Chuk Moran
Computer Game Studies
12/9/06

Intro

What's the first game you ever played with a stored program digital computer? Pressing +1 as many times as you could before time ran out. Clicking a stopwatch on and off as quickly as possible. Tetris. Pong. Getting Windows to print. Games grow like weeds, wherever capacity exists for them. The computer is not just an object, a machine capable of doing magic on its own, but also a flow of electricity with a continuing input of maintenance and use[1].

Computer games are a name for games running on a computer, whether the computer is a Playstation Portable or an iMac. These games are strikingly different, but there also emerge similarities worth commenting on. These similarities are less important, in a particular game, than the specificities of the game. However, by making some tools for analysis in the discussion of video games, I hope to help other articulations of particular game's implications in strategic interventions in other moments of discourse.

On this premise, what I offer is an analysis of gaming as a form of experience, built around repetition between games that have been classified within real time genres. These games tend to have a player character, audio and visual output with some also using a rumble pack (vibrator in the controller). What matters is not to define and limit the objects of this analysis, but to understand what is common (can be said of many) to some games, and might be worth considering in others. The stakes for this analysis are never strictly internal to a tightly defined notion of game or software, but always try to remain open to the levels of

[1] Hornborg, Alf. *The Power of the Machine* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press: 2001).

circulation that pass through gaming, and outward into other worlds, where media debate endlessly violence and gender in games with closed-minded understandings of gaming and the player interacting with virtuality.

Simulation 1

The game is not merely a computer inside with a player's experience on the outside. The game is not completely opaque, not just a spectacle. And it is not a clear window into some kind of real that lies within. The game runs as a portion of the calculations made by a computer's hardware. The game is built purely of code that has been compiled. The game consists of data and processes. The game subsists on the screen and in the controls as input and output routines. The game is light and sound with a twitching player responding to cues. The game frames and enacts a story in which the player participates. The game is a set of rules implemented by software. The game exists as diversion for those who might play. The game provides a lifestyle and manifesto for aficionados. The game takes place within other games of competition, as a way to relax, as a privilege, or as a requirement for social status. The game is not a black box we might someday get to look into. There are layers of the game that involve different registers of awareness, and there are no final boundaries to the inwardness of the game or to its connections outward.

How do these layers coalesce into things we can recognize and collect at the level of procedure? At what other layers does the player have to abide by rules, learn from them, or respond to code that is some kind of law in the game?

Agency

With hands on the controls, those playing a game are reaching into another world. Steven Shaviro writes of playing *LambaMOO*,

> Yes, that was indeed my body, sweating, grunting, straining its eyes, furiously typing. But that was also my body, relaxing in the hot tub, drinking a beer, splashing, casually flirting, sorting out sexual responses, and reeling off lame one-liners. All these events occurred together, in real time, in the same stream of consciousness, along the same continuum of bodily sensations. I got tipsy on that virtual beer; the warmth of the water in the hot tub merged with the stifling heat of the air in my study. For reality is a matter, not of essences, but of effects; my actions have continuing reverberations and consequences in LambdaMOO, just as they do in RL. Deleuze writes of a hallucinatory "excess of presence, that acts directly on the nervous system, and that makes representation--with its putting-in-place or putting-at-a-distance--impossible."[2]

In this sense, the layer of a game that is simulation provides a fully present, actual world, and not just a vicarious representation. This has nothing to do with detail or heat distortion, any game makes just such a world, whether through text or graphics, with a rich soundtrack and ambient sound or in sparse beeps. There are things for the hands to touch and push and pester.

The player agency, the balance of their own weight against their ability to lift, is a conduit out of them into the game, but also back into them from the game. When a spaceship explodes, there can be parts that fly in different directions at different speeds depending on the intensity of the explosion, the presence of other debris, the pull of a kind of gravity. When jumping and landing makes the player character bump back into the air, the landing is bouncy. A city whose population leaves rather than pay the tax rate is a bunch of libertarian scoundrels. These impressions cannot but register for the player as realities of the game as a world.

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[2] Shaviro, Steven. *Doom Patrols* (New York, NY: Serpent Tail, 1997), http://www.shaviro.com/Doom/ch13.html (accessed Feb 21, 2004). cc.13

Take each of these things and split it. One part is the materiality of the thing, it as an object. The other part is the participation it offers to the player. From this bifurcation, and putting everything into these two terms, axes of a graph become possible. Here the flow channel accumulates between challenge and ability. The flow channel is the cozy colon of fun gaming. The player is neither too anxious nor bored.[3] For game design, this is an aspiration. In gaming as a form of experience, however, things are constantly falling out of balance. Affordances and constraints match up in only a small, central zone of the game.[4] There are also menus and loading and saving, there are options and settings and quitting, restarting, and starting all over, there are load screens and cheat codes and graphics gone wrong. There's the grind and forgetting how you got where you were when your character fell when you slipped up and died just a moment ago. There is micromanaging and changing your character's clothes or sculpting their face, there's getting lost on the way to some newer place because around you now everything's been dead on the floor for an hour or more.

In all this there is the active process that is the player character's miracle of action that appears as other than play. The miraculation, from the hands, of the player character. The character does its things in the game at the same time the hands do their little thing by themselves, and while the relation between one button and one action can be clear, the playing character, whose course the player performs for itself as spectacle, has appeared in a way that can only be explained as unexplainable. The miraculation of the player character, which

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[3] Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real.* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2005). pp. 112-113

[4] Michael Mateas discusses agency in terms of dramatic probabilities and capabilities the player is afforded, which is a question of the dramatic emergence of meaningful agencies rather than the structural position of the agency of the hands. Mateas, Michael. "A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games." (In *First Person.* Ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2004). pp. 25

requires but also provides faith, is not a technical operation within the software, but a practical reality in playing a game as a form of experience. Hands fidget and prod the controls, and an agency appears within the game. Within this, action arrives that exceeds playfulness, and that allows playfulness to emerge out of basic skilling, habituation, and training. There is speaking English and there is playing with its words. A basic level of familiarity and day-to-day use (the player character as user interface) is part of the emergence of gameplay, but playing, in the sense of playfulness, is piled unstably on top.

Interactivity

Hands pushing buttons, oh this must be interactive. Of the confused promise of digital media, interaction presents itself as an especially clear and valuable one, when it usually delivers neither. "We call computer games interactive media, but we should more accurately call them "interpassive". Self-confined to our homes and hearths, we surrender our personal adventurousness to these virtual proxies on screen."[5] For any discussion of computer games, this reminder is welcome. Although media such as games are very often taken in this way, the priority of game studies always bears out a trace of this demand for traffic between the game experience and an adventurousness exceeding the game as hardware. Interaction can be a word to describe the increased narcotizing power of a medium, but it can also be a way to use the same appeal of adventure as a feature of some media over others. Brian Goldfarb critiques understandings of interactivity focused exclusively on "mechanical choice," arguing that

[5] Kane, Pat. "Opium in the Living Room." (*The Guardian Comment*, Nov. 9, 2006). http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,1942997,00.html (Accessed Dec. 1, 2006).

> "interactive" media incorporate a range of techniques beyond those that involve mechanical selection. In many instances, television or video can be said to have been made to function 'interactively,' if we understand interactivity to mean an engagement of the user in the production of knowledge and meaning, and not simply in the mechanics of making "choices."[6]

Against the understanding of video games as just another mind numbing bastion of media drivel, interactivity gives the impression of agency and activity of a user (rather than viewer), just by pressing buttons that do things. The understanding of media this operates against is comic in its imagination of the passivity involved in understanding and enjoying music and film.

Indeed, someone with a good idea what's going on in the game has got game, has a way of doing things that is their own. Those just trying to figure out what's going on are trying to follow the rules, with the hope to some day play the game. Interactivity for gaming does not mean simply pressing buttons, but also means an active relation at other levels between the user and the game.

In this way, we can say that gaming is not so simply reducible to competition as McKenzie Wark states,

> Needs no longer enters into it. Not even desire matters. Win what you desire; desire what you win. The score is the thing. The rest is agony. The gamer as theorist at first sight seems to have acquired an ability that counts for nothing in gamespace. The gamer as theorist might begin with an indifference to distinction, to all that the gamespace prizes. One plays not to win (or not just to win). One trifles with the game to understand the nature of gamespace as a world - as the world.[7]

Players can do more things in a game than maximize their score. It doesn't take a removed game-theorist to want to explore the game's world or socialize on a MOO. It is in the relation between different types of players that a MOO gets a social world, and that players position their own priorities in gameplay[8].

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[6] Goldfarb, Brian. *Visual Pedagogy*. (Durham, NC: Duke, 2002). pp. 16

[7] Wark, McKenzie. *GAM3R 7H3ORY: Version 1.1*. (Institute for the Future of the Book, 2006.) http://www.futureofthebook.org/gamertheory/ (Accessed Dec. 1, 2006). pp. 20

[8] Taylor, TL. *Play Between Worlds.* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006). pp. 69-70

Interactivity isn't about pure competition for everyone, but even when it does mean competition, it's in the particular way it offers competition that a game has its own style and things to say. Despite computers running on base 2, games do not make only "digital decisions on all shades of difference."[9] What is interactive about a game is not just a player and their mindless quest to win at any cost, but the give and take of what the game is, why it is played, what is fun about it, and how it can be used in a string of contexts expanding out from the isolation of Wark's typical gamer.

Identification

Wark's gamer theorist is a character with whom it would be easier to imagine an affinity. Whose actions would be more understandable, who would be more like ourselves, as the audience of his book on gamer theory. Identification as another iteration of ourselves, the vision of a game as a fulfillment of a thing that is what we have already meant to be where we are now and will finally become in some other place. Another part of the identification by which the player comes to position itself in terms of action in the world of the game is transformation. Identification can then be, "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image … this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction."[10]

Reflection from the mirror serves the ego, which needs to be posited as agency somewhere, but the fictional direction and situation of the ego are also understandable visually. Identification as "first and foremost an identification with

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[9] Ibid, 22.

[10] Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." 16th International Congress of Psychoanalysis, Zurich. July 17, 1949. pp. 2

a particular gaze from which I see myself being seen."[11] The player character is just like any other moving thing in the game world in which it inhabits. This is a way that the hands that play have to get used to being seen.

There are other understandings of the identification moment mirrors offer. What is seen in a mirror, like what is seen in the game, might be the self one is forced to live, but it can also be understood as a friend, an image to ponder, a dressing room mirror taking part in the production of a look, a filter for sense modalities, or a more lustrous version of the kind of visual reflection any shiny object offers. Foucault writes,

> In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.[12]

Video games offer this kind of vision, of an I in another place that is not here, and of an I that cannot be in the game because it must be here. The trick of the mirror, which is distinct from games, is that the eyes can focus into the depths of the mirror, and do not have to regard it as surface in the same way we are forced to see a screen. There is only one distance from the eyes at which the screen comes into focus.

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[11] Sinthome. "Fantasy and Subjective Destitution," (*Larval Subjects*, Nov. 16, 2006.) http://larval-subjects.blogspot.com/2006/11/fantasy-and-subjective-destitution.html (Accessed Dec. 1, 2006).
[12] http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html

Where

Identification as transportation and transformation give a sense of the position of the player in and out of a game, and what where that position is means. This is the sense in which "[v]irtuality is not simulation , imitation, mimesis of reality, but the access, so to speak, to another ontologically different dimension."[13] Tony Hawk, the pro skater, grinds, cruises and tricks, but returns also as my body on the street when I walk. The Prince of Persia becomes the movement of the feet, the connection of weight to strength, of the hands to architecture, of the eye that always includes (as repayment for the hapticity of vision) a solid opportunity of bodily movement. That's the export from the heterotopic mirror, from the ontologically different dimension.

This is how the magic circle breaks down. At the edge of a game, at its walls or edges, at the edge of the court, is the magic circle. "[I]n video games, the magic circle is quite well defined since a video game only takes place on the screen and using the input devices (mouse, keyboard, controllers), rather than in the rest of the world."[14] Perhaps the strict definition of a game Juul uses does end at a magic circle. The magic circle bounds discussion and thinking of gaming as a form of experience, delimits the game at the edges of hardware, and forecloses the sociality out of which play arises and the porosity of boundaries in the game. The edge of a tennis court may be the magic circle that bounds the game, but it is also very much a part of the game: a place to try to hit the ball and a mark around which to position a ball boy, a fence, and an audience. The problem with

[13] Perniola, Mario. *Sex Appeal of the Inorganic.* Trans. Massimo Verdicchio. (New York: Continuum, 1999). pp. 30
[14] Juul, 164-165.

magic circle theories is that the kinds of boundaries they want to fuse into a circle that works by magic are neither in the shape of a circle nor running on magic. They are software implementations leveraged by the player and take different forms, in the case of bounded 3d objects they are an impenetrable skin, and in the case of edges of maps they can be an infinite fall off the side or a sky that is really only texture on a high ceiling.

What happens in the game neither stays in the game nor escapes to run wild in its natural state. Animals may stay in their cages in zoos, but this should not be understood as a self-enforcing limit to the many forms of their existence, or their influence and uses.

Hands of the game

Fingers perched on the keys to central actions, twitching over to nearby keys for secondary controls. Hands wrapped around a controller with wrists holding the thing in place so the thumbs can swap between A and B, X and Y, joysticks and directional pads. There are hands separated onto the keyboard over w, a, s, and d for movement and onto the mouse where the index finger can coordinate firing weapons with a middle finger that zooms in. Like martial arts technique, these are different approaches to the posture and movement of the hand, the relation between the index fingers and the thumbs, between the wrists and the palm. In arcades, built into the machines, controls bring new hands onto them, offering a track ball or joystick, six buttons or two, distributing the controls to provide a distance between the bodies that stand and make the game continue to be played.

Real time games situate reactions and thought in ongoing activity. There is no outside space in which to think, there are points of vulnerability on the screen that must be watched and protected. Targets and beings, with which to negotiate by any means necessary, come and go, and cognition cannot just be *of* something, but also must be something. For the hands that play, interaction is buttons and controls, analog and digital inputs, extensions of the body that have particular relations to sensation and are not mere pieces of rubber and plastic. The image of this relation of the body into a technology it uses is not just the cyborg, part human and part machine, but the animated secretarial class of workers in *Ghost in the Shell*'s Section 9 whose hands, when typing (which is almost all the time) open into thin metal tentacles that thrash around the keyboard hitting unlabeled keys that blink when touched. For the circuit of gameplay itself, it makes no difference if the thing playing the game is a human with robot attachments, a robot with human features, or a monkey.

However, controls are not just metaphorically appropriable as extensions of the human body, they are in fact designed that way. The pressure they require to be depressed, and the limit to how hard they can be pushed, the rigidity required of the thing that pushes them, the range of motion of the mouse, the ability of the arm to move the hand one way and the direct opposite immediately are all part of the design. A bird or starfish, or a hand without bones, was never a possible player.

Visions of Game Fun

Why people play games and what fun they get from them are not philosophical questions so much as practical orienting devices for discussions about gaming.

A kind of correct answer is secondary and could only emerge from the answers upon which people are already acting. It is the same with questions about the meaning of life or what a person's purpose is on Earth. These questions may mark the limits of discussions that imagine themselves too pragmatic to engage philosophy, but this dismissal is also an insulation of implicit and already operative answers to these questions. In this way, political authority can work from assumptions and understandings of how these questions can be answered without having to defend this inheritance.

In a video game, the fact that the layers of game world come from code and the cycles of a processor call the imagination to questions about the creation of the game that are a distraction from the administration of the game along lines of a vision of gameplay. TL Taylor argues that a company owning and operating a MOO[15] is a holder of copyright, and at that level, they have found they can keep their players as consumers of copyrighted material. When consumers do more than that little name for them implies, and instead create a world of meaning for the game, levels of depth the game never anticipated, and outsides to the game that fundamentally change it, their contribution goes unrecognized by copyright law.[16] The company wants players powerless and forced to pay, but it also needs them to keep their account with the service, customer satisfaction. At the same time, churn is a part of the process and not a threat to the service. Old hands at the game probably have all kinds of useful suggestions for

[15] Multi-Object Orientation, or MOO, describes online environments where many users can do different things simultaneously in the same virtual space. It's a broader and more up to date version of its predecessors, MUDs: Multi-User Dungeons.
[16] Taylor, 128-130

improvement, but they're also complaining much more than new players and paying the same monthly fees.

What the company running a MOO does is not just create a game or claim intellectual property rights to it in order to exclude and dominate players along a model of consumers. The company runs a government whose basic laws (an End User License Agreement leaving the user to click "I agree") are consented to without much consideration. "Developers of virtual worlds govern their players by nonnegotiable, often inaccessible, contracts. Much of the promise that virtual worlds will develop into influential communication forums conflicts with the reality of EULAw."[17] The company writes this click-wrap constitution with terms that "inevitably grant all rights to the owner of the world."[18] Enforcement mechanisms are the game's ever-changing software, customer service representatives (often heavies in big armor), account suspension or deletion, and legal action. The purposes of this government are more complex than profit, because that one drive for profit realizes itself as a splintering call for contradictory goals.

A game's administration needs to attract users (and in some games, keep them). Almost every aspect of the game can draw in or scare off potential players. If the game is more open to users as content creators, it can be an attraction. If the kinds of content they create aren't appreciated, it can hurt profits. The orchestration of a game in the context of these competing goals is a

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[17] Jankowich, Andrew. EULAw: The Complex Web of Corporate Rule-Making in Virtual Worlds. *Tulane Journal of Technology and Intellectual Property, 8* (1), pp. 9

[18] Lastowka and Hunter continue, "Though this practice would seem to make the resolution of property disputes simple - the world-owners get everything and the subscribers get nothing - virtual worlds will increasingly challenge the strength of EULA-based property demarcations. We will likely see courts rejecting EULAs to the extent that they place excessive restrictions on the economic interests of users." Lastowka, F. Gregory, and Dan Hunter. The laws of the virtual worlds. *California Law Review 92* (1), pp. 50.

vision of game fun. A series of decisions about what makes a game worth playing, what is not fun, and what the role of the game is in players' lives.

The problem with gold farmers is that many other players see them as cheating. The game was supposed to be fair, rewards come with merit, time, and effort. The game was supposed to be a way to relax. The game was not supposed to be a workplace, was not supposed to be about utility, and is not supposed to be how you spend your work time. Gaming is for leisure. Yet gold farmers remain and do not destroy the game. Farmers, like NPCs, remind us that there are things in the game that are not there to play. The gold farmer is a bug in the pantry: an unwelcome detail to some constructions of a place figured in terms of its relation to a context shared only by some. Some players treat gold farmers as competition, because the goods they sell go on to other players who didn't have to earn their achievements. What leisure with earning really means is time, and the fantasy upon which gold farmers intrude is one that privileges sitting at a computer for hundreds of hours, over countless other marginalized constructions of the game and gameplay.

Effectance

Effectance "is the desire for competence and feeling effective in dealing with the surrounding environment. The pleasure one gains from exploring, manipulating objects, and developing one's skills can be explained by this human need for personal accomplishments."[19] To understand the inevitability of effectance in computer games, references to the human serve to stabilize not

[19] Buckles, Mary Ann. "Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame Adventure." (PhD dissertation, UCSD, 1985). pp. 37

only the player but also the responsibilities of game development and game criticism. There will always be a human playing the game and that means any player will need personal accomplishments: meritocracy is hardwired.

Effectance isn't a psychological issue of the internal hopes and needs of a human player in terms of mind or society, but is the physical layout of the orientation of gamer and game. Locked together in the interface until the game offers its ending, until there is not more coding for the character to push through, until there is no more screen, until there is nothing more to be repeated, until the player quits and leaves. This is the negotiation on a formal level between the physical playing of the game and an audiovisual event with a tactile interface that is both necessary to the event's functioning, but also very clearly external to it. The metalepsis of the game's diegetic and narrative substrates is in your hands, but the rejoining of this escape with the whole is that the hands have ceased to be yours.

Like cars staying in their lanes, effectance is less robustly described by psychology than by structure. Cars threaten other cars when they veer out of a lane without changing lanes. They can be pulled over for it. Drivers are educated formally and informally to stay in their lane, roads have lanes that are clearly marked, these marks are legally either lit by the sun, streetlights, or a car's headlights. A psychological understand of cars staying in their lane imagines human mental processes considering options in this context, as if the mind's structured agency were the relevant question. What matters in effectance is how the situation of gameplay produces it, how the formal and informal education of gamers establishes it as practice, how game rules enforce

effectance as an expectation and proper course, and how gameplay give cues to the continuation of effectance as an ongoing player behavior and becoming.

Winning and losing both feed the desire for competence and feeling effective, but in very different ways. Losing is ever present. In most games, dying happens all the time, and winning only very rarely. Losing constantly reminds the player what is not going to work, what is a mistake, what failure is, and what will not let them continue to play. Losing is a gentle reminder that the powers of technologized subjectivity mean life as not only "a divinely strong and self-reliant steel man, but also … a vulnerable and mortal cyborg body, completely unable to function on its own."[20] Though players (and games) can come to terms with death and losing, and make it something other than a negative reinforcement not to lose any more, the overall impact of losing is to cut off an ongoing moment of gameplay and return to someplace or time before in the game's story. Winning, on the other hand, is a prospect as remote as getting a date by smiling at a stranger. Players are still drawn towards it, but by fantasies of what winning might turn out to be.

The direction of effectance is not just escapism. The direction appears as escapism from the point of view of the institutions and activities that see the player's becoming as an abandonment, as hopeless and terminal. But then there is also the forceful pleasure of the perversion of mind, body, and soul that the game enters the players world as an opportunity for. Not just escapism: the recreation of the apparatus that is the player's worlding instrument. Superpowers growing out of the hands and shoulder, slugs that shoot from the eyes, and all of

[20] Bryld, Mette and Nina Lykke. *Cosmodolphins: Feminist Cultural Studies of Technologies, Animals and the Sacred*. (London, UK: Zed Books, 1999). pp. 115

this is not just the body of puberty (the dominant representation of comic books' readership), but the body of transformation. The becoming that does not settle into any icon but diverts its growth into the specificities of a game world never permanently integrated into a particular being, but only surfing between games and characters and powers and virtual bodies and user interfaces.

Gender of gamer, gender in games

Despite so much statistical work on who is behind the anonymous tide of gaming that makes the industry suddenly so large, the gender of the gamer is not a question of the uncounted bodies of women and men at home. The gender of the nurse is not a direct result of the number of women and men with nursing jobs. At the same time, the issue is not merely changing media representations of gender in gaming. Gender largely circulates at the level of representation, but the engenderment of gaming that media represent are not created from scratch in every portrayal. It is gaming's gender that impresses itself upon representations of gaming. Gamers are geeky boys because they play games where boys save princesses from ogres. The worlds they inhabit are filled with imagery, storylines, modes of play, and music gendered masculine.

It is not even that the gamer is a single gendered character in a media ecology, but that it is an icon alive, all over its surfaces, with Mario and Lara Croft as much as couches and Nintendo controllers. That which the player becomes in the structural force of effectance genders gaming, that ontologically different dimension into which identification projects the hands is never a neuter space

with indifference to gender, but is a constant performance of details of gender unresolved by the symbol of Man or Woman.

Oni and Lara Croft, Princess Peach and Chun-Li. These women characters from games are not mere play things of male gamers, but are refigurations of the feminine gender in the representation of gaming. Discussions of *Tomb Raider* focusing on Lara Croft's body as a distortion of women's bodies or a kind of scopophilic pleasure for male gamers miss the productive power of the character to produce a femininity specific to gaming and software. Lara is a legacy for gamers: an attitude and a sense of expectation. This is what the enactment of a virtual body can be. It is neither what a body of flesh has to be understood in terms of, nor a Gnostic hope of turning into a cyborg thrilled to abject and ignore the materiality of bodies it would rather leave behind. The Gnostic accusation, as well as the tradition it criticizes, marked by a "distrust or even outright hostility to the body," depend on an unremitting superiority of computer simulation in order to make the call to "Jack in, leave Mother Earth behind forever."[21] But cowboys ready to leave the flesh behind soon learn,

> computerization doesn't release them from the flesh and its imperious demands. Cyberspace is ostensibly designed as a convenient, disembodied, and harmlessly neutral image of the world's amassed "information." But in fact the Matrix is anything but neutral; it bites and it kills. It is permeated by all sorts of strange forces: self-organizing alien interests, concentrations of political and economic power, irreducibly subjective kinks and quirks, remnants of genetic manipulations gone awry.[22]

The player enters something with all the complications, movement, corruption, embodiedness, and resistance of the body. And the player becomes one of those with bodies in both worlds, meeting the calls of gaming in one and scraping

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[21] Bey, Hakim. "The Information War." *cTheory, a022*. 1995. http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=64 (Accessed Feb. 22, 2004).
[22] Shaviro, cc. 5 (http://www.shaviro.com/Doom/ch5.html)

by in a full engagement with the other: a gamer. This is the backhanded escapism of the world into which their agency as hands abandons them.

Moving into the gender of the gamer, doing their own part in the construction of the gender of gaming, of the game world, of the body that plays.

Simulation Part 2

Hidden beneath the functions of game elements, are other functions of the game. Hidden behind the construction of gameplay as one type of structured experience is another world of possibility for interaction. Hidden through sepia tones is the real of memory in a movie flashback.

Hidden beneath means that in relation to what is seen one must believe also in a thing that is, from a point of view, behind and under what is seen. This does not mean that the thing hidden beneath determines the superficial movements of the mask, on the contrary it is the mask that creates characters imagined also to exist in another way beneath. The mask continues to exist even when removed, and what can be claimed to hide behind the mask will also, in other contexts or from other points of view in the same situation, be visible on its own. Thus, when one can read the code of a game, this is not the originary principle of the game, the real core of its existence, but an artifact discovered later that verifies the imagination of some alternative activity in relation to the layers of the game a player has already experienced. Reading the entire code of a game does not explain the character's sense of style or the experience of cruising through level after level with ease. To understand the programming that provides ambient sound in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* risks domesticating its critique of urban

space and populations into a coded solution to indicate where the player is and alert her to the presence of bystanders.

Video games are often like hand crank radios, without user input they don't play very long. To be depended upon by the system in this way involves the player at a level more basic than the interactivity of making choices with buttons. The player's continued physical attention sustains the object world that computer and player produce together. In one way, by reference to maps as files and images for navigation, space in a game is fixed and already present. For the player's ongoing interaction with the computer, however, space is constantly being produced by movement commands and the dispensation of meaning that makes and changes the face and realities of places.

The time of the game is, in one measure, a time singular to the game as a state machine. Real time in proportion to the computer's clock or processing speeds. In another way, time can be matched to diegetic durées of timers, lifespans, movement, pauses, and journeys. Simultaneously, the context of play makes its own kinds of time, times of competition or before losing interest, time until something is done cooking, time set aside for the game, or time created by canceling other plans. The time of the game, as a progression, can be traversed by saving and loading games, the equivalent to tropes of time travel. In all these negotiations with time, however, the hands that play a real time game cannot, without recourse to menus, but be plunged into the real time that is the software's periodic queries to check about player input.

Do those who play have no choice to do otherwise than the procedures of the game, to think other than according to the software that not only is, but also rules the gameplay experience? Part of simulation is always that principles are

encoded into it which an audience is not given a formal option of expressing an opinion about. In a first person shooter, opting out of violence means not only death or boredom, but also an end or restart of the game. Monsters always attack. In the arcade, this is more forceful, since losing means you have to put in more money or stop playing. The contest between imagining the player as infinitely free and treating the player as forced to follow the sweep of the game or risk death fails to appreciate the power of inducements built into the game and discovered by the player that influence behavior, and the player's hesitations and exceptions taken from this determined kind of path. In any first person shooter, the mind of the player rides along as a camera and set of controls plugged into the body, which is pure meat. Does this mean that those who play the game are persuaded by the Cartesian dualism built into the game, or, worse, physically trained so they act on this assumption without even being aware of it? The thing that plays a game does not need so much to actively understand and refute principles of simulation, as perform the game in understanding of them without translating the principle into a command on other parts of life. This is not so much an operation of resistance, as it is one of insensitivity and fragmentation, where what moves between parts of the thing that plays is not simply transmitted from part to part, but is only one thing among many in busy traffic.

Machine Elves

Between each rule as affectively constructed for the player and as implemented by software, a discrepancy visits. Glitches in computer games have changed with technologies, ways of rendering graphics, and types of gameplay. Once, players at consoles would complain that they'd been cheated if the game called

something a hit that looked to them like a miss. If the game didn't register a button pressed, something had gone wrong. Glitches of this kind glare at players who resent a game that has shown itself to be again an object of their efforts rather than an instrument in them. Other kinds of glitches have no impact on gameplay, but can end the game. Some events in a game are routine and become invisible as glitches. Glitches are not aberrations from the game according to any strict rules, so much as they are departures from constructions of the game, or visions of how the game is supposed to work. They can remind us that a game is software grinding away behind the scenes, but it also shows us the nature of the thing with which a player had come into such intimate a relation.

What cannot be repressed from the discrepancy between the rules of the game as they are encountered and experienced (which are championed by losing, death, and failure for the player) and as they are computed and outputted, are the flickers that imply a machinery underlying the process: a specter of a machine in whose operational state an I can emerge in a world of operation that often becomes not as it seems. Breakdowns show how the system had, up to that point, worked. Software's regulation of the activity it makes possible has particular characteristics distinct from other forms of regulation. It is automated, immediate, and plastic. It can regulate without transparency, its rules cannot be ignored, and yet it is prone to sudden failure.[23]

The character of glitches, which becomes soon understood as the character of also that which was not a glitch, is arbitrary. Chosen. One cannot avoid a feeling of coherence or relation and totality to these arbitrary decisions. The computer game world, of each game and in any form of gameplay, is an

[23] Grimmelman, James. "Regulation by Software." *Yale Law Journal, 114* (1719).

orchestration of game elements in conspiracy to entertain and enter the player, to engage and influence the player. Gameplay, as much as the implementation of game art, and the architecture of the possibility of game space, as much as any particular place in a game, live in a medium that corresponds to a residue of humanity that demands visual and auditory stimuli. A game provides surfaces of interactivity with the human interface device, monitors all input and injects it into some agency that may need player control very much or almost not at all. A game provides paths of performance that may be more of less strongly preferred but are always optional, to be opted into. Terence McKenna writes in a different context of something he calls machine elves,

> So beings are making objects, showing you objects, the objects are turning into beings and making other objects, these beings and objects, they jump into your chest - and then they jump back out. They jump into your body and disappear into your body, and then they jump back out, waving these things, just throwing this stuff in all directions. They are - the word that comes to mind is: they are *Zany*. It's like a Bugs Bunny cartoon, uh, gone mad. And all of this energy - they are elves. This is what elves are. It's this weird thing, where they love you - or they like you a lot, but you can tell that their sense of humor is Weird **...**
> this place is... somebody very weird... it's their idea of a reassuring environment for a human being! It's like a playpen. It's this warm. well lit, secure, womblike environment, and when I break into it they these things, the elves and the toys, are toys! These are things to amuse me. The way you would hang, uh, cubes and blocks above a cradle... a playpen, you know? Because children are supposed to coordinate shapes and bright colors. That's what these things are: they are toys to try and get me to coordinate my perception in this place. It's a holding area of some sort - someone's created this and is watching me.[24]

This is the sense of care and attention that TiVo's iconic tv/elf shows, and the kind of playful neutrality and fun Google's web applications sport as visual style. With an awareness of the kind of visual-affective construction of games occurring at this level, the world of the video game more easily ceases to require an outside real world for it to be constructed as a stylized reference to.

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[24] McKenna, Terence. 1990. "Time and Mind." (Workshop in New Mexico, May 26/27). http://deoxy.org/timemind.htm (Accessed Nov. 24, 2006).

Machine elves are not so much the actual set of processes previous to a video game as they are the thing-behind implicit in the video game as a mask. They are virtual machinery, the processing apparatus invented to explain the miracle of a thing whose production must be explained. Objects confront us in everyday life without any sense of where they come from until a source is imputed by an advertiser, or some other intervention into the consumer atmosphere. First there is a shoe, then there is a sweatshop from which the shoe comes. Although, "in fact," the shoe must have come from somewhere, this is part of a philosophical appropriation of consumer objects into networks of meaning dependent on cause, production, and transportation that is neither automatic nor inevitable for understanding everyday reality. Likewise, breasts are "in fact" fat and glands on a human body, but that fact is not their competitive, seductive, or nurturing aspects, which are far more important in social reality. The virtual machinery of a video game takes on exciting faces of utility, structure, function, and constant, unflinching, calculation and repetition not unlike the celebration of virtual machinery in the 2005 remake of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.[25]

Video Game Violence

When a video game is a violent video game, this is not because millions die, it is not because social policies allow avoidable death at a marginally profitable level. It is not because western medicine makes disease, or because of the slow statistical murder of the freeway system, or particulate air pollution. It has nothing to do with job-related 'accidents' or fatalities. It's because the hands, as tools of a silly little child, have provoked graphic and horrific death. Because

[25] *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Tim Burton. 2005.

violence has been taken responsibility for, because it is happening in your own hands (those that attach to your precious forearms).

This is the sense of violence in a media ecology where killing is against the rules but death is normal, where the exceptional instance of violence is the focus of our animosity but the (readily identifiable) processes of destruction are invisible. Violence in areas where it is common just can't be changed, but violence where it is rare must be shown zero tolerance, rooted out, and banned. NIMBY nonviolence.

As Huey P. Newton said when he got out of jail, "existence is violent".[26] Playing the game, different layers involve different kinds of things to call violence. At the level of code, violence disappears, because only statistics of health change and eventually an animated object, e.g. a monster, stops getting animated and becomes a static object. Players do not simply enact what they train to do, but have to come to terms with principles built into their simulation: interaction is more than a power to click to kill. To be played by the game into violence, the hands learn certain kinds of hapticity from vision, sound, and rumble packs. Those feelings are not hidden forms of violence, they are the subtending reality to representations of violence which are, again, directly provided as possibilities by a world of machine elves bent on having what we are still calling violence inflicted upon them.

The orchestration of violence in a game appears as a wild and terrifying choice of players within certain constructions of gameplay. Is killing bystanders a dark fantasy? Or is it the relation of the player to graphics and simulation, to

[26] Newton, Huey P. (Interview, 1977.) http://odeo.com/audio/1832692/view (Accessed Dec. 5, 2006).

something which is only mimetic to an outside real to those not playing the game?

Violence in the game is not entirely a harmless engagement in graphics and computerization, I hope. It is also an empowering activity of politics as housekeeping and the desperation of existence as always already violence. It is, afterall, because of the organized violence around them that the player character responds with violence. Magic circles of gameplay draw borders around game violence as something entirely internal to the game. But the hands that play and learn the feeling of game elements play other things in their life than games. They learn rhythms from the game, the delicacy of buttons and their proper timing, how to navigate about them and map them into the hands embodied knowledge. I would even suggest that the tradition of exceptional violence as a desperate measure of interruption carries a crucial technology of resistance to disciplinary power, and has not yet been fully coordinated into post-disciplinary societies of control.[27]

The real issue of video game violence is anxiety about who gets to exercise what is considered violence, with a focus on a particular construction of games as competitive, violent, and mindless escapism.

Conclusion Part

Through an analysis of real time gaming as a form of experience, action, platform, fighting, and FPS games can be more productively trafficked in and out of the virtual worlds they involve but do not end at. Between games, controls and

[27] Deleuze, Gilles. “Society of Control.” *L'autre journal, 1*. 1990.

tactics (such as circle strafing or inventory maximizing tricks) can be repeated. This kind of repetition forms not only game genres and an easy market for sequels or knock-offs, but also a tradition of gaming whose repeated traits provide the basis for a systematic analysis that does not apply to a bound set of games, but can instead be brought to bear on particular games.

Games have layers and are not black boxes, nor windows into a computer reality. Instead they call forth virtual machineries whose pedigree I call machine elves. Players interact with these layers of the game by doing more than pressing buttons and thus "making choices." They are played by the game and also must come to terms with principles of simulation, and do so in ways other than being conquered by them. Identification and effectance are structural and practical ways in which gaming is a transformative process for the player that is not mere escapism. Particular visions of game fun, sometimes enforced with more or less totality, by software regulation and EULAs, but more often imagined and enforced through more informal means, foreclose other, often more productive, understandings of gameplay. The gender of gaming and the gamer are thereby affective constructions of games and the player becoming gamer, although these are not the only generators of the gender that games and gamer representations are so thickly saturated with. Finally, video game violence becomes a fantasy of virtuality as a mimesis of reality, with gaming as a kind of viciously competitive escapism. That which can be called violence in video games is better understood as a kind of intimacy with an object world which makes violent agency a tradition for resistance and a means of desperation.

No body lives in games, except gold farmers who make their livelihood in virtual worlds whose mode of being in them makes these places largely

unrecognizable as games. The questions that understanding gaming as a form of experience hopes to invigorate are ventures of import and export between gaming and other social worlds. In these discussions we should remember not only the agency of the gamer, at different layers of a game's surface, but also its construction and relation to the agency of software.

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