clear that he believes in creating appropriate choices for *all* players, concluding:

> And the person who says that the only way to please them is to restrict options for others is, if you ask me, the one who deserves it least.[32]

Obviously under the impression of earlier controversies and backed by the considerable financial success of their earlier games, BioWare finally decided to step it up with the same-sex romance options in *Mass Effect 3* (2012). With a simple tweet, game director Casey Hudson told the world that he was 'Happy to confirm #ME3 supports wider options for love interests incl. same-sex for m&f chars, reactive to how you interact w/them in-game' a year prior to release.[33] The first exclusively gay and lesbian romantic interests in AAA gaming, Samantha Traynor and Steve Cortez, were written to provide the seamless integration of believable and life-affirming representations of same-sex relationships. All of the content was still written by white/male/straight authors Patrick Weekes and Dusty Everman, but they approached LGBTQ staff in BioWare for proof-reading and –playing.[34] Their aims were to avoid stereotyping – Weekes conceded that it did not work 100%[35] – to stay realistic in their representation and development of relationships, and to seriously think about what can be shown, what must be, and what must not, especially during the sex scenes.

Special attention was given to the m/m romance options, while the f/f relationships were seen as less problematic.[36] MaleShep not only has to take the initiative to establish a m/m relationship, he also has to make a serious and continued effort and to mechanically confirm his intentions *twice*. Weekes and Everman explain that this was in reaction to the *Dragon Age 2* controversy: Some straight male gamers were obviously afraid of being 'ninja romanced,' i.e. of becoming the object of a male character's affection without intentions on the

player's side.[37] Certain players are afraid of missing the subtle hints that a bromance they have built with another male character might turn into a romance with just one 'wrong' choice in the dialogue wheel. The repeated confirmation necessary to lock in a romantic path with a male character is a nod in their direction to give them more control and to safeguard their agency in the matter. This is an interesting case of how again the m/m option is perceived as a threat and therefore treated differently from the f/m, m/f, or even f/f options available in the game.

Still, the existence of loving same-sex relationships and their contextualisation with the game setting are essential. Within the diegesis of the game, the 'special' character of these relationships is not marked. Gender roles and expectations are irrelevant in this fictitious 22nd century, even though gender and sexual preferences still exist as part of the human condition: There is no reaction whatsoever when Steve Cortez tells Shepard about how he lost his husband during the war, nor when Samantha Traynor shares her thoughts about her girlfriend at university. Even the straight, super-macho space marine James Vega has no problem with being sexually looked at and appreciated by his gay team-mate during his training sessions, as evidenced by the friendly teasing that goes on between them. All serious relationships in the game, regardless of gender constellations, are built on strong friendships and a growing sense of intimacy. Gender and sex only come in once the intimacy established is to cross the boundary into a sexual relationship, as it should be in an otherwise gender-blind society.

Yet even this model case of how to handle the inclusive treatment of sexual diversity in video gaming still shows a disappointing disproportion in the available romance options based on the gender of the player character: While 60% of FemShep's possible romances are f/f, MaleShep only has 25% m/m options – he can choose between a gay man of colour (Steve Cortez) and a bisexual Russian/Ukrainian-Canadian (Kaidan Alenko). This minor flaw shows how prejudice and misconceptions still inform representations of sexuality and sexual diversity in video gaming, but BioWare's daring push towards a more egalitarian representative regime must be seen as a decisive step forwards and a milestone in the development of the medium and the associated subculture. In a war to save humanity, Shepard's humanity remains unquestioned, no matter their gender or sexual identity, no matter the person they love. This, I would argue, is *Mass Effect*'s greatest triumph.

Notes

[1] James Leach, 'Word Play: All You Need Is Love', in *Edge* #243 (Bath: Future Publishing, 2012): 154.

[2] Richard A. Bartle, *Designing Virtual Worlds* (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2004), 549.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Steve Swink, *Game Feel: A Game Designer's Guide to Virtual Sensation* (Amsterdam and Boston, MA: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2009), 316.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 317.
[7] Tynan Sylvester, *Designing Games: A Guide to Engineering Experiences* (Beijing and Cambridge: O'Reilly, 2013), 8.
[8] Ibid., 12.
[9] Ibid., 29.
[10] Ibid.
[11] James Portnow, 'Sex in Games', video on Penny Arcade's *Extra Credits*, accessed 24 May 2013, http://www.penny-arcade.com/patv/episode/sex-in-games.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Diane Carr et al., *Computer Games: Text, Narrative, and Play* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 176.
[15] Bartle, *Virtual Worlds*, 532.
[16] Kathryn Wright, 'Gender Bending in Games', womengamers.com, 2000, in Richard A. Bartle, *Designing Virtual Worlds* (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2004), 536.
[17] Bartle, *Virtual Worlds*, 555.
[18] Ibid., 671.
[19] Ibid., 702.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Marsha Kinder, 'An Interview with Marsha Kinder', in *From Barbie to Mortal Combat*, eds. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2000), 219.
[22] 'The Psychology of… Avatars', *Edge* #240, 100.
[23] Kinder, 'An Interview', 221.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Henry Jenkins, '"Complete Freedom of Movement": Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces', in *From Barbie to Mortal Combat*, eds. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2000), 276.
[26] James Portnow, 'Diversity', video on Penny Arcade's *Extra Credits*, accessed 24 May 2013, http://www.penny-arcade.com/patv/episode/diversity.
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[34] Patrick Weekes, 'Same-Sex Relationships in Mass Effect 3', on *BioWare* homepage (May 7, 2012), accessed 25 May 2013, http://blog.bioware.com/2012/05/07/same-sex-relationships-in-mass-effect-3/.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

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René Schallegger was trained in English and American Studies, as well as French, with focus on literary criticism at Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt (Austria), and Anglia Ruskin University (Cambridge/UK). His Master's thesis entitled 'Voices of Authority – A Postmodern Reading of BABYLON 5' (2002) was followed after several years of working for the Provincial Government of Carinthia

(Austria) by a doctoral thesis on 'Joyful Games of Meaning-Making: Role-Playing Games and Postmodern Notions of Literature' (2013). His main research interests are theories of Postmodernism, Game-, Comics-, TV-, and Film Studies, especially in a British and Canadian Studies context. Currently, he is Post-Doc Assistant for British-, Canadian-, and Game Studies and Vice Head of the Department of English and American Studies at Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt (Austria.)

The End of the End as We Know It: A Philosophical Look at the Narration in *Mass Effect*

Thomas Morisset

Abstract
The roots of our reflection about such a modern invention as videogame lie in the philosophy of Aristotle, mainly in *Poetics*, 1450b25-35, where he stated that 'A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end.' This chapter aims to show how videogames challenge the very definitions of the middle and the end and how those redefinitions affect its storytelling. The interactive nature of videogames involves a spatial turn in narration that prevents us from speaking of middle the way Aristotle, or today's literature, does. Electronic media have been previously categorised as 'rhizomatic' medias (Deleuze, Murray). However, drawing upon our play through of the Mass Effect franchise, this statement remains a theoretical one because the common equivalence between the 'good ending' and 'the ending-where-you-played-the-most' seems us to be problematic and anti-rhizomatic. Linking this to the emergence of capitalism, and its ideology of engagement, in storytelling, we would like to open a discussion on new and creative forms of game completion. Even the 'perfect' ending of *Mass Effect 3* was a disappointment, which prompted Bioware to change it a few months later. Changing the ending because of the audience is nothing new (see A. Conan Doyle), but erasing the previous one is and should be questioned. Moreover, over these couples of months, one could ask: what became of the end of *Mass Effect*? What transpired during this time, mainly over the Internet, was the so called 'indoctrination theory': a conspiracy-theory-like interpretation of the previous ending stating that the future one would be entirely reversed. By retracing this idea's history, we would like to show the artistic and creative potentials of such moments of suspicion that *Mass Effect 3* has unwittingly created and encourage the authors and editors to use these moments as an artful resource.

Key Words: Aristotle, art, end, middle, narration, rhizome, spatial turn.

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1. The Narrative Canvas in Video Games: From Middle to Milieu

Mass Effect is one of the most successful video game franchises of the past few years, acclaimed by both public and critics. One of its most praised features was the epic storyline and deep universe, in which the player was given access to a large array of moral decisions, sometimes as painful and emotionally engaging as choosing which member of your crew will live or die.

This quite perfect picture was tarnished by the end of *Mass Effect 3*, which was scheduled to put an end to Commandant Shepard's story arc. The reaction was so

overwhelmingly negative that, in April 2012, just a month after the release, Bioware, the developer, announced that an 'extended cut' version would be released later that year.[1] We would like to show how this event questions the very definition of an end and how video games, as a cultural medium, blur the frontier between what is art and what is not.

Before we further examine this event, let us take a look at the structure of the narration in all three episodes. The player is able to navigate between mandatory missions and optional ones (*Mass Effect 2* adds a third category, but we will come to that later). The mandatory missions develop the main plot whereas the optional ones are just ways of gaining some more experience points and delving deeper in the universe. The plot can be summed up as follows: Commandant Shepard, helped by alien races, has to save the galaxy from the Reapers, a race of giant synthetic spaceships determined to annihilate all organic life.

The vast majority of these primary missions do not have to be played in a well-defined order. For example, the first three main missions of *Mass Effect 1*, after Shepard left the 'Citadel' with her ship, may be completed in any order, which may prompt small variations in various dialogue scenes. These additions of small plot variations, the player's own rhythm of exploration and very dramatic and plot-twisting choices, make each game of *Mass Effect* a very personal experience.

For these reasons, it seems safe to assume that video games perform a kind of spatial turn by making the text of the scenario look like, and be experienced as a map. To better understand what it means, let us take a look at the now classical book of Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Murray makes a clear distinction between two modalities of interactive storytelling, 'the solutionless rhizome or the solvable maze.[2]' The latter is associated with adventure games, like the old text-based RPGs: there is only one way out, but multiple dead-ends occur. The former, deemed as a more artful form by Murray, is to be found in electronic and hypertext literature as a web of equally relevant text fractions that offer a wide variety of points of view.

Nonetheless, we believe that these two forms share a common trait: the lack of a middle. To understand this sentence, we have to look at this small and seemingly innocuous extract of Aristotle's *Poetics*:

> A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end. A beginning is that which is not a necessary consequent of anything else but after which something else exists or happens a natural result. An end on the contrary is that which is inevitably or, as a rule, the natural result of something else but from which nothing else follows; a middle follows something else ans something follows from it[3].

This – otherwise good – translation missed the point of the last sentence. In the original text, there is no verbal form, which may mean two things: it is either the Greek verb 'eimi' (to be) which would have been eluded, or it implies the repetition of the last employed verb. Most of the translations we know consider the former to be correct. However, we think that the symmetry of the first two sentences should be extended and therefore the same verb used a third time.

The verb used by Aristotle is 'pephuken,' a past perfect form of 'phuô,' which means, when talking about plants, to grow and is the root of 'phusis,' nature. The translation 'happens as a natural result' should convey the idea of something growing according to the harmony and regulation of nature. That is to say that nothing comes to be by accident and that every meaningful middle embodies the form of the whole. In a video game such as *Mass Effect* it is impossible to say that something 'happens as a natural result' of something else. It is always a decision of the player, an actualisation of a narrative possibility. There is no middle, there are only milieu, i.e. a configuration of possibilities, of different points on a map.

It has to be understood that the remark of Aristotle was not plain theoretic, but also an aesthetic judgment: Aristotle was not initially speaking of every type of literature but only of tragedy. In this regard, video game narration has more to do with the improvised poetry of a Homeric bard singing on a loose canvas than with the Athenian tragedy.

As such, though it has a solvable outcome, *Mass Effect* and other games that present similar patterns of narration appear to be closer to a rhizome, than to a maze. Contrary to Murray, we think that being a maze or a rhizome is far more a matter of travel than a matter of destination.

2. *Mass Effect 2* and the Issue of Personal Investment

Let us investigate further this canvas as it appears in *Mass Effect 2*. We have already said that this game introduces a tweak in the primary/secondary mission structure of the first episode. It introduced the 'loyalty missions.' In these, the player has to help one of her crew mates to settle once and for all a personal issue in order for them to be loyal to the commandant. In the game, being means gaining a new ability in combat, and having greater chance to survive the final encounter of the game. Though all of these missions rather stand on the optional side, the player is led towards completing these, both through diegetic and extra diegetic encouragements. The so-called 'perfect ending,' in which no one of Shepard's friends is killed in action, can only occur if all these missions have been correctly completed.

Why is it the deathless ending that is defined as perfect? Death is nothing but a part of every story, so are not we a bit naive and too happy ending oriented? We think that death is a powerful story element as long as it is meaningful – but here, the death of a member of the crew has no other meaning than: you have played something wrong, try again later. Moreover, this 'perfect' or 'good ending' term is

of common use in the video game industry to qualify the outcome that the player encounters when his percentage of completion of the game is at its maximum.

We are bothered by these distinctions between good and bad endings because they are undermining the purpose of a rhizome. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have noted that all idea of hierarchy was alien to the very nature of the rhizome.[4] The meaning of a rhizome is not set in stone, whereas the meaning of *Mass Effect* is subdued to the player's investment: the more you play, the more you deserve an ending that pleases you. Thus, a good part of the potential of video game as an art form remains unexplored.

Another detail: after accomplishing their loyalty missions, Miranda and Jack will have a fight. If Shepard takes sides in this quarrel, she will lose the loyalty of her other crew mate. The only way to keep both women loyal is to choose a special appeasing dialogue option, unlocked by a high dialogue skill. But, to the best of our knowledge, it is impossible to reach this mark unless the player has started with higher dialogue skills than normal by importing his Shepard of the first episode into the second one.

This importation feature is one of the most enjoyable aspect of the franchise, as it strongly connects every decision and experience from all three games. It creates investment by allowing a strong emotional connection between the player and her Shepard. But here occurs a deviation of this system as it hinders your progression if you have not played; i.e. bought the first installment.

This logic of investment is at its peak in *Mass Effect 3* with the necessity of playing multiplayer for a while in order to have access to the perfect ending. Playing multiplayer death match increases a 'military preparation' score that unlocks some of the features of the final scenes. It is worth noting that these multiplayer levels are on a free-to-play economic model: if she wants to acquire rapidly new and enhanced equipment, the player has to spend real money for it. Therefore it seems that the promise of a better ending was nothing but a hook to sell more contents.

The player is rewarded for his investment – including financial investment (another example is the use of DLC to unlock new characters and, therefore, new dialogue options). Thus is stressed one of the most important stakes for the video game to solve: to what extent do success and meaning have to depend on each other? By merging together the satisfaction of achievement and the satisfaction of fiction, it clearly seems that developers are limiting the available array of emotions and narrative possibilities.

3. The End of the End: *Mass Effect 3*'s Final and the 'Indoctrination Theory'

We cannot dovetail any more the utterly negative reaction of the public when the third installment of the game was released. BioWare themselves had previously stated that *Mass Effect 3* was due to conclude the Commandant Shepard's story arc. However, the players were infuriated with the ending for two main reasons.

First, these endings were criticised because of their likeness and because they carried various plot-holes. Second, they were charged with not respecting the player investment and being incoherent with the fictional universe.[5] This overly negative response led Bioware to announce that an 'Extended Cut' DLC would be released later that year.

Flash forward to the end of June 2012. This 'Extended Cut' did not drastically alter the previous ending, the most meaningful change being the addition of a fourth end. Otherwise, it mostly did what the the players were crying for: it featured additional sequences that, on the one hand, allowed the player to better understand the way his choices affected the universe, or, on the other hand, fixed some discrepancies. If most of the formal issues were fixed, the meaning issue that was raised by the spreading of the so-called 'indoctrination theory' seemed, in our opinion, not to be perfectly tackled.

What was the indoctrination theory? To sum up briefly, it was the belief in an aesthetic conspiracy theory: Bioware had done on purpose a disappointing end in order to later reverse it. This belief relied on the supposed fact that the last minutes of the game were part of a dream. The term 'indoctrination' means in the *Mass Effect* universe: a process used by the Reapers to control the mind of other sentient races. The partisans of this theory stressed, as one of their major arguments, that the final choices were biased. The 'synthesis choice,' which prompts a synthesis of organic and artificial lifeforms, could clearly be identified as the good choice: it had no real drawback and its presentation was slightly more developed than the others. But the main antagonist of the first *Mass Effect*, Saren, who was indoctrinated, held the exact same discourse. Therefore the last twenty minutes of the game were said to be a mental trap set by the Reapers to prevent Shepard from winning the war led against them.[6]

This theory was ultimately proven wrong but why did it emerge? The belief in the indoctrination theory was the expression of a denial: to deny the very possibility that the authors of acclaimed and engaging video games could miserably fail. What this theory expressed was a strong relationship to the concept and to the figure of authorship as guardian of coherence. As in the physical world, conspiracy theories seem to be a defensive mechanism set to protect a way of things encountering a dramatic shift: what the player here wanted to protect was the meaningfulness of the dozen, if not hundred, hours spent on the game.

But why is this event so important? After all, it is commonplace, between friend or on message boards, to speak about series, to imagine what is about to happen in the next episode or to blame writers for their lack of imagination. Moreover the fan fictions are numerous and some of them are as well written and as deep as the stories told in the canon. As long as Bioware remained silent, it was no different. But as soon as they stated that they shall change the ending, they, so to speak, opened their work.

We take the word 'open work' in a very different meaning as Umberto Eco

does.[7] According to his ideas, Mass Effect is already an open work because its very structure grants the player freedom of movement and choice. This dimension is undeniable but in our case, 'open' has the same meaning as, when armies are on the verge of defeat, they declare a city open, abandoning the inhabitants to the enemy and creating a power vacuum. The statement of Bioware was not an invitation to take part to an interactive work of art but for a few month *Mass Effect 3* was like a field that players could storm or just patiently wait in. But players weren't just excitingly waiting for the release of another product, they were facing an unexpected vacuum in a formerly complete artwork. Thus the vacuum itself, as well as what tried to replace it, became part of the artwork. Our concept of 'open work' means that the form of an artwork may be torn apart by artful events which expend the frame of the aesthetic experience. In these cases, we think that the public's right and duty is to fill the vacuums created by such unexpected events. In other words, every article about the indoctrination theory are not just critical reviews, they are part of an extended definition of *Mass Effect* as an artwork.

Taking a step back from the meaning of the game, one has to ask itself: why did Mass effect end like this, i.e. why did it take this disappointing form? The journalist Paul Tassi expressed what is, I believe, the correct interpretation of this: for him, the end of *Mass Effect 3* was meant to be disappointing in order for Bioware to sell DLC that would add more depth to the story, thus finally meeting player's expectation.[8] It seems that his predictions were true as the last solo DLC of *Mass Effect 3*, called 'The Citadel,' offers the possibility to wave good bye to Shepard's best friends, a possibility whose absence was originally greatly missed by the fans.

This logic of additional content shows two things. First it is the pinnacle of the logic of investment and flexibility that spawned the entire playthrough of the game. Thus, we understand this phenomenon as the emergence of a capitalistic way of making art form. Second, it dramatically alter the very concept of end because, being potentially easily modified by DLC, any end may never be set in stone. The mere possibility of DLC makes the players suspicious. Theoretically, no videogames that are able to use the DLC technology have an end, in the aristotelician meaning of this term.

4. Conclusion

We do not want to say that the 'indoctrination theory' turned *Mass Effect* into a participative work of art. But we do think that the player that will play the game and its DLC in twenty years will miss what was an engaging aesthetic experience: to have a work of art that was open. One could argue that the same could be said of watching series during its first season and watching all the episodes at once years later. But the purpose of series is to be linear and to build excitement – and series do not erase their former episode. The politics of DLC, as it appears in the *Mass Effect* franchise, builds disappointment and complete a work in a nonlinear way by

replacing or enhancing the previous experience.

Mass Effect 3 has unwittingly showed that it is possible to apprehend the release of a DLC, not only as a cynical and economical event, but as an engaging and artful experience. There are mind games to be played between the public and the developers that could use the suspicion of DLC to modify their game, forcing the public to craft theories to fill temporary vacuums. The flexibility of the medium, thanks to the DLC, allows such an era of suspicion to emerge and it's up to the creators to use this potentiality of aesthetic experience outside of the game time. We truly wish that what happens by accident in this case becomes an artistic resource. By doing so, the rhizome would not only take place in the virtual world but in the interaction between the video game, its creators and the public.

Notes

[1] The official press release is available at the following address: http://investor.ea.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=662095.
[2] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 173.
[3] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995),1450b22-32.
[4] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980), 9-37.
[5] See for example Sparky Clarkson, '*Mass Effect 3*'s Ending Disrespects Its Most Invested Players', *Kotaku*, 3 April 2012, accessed 25 October 2013, http://kotaku.com/5898743/mass-effect-3s-ending-disrespects-its-most-invested-players.
[6] More information can be found in Paul Tassi, 'Did the Real Mass Effect 3 Ending Go Over Everyone's Heads?', *Forbes*, 21 April 2012, accessed 25 October 2013, http://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2012/03/21/did-the-real-mass-effect-3-ending-go-over-everyones-heads/.
[7] Umberto Eco, *L'œuvre Ouverte*, trans. Chantal Roux de Bézieux (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965), 15-37.
[8] Tassi, 'Did the Real Mass Effect 3 Ending Go Over Everyone's Heads?'.

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Thomas Morisset is a Philosophy PhD and a member of the laboratory EN-ER at the Parisian 'École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs.' His work focuses on the aesthetics of videogames. He is also director for the theater troupe 'Compagnie du Quart de Siècle' and publishes poetry.

The Virtual Identities of Actual Gamers: An Analysis of Popular Response to *Mass Effect 3*

Jakub Siwak

Abstract
From the perspective of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the recent debacle surrounding the *Mass Effect 3* gaming series arguably indicates the difficulty of producing a 'body-without-organs' in the contemporary era. For Deleuze and Guattari, a 'body-without-organs' may be a creative artefact which exceeds the axiomatic stratification that informs present-day capitalist society, and thereby makes possible an immanent field in which new experiences can precipitate new thinking. On the one hand, *Mass Effect 3* initially continued to mirror aspects of such stratification, insofar as it remained a traditional third-person action role-playing game replete with valorisation of the dominating, exploitative, hyper-individualistic consumer subject. However, on the other hand, the tragic ending of the game, involving the demise of the protagonist, Shepard, constituted a 'line of flight' away from such stratification. Arguably, this 'line of flight' not only thematised the fragility and vulnerability of human beings, but also pointed toward their loss of individuality – or 'dividualisation' – within contemporary 'control' society; the process of which Deleuze explores in his article 'Postscript on Control Societies.' This chapter takes as its point of departure many gamers' formidable negative reaction to the tragic ending of *Mass Effect 3*, which culminated in an online petition during which no less than $80,000 was raised, in order to force the game developer to create an alternative ending in which Shepard survives. In this chapter, it will be advanced that these gamers constituted a conglomerate – or a 'desiring machine' – which attached itself to the 'body-without-organs' of *Mass Effect 3*, with a view to stratifying the latter in accordance with the axiomatic of capitalism. This study has a bearing on the issue of identity formation through gaming.

Key Words: Action role-playing game, actual, virtual, desiring machine, identity.

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In terms of cultural studies, which of course draw heavily from philosophical enquiry, we always try to examine and contend with the features of contemporary society. It is through looking at instances, or points of contention within that society, that those features make themselves evident. One of the features that makes itself most evident today is the impact of technology in terms of identity.

I have always been interested in digital spaces, and the possibilities they seem to offer for those that experience and immerse themselves in them. Recently, a fascinating conflict emerged from within this space. Here, the developer[1] of the

highly rated game *Mass Effect 3* was being battered by gamers who found that the ending to the game, and by extension, to the trilogy, had failed to meet their expectations. As a result, they had taken to internet forums en masse, created online petitions, and even collected money in order to demonstrate their displeasure with the developer's creative decisions.[2]

The conflict could be examined in a variety of ways:

Firstly, it could be discussed in terms of narrative. We could debate the storyline and say that a well-executed development and progression has collapsed at its end under the weight of expectation.

Additionally, we can take a more deterministic route and argue that a game must always be tied to certain parameters, statistical configurations, and so forth. Thus, we can argue that the infuriated collection of individuals battering the developer has missed the point – there will always be a framework that surrounds even the most expansive of games.

Both discussions are in themselves fascinating talking points, but in terms of a cultural studies perspective, it is essential to ask a more oblique question. That is, we need to discuss *why* games evoke such strong reactions amongst gamers.

What is it about games that evoke such strong reactions? Certainly, other media artefacts have elicited strong responses in the past, but these reactions on the part of the audience can easily be tied to a certain discourse. For instance, Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004) was met with much controversy, with claims of anti-Semitism, unhappiness with the graphic violence within the film, and so forth. If one examines these responses, the personal investment on the part of the audience is relatively simple to trace. Here, religious discourse and its undeniable emotive attachments would be the primary area of focus for anyone examining the controversy generated. If we attempt to understand the responses to the ending of a game, we must then look at the attachments and investments made by the gamer in terms of the media artefact in question. Certainly, it is peculiar that people would be so attached to what is in essence, a commercial product.

The central question with regard to the conflict between the developer and the disenchanted gamers must then revolve around locating the discourse at play here. In other words, we need to try to understand why something virtual would be so important to so many; so much so that they would raise thousands of dollars in order to prove a point to the developer.

In order to build up a context around this conflict, this chapter will reference the post-structuralist thinker, Gilles Deleuze, and in particular his article *Postscript on Control Societies*,[3] in order to explain the societal context operating around this conflict between the game developer's vision and the fan reaction.

Let us first establish the features of contemporary society, one in which the angry gamer above would find themselves operating within:

Deleuze developed his notion of 'control society' in the 1990's, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault. In his two seminal texts, *Discipline and Punish* (1975)

and *History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Foucault showed how during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a *disciplinary society* came into operation. This society was based on the idea of confinement. John Marks explains this idea thus:

> Disciplinary society developed a network of sites and institutions – prisons, hospitals, factories, schools, the family – within which individuals were located, trained, and/or punished at various times in their life…Essentially, [this] system is one of contiguity: the individual moves from site to site, beginning again each time.[4]

Deleuze, in developing his notion of 'control society', argues that 'control societies are taking over from disciplinary societies.'[5] He certainly does not disregard Foucault's argument, but states that post WW-II, a shift has occurred, in which confinement is no longer the primary means of control. Instead of the 'moulds' that one would find in a disciplinary society, individuals within a society of control find themselves in a constant state of 'modulation.' That is, we move from contiguity to continuity. Foucault himself acknowledged that as he was tracing disciplinary society, something new was emerging. So, today, we find that contemporary society takes on an amalgamation of features (both disciplinary and beyond).

We must next determine how Deleuze comes to his assertion that in present times, individuals are constantly in a state of modulation (the defining feature of control society). It certainly makes sense that when we enter sites of confinement, we must function in a particular way, and according to particular restrictions we may not enjoy. Additionally, we may disagree with many of the rules enforced within these sites, but subordinate ourselves to them in order to be able to function *effectively*. Surely though, when we leave these sites, these moulds, we have the luxury of escaping these restrictions. For instance, playing a game at home, in one's free time, should be regarded as an escape from the everyday pressures we face as we negotiate the many restrictions of being out in society. Although this is an appealing idea (this idea of 'getting away' when in private), a Deleuzian approach would disagree that this is possible. Deleuze points out that 'control societies function within a time where information technologies and computers are the constantly utilized *machines* of our time (original emphasis).'[6] It is certainly indisputable that we live in an information age; this emphasis on information has a number of implications, namely that information and the instant communication that it allows becomes that which allows for constant modulation. We receive messages related to work at home, our debts follow us around everywhere, never mind that this is a virtual concept tied to constantly fluctuating conditions based on a virtual common marketplace, we are constantly 'switched on' and tied to others. The distinctions that had existed in disciplinary society now cede and blur in a

society of control. In a way, the individual becomes dismantled and is made into an interface through which messages constantly travel. In a way, there is a severe objectification – we become 'dividuals,'[7] to be interpreted as 'data, samples and markets 'and 'constantly coerced into forms of communication.'[8]

In essence then, Deleuze charts a vision of a highly restrictive society, one in which we are disallowed from reaching our potential as beings. Instead of living in an open system that promotes 'becoming,' we turn to poverty-stricken definitions of the self, finding release in the information that we access.

If we are living within such a society, that is, one in which we are always exposed to the dictates of the virtual, how then does this relate to that gamer who so angrily reacted to *Mass Effect 3* not having an ending which correlated with their expectations. Here, we come to three points; the first relating to the gamers themselves, the second to the developer and the medium of gaming, and the third to the Deleuzian concept of 'lines of flight' (his term for resisting restrictive and dominating discourses).

With regards to the disaffected gamer, an idea that can immediately be pointed to is that, on the part of those protesting the ending, there seems to be a lack of distinction between the character employed in the game and the self. The gamers, having invested not only their money, but more importantly, hours upon hours of their time, cease to see the game as a commercial media product that is encountered; rather, it becomes a space in which they *explore themselves*. This level of immersion and investment opens up a multitude of avenues for discussion.

Before a discussion can be performed around the gamer, it is important to briefly account for the specific point of difference, and the source of the conflict with regards to the game. *Mass Effect 3*allows the gamer to make moral choices throughout the period of play – these choices will then affect the eventual outcome, that is, the protagonist's fate. It is here that the conflict arises. Despite the element of choice on offer for those that engaged in the game, ultimately, the game ends in a pre-determined way, regardless of the gamer's input throughout the course of play. As one gamer, involved in the protest stated, 'the game is about choices and consequences. You do good things and bad things. We were promised by the developers to have 16 different endings. All these choices you make and you get a choice of three different endings which are exactly the same, minus a couple of tweaks here and there.'[9]

So, there is a sense of absolute betrayal circling around this issue. If we take Deleuze into account here, we can say that the gamer involved in this argument becomes that interface alluded to earlier – a cipher of sorts who allows themselves to 'become' a character in a commercial media product. In this way they reject their potential, tying themselves to an image created for them. Rather than escaping from restrictive realities, or societal conditions through gaming, they openly apply for admission into an identity created for them by a game developer (who, ultimately, besides the aesthetic and creative aspects, is simply trying to shift

enough units to sustain itself and to turn a profit). Another point here could be tied to the concept of autonomy. While the gamers affected may have believed that they had a significant input in terms of the outcome, they fail to realise that a game operated within a closed system, or structure. Certainly, any game has a set of parameters which cannot be overcome, and thus the element of choice becomes something of a misnomer. While the gamer may be given choice at certain times, ultimately, the over-arching structure of the game, and its features, will remain unaffected by their decisions. Again, we must ask as to why someone would invest so personally in such a project. Once more, we come to Deleuze's assertion that we always experience modulation within a control society, *personally* investing in that which serves a particular function; that is, the generating of profit.

Looking at the other side of the conflict also exposes the various limitations that a restrictive society places on the creators of content. While it is undeniable that the developer's reason for releasing the game under discussion would be to make money, one could point to the game's aesthetic and creative merits, and include them within the developer's motivation. The ending of *Mass Effect 3* signals a move away from its competitors within this sub-genre of gaming. Unlike in other titles, where the protagonist participates in an orgy of violence without fear of recrimination or death, the protagonist in *Mass Effect 3* simply dies, regardless of how the gamer played the game. In doing so, one can't help but feel that the developer made a deliberate choice; to end the trilogy on their own terms, and not on the terms associated with this form of gaming. However, this *unique* move, this 'line of flight,' as Deleuze would call it, is disallowed by commercial pressures. Creativity, a necessary component for resisting restrictive societies, is under pressure from the dictates of the market. The target audience, its monetary clout, and the commercial interests involved soon become the determining factors of a storyline within a game. The audience are determined for the game to match its preceding promotional campaign. Any deviation from this course, any challenging conclusion, is deemed *sacrilegious*. As one complainant stated, 'After reading through the list of promises about the ending of the game they made in their advertising campaign and PR interviews, it was clear that the product we got did not live up to any of those claims.'[10] Here once more, we begin to see the influence of a society in which one type of thinking begins to exclude all others. A few months after the controversy, a patch had been released, offering the gamers' some consolation. To their credit, the developer's did not alter the original ending. The patch's effect is described as follows:

> The expanded ending sequences for Mass Effect 3 were patched into BioWare's spacefaring RPG today on Xbox 360, potentially remedying a large portion of the community's dissatisfaction with the original finales. The free, 1.9 GB update doesn't change the contents of the original Mass Effect 3 endings – a point

> BioWare has repeatedly and eagerly made when discussing the additions. Rather, it adds "additional cinematic sequences and epilogue scenes" which provide "more ... answers and closure."[11]

Regardless of the eventual outcome of the tussle between developer and gamer, one idea begins to surface; the idea that the potential of gaming is so often stifled by the discursive limitations of what Deleuze terms a control society – a discursive development which, through consistent modulation, outline the parameters of possibility, and thus has a negative impact on both sides of the exchange.

Heading towards a conclusion, and to move away from such a pessimistic overview, the chapter will quickly reference Deleuze in terms of what gaming can do to loosen the shackles of restrictive societal dynamics. Deleuze always states that something should be seen in terms of its potential. So, for instance, we would ask as to what a medium like gaming could produce. It is plausible to suggest that gaming has a tremendous scope to it, but often, it becomes tied down in clichés, demands for repetition, and caught up in financial interests – all of these being factors that call for a restrictive focus, and a rejection of creativity. Claire Colebrook, writing on Deleuze, offers a wonderful, evocative example of how trying to think outside of restrictive parameters opens up the possibility of the new:

> A philosophical concept works against this reductive and generalising tendency by expanding difference. It creates new ways of thinking. Take the concept of love. Opinion will reduce love to its already known forms – bourgeois marriage – and then dismiss all other forms: "That's not love; it's perversion!" A concept in its philosophical sense moves beyond any example or model to think the very power or possibility: so "love" would not be reducible to any given form, whether that be familial, homosexual or heterosexual. We might form a concept of love, as Deleuze did, that was as open as possible (Deleuze 1973: 140). Love is the encounter with another person that opens us up to a possible world. This concept does not take a form of love – the couple – and then say that this is what love *is*. The *concept* of love as "a possible encounter with another as a whole new world" allows us to think of forms of love that are not yet given, that are not actual but virtual.[12]

In terms of gaming then, if we allow the medium to move towards such a space, the possibilities then of gaming to become an open space of creativity, both for the developer and the gamer, become more realistic. Gaming certainly has this potential to allow us to move away from those restrictive fixed signifiers that we cling to in order to make sense of lives. A strange virtual interaction, such as

Botanicula (Amanita Design, 2012), gets us to *experience* outside of those fixed structures of meaning (the political subject and the psychological subject).

Notes

[1] *BioWare*: A Canadian video game developer currently owned by *Electronic Arts*
[2] This is evidenced in the mainstream media. Although sums tend to differ, there are multiple articles that reported on the conflict. The BBC for instance, reported that a Sebastian Sobcyzk was heading the UK protest against the ending of the game, and that $70 000 had been raised thus far. With regards to the ending, he laments, 'They just completely destroyed the whole game for us. If I wanted to get my soul crushed, I could just turn on the TV and put the news on'. BBC Technology, 'Mass Effect Campaign Demands New Ending to Series'. The article also refers to a US gamer who had allegedly filed a complaint to the Federal Trade Commission against the developer.
[3] This article appears in Deleuze's text *Negotiations* (1995) and offers a useful insight into the implications of information technology, at a time when (relatively) it was in its infancy.
[4] John Marks, 'Control Society', in *The Deleuze Dictionary*, ed. Adrian Parr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 53-54.
[5] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 178.
[6] Ibid., 180.
[7] Marks, 'Control Society', 54.
[8] Ibid.
[9] 'Mass Effect Campaign Demands New Ending to Series', BBC Technology, accessed 6 May 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-17444719.
[10] Statement taken from the 'Mass Effect Campaign.'
[11] 'Mass Effect 3 Extended Cut Endings Available Today, Watch Them Here', Polygon, accessed 8 May 2013, http://www.polygon.com/gaming/2012/6/26/3118472/mass-effect-3-new-endings.
[12] Claire Colebrook, *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Gilles Deleuze* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 17.

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Jakub Siwak is a doctoral student and lecturer at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa. His current area of research involves post-structuralism and emerging media formats.

Implicit and Explicit Video Game Structure in *Shaun of the Dead* and *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*

Jamie Skidmore

Abstract:
Shaun of the Dead and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, are films by director Edgar Wright modelled on video games. *Shaun of the Dead*, for example, is a simulacrum of a video world, in which Shaun and his sidekick Ed are the equivalent of avatars. The 'game' possesses many of the traits of a first-person shooter game, such as weapon upgrades and boss levels, and it contains aspects of open world racing games. This chapter employs formal and semiotic theory to examine the development of the video game paradigm in *Shaun of the Dead* through to its very explicit representation in *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*. This research uses formal analysis to examine shot composition, pacing, and camera movement in order to reveal how Wright emphasises the aesthetic of a video environment. A semiotic analysis of the morphological elements of the films further reveals parallels to video games. Applying the theory of spectatorship, this chapter examines the reasoning behind Wright's decision to create a simulated world that attempts to replicate that of a video game. In *Shaun of the Dead*, Wright juxtaposes the 'zombies' over normal human beings living an oblivious existence. In a similar vein, this chapter concludes by answering the question: 'What is Wright commenting on when he ties his films to the world of the video gamer?'

Key Words: Video game, zombie, Edgar Wright, *Shaun of the Dead*, Scott Pilgrim, first-person shooter, racing.

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'Get Ready.' 'Here We Go!' These iconic words inform the video game player that the game is about to start. In the film world of British director Edgar Wright, it informs the spectator that an epic battle is about to begin. These lines preface the climatic moment in *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, but they could also signal the start of the barroom battle in Wright's best known film, *Shaun of the Dead*.

Scott Pilgrim vs. The World is a film about a young, Canadian man, Scott Pilgrim (Michael Cera), and his developing relationship with a mysterious, American girl, Ramona Flowers (Mary Elizabeth Winstead). It begins with Scott in a relationship with the 17-year-old Knives Chau (Ellen Wong) who idolises him. Scott catches a glimpse of Ramona at the library and immediately falls for her. In order to completely win over Ramona, however, he must first defeat all of her exes, collectively known as 'The League of Evil Exes.'

Upon viewing *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* it is immediately obvious that Wright has fashioned the film after a video game. At least this seems to be the

case, as video game iconography appears throughout the film. In reality, the movie is based on a graphic novel by Bryan Lee O'Malley, which is also titled *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*. The graphic novel, in turn, is based on a video game paradigm, which is where the film finds its template.

In the graphic novel, unlike the film, Scott Pilgrim is an avid game player. Whenever he talks on the phone with his roommate, Wallace Wells (Kieran Culkin), for example, Scott is always at his Nintendo game console, playing a game reminiscent of Super Mario Brothers, but with cats. Wells, meanwhile, is at work playing computer solitaire. In the film it is another character, Young Neil (Johnny Simmons), who eventually replaces Scott in his band, who is constantly playing on his Nintendo DS.

In the comic book, we discover that Scott's knowledge of language is influenced by video game culture. For example, when his girlfriend, Ramona Flowers, asks him, 'Are we an item?' He answers, 'I'm sorry, what?' Meanwhile, 'items' found in Super Mario, such as a mushroom, star, and a flower appear in 'thought clouds' above his head. He is attempting to equate this word that he understands in his game world to the real world.

Essentially, for Scott Pilgrim the real world and the video game world are interchangeable. The environment of Super Mario Brothers is as legitimate of a world for Scott as the one in which he exists outside the game. Therefore, the title of the film, *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, relates in part to Scott's struggle as a young man to come to terms with love and relationships. By setting both the graphic novel and the movie in a setting that has the same rules, characters, and consequences of a video game, Scott's character is able to examine his own angst.

The video game paradigm in *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* acts as a metaphor for Scott dealing with the issues of dealing with a young woman with a romantic past. Scott is placed with Knives at the beginning of the film, as she is innocent and most likely a virgin. When he meets Ramona, he must deal with the fact that she has baggage in the form of multiple ex-boyfriends and even an ex-girlfriend. All of the exes challenge Scott both ethically and physically, as he has to deal at times with their superior strengths and successes. He also has to face the fact that some of the relationships are complicated, such as the fact that Ramona dated another woman; or that she dated twins at the same time.

By fighting within a video game environment, Wright is able to use game battles as a metaphor for dealing with a steady stream of shocking prior relationships that Ramona was in before moving to Scott's hometown of Toronto, Canada. Violence in video games is ameliorated by the fact that characters do not die, they are not permanently hurt or injured, nor do they feel pain. When Scott is killed by the last of Ramona's exes, for example, he does not die, but instead uses his '1-up' that he was awarded in an earlier battle.

Scott Pilgrim vs. The World is modelled after a seven level game, with a boss at each stage. Every zone is influenced by a different style of video game, such as

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater, *Rock Band*, *Mortal Combat* and *Double Dragon*. Each level is progressively challenging, as in a normal video game.

The first boss that Scott faces is Ramona's ex from the seventh grade, Matthew Patel (Satya Bhabha). He has a group of cronies, known as the Hipster Demon Chicks. All of the enemies in *Scott Pilgrim*, below the level of boss, look the same as the others in the group to which they belong. The Hipster Demon Chicks, for example, are all played by one actor performing a single set of movements. This character is then replicated four times in the background behind Patel. During the movie, as in a video game, the bosses become increasing difficult to defeat. Consequently, Patel is the easiest battle for Pilgrim to win. Following the model of the battles being metaphors for dealing with Ramona's past relationships, it makes sense that Patel goes down with relative ease. As her grade seven fling, he would not have had a significant relationship with her, so it is easy for Pilgrim to not be overly affected by her romantic history in this instance. After each battle Scott is awarded points, as in a video game, and he receives a 1000 points for defeating Patel. This increases by a 1000 points after each fight, so when Scott defeats his next opponent, Lucas Lee (Chris Evans), he's awarded 2000 points. The exception to this rule is when he beats the final boss, Gideon and receives '7,000,000,000' points.

As Scott's second opponent, Lucas Lee literally throws him for a loop. In fact, Lee throws Scott through the air into a tower that is part of Castle Loma in Toronto. Scott then comes crashing back to earth, both literally and figuratively, when he falls through a series of scaffolding to the ground. Lee also has a series of minions, which are his own stunt doubles. Lee, it turns out, is now an action film hero and he is in Toronto shooting a new movie on location at the historic Castle Loma. Lee was Ramona's second boyfriend, and was a young, geeky skateboarder when they dated during their freshman year in high school. Scott is able to defeat Lee's henchmen, but cannot beat Lee in battle. Instead, Scott challenges Lee to ride the rails of the steep steps going down from Castle Loma to the street below. The ride down is reminiscent of a game such as *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*, but Lee loses control at the end and explodes, giving Scott his second victory. Lee's succumbing to peer pressure is reminiscent of his relationship with Ramona. He was an insecure skater dude when he met Ramona, and she left him for her next boyfriend, Todd Ingram (Brandon Routh). She also cheated on Lee with Ingram, so he always feels he is not good enough and must prove himself to her and others over and over. This also explains his need to be an action hero, which provides a facade over his weak sense of self worth.

After Scott defeats Lee he realises that Ramona has vanished. The next day as he walks down the street, underneath seven crosswalk signs with their 'X' icons, he notices the 'X-Men' patch on his own coat. He tears the patch off of his coat, not wanting to be one of Ramona's exes.

Ramona's fourth ex, Todd Ingram, is reminiscent of Storm from the X-Men

with his white hair and eyes, and his ability to levitate. He also has a 'Deveganizing Ray,' reminiscent of Cyclop's laser eyes in X-Men. As it turns out, Ingram is currently dating Scott's former great love Envy Adams and is the bass player in her band. Scott also plays the bass in the band Sex Bob-Omb (a character from Super Mario Brothers whose icon also appears on the band's bass drum), but is defeated by Ingram in a battle reminiscent of a Rock Band duel. Scott is not able to beat Ingram, but 'cheats' by slipping half and half cream into his coffee. Ingram is then arrested by the Vegan police and loses his vegan powers for consuming milk products on three separate occasions. Ingram is akin to that better looking version of yourself, who is also seemingly better at everything. Scott's use of a 'cheat' in this instance turns out to be justified, when we discover that Ingram knowingly consumed Chicken Parmasano in the past. It is also a reference to using a 'cheat' in a video game, which allows you to avoid difficult characters and obstacles.

The next three exes that Scott must face are reflective of Ramona's sexuality and therefore all prove to be difficult opponents. Roxy Richter (Mae Whitman) and twins Kyle (Keita Saito) and Ken Katayanagi (Shota Saito) represent Ramona's experimental period when she tried bisexuality and *menage a trois* with the Katayanagi twins.

His final battle with Gideon Graves (Jason Schwartzman) is the most difficult of all, which is consistent with fighting the final boss in any game. This is because Graves represents an adult, committed relationship for Ramona. Scott is unable to defeat Graves until he is able to find his own sense of self-respect. As well, he must come to terms with cheating on knives and Ramona. In the end, Scott is only able to defeat Graves after using an extra-life and fighting him in sync with Knives in a fight reminiscent of a scene earlier in the film when they play *Ninja Ninja Revolution*, a play on Dance Dance Revolution.

Scott Pilgrim vs. The World follows an explicit video game template. Besides the many battles noted above, there are many other indicators that the film is set in a video game environment. When Scott pee's a 'Pee' meter, reminiscent of health meters found in video games, appears. Graves also has a similar meter indicating his health in his final battle with Scott. When each battle begins a 'vs.' sign appears between the two combatants, and points are scored whenever an opponent is defeated.

Unlike the explicit video game template found in *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, *Shaun of the Dead*, Edgar Wright's comedic horror/zombie film, has a video game sub-structure that is not as obvious to the spectator at first glance. *Shaun of the Dead* is a parody of horror films, such as *Dawn of the Dead*, George Romero's classic zombie movie. Clearly, the title of *Shaun of the Dead* is an homage to Romero's cult classic. On the surface, *Shaun of the Dead* appears to be a simple comedic take on zombie films, but like *Scott Pilgrim*, Shaun (Simon Pegg) must move through a variety of levels and defeat numerous bosses in order to 'win the

game' and the girl.

The first suggestion that *Shaun of the Dead* is a simulacrum of a video game is when he plays *Timesplitters 2* with his best friend Ed, played by Nick Frost. *Timesplitters 2* is a first-person shooter game, which is one of the templates for *Shaun of the Dead*. Enemies in *Timesplitters 2* include zombies, which is another hint that *Shaun* is a giant video game being played out on screen. Shaun and Ed encounter their first low level enemy in the backyard where they find the zombie named Mary. The first weapons they have at their disposal are simple: a rock and hand-to-hand combat. After a short fight, Shaun impales Mary on a spike, only to have her re-animate. Like in many video games (and zombie films) the enemy has to be killed in the correct manner. During this fight, they face another zombie who is the splitting image Stitches in World of Warcraft. They enter the house to regroup and they are attacked by a third zombie, while the other two look in through the window. This time they try to defeat him with beer cans, a video game controller, and finally defeat him by smashing an ashtray into his skull. The game controller, which moves quickly across the screen, is a subtle reminder that this world is modelled after a video game.

After 'leveling up' and gaining additional knowledge on how to kill zombies from a television newscaster, Shaun and Ed collect additional 'weapons' from their kitchen, including knives and forks, a sugar jar, and a toaster – essentially, everything except for 'the kitchen sink.' These weapons are useless against the zombies, but they find a record on the ground in the same manner that weapons are found in video games and the duo end up throwing dozens of records at the two zombies. Although they have little affect on them, it is equivalent to leveling up in the lower levels of video games. When records prove to be insubstantial, Shaun finds the iconic cricket bat found on the film's poster and Ed finds a shovel. Although the weapons seem simple and mundane, they foreshadow Wright's choice of weapons in the subsequent *Scott Pilgrim* film. During his second battle Scott fights the low level skater enemies with a skateboard.

During the next section of the film, Shaun plays out in his head how he will rescue his mum from his stepfather, who he imagines is now a zombie, and then saves his girlfriend who has recently dumped him. We see this scenario played out three times, which is suggestive of the manner in which video game players can attempt the same sequence multiple times until they figure it out and move on to the next level. Ed drives the car to Shaun's mum's house, in a scene reminiscent of a game such as Crazy Taxi. In this driving game scenario, Nick drives into a (zombie) pedestrian, and then after dropping off Shaun, inexplicably crashes the parked car into a danger sign. They then 'move up' from their first vehicle into a Mercedes Benz owned by Shaun's stepfather.

After picking up Shaun's girlfriend, and two roommates, and another Crazy Taxi-esque sequence in the Benz, the group abandons the car when the stepfather turns into a zombie. On foot through back alleyways, Shaun's group encounters a

group of what appears to be doppelgängers. They are dressed in a similar fashion to Shaun's group and carry many of the same weapons. The doubling of characters is another nod to the video game sub-structure of this film – these 'doppelgängers' represent the repetition of many characters found in games such as *World of Warcraft*. Like other role-playing games, characters can share costumes and weapons and you often find players who are identical in every way to your own.

The most obvious parallels with video games occur at The Winchester, the pub where Nick and Ed always hang out and where they take refuge from the zombie horde. Their first opponent is Big Al, the bartender of the Winchester, who proves almost impossible to take down. The crux of the argument that *Shaun of the Dead* is modelled after a video game takes place after Nick and Ed upgrade from the pool cues they use on Big Al to the Winchester rifle that hangs above the bar. This sequence of events is straight out of a first person shooter game, right down to the P.O.V. camera shots straight down the barrel of the rifle. As Nick fires, Ed shouts instructions you would often hear in video games: '12 o'clock' and 'reload' are two examples. The most obvious refrain, however, is when Ed to aim 'top left,' referring to how a shooter in a video game observes the screen. This is also a repeat of a scene at the beginning of the movie when Nick tells Ed to 'reload' and 'top left' when he's playing *Timesplitters 2*.

During the shooting sequence, Nick misses his first few targets, hitting targets on the bar walls instead. When he strikes the brass bed warmer the bullet rings off the metal with the same sound found in many target shooting arcade games.

The film concludes with Ed having been bitten and now living in the garden shed in the backyard. Nick drops in for a visit and finds Ed, now a zombie, playing a video game. Nick picks up the controller and the game announces that: 'player two has entered the game.' Echoing an earlier scene in the movie, this line sums up the construct of the movie as a simulacrum of a video game.

In *Shaun of the Dead* and *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, director Edgar Wright uses a video game model to structure the films. It is a logical decision, as the 'plot' of a typical video game mirrors that of horror and action films. A protagonist faces a variety of challenges, which become increasingly more difficult to overcome. The plot builds towards a climax, similar to that of the final meeting with a boss, and the game ends, like the films, when the protagonist triumphs. The decision to mirror video games in his films also allows Wright to hold a mirror up to society, questioning how we react to the past relationships of our own partners, and how we can easily become zombies in our own, waking existence.

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Jamie Skidmore is a professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland where he teaches practical courses in film and theatre production. He is also a writer, director and designer, and works in professional theatre outside of the university. His research includes work on Newfoundland theatre and circus, amongst other areas.

Rewriting Morality: Women, Sexuality and Morality in *Dishonored*

Meaghan Ingram

Abstract
This chapter is focused on the intersecting subjects of gender, sexuality, and morality in *Dishonored* (2012). I would like to posit that the game's strong 19th-century British influence is connected to its rereading/writing of Victorian sexuality and attitudes toward illegitimate offspring (as well as the moral stigma – or lack thereof – that comes with bastard children), particularly for the relatively few female characters. Through Victorian female literary tropes, ideals and attitudes, it is possible to gain a better and more complex understanding of the game's treatment of its female characters and their place in the world of the game. Simultaneously, it is necessary to address the backwards-looking and revisionary nature of a game set in an unVictorian world created by modern developers, and the role of contemporary biases (gendered and otherwise) in this setting. Neo-Victorian literary critics such as Samantha Carroll, Alexia Bowler and Peter Widdowson provide a mode of critical discourse that help to understand and explain *Dishonored*'s re-vision (and lack of re-vision) of gendered roles, tropes and archetypes. Additionally, Stefania Forlini provides perspective on the question of morality in Neo-Victorian texts, which proves interesting when considering *Dishonored*'s female characters and their places in the game's moral system. The overall aim of this chapter is to place *Dishonored* alongside the Neo-Victorian literary tradition and apply relevant critical thought to explore the overlapping and intersecting traditions of gender within the game.

Key Words: Gender, sexuality, morality, *Dishonored*, literary tropes.

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To get the basics out of the way first: *Dishonored* (2012) is a first-person action-adventure game with an emphasis on stealth combat developed by Arkane Studios and published by Bethesda Softworks in 2012. The game's relatively linear story follows Corvo Attano, former bodyguard of the late Empress Jessamine Kaldwin, as he tries to clear his name and coronate the new empress (Emily Kaldwin). The premise is made interesting by virtue of the game's setting in the fictional city of Dunwall on the island of Gristol where (not-quite) whale oil powers electric arc pylons and the city is being ravaged by a plague. For anyone familiar with the game or its development, the setting is quasi-Victorian; the world may be completely fictional, but the setting is intended to mimic Victorian aesthetics and atmosphere.

There is a lot to be said about *Dishonored*'s aesthetic, plot, values and characters, but I am going to focus on Empress Jessamine Kaldwin. Through examining Victorian ideals of femininity, it is possible to gain a better and more complex understanding of the game's treatment of its female characters and their place in the world of the game by understanding the history that informs the game's world. Characters' interactions with the Victorian constructions of femininity within a Victorian-influenced (but distinctly not-Victorian) world can be more broadly approached through neo-Victorian criticism, and laid against ideas of revision, recursion, repetition and dissonance. Questions such as, 'What is Victorian about this game? What's different – what isn't Victorian? And why is it different?' are important to consider in light of the intersecting nature of constructed femininity. I would like to posit that the game's strong 19th-century British influence is connected to its rereading and rewriting of Victorian sexuality and attitudes toward illegitimate offspring (as well as the moral stigma – or lack thereof – that comes with bastard children), particularly for the relatively few female characters.

Samantha Carroll, Alexia Bowler and Peter Widdowson note that there is a present-day interest (bordering on infatuation, depending on the critic) with Victorians and Victoriana. Widdowson writes that '[i]t is surely a truism by now to remark that large swathes of British "contemporary fiction" by a diverse range of authors … are in fact "historical novels."'[1] About the commercial viability and popularity of historical and neo-Victorian novels (and perhaps more broadly, neo-Victorian fiction), Carroll writes that 'Gutleben suggests that these paratactic blurbs frequently overstate the neo-Victorian novel's connection to best-selling Victorian novels or their authors in order to capitalize on (or cannibalize) the Victorian novel's continuing popularity.'[2] This suggests that there is a value to connecting with the Victorians, a value that can be capitalised/cannibalised. So although critics are talking specifically about books, Victorian history and culture is clearly still fascinating to readers, writers, and other consumers of media. I would argue that (Victorian) literature, (Victorian) history and (neo-Victorian) literary criticism are useful when applied to this game as they help to situate it in both a cultural past and a cultural present.

An interesting dialogue starts when present-day authors, artists, and, in this case, game developers, try to write about or re-create a Victorian past, or an imagined past not far removed from real history. Widdowson writes that Neo-Victorian authors '"[write] backwards," a kind of mirror-writing in which inverted images depict a very different reality to that authoritatively represented by the received tradition.'[3] Widdowson is writing about re-visionary texts; that is, texts that literally rewrite pre-existing texts, but with structured differences (his examples include *The Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*). I feel the theory of revisionary or recreative texts can be applied more broadly,

encompassing texts which revise both history and fiction, and including literary tropes as a sort of socially-constructed text undergoing recreation.

Widdowson writes that to '"rewrite" … canonic texts from the past, [means to] call to account formative narratives that have been arguably central to the construction of "our" consciousness.'[4] Re-vision to Widdowson is an act of revising history and literature through patterns of repetition and structured dissonance. Widdowson did not have a game in mind when he wrote his paper, but nevertheless the theory of revision through fiction is certainly applicable to a game set in an imagined approximation of 1890s London. *Dishonored* is not a re-vision as Widdowson imagines it, but more a re-creation through recreation. For one, there is no text for it to revise in the traditional sense; *Dishonored* writes its own text(s) in its own world, and selectively borrows and revises the things it does incorporate from the world we know. The player is allowed to move through an environment that is inarguably informed by a Victorian aesthetic and influenced by a Victorian past. The events, characters and world are uniquely not-Victorian, and it is the differences, modifications and disinclusions that make it a re-creation instead of a re-vision.

But there is a balance that must be maintained between the Victorian influence and the re-creation in order to preserve the authenticity of the historic/cultural influence. If the game attempts to rewrite too much, it risks losing the close connection to the historical source and merely sheathing itself in a veneer of Victoriana instead of reflecting backwards on a Victorian heritage. In order to do more than 'look' Victorian, it must also have characters driven by Victorian ideals or functioning within prescribed roles that resemble (if not replicate) Victorian roles.

It is worth noting once again that *Dishonored* is not set in 1890s London; rather, it is set in a fictional world (The Isles/Gristol) based on the British Empire during the 19th century. It is not a perfectly accurate replication of the British Empire with different names for similar places, although the developers did state that they took significant influence from London architecture and British history. However, this is not just an imagined Victorian London; the main source of power is a sort of magical whale-oil, for one thing. So although *Dishonored* strives for a very Victorian aesthetic, there are significant differences in the visual landscape.

Finally, the main point: I would like to talk about the dead Empress. She is in the game for all of five or ten minutes, so it seems (at the outset) as though she's not very important except as a catalyst for the plot. And, to some degree, that is true. The story is not, after all, Empress Jessamine hunting down the killers of her bodyguard. However, she does have an important and interesting role, even if it largely goes unstated. Jessamine has a daughter and heir (Emily Kaldwin) but there is no conclusive answer (in-game or from the developers) to who Emily's father is. Jessamine is never stated to be married, or have been married, or be widowed.

There is no suggestion of any prince consort skulking in the background. But most importantly: no one in the game world is bothered by it.

There are some suggestions (voiced by two side characters) that Corvo, the protagonist and player avatar, might be Emily's father, but it is speculative and never confirmed or denied. The game developers are incredibly cagey about confirming or denying anything left ambiguous by the plot, so it is likely never going to be addressed head-on. The point of that is: Emily does not have a named father. She is a bastard, which is... sort of a big deal, in a Victorian-not-Victorian setting. (By the way, another character mentions 'recognizing one of his bastards,' so bastardy as a concept does exist). But the most significant thing about Emily Kaldwin's bastardy is its insignificance. She is the undisputed heir apparent to the throne of the Isles, and given that this world is in turmoil and there are at least two attempted political coups during the game, you'd think now would be the time to denounce Emily's legitimacy – and, given that we know bastards exist and are not the social norm, it seems as though it would be the perfect time to suggest she was not a 'real' heir. And yet, no one does.

This strange sort of silence is made really strange when laid against real-world Victorian values, where the mothers of illegitimate children were frequently criminalised, sometimes demonised, and often objects of pity and scorn. Higgenbotham suggests that the mothers of illegitimate children were almost-always classed as poor and needing support; 'Sin of the Age: Infanticide and Illegitimacy in Victorian London' discusses exclusively the alarm over unmarried mothers in Victorian London, and the perception of unmarried mothers being at risk of committing infanticide.[5] In addition to the perception that unmarried mothers were always lower class, there was the social stigma attached to an illegitimate child as proof that the mother had sexual relations outside of wedlock. Higgenbotham writes that 'the unmarried mother, it was assumed, would seek above all to conceal her fall from virtue by destroying the evidence of her sin, the illegitimate infant.'[6]

Furthermore, Higgenbotham notes that 'the mother's deed was blamed not simply on her poverty but also on her betrayal by the father of her child.'[7] Jessamine is clearly not impoverished, and there is never any suggestion that the father of Jessamine's child is missing, or at fault, or has 'betrayed' them; in fact, he is completely unimportant to establishing the legitimacy of the child. There is also no suggestion that anyone is trying to conceal Emily being born out of wedlock. While two characters speculate on whether Corvo is Emily's father, no one ever brings up Jessamine's marital status in relation to the legitimacy of her daughter.

English bastardy laws during the Victorian period stated that a bastard child was filius nullius – literally, 'nobody's child.' The identity of the mother, then, had no importance in determining the identity of the child as far as the historical English legal system was concerned; the only identity that mattered regarding legitimacy was the father's. Frank writes that 'even where a child is subsequently

legitimized, he is not entitled to inherit by descent from the father, and the restrictive nature of married women's property laws frequently left the mother no property to bequeath.'[8] Illegitimate female children were at even more of a disadvantage for inheriting property than male illegitimate children, given that they 1) in most cases could not inherit property anyway, and 2) if they could, it would transfer away from them if they married.

In contrast to Victorian ideals, which are aggressively present in many other ways in the game, there is absolutely no social stigma attached to Emily's identity as a bastard daughter. In fact, Jessamine's daughter is the unquestioned heir of the empire. There is no ending of the game where Emily does not inherit the crown (except – spoiler alert – if she dies; and if she dies, the empire dissolves entirely. There is no empire without Emily). And, far from being 'nobody's child,' Emily is most definitely established as Jessamine's daughter; she may be a bastard, but she is very much legitimate and capable of inheriting land, property, and titles. In this way, *Dishonored* inverts Victorian traditions by privileging the mother's legitimacy over the father's, and making paternal heritage unimportant.

First, it suggests that sexuality, at least, is not as strictly policed as modern viewers expect of Victorian-themed texts. Jessamine is able to have a child out of wedlock – a pretty clear expression of heterosexual intercourse – with no negative consequences for her or her child. She is not challenged for having an illegitimate daughter, and it neither disqualifies her from ruling her empire nor casts her in a negative moral light. Secondly, it inverts a Victorian paternal tradition of inheritance and legitimacy by writing out the importance of the father and re-writing the importance of the mother as taking precedence – at least, in this instance.

As revolutionary as that might sound, I am not trying to suggest that this is a matriarchal society; it is very much patriarchal. Professions are, for example, still very much gendered. Women can't work on whaling ships, or in the militant arm of the clergy, or the city guard, or the navy. Women who do not fit into socially-constructed boxes are overwhelmingly ostracised or persecuted as heretics. So although Emily is free to inherit the empire, it is not indicative of an overall system that favors female supremacy.

This is a game, not a history textbook. But it is a sort of imagined history – a fictional world that looks and feels very similar to what is held up as true history. And by bending the rules and re-writing them to refocus values, *Dishonored* is able to get the viewer closer to a thematic understanding of historic spaces and the rules that govern them by making those rules completely unfamiliar. At the same time, the values that underscore the changed elements of the game – that illegitimacy is a non-issue, that the mothers of illegitimate children have nothing to be ashamed of – are very much a 21st century values laid over a Victorian aesthetic that carries sets of coded values; values such as, 'unmarried mothers are poor,' or 'unmarried women are likely to kill their illegitimate children.' Giving players something they

can connect with (an underlying set of values and morals that correspond to what a 21st century person can understand) allows them to better connect with concepts they might otherwise find obscure or untouchable. Additionally, it demonstrates that a game – or any text that chooses to revise and rewrite history into fiction – can do so in a way that imagines both an accurate estimation of the past but refuses to reiterate the sexist dogmas of that past, and does so while still feeling authentically Victorian.

Notes

[1] Peter Widdowson, '"Writing Back": Contemporary Re-Visionary Fiction', *Textual Practice* 20, No. 3 (2006): 491-507 .
[2] Samantha J. Carroll, 'Putting the "Neo" Back into Neo-Victorian: The Neo-Victorian Novel as Postmodern Revisionist Fiction', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3, No. 2 (2010): 172-205.
[3] Widdowson, '"Writing Back"', 501.
[4] Ibid., 491.
[5] Ann R. Higginbotham, '"Sin of the Age": Infanticide and Illegitimacy in Victorian London', *Victorian Studies* 32, No. 3 (1989): 319.
[6] Ibid., 319.
[7] Ibid., 322.
[8] Cathrine O. Frank, 'Fictions of Justice: Testamentary Intention and the (Il)Legitimate Heir in Trollope's Ralph the Heir and Forster's *Howard's End*', *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)* 47, No. 3 (2004): 315.

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Meaghan Ingram is newly-graduated from Simmons College (Boston, MA). While interested in Renaissance Florence, Victorian history and game development, currently her research and writing is focused toward videogames and their use as cultural artefacts.

Spaces of the Past: Nostalgia in the *Murder on the Orient Express* and *The Last Express*

Radha Dalal

Abstract
In this chapter, I examine films and videogames as virtual assists in the recovery of Istanbul's threshold space and the Orient Express' pre-World War I prestige. Post-war crime stories taking place on the Orient Express and in Istanbul emphasise the chaos and instability of a new era inaugurated by the shocking aftereffects of an all-too-modern war. Filmic and ludic media offer immersive experiences that spatially draw the viewer/player (virtual *flâneurs*) into visual adaptations of these popular crime narratives. As I demonstrate, however, the visual incarnations of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* deviate considerably from the original text to emphasise the elite, nineteenth-century salon-like space of the Orient Express and the liminal quality of Istanbul as the gateway between the West and the East. Jordan Mechner's videogame, *The Last Express*, also forms a believable closed universe, but on an alternate historical timeframe that parallels the unfolding of real events. The elite status of the train and the dangerous plurality of Istanbul are highlighted in this narrative as well, but the goal of the game, futile as it may be, is to stop World War I at all costs. The ultimate aim is to allow the uninterrupted continuation of pre-war times. From a contemporary vantage point, the nostalgic access in both narratives is to an unreal and an unwitnessed history. The viewer/player engages in a virtual form of mobility, a virtual travel into the past or into another temporal frame, even into another space.

Key Words: Nostalgia, space, *flâneur*, crime, Istanbul, Orient Express, mobility, Great War.

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1. Introduction

In the final filmic sequence of *The Last Express* (1997), Robert Cath, an American physician, and Anna Wolff, an Austro-Hungarian violinist, jump out of a moving Orient Express as it approaches Istanbul's Sirkeci Station. But Cath realises that Tatiana Obolenskya, a young, aristocratic Russian passenger, is trapped in it and rushes forward to save her. The scene shifts to Tatiana humming a wistful melody as she handles a crate full of ammunition. In an inner monologue, she states: 'They mustn't get the guns. There must be no more war.' With a determined expression she strikes a lighter. Seconds later the train explodes and a large, sinister shadow in the form of a soaring falcon spreads its wings across a map of Europe. It signals a gathering darkness, the coming of war. The date is July 27, 1914. It coincides with history – on July 28 Austria-Hungary declared war.

Emphasised in the game is the rupture of gentle tradition by the Great War. During the post-war period, stories about the Orient Express evoke longing for a pre-war purity, when the train was the quintessence of elite culture based on distinct class hierarchies – after all it was a luxury train with only first-class compartments. The introduction of second class in the 1920s diluted its prestige, creating a microcosm of blurred social divisions which mirrored the same instabilities in this hallowed bourgeois space that were beginning to destabilise fin-de-siècle Europe. Its exotic destination, Istanbul, also endured drastic changes, shifting identities from the capital of a struggling Ottoman Empire to a mere city of the new Turkish Republic.

I examine two strands of fiction that capitalise on these transformations: Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, with special emphasis on its filmic and ludic adaptations, and Jordan Mechner's, *The Last Express*. The visual 'remediations' of Christie's novel give increasing prominence to Istanbul.[1] Mechner's game engages the marginalised city as the destination where the fate of humanity will be decided. The blend of reality and fiction woven into the intricate fabric of the video games impels players, virtual *flâneurs*, to participate in 'nostalgic-play.'[2] My aim here is to trace two distinct intertwined nostalgic narratives embedded within each of these stories – a longing for the bourgeois space of the train and for the threshold space of Istanbul.

2. Modalities of Nostalgia and Space

Murder on the Orient Express and *The Last Express* reveal undercurrents of multilayered nostalgia for the elite Belle Époque identity of the train and also draw upon the literature in the twentieth century that hopes to recover the 'authentic' Istanbul from its westernised and modernised urban space. The films and games recreate the liminality of Istanbul for their respective characters and, through their visual immersion capabilities, for a contemporary audience. The nostalgia, therefore, is for that lost experience of the city as a liminal space rather than its actual cityscape. Similarly, the nostalgia is also for the bourgeois space of the train, which connotes a different level of socio-political interaction with Istanbul.

Susan Stewart, in *On Longing*, argues that the nostalgic's desire to find the 'authentic' space, this prelapsarian utopia, is a reconciliatory gesture suffused with naive idealism.[3] Nostalgia transcends lived experience; therefore, the object of nostalgia has never existed except in narrative. In her treatment of miniatures, which she considers 'a metaphor for the interior space and time of the bourgeois subject,' Stewart asserts that such spaces, the nostalgic's objects, are visually controllable.[4] In the case of the films and video games, which I read as miniatures, the represented visual space is one that is fleetingly possessed and one that negates full possession by intensifying a loss never experienced. The reductive capabilities of these media shrink space into a visually consumable miniature. They serve as 'stand ins' for historical figures and events colored with collective nostalgia.

3. Istanbul and the Orient Express: Post-War Spaces for Crime

In spite of the shift from an imperial and Islamic regime to a democratic and secular nation, the image of Turkey in the Western imagination barely altered during the early twentieth century. Negative representations of Istanbul continued and proved the means to comprehend this dual loss of the city – its Byzantine lineage and its Ottoman exoticness. Istanbul became the ideal setting for numerous tales of intrigue and espionage that presented its Middle Eastern heritage as barbaric and decadent.[5] Many novels emphasise the relationships amongst travel, crime, and Istanbul. The city is either the fateful destination or the charged point of departure, yet seldom figures prominently in the narratives; the prevailing relationship between the train and the city is enough to conjure the thrill of adventure. The Orient Express' unique mobility across nations and kingdoms served to monumentalise and mythologise the intersections between the two.

Agatha Christie's classic set in the tense interwar period of the 1930s, features one of her most memorable characters, Hercule Poirot, who becomes a last minute passenger on the Simplon-Orient Express as it prepares to depart from Istanbul. A murder takes place in the middle of the night. Immediately thereafter, and based on a true historical event, the train is stuck in a snowdrift stranding the passengers. During this stationary period Poirot investigates the identities and possible motives of the passengers who represent a diversity of Euro-American nationalities and social statuses. In the end, the victim turns out to be a murderer himself, the kidnapper and killer of a small child. As officials work to restore the tracks, Poirot reveals the complexities of the crime – twelve killers, all connected to the child victim. Through the clever plot Christie explores themes of collective justice, bourgeois family connections, and crisp detective logic.

Unlike Christie's novel, which is a reflection of justice administered in what was once a solely bourgeois space, Mechner's *The Last Express* underscores the hollow power of the bourgeoisie and their inability to prevent catastrophe. Beginning a few days prior to the start of World War I, the story is an ingenious blend of history and fiction. Instead of Christie's strictly Euro-American cast of characters, *The Last Express*' passengers reflect the high society associated with the pre-war Express and a cross-section of the political entities and ideologies about to clash in the war. The train also has compartments allocated for real figures of history: the pacifists Jean Jaurès and Marshall Putnik. Their presence calls attention to the purpose of this journey – to bring about a peaceful resolution that allows the pre-1914 era to continue without interruption.

Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* and Mechner's *The Last Express* refashion and remap spaces of urban life to create a believable closed universe. In both, the trains offer segregated, modern social spaces where murders and other mysteries are introduced in a rationalised and sanitised manner. Coupled with this ordered space is the unfathomable and disordered space of Istanbul, which provides the countering instability to draw the audience into the narrative. Within

these micro-universes, some of the same anxieties provoked by the alienating modern condition are explored through the eyes of the protagonist/detective and, by extension, through the interpretation and interaction of the reader/viewer/player.

4. Bourgeois Spaces and Iconic Losses

To fully appreciate the atmosphere generated by the powerful images in the *Murder on the Orient Express* and *The Last Express*, a look at the train's history and its perception as an emblem of bourgeois culture is useful. The interiors of the train in these new media reflect the luxury and aesthetic tastes that characterized the standard of living of the privileged in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a lifestyle whose existence was directly threatened by the Great War. In the *Murder on the Orient Express*, a group of elite Euro-Americans rides on the train to purge a vile member of society who continues to endanger their way of life. In *The Last Express*, the set of international travelers, from Europe and other nations, represent the already frayed and fragmented character of 'global' unity leading up to the War. The scenes in the train reveal a palpable anxiety related to the loss of influence and political control, and a shift in the distribution of power and the relevance of sovereign authority.[6] Preventing war was also a means to prevent the dissolution of a class system that had facilitated political power and social solidarity. Visualising the elite luxury of the train is central to perpetuating nostalgia for the loss of innocence.

The Orient Express' first-class passenger list, combined with its elegant interiors, created a private space where the intermingling of society was quite similar, for instance, to a nineteenth-century Parisian salon. The exclusivity of the train ensured that the traveling companions would encounter fellow passengers of equal or higher status, that is, from the bourgeoisie or the nobility.[7] In spite of being a mode of *public* transportation, the train's rich, sophisticated, salon-like atmosphere is in direct opposition to Jürgen Habermas' reading of salon culture as part of the 'public sphere' and even Joan Landes' assertion that salons were 'an extension of the institutionalized court.'[8] Rather, as Steven Kale has suggested of Parisian salons, the train's culture is a reflection of European high society, imbricating public and private spheres.[9]

The sensory experience within the enclosed space of the train also lends itself to a Benjaminian reading of the *intérieur*. In his *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin suggests that the passages of the Parisian arcades demarcate a space that turns the outside into a landscape to be enjoyed from the comforts inside. The Orient Express serves as a mobile equivalent of the arcades; its interior space is a refuge for the bourgeoisie, isolated and remote from the vagaries of street life of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But the fateful events of 1914 temporarily disrupted the train's passage and permanently altered its luxurious service, initiating an era of melancholy and nostalgic reminisces.

To recapture some of the social flavor of prewar Europe, European bourgeoisie began to invent iconic markers that would remind them of the Belle Époque.[10] The reinstatement of the Orient Express gave them an opportunity to once again experience some of the luxuries of their former life. But certain changes remained irreversible – the inclusion of second-class compartments and border checks by customs officials became the norm. The train concurrently became a symbol of the endangered bourgeois culture and a perfect setting for crime. This coincides with the rise of the detective, more specifically, the *flâneur*-detective. The *flâneur* is an ambiguous modern figure, part of the crowd and detachedly observing it. He is at once a fugitive, intensely suspicious, and a detective, passionately surveilling. The *flâneur*-detective searches for clues that will lead him to uncover the mysteries hidden in social interactions. Through the narrated spaces of *Murder on the Orient Express* and the *Last Express*, the criminal fantasy of the bourgeois interior is nostalgically brought to the surface. Indeed, the depiction of social classes and the interior décor of the Orient Express in these narratives attempt to capture the elite prestige of the train while simultaneously hinting at the possibility of dangerous encounters.

5. Recuperating the Threshold Space of Istanbul

While Istanbul is the site of deathly climax in *The Last Express*, it plays a minor role in the *Murder on the Orient Express*. Yet, new media adaptations of Christie's novel increasingly elevate the city's importance in the trajectory of the plot. The first cinematic adaptation was Sidney Lumet's 1974-film of the same name. In 2008, the Adventure Company released a PC video-game version of the book/film with a new character, Antoinette Marceau, who assists Poirot in solving the crime. In July 2010, PBS Masterpiece Theatre produced a television version of the book. Just as the locus of the 'authentic' Orient Express and Istanbul is in the past before the Great War, these remediations of the *Murder on the Orient Express* attempt to 'honor, rival, and revise' the textual origin to provide an immediate and authentic experience of the train and the city.[11]

Remediation alone, however, does not adequately address the desire to repeatedly animate a particular narrative in different media. This emerges from a deeper interdependence between the individual and collective memories of a society, and their nostalgic relationship to a real or imagined past. This phenomenon is perhaps best explained by Svetlana Boym's bifurcation of nostalgia into two discernible types: restorative, with its emphasis on *nostos* and rebuilding the lost origin, and reflective, which resides in *algia*, the perpetual feeling of longing and loss.[12] In both *Murder on the Orient Express* and *The Last Express*, the two forms of nostalgia surface within the complexities of temporal and spatial manipulations that transform the original text – the novel in the former case and history itself in the latter.[13] Laurie Taylor and Zach Whalen inquire if such nostalgic remediations 'comment on the ideologies embedded in the older form,

or… suggest a sense of loss.'[14] By examining the different forms of the *Murder on the Orient Express*, I argue that such remediation does both: it reveals and highlights some of the embedded ideologies by seeking to 'authenticate' the text in space and time and, consequently, this reworking makes the loss manifest. My underlying interest here is to understand how earlier interwar-period nostalgia permeates the depictions of Istanbul in contemporary media.

In Christie's book, Istanbul is a passing experience, a brief stop for Poirot before he embarks on the Orient Express. Christie does not paint a vivid picture of the settings for her stories – she does not describe the trains or Istanbul save for a mention of relevant landmarks. Her plot operates on popular pretexts already existing in Western imagination – the Orient Express, Istanbul, train, intrigue – together generate the right criminal tone. In contrast, the authenticity of a setting in films is often dependent on filming in the right historical location. Lumet achieves this by situating the narrative of Christie's novel in real spaces, that is, the city of Istanbul and actual trains. Extensive filming in Istanbul diverges greatly from Christie's text and her own interest in describing the city. The Orient Express' intimate association with Istanbul is not enough to produce the right kind of visual tension in the film. The city's interwar-period character has to be visualised to make it believable and to provide the background for the subsequent story. The threshold geography of Istanbul is stressed through aural and visual markers in the opening scenes: the call to prayer sounds in the background just as the camera pans over the Golden Horn and Istanbul's distinctive minaret-filled skyline. These shots and the dialog authenticate the location for the viewers.

At Sirkeci Station a colorful, ethnographic parade of people including Asian women in kimonos, African nobles, Arab men in long robes, and even Indian porters intersect the paths of the elite characters. Again, the emphasis is on Istanbul and particularly the train station as a threshold. While this focus on the city is new to the filmic edition of the story, the rest of the narrative follows the book fairly closely. The Masterpiece Theater version, on the other hand, forms a stark contrast. The narrative begins in Istanbul with Poirot presumably crossing the waters of the Golden Horn. Yet, it is clear from the passing scenery, the preposterous placement of domes and minarets, the city is not Istanbul. A faithful representation is not at stake here; Islamic markers are enough for authentication.

Two of Christie's characters also get entangled in a skirmish, which ultimately ends in men stoning a woman to death while others cheer them on. This event is not part of Christie's original book, but is newly inserted to tap into the underlying theme of mystery, murder, and collective justice. Yet, in this they are providing a representation of Istanbul that relegates it neatly back into a fictitious past, a past beyond Christie's own creation. The stoning is inserted as commonplace occurrence where people rather than the law perform the acts of justice. Given recent events in Iran and Afghanistan, where freedom for women is still a highly contested issue and violent acts against women are often sanctioned in the name of

Islam, the stoning in 1930s Istanbul becomes a social comment on the religion rather than a historically contextualised depiction of the city itself.[15] Istanbul's close association with Islam makes this association fair game. The presumed inferiority of races that allow such subjugation of women in the name of religion is thinly veiled in this version. In addition, a subtle cultural dichotomy is suggested in the comparison between the heroic Euro-Americans, who justifiably avenge the brutal murder of a young child in Christie's original story, versus the barbaric treatment elicited by possible adultery in this new adaptation. Are such liberties possible because the representation is supposed to be of a past event?

Anne Friedberg, following Benjamin's assessment of cinema as effecting a spatio-temporal transformation within society, argues that such displacement of time and history is caused in part due to 'the implicit time travel' in cinematic viewing.[16] As she states, 'One of the essential properties of cinema is its temporal displacement of the spectator: the time of a film's production, the time of its fiction, and the time of its projection are all conflated into the same moment of viewing.'[17] This can also apply to video games, which provide one further level of displacement through spatial immersion.

Istanbul's representation as a dark and mysterious place is tempered in the video game version of *Murder on the Orient Express*. Through minor quests, the game takes on a heuristic dimension where Sirkeci Station becomes the venue to gain knowledge about Turkish culture, especially its prized Iznik and Kütahya ceramics. Antoinette Marceau, a new character created to allow a player greater degree of control within the scope of the narrative, has to walk around Sirkeci Station repeatedly to complete various small quests. She often comments on the beauty of the station. Its neo-Islamic façade becomes the oriental marker of Istanbul. The liminal space of the station, at once a gateway between two different forms of traffic – the city and the railway – is also the metaphorical stand-in for Istanbul's ambiguous geography.[18] The scenery imitates earlier representations of Istanbul in the placement of domes and minarets. Inside the train station, the space is pristine and clean and shows nothing of the plurality present in the films. The game's emphasis is on play and aesthetics rather than characterisation of Istanbul.

6. Conclusion

Real world history is integrated into the games' narratives where nostalgia links the past to the present.[19] For the *Murder on the Orient Express*, this means placing the player in the fictional time and space of Christie's masterpiece; for *The Last Express*, the historical trajectory closely parallels actual developments in world history, but the flow of history is changed to suit the narrative of the game. Video games allow players change the outcome of pivotal historical events. This creates new and lasting images of a past that has been reanimated to serve the needs of the present. In the case of *The Last Express*, it is impossible for the current generation to have any firsthand knowledge of World War I or its preceding time. Nostalgia

for this period then is not based on a memory of origins, of a witnessed but unattainable past. Rather, the forces of postmodern consumption foster this nostalgia and create a yearning for the lost object that the player never experienced. Arjun Appadurai defines this as 'imagined nostalgia' – a longing for a loss that did not occur. [20]

This nostalgia also emerges from a specific kind of twenty-first century *flânerie*. As noted earlier, railways offered the *flâneur* a new form of locomotion and a new means to survey the landscape. From the interior spaces of the railway compartment it is possible to gaze outside and yet remain unobserved. This same type of spectatorship is possible in the virtual world. The monitor or television screen becomes the window through which images are transported.[21] For players of *The Last Express* and *Murder on the Orient Express*, this time-space compression brings about a virtual form of mobility, which establishes a new kind of virtual *flânerie* and infuses the viewing/playing experience with the pleasures of exploring and [re]playing the past.

Notes

[1] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

[2] I use the term 'nostalgic-play' as defined by Anna Reading and Colin Harvey: 'Video game stores are replete with titles that allow players to fight wars already won or lost and visit cities and times long since gone. Yet video games can invoke the memory of the past in other ways than simply recreating historical vistas or reenacting past events. Video games can reinvent the narratives established by other media in a particular and playful fashion. It is this process that we call *nostalgic-play*.' Anna Reading and Colin Harvey, 'Remembrance of Things Fast: Conceptualizing *Nostalgic-Play* in the *Battlestar Galactica* Video Game', in *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*, eds. Zach Whalen and Laurie Taylor (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), 164.

[3] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 23.

[4] Ibid., xii.

[5] For examples see *Greenmantle* (1916) by John Buchan, *Eunuch of Stamboul* (1935) by Dennis Wheatley, and Eric Ambler's *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1939).

[6] Charles Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany, and Italy in the Decade After World War I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 9.

[7] Purchasing a ticket for the Orient Express was no small feat. As a columnist for the 1894 *The Speaker* notes: 'It is no ordinary train for which you take a ticket from a booking-clerk at a hole in the wall. You go to 122, Pall Mall, and negotiate

your place with a gentleman in an office. You are warned in the concise and stately language that Bradshaw commands, that otherwise it [Orient Express] may not condescend to take you at all.' To make the run from Paris to Constantinople profitable, the train executives rarely sold tickets for journeys shorter than a stop in the Balkans. *The Speaker* (1894), 666.

[8] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) and Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 23-25.

[9] Steven Kale, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 12.

[10] See Natalia Starostina's excellent study on how railways, including the Orient Express, were reconfigured during the interwar period to be symbols of elite culture. Natalia Starostina, 'Engineering the Empire of Images: The Representations of Railways in Interwar France' (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2007).

[11] Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*,17.

[12] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 41.

[13] David Lowenthal argues, 'The diverse goals of contemporary nostalgia do have one point in common. They mainly envisage a time when folk did not feel fragmented, when doubt was either absent or patent, when thought fused with action, when aspiration achieved consummation, when life was wholehearted; in short, a past that was unified and comprehensible, unlike the incoherent, divided present. Significantly, one thing absent from this imagined past is nostalgia – no one then looked back in yearning or for succour.' David Lowenthal, 'Nostalgia Tells It Like It Wasn't', in *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, eds. Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 29.

[14] Zach Whalen and Laurie Taylor, eds., *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), 9.

[15] Even during Ottoman rule stoning of women in retribution for adultery was not a routine practice. Fariba Zarinebaf notes that 'The stoning to death of women accused of adultery and fornication was a fixed *shari'a* penalty that did not exist in the Qu'ran and was rarely applied in the Ottoman Empire'. Fariba Zarinebaf, *Crime and Punishment in Istanbul: 1700-1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 105. Under the Turkish Republic, adultery remained illegal for women through Article 440 of the Turkish Penal Code. Women convicted of this charge could be sentenced for up to three years in prison – no retaliatory stoning involved. The law was repealed in 1998. For more, see Pınar İlkkaracan, 'How

Adultery Almost Derailed Turkey's Aspirations to Join the European Union', in *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East*, ed. Pınar İlkkaracan (Hampshire: Aldershot, 2008).

[16] Anne Friedberg, 'Les *Flâneur*s du Mal(l): Cinema and the Postmodern Condition', *PMLA* 106, No. 3 (May, 1991): 421-420.

[17] Ibid., 427.

[18] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 174.

[19] Whalen and Taylor, eds., *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*, 2.

[20] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 77.

[21] Mike Featherstone, 'The *Flâneur*, the City and Virtual Public Life', *Urban Studies* 35, Nos. 5-6 (1998): 923.

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Radha Dalal is Assistant Professor in the Art History Program at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar. She researches visual cultures of mobility with a particular emphasis on the Ottoman Empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Constructing a Reality: A Post-Structural Analysis of *Deus Ex*

Luke S. Bernfeld

Abstract
This chapter will present a post-structural reading of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, a video game developed by Edios Interactive. Specifically, I will demonstrate that in this game the notion of 'truth' is revealed to be slippery and radically open-ended. In making my argument, I draw on three prominent post-structuralists, namely, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Drawing on Derrida, I will show that language produces substitutions and intermediaries rather than a direct representation of 'reality.' Moreover, Foucault addresses the obsession with wanting to find meaning emanating from texts' authors in our culture and suggests that, in order to allow for more freedom of interpretation, texts should be read without using their authors as a key to meaning. I will use Foucault's argument to illustrate that in the game there are unreliable authors of the game's 'truths;' in the game the player determines the game's ultimate outcome. Finally, I will use Nietzsche's argument that all language is a linguistic response to nerve stimuli; this concept is evident in the game as a player attempts to find 'truth' but encounters only linguistic creations that determine the player's reality. In other words, as the game shows, language produces its own reality based on perception and cultural understandings. Ultimately, in the game the player operates in a world devoid of 'truth,' in which truth is created by the game itself and the player's particular actions within it. Overall, my chapter also argues that these three post-structural game elements offer a compelling reflection of our own 'reality' – a world in which, like a player in *Deus Ex*, individuals create truth through language (intermediaries) and thus what they take to be their reality.

Key Words: Theory, games as text.

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1. Introduction

This chapter will present a post-structural reading of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, a video game developed by Edios Interactive. Specifically, I will demonstrate that in this game the notion of 'truth' is revealed to be slippery and radically open-ended. In making my argument, I draw on three prominent post-structuralists, namely, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Drawing on Derrida, I will show that language produces substitutions and intermediaries rather than a direct representation of 'reality.' Moreover, Foucault addresses the obsession with wanting to find meaning, and a sense of truth emanating from a texts' author in our culture, and suggests that, in order to allow for more freedom, and openness with regards to interpretation, texts should be read

without using their authors as a key to meaning. I will use Foucault's argument to illustrate that in the game there are unreliable authors of the game's 'truths'; in the game the player determines the game's ultimate outcome. Finally, I will use Nietzsche's argument that all language is a linguistic response to nerve stimuli; this concept is evident in the game as a player attempts to find 'truth' but encounters only linguistic creations that determine the player's reality. In other words, as the game shows, language produces its own reality based on perception and cultural understandings. Ultimately, in the game the player operates in a world devoid of 'truth,' in which truth is created by the game itself and the player's particular actions within it. Overall, my chapter also argues that these three post-structural game elements offer a compelling reflection of our own 'reality' – a world in which, like a player in *Deus Ex*, individuals create truth through language (intermediaries) and thus what they take to be their reality.

2. Review of Literature

In his work, *The Exorbitant Question of Method*, Derrida illuminates the issue of 'total absence and the absolute plenitude of presence.'[1] To illustrate this point, if one were to say the word chair, while the chair does exist the word does not capture everything about said chair, therefore there is not a total absence, also no plentitude of presence. Derrida adds that substitutions and intermediaries are all that can be accessed in language. Derrida states, 'The play of substitution fills and marks a determined lack.'[2] As words are used to describe the world around us it becomes obvious that there is a lacking connection between the words and the thing that they are intended to describe.

To define what these substitutions and intermediaries are, I turn to Nietzsche's work *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*. In his work Nietzsche illuminates the lack of a 'thing itself' or a connection to the reality that words fail to describe. As Nietzsche puts it, 'What is a word? It is a copy in sound of a nerve stimulus.'[3] So, words do not preexist the thing that they are attempting to describe, but rather the words are created in order to make sense of the thing that is in front of the one labeling it. This interaction then does not lead to language being able to interact with 'the thing itself,' instead language is all that remains after this interaction is done. According to Nietzsche these left overs are the 'boldest metaphors,' and 'arbitrary assignments.'[4]

In Foucault's essay, 'What Is an Author?' he inserts the necessity to remove the author to open interpretation and to make the text the focal point of interrupting a text. As Foucault puts it, 'we can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author.'[5] Without the author, the freedom of interpretation opens and a culture develops wherein the author losses his/her power to affect that process. Foucault even compares writing and the effect of authorlessness in interpretation, to a game. Foucault states, 'Writing unfolds like a game that inevitability moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them

behind.'[6] When the text is free of its author, it will begin to break the constructed rules of academic interpretation that bind the reader to the set interpretation given by the author.

3. The Game

The game *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, a first person shooter role playing game, takes place in the year 2027 in a world were cybernetic implants, called augmentations, are emerging. Augmentations are used by the military and by common citizens as well. Augmentations can be used in order to replace lost limbs or to create super soldiers. As with any leap in technology in reality, there are those in the game who question the morality of such actions. These people make up the base of the anti-augmentation, Humanity Front. The player character, Adam Jensen, is stuck in the middle of this controversy; as an ex-SWAT officer turned private security working for Sarif Industries, a company that specializes in augmentation technology. Adam's ex-girlfriend, Megan Reed, has discovered a way to cure augmentation sickness, an illness that, if not treated by expensive injections, can kill the augmented host. At the beginning of the game the player learns that there is a secret society that does not want this research to see the light of day. The research facility that both Adam and Megan work in is attacked, during the attack Megan is seemingly killed, as well as Adam. Adam wakes to find that he has been resurrected by Sarif and was heavily augmented in the process.

Due to the amount of damage that Adam has taken, most of his body is covered in augmentations, even to the point that the player cannot see correctly without them. As soon as he enters Sarif Industries, he experiences issues with his visual implants. Adam is directed to Frank Pritchard, the head of Sarif's cyber-security team. Afterward, the player as Adam starts his investigation into the events at the facility and learns that there is a greater conspiracy involved in the events that lead to the attack on Sarif Industries. Adam, in an attempt to discover the truth, heads to Heng Sha Island in China. There he is stopped by the local police who are controlled by the Bell Tower Corporation. Once he gains entry into the core of the Bell Tower office building, he learns that a group calling themselves the Illuminati are behind the conspiracy and that the scientists from Sarif Industries, like Megan Reed, are in fact alive and working for the Illuminati. Adam believes that the scientists are being held against their will and decides to mount a rescue attempt.

Adam returns to Detroit to find that he has received a message from the global news anchor, Eliza Cassan. Adam decides to follow the tip, only to find that the news station is empty. After finding Eliza's office, Adam's questions are thwarted when Eliza reveals herself to be a hologram and vanishes. With the help of Serif's tech wiz Frank, he finds the source of Eliza's hologram in the basement. Once there, Adam learns that Eliza is actually a super computer programed to spin the news in favor of an unknown client. Adam's questions are thwarted again when Eliza blames an augmented mercenary for her inability to tell Adam the truth. After

a long battle with the mercenary, Eliza tells Adam that she cannot tell him what happened to the scientists but another man can.

The trail of half-truths and outright lies, like the one that Eliza continuously feeds the public and the player persists until the end of the game, where the player is told that the world's augmented population has been fitted with cerebral implants that, when activated, will make them puppets to the Illuminati, as if owning and controlling all the information that flows through the news was not enough. This chip is then short circuited, by a rouge member of the Illuminati to make augmented people violent toward any non-augmented people around them. In this final level of the game, Adam tries to stop the signal effecting augmented people and attempts to find the truth of who is behind the short in the chip. As Adam makes his way through the floating station, he is directed by Eliza. Also, Adam questions David Sarif, who is the head of Sarif Industries, and Bill Taggart, the head of Humanity Front. In the end Eliza presents Adam with four choices. He can give the humanity the whole truth as given him by the news spinning computer, he can make the chip short seem like a terrorist attack by Humanity Front, or make it seem like the augmentations are malfunctioning, or the player can sink the station and let society learn for themselves what happened. The player then choses which end he or she wants. No matter what ending is chosen, however, after the credits are over, the same unknown man from the beginning of the game has a conversation about a greater project he is sure will not be held up too much by the events at the floating station. He invites Megan Reed into his office and discusses a new project with her. The unknown man then reveals himself to be Bob Page, a new character to the game, and the leader of the Illuminati.

4. No Truth

The player as Adam never had a chance at the 'truth' because he never runs into a reliable narrator to give him information. All that is accessible for the player and for the characters in the game are intermediaries and metaphors, all of which are provided by the 'bad guys.' Adam cannot even see without the substitutions of his augmentations. The player requires implants to see the world and, as is proven throughout the game, these images can be hacked to make the player see things that are not there or if they even malfunction slightly the player is greatly disabled.

Even more than seeing though, is the fact that the player as Adam seems to always be following orders given by others who will never tell the player the whole truth of the situation and whose motives are rarely in consideration of Adams interests. At the beginning of the game David Sarif is giving the player orders, David makes it perfectly clear that his first priority is to make money and keep the stock holders happy. In the middle of the game, however, Adam's loyalty shifts to Eliza Cassan. Adam, after working his way to the basement of a global news organisation, discovers that the lead anchor for the organisation, Eliza, is a super computer. Eliza states, 'Hello Adam, I knew you would find the real me

eventually,' to which Adam replies, 'This is … impossible. People would know.' Eliza then reveals what her programing is for, 'Would they? I was engineered to monitor communications and data-streams. To find out what people are talking about and make sure it's being discussed correctly.' Up until this point Eliza has informed Adam and the world about events taking place; now she has revealed that it has all been configured to suit some unknown person or group of persons' goals. After this, Adam inquires whose angle she is protecting, and the player is left never know who is having Eliza spin the news.

Adam asks about the location of the kidnapped scientists. Eliza responds by saying 'I want to tell you Adam but I cannot' Adam asks, 'Why not?' Eliza answers, 'Because she won't let me' as Eliza says this she points to a heavily augmented mercenary in the same room with them. The player then kills the heavily augmented mercenary. Eliza then tells Adam, 'I cannot tell you where Reed and the others were taken. They vanished from the global grid as soon as the doctor removed their GPL implants.' It is here that Eliza starts to use the player as her personal hit man; after he kills the mercenary she still does not have any real 'truth' to give the player. The 'truth' that the player is trying so desperately to find is once again left outside his reach, because all that the player is ever able to interact with are the intermediaries and substitutions of the truth. The player is becoming stuck in a cycle of language not being the truth that he or she is seeking, and so will never be able to access the 'truth.' After sending Adam after the doctor described in the scene, and hinting that David Sarif may be involved, Eliza tells him that he has to leave and warns him, 'Just ... be careful, Adam. Because everybody lies.' Eliza essentially is telling Adam that she has been lying to him. If everybody lies, then she is lying, and, likewise, every character that Adam interacts with lies. The lack of a reliable author of truth leaves Adam to sift through the pile of lies for some truth. These truths will only elude him and all that he can find are intermediaries claiming to be the truth but never delivering anything more than more intermediaries.

In the end, the player has to make a choice which of the four possible endings offered by Eliza most suits the way that the player wants the game to end. This choice, however, does not ultimately matter, because the mastermind behind all the events of the game as revealed after the credits, a Mr. Bob Page, has been pulling the strings the entire time. Also, Megan Reed is revealed to be in league with Mr. Page, who has been working on a Project Morpheus. None of the player's actions have led to any real 'truth.' Additionally, the player's actions have seemingly done little to affect the overall goal of the Illuminati. All that is left are the intermediaries and substitutions that have been feed to the player by Eliza and the Illuminati. No real 'truth' is available for the player; he or she is left to serve those who are able to control the information flowing to the player.

The construction of a reality applies to the real world in that the reader or player is only able to serve the author of 'truth,' truth that is created by

intermediaries that are unable to access the actual and ultimate truth. Leaving the reader or player with unreliable narrators to guide them to more intermediaries, thus the cyclical nature of the construction will continue. Thus, there is a need to remove the authors in order to open the interpretation of the construction, so the player can realise that the 'truth' is hidden behind an impenetrable veil of constructed language.

5. Final Thoughts

The game and the real worlds in which we live are linked in the lack of reliable sources of truth. As with the player in the game, the search for 'truth' is never truly over. Just when the reader or player thinks that the truth has been found, another intermediary is all that is revealed. The deception in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* leaves the player never really finding anything that could lead to the source of the problem. So, the 'truth' can never truly be found because the source of truth is non-existent. Every source that comes in contact with the player either tells the player that the source has an angle, or in the case of Eliza, tells the player that the sources are lying to them. So the player and the reader are left without a source for truth and, therefore, they are left to sift through the intermediaries and the substitutions with no hope for ever interacting with the core truth.

Ultimately, language cannot access Truth. However, language has the capacity to communicate truth. Language is all that is available to communicate the knowledge that each individual gains, and each individual brings their own experiences, lending a multiplicity to interpreting reality. If the player was able to gain more lenses to see the events of the game, that may lead to a greater truth found in the game. In the real world, a multiplicity of interpretation, or freedom of interpretation, allows for new ways to look at older issues. So, freedom of interpretation allows for those individuals open to multiple interpretations to gain more information and therefore more truth.

Notes

[1] Jacques Derrida, 'The Exorbitant. Question of Method', in *On Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976 [1967]), 157.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense', 1873, in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, eds. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston, MA: Bedford Books, 1990), 890.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, trans. Donald Bouchard and

Sherry Simon, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 138.
[6] Ibid., 116.

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Luke Bernfeld is a Masters Student at University of Texas at Dallas. After achieving a Bachelors in English Literature from Utah Valley University. He is now turning his focus on video games and the textual nature of gaming.

Engaging with Videogames focuses on the multiplicity of lenses through which the digital game can be understood, particularly as a cultural artefact, economic product, educational tool, and narrative experience. Game studies remains a highly interdisciplinary field, and as such tends to bring together scholars and researchers from a wide variety of fields and analytical practices. As such, this volume includes explorations of videogames from the fields of literature, visual art, history, classics, film studies, new media studies, phenomenology, education, philosophy, psychology, and the social sciences, as well as game studies, design, and development. Twenty-six chapters are organised thematically into four sections focusing on educational game practices, videogame cultures, videogame theory, and the practice of critical analysis. Within these chapters are explorations of sexual identity and health, videogame history, slapstick, player mythology and belief systems, gender and racial ideologies, games as a 'body-without organs', and controversial games from *Mass Effect 3* to *Raid Over Moscow*. This volume aims to inspire further research in this rapidly evolving and expanding field.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Dawn Stobbart studies at Lancaster University's English Department, focusing on the way that videogames function as a carrier for narrative and its role within this medium. She has an interest in contemporary Literature, and especially the way this translates to the videogame.

Monica Evans is an Associate Professor of Computer Game Design at the University of Texas at Dallas. Her current research focuses on narrative for interactive systems, digital ethics, and experimental game production. She runs the Narrative Systems Research Lab at UT Dallas.

ENGAGING WITH VIDEOGAMES:

PLAY, THEORY AND PRACTICE

ISBN 978-1-84888-295-9 £7.95

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