Playing Badly:
The Heroic Cheat and the Ethics of Play

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Abstract

This dissertation explains the work of hegemonic play in understanding what games are and what they do. This explanation is used to formalize a new theoretical and practical model for games criticism that can also be applied in literary, media, and social criticism. The present moment has been dubbed a "ludic age" as our algorithmically-informed world increasingly resembles game systems, a similarity exacerbated by an ongoing and intentional surge in deploying game concepts across every corner of organizable experience. Despite these signals to the value of reading games within ordinary experience, there persists a deeply held belief that the essential nature of games lies in their radical difference to non-game or "real" life. In *Playing Badly*, I challenge the game/non-game dichotomy on its logical and philosophical grounds and with regards to its practical utility, arguing that classical game ontology offers neither a compelling description of games nor the means to use that description robustly in critical work. By rethinking game ontology, my argument reveals games' crucial role in producing and maintaining the fiction of stability on which everyday forms of life depend. Reading texts, whether social, digital, or traditional, from this ludic perspective offers a framework for critiquing the ethical stakes at play within each system. Games, however generous one is with that category, exercise power by formalizing values in their rules. Ultimately, my project creates space for resistance by using the concept of cheating to reveal opportunities for play within the systems of value represented in our texts and by extension the systems in which we live our lives.

To contextualize my intervention, I explain the strengths and weaknesses of current views on game ontology within game studies and offer an alternative argument in favor of a game-specific ontology generated through the interaction of a game's socio-historical context, formal components (rule interactions and representational choices), and the term hegemonic play, which refers to a way of playing a game that reinforces its dominant hierarchy of values. I contend this approach better accounts for the dynamism inherent in games, which change depending on where, when, and by whom they are played. It is the concept of cheating that organizes these forces and offers an infinitely clearer picture of the borders of the protean texts we call games. I present an array of readings of traditional, social, and digital texts that demonstrate how cheating makes the values at play within game structures legible and how this view of games can be brought to bear on other texts where game structures predominate, which is to say any text at all.

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Introduction

Look at me,
Look at me,
Look at me now!
It's fun to have fun
But you have to know how.

Dr. Seuss, *The Cat in the Hat*

Like all tricksters, the Cat in the Hat teaches ambivalence. While the delightful tautology that "it's fun to have fun" has captured the public imagination, fewer remember the qualification that follows, "but you have to know how." Seuss's Cat teases with a choice between fun that plays according to rules and fun that is inherently transgressive; a choice whose obligatory decision ("you *have* to know how") is at once instrumental and moral, at once practical (how to have more fun) and ontological (fun is only really fun when the right choice is made). This version of play is our most familiar. Sentimental, it imagines a mythic childhood whose play is exuberant and innocent even as it tips its hat to the threat of rules and obligation which are both a constraint upon and a medium for pleasure in more "sophisticated," or adult, play.

The uncertainty in Seuss's quotidian drama is echoed within the human story writ large. The dialogue between playing and the rules of play is a conversation so foundational and far-reaching that our lives would be

incomprehensible without it. The germ of this ancient conflict flowers perpetually throughout human history as permutations of form—improvisations that emerge like shoots to anchor and organize new patterns—that act as organizing principles across the panoply of lived and imagined experience.

The goal of the work that follows is to deepen our understanding of the phenomena of play and games with regard to how these reflect on human experience. I offer a model for analyzing how the frames of play and gaming make sense of moral narratives. This model is predicated upon the argument that games are rhetorical systems that provide opportunities for ethical play. Just as with the Cat in the Hat, it is not always clear whether ethical play means following rules or playing against them.

Improving our understanding of games has a special urgency as they command a larger and larger share of public attention. In *The Gameful World*, a recent collection of essays about the rising influence of games, NYU professor and game scholar Eric Zimmerman dubbed the present moment a ludic age, or "ludic century," wherein our algorithmically-informed world increasingly resembles game systems (2014). Moreover, he argues, just as previous centuries were marked by dominant cultural forms like the novel or moving image, games (specifically digital games) are revealing themselves as a major medium of cultural expression in the 21st century.[1] Recognizing this allows us to acknowledge both the explicit profit-focused trends and ongoing deployment of

[1] From a strictly economic perspective, the Entertainment Software Association, using data from the NPD group, show that in 2017 nearly $25 billion was spent on game content (i.e. games themselves). See *Essential Facts about Video Games*.

game concepts across every corner of organizable experience,[2] as well as the proliferation of game images, language, and aesthetics in social life in more subtle and complicated ways.

Responses to the ubiquity of game stuff are as varied as the games themselves. The prolific and influential game scholar, Ian Bogost, has famously excoriated the practice of gamification as "bullshit," specifically business consulting bullshit (2011c, 2014). Bogost's argument is motivated by two equally important concerns. First, there are some deeply concerning ethical problems even when the gamification of a business "works." For example, consider the relative merits of a company that, although it pays its employees low wages and demands long hours in poor conditions, manages to improve employee satisfaction and productivity by gamifying their labor. There is nothing preventing a sweatshop from using leader boards and cross-team competitions to extract more labor from its workforce. While the subjective experience of the employees' situation has changed, their material circumstances have not. If a subject can be trained to enjoy its torments, are they nonetheless torture? Similar problems abound as persuasion collapses into manipulation as the gamifying of production and consumption grows more sophisticated when accompanied by the analysis of mass data. Bogost rebrands this style of gamification as "exploitationware," a moniker equally applicable to his second concern: that gamifiers in the consulting world don't care at all if their interventions work and are only interested in selling

[2] Via a process that has come to be known as "gamification," which uses game concepts, tools, or structures in traditionally non-game contexts like work, healthcare, or a marketplace.

more gamification (2011c). That is, the gamification consultant Bogost admonishes isn't properly concerned with games as such, and this disregard impoverishes the so-called games (and gamifying practices) they are hawking. The concern with propriety gives away the game that Ian Bogost and the Cat in the Hat are ultimately concerned with a similar problem: *how* is one to play? What exactly are games and what are we to do with them? If there isn't necessarily a right way to play, is there a wrong one, or at least a better or worse way to play?

Games' famous resistance to definition has two important parts. First, any statement about what games are is also a statement about how one relates to games. While this may seem obvious, it bears stating explicitly because it goes often goes overlooked. A huge amount of ink has been spilt, for example, in raking over Wittgenstein's famous observation that games don't have a fixed set of shared qualities:

> Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: "There *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games' "—but *look* and *see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!— …see how similarities crop up and disappear.

> And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. (Wittgenstein, ¶ 66, 36)

To understand Wittgenstein's observation, we need to include the I that looks and sees. The relation of concern is not between a game and a game, but between games and the players of games. For the notion of "family resemblances" to make sense, this second-order observation is required. It is helpful to remember that any claim about what games are is also a statement about what games mean. The second part of the difficulty in defining games follows from this awareness.

Games are a moving target. Inside the exchange of how we relate to games is the provocative question of how we wish to relate to games. Sometimes the relationship to our play surprises us. Although the actions of play are historically situated, the experience of play is not strictly temporally linear. For instance, a situation may arise where, although you thought you were playing at the time, it later turns out that you were not playing at all. Whatever our historical circumstances, we usually have some say about what we want games to be in the future. How should our playing take shape? Like language, games change in their use. As we cross from one field of play into another, we must be sensitive to the different contexts of play, alert to the ways in which the game displays its values, and above all attuned to the players in the game—including ourselves—and how we choose to use or be used by those forces.

At the heart of the rhetoric of games is the recognition that a game is a system: it is a simplification of the chaotic fullness of the world. Through the process of abstraction, the designers designate the bits that matter for the purposes of the interactions they symbolize. Games are useful structures, material and metaphorical patterns, for making sense of the world. "The game of life" doesn't contain all of life any more than the "dating game" encapsulates the entirety of romantic relationships. They serve as a useful shorthand for their players to identify, and to negotiate, what is going to matter as the course of their play establishes patterns of behaviors that make a life, play by play, legible.

I contend that using the concepts of play and games to think through texts—in which I include social texts like standing in line at the grocery and traditional texts like novels—draws to the fore the ways in which textual objects, like games, systematize values. Moreover, I argue that it is only by asking the additional question of what it means to cheat at the game/text in question that we can clearly see our relationship to the game being played and how the gameplay makes its arguments.

Play in its fullest sense is a reminder of power: imagined and real, as both actor and object. It gestures to the ancient meaning of fate as the sphere of influence within which one's life is lived. Cheating is at once a way of playing and a way to speak about play. Understanding it is a matter of understanding what cheating does for us, which at least in part is to serve as a second order system from which to judge the values of another system (be it a game, a system of law, religion, honor, or what have you).

The notion of a game doesn't make sense if there can be no appeal to some outside perspective, though this perspective may be itself another game. Gregory Bateson points to this when he describes play as metacommunication (138-48). Certainly play is metacommunicative, but so is almost everything else. The logic of play—and the valuation of a game—happens within a layering of the registers of human experience, calling to a system superimposed upon experience in order to make sense of it. Likewise, cheating may be an appeal to a higher order system (rules about rules).

The work that follows is organized around three inter-related claims. First, that using the concepts of play and games to understand texts reveals how traditional views of texts are supported by systematized relationships (games in the text) and deepens our appreciation of play and games. Second, that the question of what it means to cheat best reveals the values at play in any given game. And last, that the values revealed are in conflict, and this conflict is the space the game allows for ethical play (playing with values).

As we come to better understand the rhetoric of games—how values are coded into rules and communicated through their processes—we are better able to play critically. This critical awareness is first and foremost a matter of games literacy, but what is it that is being read? I argue that what is read as a game's ideology or values is best expressed as that game's hegemonic play.

Hegemony in this sense derives from Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. Gramsci recognized that power does not only operate through direct force but also by way of consent. Cultural hegemony, as he described it, is the

production of consent among the masses to the authority of the ruling power. Games operate according to an analogous structure: there are decisions that are forced by the program (e.g. going to the right in Super Mario bros.), and there are also non-neutral decisions left to the player like jumping on Goombas (see Figure 1 below).

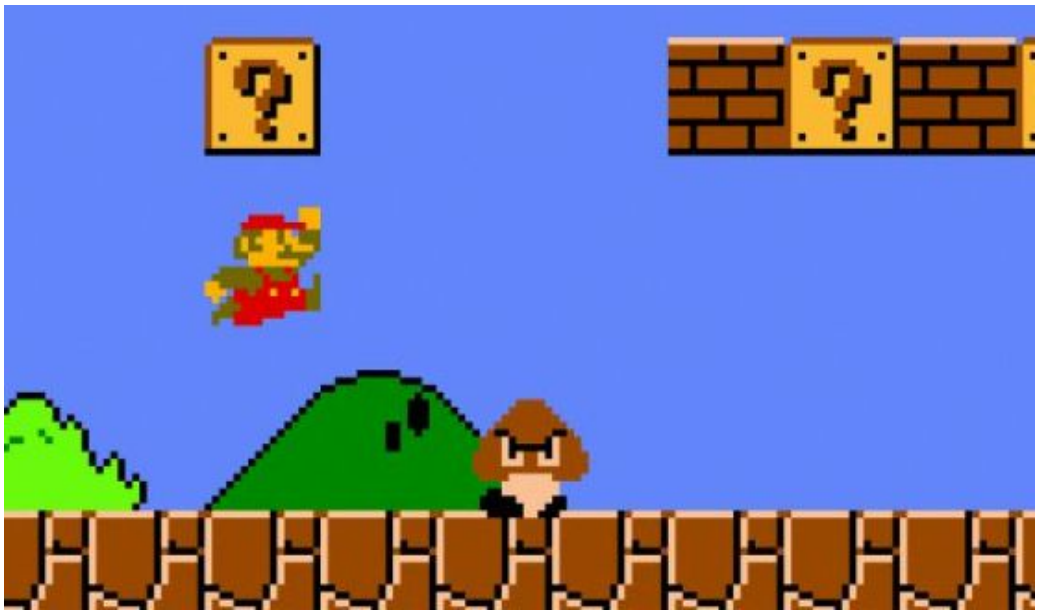

Figure 1. The player-controlled Mario prepares to jump on and squish a Goomba. Defeating this enemy is not necessary for level progression.

The non-neutral decisions like the one above are incentivized by the game: players earn points, the program makes special sound effects, there is the satisfaction of having affected the game state, and the interactions of the game are made more dynamic and complex. While the system doesn't insist the player jump on the Goomba, it weights the decision so that it is hard to do otherwise.

Super Mario Bros. uses a point tally to generate high scores: celebrating an accumulative vision of mastery wherein the player who is most expert is the one who extracts the most points from the game. The pleasure of dominating the game system is—by way of the high score—by extension the domination of other players. Points become a totem through which players display mastery and status within a play community. While the game encourages caring about the point system, it because the player community consents to this logic and organizes its discourse around the gameplay as being "about" achieving mastery that Super Mario Bros. becomes not just a story about saving the princess, but doing so in a way that earns the most points (i.e. the "best" or "right" way).

It is only because, as critics and critical players, we have a heightened sensitivity to a game's hegemonic play that the different modes of critical play—counter-play, unplaying, and anything that might be recognized as alternative play—become possible. Awareness of hegemonic play opens space for playful resistance and counter-discourses, liberatory tactics as varied as there are games to play. Attending to a game's hegemonic play allows us to hear the multivocal conversation of ethical discourse in games. I explore this conversation, and have hopefully indicated a path to participating in it, in the chapters that follow.

Chapter one situates this investigation within the discourse on game ontology in the specialized subfield of game studies. Here, I make a case for the benefits to game criticism of a more open view of the category game, and how a tacit understanding of hegemonic play is imbricated upon game ontological arguments. In this section, I also lay the groundwork to demonstrate how my

proposed ontology will fail to exhaust the category game and what this failure might mean for the cultural role of games going forward that I take up again in the fourth chapter.

Chapter two presents the heroic cheat as a figure made legible by reading texts as games. Using the character of Odysseus and the disgrace of professional cyclist Lance Armstrong, I show how these figures call attention to the contradictions and conflicts inherent in game/play to reveal the agonistic tensions of a text's presentation of rational and prerational value systems.

In chapter three, I read Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* as a case study to investigate how cheating opens so-called "soft" or social games (games whose rules are implied and changeable and whose outcomes often exceed "mere" play). Thinking through the novel in this way reveals its foundational games: the patterns of interactions that readers depend upon to build coherent and meaningful readings. The heuristic provided by cheating as a way to understand the novel shows the game elements at play in structuring the characters' lives. In *Never Let Me Go*, these devices, tricks, and rules are marshaled to outline the borders of human being, the definition of which is the central game of the novel. The conflict of the game displays how characters' investment in certain forms of life set limit-points beyond which they cannot go without threatening their narrative coherence. These points are sites of paradigmatic tension where what one does changes what one is: where the instrumental and efficient functions of cheating are at once insistent and untenable.

Finally, in chapter four I return to detail the workings of hegemonic play with a specific emphasis on how this takes shape in video games. I present two readings of games that highlight the critical possibilities of hegemonic play. Finally, I look to take on what the failure of my game ontology and critical method might mean for the shape of the future of games.

Chapter 1:

Hegemonic Play: How to Do Anything with Game Ontology

Fundamental to understanding our relationship to games is a working sense of what they are. Debates on game ontology have proposed some arguments that help to position oneself within a frame of reference regarding attitudes and beliefs about what games are and what they do.

This chapter intervenes in the discussions of game ontology that are at the heart of humanities work on game studies to offer a different perspective on what games are and can be. By advocating for a more open and mutable definition of games, I argue that identifying a game's hegemonic play is an essential entry point that must precede any subsequent interpretation of gameplay. Additionally, it is only in the light of such a perspective that the possibilities for ethical play can be meaningfully pursued.

My arguments depend upon the recognition that the identity of games cannot be thought apart from an ongoing relationship between players and their games. Although I begin with, and often return to, examples of traditional (non-digital) games, video games are of special concern here. The view of games offered here involves the interrelation of three core concepts: game, cheating, and hegemonic play. I define these as follows:

1. Game: an experience of play made possible by a system of rules such that the experience is repeatable and at which it is possible to cheat.
2. Cheating: the violation of an operant rule of a game to affect a given outcome.[3]
3. Hegemonic play: the style of play most valued and encouraged by the game system and the play community. This term gathers the cluster of forces that together form the context of gameplay. Context in this regard needs to be thought expansively and includes, but is not limited to: a game as cybernetic system, a game's representational logic and symbols, its paratexts, and the play community in which the experience is being considered.

These definitions are elaborated over the course of my argument, but it is useful to have all the cards on the table from the beginning.

I've found that a certain amount of eye-rolling often accompanies discussions of what games are. Perhaps this is due to the difficulty of resolving ontological questions, let alone discipline-defining ones like what is literature, what counts as history, or what are games? Nonetheless, to paraphrase Rei Terada, just because something is impossible is not yet an argument not to do it.[4] To be frank, my goal is not to solve the definition of games but to make a case for

[3] Cheating can happen in environments without perfect knowledge but not in situations of complete ignorance of the governing rule system. Players may not know the exact consequences of specific actions but nonetheless transgress rule systems to influence a game's outcomes in a more general way.

[4] This reframes a comment made by Terada in the discussion following her talk, "Radical Anxiety," presented at the University of Minnesota on April 12, 2013. The comment sounded the obligation of the activist that endures despite an inability to cause transformative revolution.

how seeking the identity of a game draws out opportunities for ethical play in the games that are always already embedded in world.

As the recent ugliness of Gamergate has shown, alongside the less toxic proliferation of categories like "un-games," "art games," and "serious games," claims that a title is not a game (or not "really" a game) are regularly deployed in dismissals that suggest it is just some quality of "game-ness" that is at issue. One would do well to consider the stakes of these gestures of inclusion and exclusion, and how the category "game" is mobilized to control both access and content.[5] But the question of what games are is more than just a gate-keeping tool, it is also a chance to wrestle with one of the most pervasive of human metaphors and to interrogate our most cherished objects and pastimes.

I. Game Ontologies: problems and possibilities

The project of game ontology suffers from three major problems (perhaps more, but these seem the most significant). What I like about these problems is that they are both serious and inevitable. No game ontology, including the one I

[5] Gamergate is an event within the international gaming community beginning (roughly) in August of 2014. Theoretically, Gamergate stems from a crisis of identity about who gamers are, what games should/can do, and how gamers understand the role of games culturally and themselves as consumers. In practice, however, Gamergate is a reactionary campaign of harassment/terror levelled against prominent female game developers specifically, and women, minority, and LGBTQ gamers in general. It has been described, accurately, as a hate group. Additional information on Gamergate can be found here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamergate_controversy. Major international news agencies have covered the scandal but, because of its ongoing nature, Wikipedia's cumulative reporting may be desirable in this case.

propose, escapes them. Happily, these problems are also opportunities to approach games differently.

The first problem is a tendency to conflate play and games. In even the best game ontologies, characteristics of or attitudes about how one plays are folded into and offered as attributes of what is being played. This can be clearly seen in arguments that view play, and by extension games, as intrinsically voluntary, such as in the classic works on play and games by Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, and Bernard Suits. Each author gives play's voluntary nature as essential and inalienable to gameplay: "First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it" (Huizinga, 9); "There is also no doubt that play must be defined as a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement. A game which one would be forced to play would at once cease being play" (Caillois, 6); playing a game is "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (Suits, 54-55). The focus on the player's intention is problematic from a textual perspective since changing what motivates a player, or how she feels about what she does, doesn't necessarily change what she does; yet the critic only has access to what is done as a material record of play. Any game ontology worth its salt must wrestle with play, but the point at which games and players come together is exactly where game boundaries and definitions become unclear. Accordingly, it is a useful place to pull at the string of play that dangles impishly from every game. The play/game problem is a chance to see how the ability to act and be acted upon are used in game structures (patterns of experience) to produce meaning. The

voluntary nature of play, as a significant example, privileges the perspective of the player and renders the game's meanings subservient to her experience. It is also possible to think gameplay from the view of the game, with the player as either an object of play or as merely a significant actor, rather than the sole arbiter of the legitimacy of gameplay.

The second major problem game ontologies face is an impossible choice as to whether one is speaking of games as objects, games as sets of practices, and—with the rise of video games—games as a medium.[6] [7] Unsurprisingly, each approach leads to very different answers about what games are and what properties they possess. When games are conceived principally as objects, they acquire a satisfying concreteness and are effectively physical instantiations of rules (e.g. the game *Monopoly* consists of certain game pieces—and not others—used in a particular set of procedures—and not others) deviation from which risks compromising the identity of the game. Viewed as sets of practices, games are cousin to ritual, exhibit regional differences, and may be organized according to something like the "institution of a game" (Suits, 58-60).[8] As a way of doing

[6] The language of "a medium" is a useful error that gathers video games as a category and places them within the tradition of other mass media. However, it is important to acknowledge that video games are not one medium but many: a PlayStation is not PC is not a GameBoy is not a Nintendo Entertainment System, and games on cartridges are built under different material restrictions than games on disc or for digital download. Even so, speaking of video games as a medium is increasingly commonplace within game studies and is helpful shorthand to address the very diverse category of these objects.

[7] To say nothing of games as metaphor.

[8] Suits uses the idea of an "institution" of a game to imagine a collection of practices that exist in the abstract, within which game-specific goals may be found. The institution of a game is a mechanism for Suits to create prelusory goals (a realizable goal that exists independently of and prior to the game) for games that do not otherwise have an "achievable state of affairs" that exists outside the game (e.g. checkmate in chess). The institution of a game takes on a distinctly platonic character at odds with games' lived history: the institution is at once derived from actual use (in all its variety), yet legislates from an imagined, belated origin.

something, or as an arrangement of actions, games become more mobile and inventive: things that had not been games can become games by simply being incorporated into, or adapting them onto, whatever practices are available to the category "game" in a given social context. When games are thought principally as a medium through which some experience is delivered, the content of that exchange is expanded to a yet unknown limit. Whereas game-objects and (albeit to a lesser extent) game-practices control for content, the game-medium is content agnostic and accepts (if only nominally) that anything arriving by way of the medium is de facto a game.

Questioning the materiality or location of a game opens the inquiry into rule structures and social use. Reading games as texts demands that the critic produce (or identify) the text in question. Sensitivity to how a game slides beneath its signifier when critical attention is brought to bear invites further speculation into how the rules that matter—which are significantly different from the rules of the game—are produced and reproduced in gameplay. Perhaps most exciting, considering games as a medium (such as with video games) is a powerful indicator of a seismic shift in how players relate to games. Where games had long been seen as more-or-less trivial pursuits or diversions tangential to the dramas of everyday life, considering games as a medium is to think of games as a site of and vehicle for the full range of human experience. It is a sign that the expectations about what games will do, what their content is and ought to be, has expanded. Consider the difference in the scope of content between, for example, *Space Invaders* or *Centipede* and games like *That Dragon, Cancer* (an exploration game

about parents' experience of the cancer diagnosis of their child) or *Papa & Yo* (a platformer that mythologizes a child's experience of his father's alcoholism). It is not only that the material restrictions of early video games have been overcome, allowing for more complexity, but that the breadth and depth of games' subject matter is infinitely more ambitious.

Last, the third problem game ontologies face is that they are understandably concerned with games in general. However, no one ever plays a game in general; she always plays this or that game.[9] What is required is a game ontology that acknowledges this limitation. The opportunity here is self-evident, to make the turn from concern with games in general to a sensitivity to the complexities of a specific game. Attending to the individual game should not be mistaken for abandoning pursuit of games as a category but rather as a pronounced shift in focus. Toward this end, some further definitional work is useful.

Earlier, in a baldly descriptivist vein, I defined a game as an experience of play made possible by a system of rules such that the experience is repeatable and at which it is possible to cheat. It will no doubt be recognized that this definition of game is a pretty terrible one if the goal of a definition is to exclude things. For example, under my definition taking a college entrance exam is a game. Voting? Game. Applying for tenure? Also a game. While these things may not be traditionally viewed as games in the strictest sense, they are situated to become

[9] The inverse of this claim is Suits' principle objection to Wittgenstein, which I address in detail in what follows.

games. That is, they have characteristics that are sufficient, if not necessary, for a game to be taking place. As it stands, my definition brings together the most salient conditions of possibility for games rather than attempting to legislate inflexible (and imaginary) borders. I take this approach because, when all is said and done, a descriptive view of games seems richer and more useful than a prescriptive view that must exclude a wealth of things commonly associated with games like dating, institutional politics, high finance, and so on.[10] I am far, far less concerned with whether X "really is" a game, than I am with what thinking about X in terms of games makes possible.

Familiarity with a general definition of games is at stake in parsing the identity of individual games to the extent that no game is played in a vacuum. Every player has at least some notion—however broad, however narrow—of what games are, have been, and what they might do. But this, on its own, is not enough to come to a statement of what a particular game is. The Interactive Fiction writer Emily Short rightly called attention to the fact that

> many critiques of videogames… have failed to recognize the distinction between what the player is allowed to do (namely, the specific actions he is allowed to perform using the interface of the game) and what he is allowed

[10] Colloquial reference to these activities as games goes well beyond merely calling them games. They are called games as an acknowledgement of game-like characteristics central to understanding the issue.

> to mean (that is, the framework of significance the game places on those actions). (Short, 2008)

Understanding the distinction Short identifies requires acknowledging the signals that mark some game experiences as valued over others: placing distance between the possible ways of playing and creating something like a hermeneutic nexus that anchors and directs a more particular way of playing. While this latter way is not (though it may well be called) the "right" way to play, it can be usefully thought of as the way a game is usually, or customarily, played; this understanding of the game is what the concept of hegemonic play describes.

That the idea of hegemonic play always and already underlies the way games are understood can be seen through analysis of the game ontologies offered by the celebrated Canadian philosopher of sport, Bernard Suits, and Danish games scholar, Jesper Juul. Together, Suits and Juul account for two highly influential models for current ontological scholarship on games, and they also straddle the non-digital/digital divide with Suits' work focusing on traditional games and sport and Juul focusing on video games. What's more, Suits and Juul both attempt to account for (and limit) the confusion of play and games when they address, as they must, how some understanding of players' play is essential to understanding games. For Suits, play and games come to a head in his concept of "lusory attitude."

The idea of a lusory attitude is elaborated in Suits' strange and delightful book, *The Grasshopper: games, life, and utopia*. Here, Suits defines a game as an "activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs (prelusory

goal), using only means permitted by the rules (lusory means), where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity (lusory attitude)" (48–9).[11] Suits asserts that the activity of game playing is always accompanied by a "lusory attitude," which is "the element which unifies the other elements into a single formula which successfully states the necessary and sufficient conditions for any activity to be an instance of game playing" (50).

The lusory attitude is particularly important for Suits as it points to how simply conducting the mechanical operations of a game is insufficient to be “an instance of game playing.” To illustrate this, Suits offers the fictional story of Smith, who, through a series of unlikely circumstances, finds himself running a 200-meter footrace (according to its rules) in order to disarm a bomb placed beyond the finish line (131-133). Suits concludes that, while the other runners in the race were playing a game, Smith was not: expressly, and only, because he lacked a lusory attitude. Suits comes to this conclusion because, had it been possible for Smith to do otherwise, he would not have run the race before defusing the bomb; Smith’s running of the race was principally instrumental in relation to the desired outcome and so “Smith was not playing a game for the same reason that cheats are not playing games: both are pursuing a goal whose attainment overrides obedience to the rules” (134). The essential, but peculiarly

[11] Suits, helpfully, also gives a less jargon-filled version of the above: “playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (55).

invisible, role of the lusory attitude in making a game a game calls for a more detailed examination.

The lusory attitude presents playing a game as a profoundly subjective experience: it is Smith's attitude toward the race and not the race itself (the objects and actions recognizable as a race) that cause it to cease to be a game. If true, a game is thus revealed as a special kind of event that takes place only at the happy union of specific circumstances (prelusory goal and lusory means) and an equally specific orientation toward those circumstances (lusory attitude). If it is true that Smith is not playing a game only because his psychological relation to his actions is inconsistent with the generic context of those actions, then the black box of his psyche poses a massive problem for criticism. In the absence of omniscient narration, and under the aegis of the lusory attitude, no observer can ever satisfactorily conclude that what appears to be, for example, a group of people playing baseball are, in fact, playing baseball (or any game whatever) since there is no way to reliably assess their intentional state. This leaves us out in the cold, as game playing becomes stuck at the level of mere appearances; but it is just those appearances that Suits deems insufficient.[12] The game properly played (which is a redundancy in Suits' view) is in effect a performative moment, called into being only when the right things are done in the right way by the right people.

[12] Similarly, the existence of the unconscious renders the fidelity of one's own intentions at least potentially suspect even to oneself.

The sense of performative above is akin to that of the performative utterance in J.L. Austin's influential, if often criticized, *How To Do Things With Words*. Austin differentiates performative from constative utterances by the former's not being subject to a true/false valuation but instead being (or being part of) the realization of the utterance as an act (Austin, 5-6): For example, the statement "I do" in the context of a wedding ceremony. In his discussion, Austin addresses (but largely dismisses) troublingly "parasitic" types of performative utterances such as those that happen as part of theater or which are otherwise delivered insincerely (154-156). Austin's point is that such instances are quite obviously separate and distinct from the standard use of performatives and so are not, in the serious sense, "happy" (i.e. authentic/successful performances). For Suits, playing a game but not playing it happily, in the Austinian sense, is not to be playing the game at all, like Smith or a cheat. But there is a crucial disconnect in this refusal that needs to be unpacked. Happily, some of this unpacking has already been done.

In the essays gathered as *Limited Inc*, philosopher Jacques Derrida seizes upon the supplemental logic of parasitism in relation to Austin's performative utterances and argues that rather than being secondary, or external phenomena discrete from (or belatedly added onto) so-called standard use, "unhappy" or non-standard/non-serious performances are inherent in the structure of any utterance whatever. Moreover, Derrida argues (through playful appropriation and a performance of this very concept) that if it were possible to separate the two uses, the serious from the non-serious, the seriousness of the serious case must be

somehow legible in it: a part of the citable character of the (re)mark that allows just such a use to be communicable in its repetition in the first place. Thus, for the happy (serious) character to endure, it must also be available to non-serious use with, pivotally, no loss of meaning (Derrida, 34-97). Both elements of Derrida's critique (of Austin, and also of John Searle's response to Derrida's critique of Austin) have analogies with regards to games.

First, for Suits' intentional corollary to hold, intentionality must be visible/legible in the gameplay. Taking his own example of Smith as exemplar, there are no discernible signs distinguishing Smith's actions from those of the other, supposedly more legitimate, competitors. Rather Suits makes an appeal to some state of affairs taking place beyond or behind the gestures and procedures—the marks of the game. Even if Smith were to announce his intentions— "I'm being serious!"—it may be hard to take his announcement seriously. In this way, an appeal to intentionality is insufficient—absent the signs of that intentionality—because it both denies and insists upon one of the essential criteria for distinguishing games from play: that a game has a discernible, recognizable form—that it repeats and is repeatable in just the sense Derrida means with respect to his terms citationality and iterability.[13] Here, this means that a game recurs with some sense of its context intact, but here this means that its

[13] The terms citationality and iterability are distinguishable but not separable. To cite is to engage in iteration with, usually, a gesture towards or implication of a prior context (whether specified or not). However, citation is only possible because marks, conventionally meaningful, retain an ability to produce meaning that does not ultimately depend on a specific context. To put this in the frame of Derrida's larger metaphysical critique, citationality gestures towards presence ("this" being said "there") but is made possible by an inescapable deferral of presence ("this" being said where? There? "Here?" " "Here?" "). Cf. Derrida's *Writing and Difference*, *Grammatology*, and *Limited Inc*.

availability to citation is predicated upon an ability to be repeated and have that repetition understood in other contexts. In other words, in order to make sense of a context-dependent meaning, a game must be intelligible regardless of context.

To very briefly summarize, for a particular game be recognized as that game, it has to be repeatable. One cannot identify intentionality in any such repetition and, even if those intentions *were* somehow repeated (in some marked or formal manner within the structure of the game), they could then be just as easily repeated in a non-serious way—disqualifying appeals to the internal states of players as a determining factor in a game/play or non-game/play distinction.[14]

Although Suits might rebut my objection on the grounds of common sense—surely, given the ubiquity of game play, instances where individuals unwittingly find themselves participating in games is dwarfed by actual game players—it remains that Suits aims to offer a theory of games which is true in all cases, and the question of a player's attitude renders the position of any "actual" game player unworkable. The weakness of that position is demonstrated by the structural problem above but can also be seen in examples much closer to the ground. The problem of the observer invites consideration of where games happen: in the observer, in the play observed, or both, as well as in the space between? Video games are a particularly troublesome stumbling block in this regard. Imagine you are watching, on a television screen, a digital representation of a chess match taking place in another room. The television displays the moves

[14] Consider, as an analogous example, the solemnity of religious ritual satirized in a Monty Python sketch.

and countermoves that typify the game of chess, and you have every reason to report that you are watching a game of chess unfold. If it were revealed that the game was being played between two computers, would it cease to be a game of chess? Similarly, when grandmaster Garry Kasparov played against IBM's chess-playing computer, Deep Blue, was there one player in the match, or two?[15] Did a game of chess occur? Surely, it is not possible for a computer to possess a lusory attitude. The game-playing computer is like Suits' Smith, who plays a game because he cannot do otherwise, except here even the desire to do otherwise is withheld. Perhaps Suits would simply claim that video games are not games, but that merely points to my final criticism of Suits' argument, which has three closely related parts: the first is the problem of cheating, the second is the arbitrarily limited scope of his argument, and the third is a concern that his conclusion does not follow from his premise.

In Smith's case, Suits associates Smith's lack of a lusory attitude with cheating in order to locate both situations outside of the game at issue. Briefly put, Suits argues that if there is cheating, then the cheater is not in the game. This is an impossible conclusion. The only space for cheating to occur and to make sense *as cheating* is within the space of a game. Smith cannot, for example, cheat at not running a footrace. Games and cheating imply each other; they begin and end together. Cheating is thus internal and integral to games, it determines and makes

[15] Or more? Just who and how many were playing is a subject of debate regarding the legitimacy of the outcomes of the matches.

possible the rest of their structures. Smith (or a cheat) might not be playing the game the right way, but he is playing—and at play in—a game.

The Grasshopper's powerful analysis lends considerable insight into how traditional games have been received. Nonetheless, what Suits presents in this work is not actually a definition of games. Rather it is an argument about what it means to play games in one very specific way: namely "the right way" or, more precisely, conducted in accord with the consensus of how a given game is to be played. This perspective is made possible by a view of play that is fundamentally attitudinal and optional. It understands that while games and play are important, and can be very serious indeed, they are nonetheless things that happen alongside of and separate from everyday experience.[16] This misses a broader view of play that acknowledges its brute meanings and functions: play is not merely nugatory celebration but is also movement and a play of forces as such. It is just as possible to be at play in a tornado or bureaucratic machine as on a football pitch.[17] What Suits describes in *The Grasshopper* is not what it means to play a game, but rather only what rests comfortably within a game's field of hegemonic play: the style(s) of play accepted as standard within a specific community of players, at a given time, and with respect to a particular game.

Suits means for his book to be, among other things, a corrective to the problem that "there is a good deal of loose talk about games these days" (145). That is, he is addressing (in several respects) a linguistic problem: what to do

[16] "Games are, I believe, essentially different from the ordinary activities of life" (Suits, 53).
[17] Certainly what is playing and what is being played with become mobile, but this is exactly the point.

about things that are merely called games but aren't really games? His intervention starts descriptively: "I began with a group of what may be called hard core games, by which I mean that if the members of this group are not games, then nothing is. In this group I included bridge, baseball, golf, hockey, chess, Monopoly—things everyone calls games" (Suits, 164). That is, the most important quality of this class of objects is that they are called games.

Suits then analyzed this core group carefully for other similarities and based on the common ground he found, deployed a new category that functioned prescriptively: "I included [in the category game] some things that are not called games and excluded some things that are called games" (164). But there is a problem with this: the original group of hard core games had nothing to recommend them other than that everyone called them games.[18] To derive from this a category that excludes things that everyone (except perhaps Suits) later calls games refuses to acknowledge that what is designated by the term "game" can change; it denies the evolution of terms. If everyone calling certain things games was sufficient to justify the original similarity, why isn't everyone calling other things games sufficient to justify dissimilarity? In other words, similarity or dissimilarity are not necessary characteristics of the general set "game" as it exists in common use, the same use that served to ground the formation of Suits' original set.[19] In an effort to "look and see" in order to *discover* an already

[18] Above and beyond the obvious problem of "everyone."
[19] A parallel might be drawn between this term and something like "pest," which variously describes insects, rodents, birds, plants, and younger siblings. The breadth of the term doesn't make it non-functional.

existing category, game, Suits did nothing of the kind. Instead, he invented a new and more rigid one.

While Suits offers finely wrought tools for better understanding what it might mean to play games in a certain way, not all games are (or should be) played this way. Rather than conclude that Suits gives criteria for assessing how something is or is not a game, his work is better received as shining a light on the social history of games: one that illustrates how games have been broadly received and, especially with respect to modern games, how they have recently diverged from this tradition to produce new meanings and play experiences.

In his 2005 book, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, game scholar Jesper Juul offers his Classic Game Model (CGM) as a better way of understanding the nature of games. This model includes among its criteria for a game that players be attached to the outcome, and that the consequences of games be negotiable (Juul, 36).[20] The work of these criteria is to address the point at which the game is absorbed into a network of relations among players, other objects, and activities (i.e. social history), much as Suits' lusory attitude does.

Juul's stipulation of attachment to outcome similarly does not characterize play as such, but a way of playing. As with Suits, testing the limits of this criterion produces notable incoherencies. The work attachment does for Juul is to

[20] Juul's complete (CGM) game definition is, "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" (Juul, 36).

offer a reason why and how players will (and ought to) act in certain ways when playing a game, like following rules and trying to win in the first place. Juul, like Suits, acknowledges there are other ways to play, but it remains what is to be made of such variation. Suits excludes deviating behavior from proper game play through the disqualifying categories of cheats and triflers. The trifler, which is at issue for Juul's requirement of attachment, is someone who makes the moves of a game, within the context of a game, but does so for some other purpose than achieving the prelusory and lusory goals (Suits, 58-59). Juul wrestles with this dilemma through the problem of a player who fails to be happy in victory and unhappy in defeat— who is not appropriately attached to the outcome of a game—and he flirts with a similar conclusion (Juul, 40).[21] Both positions have intuitive force, but they resist comprehensive application: is there more than one way to play a game? If the trifler's trifling is not visible, is she still trifling? Again, the knot of intentionality fouls the interpretative process. Computer games are especially troublesome in this regard: it is entirely possible to set up a game of computer chess or *Team Fortress* where all sides are controlled by the computer. Clearly, computers cannot be "attached" to the outcome in the way that Juul means—which is not a matter of obedience but a relation of care—just as they cannot have the lusory attitude that Suits requires; however, it is equally apparent that a game is nonetheless being played.

The degree to which outcomes of a game are negotiable can also be pressured to the point of collapse. Juul introduces the fascinating qualification that

[21] The trifler doesn't care about winning. The cheat, by contrast, cares too much.

"a game is characterized by the fact that it can *optionally* be assigned real-life consequences" (Juul, 41). But the players of games are not entirely in control of the consequences of gameplay. The entire sweep of jock culture in American high schools (and its extension in corporate culture) is a testament to this. Likewise, consider the power imbalance of the CFO who plays squash with a junior employee; here, the consequences of gameplay may even be antithetical to the logic of the game as understood by the criteria of attachment (e.g. for fear of reprisal, the junior employee's efforts might be better understood not as trying to win the game, but trying to lose the game in just the right way).[22]

Despite these difficulties, Juul's Classic Game Model is remarkable in that it accounts for, and meaningfully responds to, borderline cases. Unlike Suits' position, Juul's argument is more at ease with the concept of a "classic game" that is accompanied by, for lack of better words, the merely game-like. The CGM sets out to identify something like that core to which Suits initially referred in order to make sense of the "gameness" of related objects and practices without necessarily barring them from consideration as games. That said, the relationship between these categories (classic game and game-like) remains ambivalent, and Juul is reluctant to set aside the intentional proclivities carried over from a traditional understanding of games. I contend that deepening and extending that ambivalence opens routes to stronger interpretations of games, gameplay, and indeed of any text whatever.

[22] Juul acknowledged similar potential pitfalls with regard to the magic circle in his 2008 essay, "The Magic Circle and the Puzzle Piece."

One ought to care about the arguments of Suits and Juul because the question of what games are preoccupies theories of games in the same way the question of what counts as literature preoccupies literary theory and criticism. The parallel between these practices is worth drawing out since it so far appears that, like a definition of literature, there may never be a conclusive definition of games. However, there still is (has only ever been) recourse to positing an understanding of games, even if we must endlessly defer The Understanding of Games. Far from abdicating the challenge of defining games, this position accepts and even celebrates circumstances in which the definition of games remains a problem. This troublesome remainder reveals games as a medium in transition, and one that may be uniquely suited to articulate the concerns of this moment in modernity.

Within the game-as-problematic there are some ground rules, literally. The one thing that game scholars have managed to agree on is that games have rules. This is no small thing. From the assertion that games have rules comes order and the forms that such restrictions bring. The limitations of games—their formal structures—impinge upon possible play and by such limits generate the character of gameplay associated with an individual game.

To get to the heart of these rule functions, it is critical to acknowledge that there are multiple sets of rules to every game. In *Rules of Play,* the game designers and scholars Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman argue that games use three rule sets: (1) operational rules, which are the kinds of rules found in

instruction manuals; (2) constituative rules,[23] which are the "formal structures of a logical and mathematical nature" that underlie operational rules; Last, there are the (3) implicit rules, which are all of the various unwritten rules that shape styles of play within a particular setting. A sense of implicit rules can be arrived at by completing the sentence: “how to play the game, considering….” For example, how to play chess considering one is playing with a young child; or, how to play chess considering one is playing in a ranked chess tournament, and so on (Salen & Zimmerman, 130-149). These three rule sets and their interactions provide the formal architecture for what we think about when we think about games.[24]

One consequence of rethinking the relationship between a game and its rules as being a relationship between a game and a system of rule sets is that this layered view makes plain some of the ways in which video games differ from traditional, non-digital games. Traditional games are premised on certain informational and social conditions that must be true prior to, and during, the playing of that game. All players must know and agree (if only tacitly) to follow the rules before the game begins.[25] [26] To say that one needs to know how to play

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[23] The term “constituative” is a neologism that works to put some distance between this kind of rule and Suit’s constitutive rules (Suits 5-51) which are game-defining rules that have priority over other rules. It is important to recognize that constituative rules are just one set of rules among many. They cannot, by themselves, dictate the meaning(s) of games.

[24] This is, of course, only one model among a host of other options. Most models vary between two- and three-object systems, depending on how the authors divide the field; all modern models use at least two rule sets. Gonzalo Frasca, for example, describes a two-ruled system, “ludus rules” and “paidia rules” that govern game states and game procedures, respectively (Frasca, 2003a, 7-24). The multiple sets (of whatever number) describe at least two contexts: the context created by the game rules, and the larger context within which the game is played.

[25] This can be fudged a bit in “learn as we go” games, but the very “learn as we go” caveat is itself a cluster of rules that needs to be agreed to—the most common and central of which is the rule that amounts to: “once we figure out what the rules actually are and how they work, we agree to play by them even if it means negating earlier actions in order to do so.”

[26] It is worth noting that it becomes necessary to move from the indirect object “a game” to the direct object “the game” as soon as an agreement of rules is conceived.

Bridge before playing Bridge may seem so obvious as to be banal, but the degree to which traditional games require an explicit and shared understanding of operational rules is often under-appreciated, likely because it is so commonsensical.[27] A similar expectation of knowledge regarding implicit rules also holds but as these rules are implicit they are assumed as part of the cultural context in which the game occurs. Additionally, beyond knowing the rules, players must try to actually adhere to the rules or have them policed by another, at least equally knowledgeable, agent (like a referee) for the game to be conducted/maintained. It is worth noting that even in cases of official oversight there is still negotiation and room for error. Although superficially, referees (and players serving a refereeing function) merely report on states of play, those moments where referees matter—where it is unclear, for example, if a ball was in or out of play—the referee does not merely report, but decides. In other words, the observational role is inextricable from an interpretive role made necessary by the possibility of imperfect observation. All of which combine to make clear that the actions (plays and decisions) by which games legitimate themselves place the felicity of game performance—a performance of game actions recognizable as "successful"—at the heart of game understanding.

The reason for the provisos and caveats in traditional games, the prior knowledge that is shared and upheld, is all of a piece: rules are required because it is possible for players to not follow them. The creation of "the game" depends

[27] Suits' example of Smith tries to pressure this point by ignoring the practical differences between Smith knowing how to run in a circle (and being limited by physical constraints to doing so) and knowing how to play Bridge. As difficult as it is to accidentally run a footrace, it is considerably harder to accidentally play a round of Bridge.

upon players' agreement to be governed by a set of rules and/or the execution of a performance that satisfactorily expresses that agreement.[28] As a result, the identity of a traditional game is as much about the effort of maintaining the rules as it is about the excellence of performance within their bounds.

In stark contrast to traditional games, video games automatically and perfectly adhere to their rules.[29] Because computer programs police their rules absolutely, players do not have to be aware of the rules before playing. Indeed, not only do players not need to know the rules, given the complexity of modern video games it may not even be possible. With video games, the cognitive work to establish, enforce, or otherwise create the game is done by the computer,[30] which is very much an active agent in gameplay. However, it is a fundamentally different kind of agent than another player would be when it comes to the concept of a game. From the computer's perspective, a video game is a program like any other: it has program-specific demands on system resources, but at the end of the day each one looks much like all the other ones, and each zero like the other zeroes. This point is highlighted by media theorist Alexander Galloway in *Gaming: Essays on an Algorithmic Culture* where he writes that

> Video games are games, yes, but more importantly they are software systems; this must always remain in the forefront

[28] For the inaugural playing of a game, Suits' requirement of intentionality if more compelling. For all subsequent re-playing of a game, the appearance of an agreement is sufficient.
[29] An exception to this distinction would be physical puzzles like the Rubik's Cube. With these puzzles, as with video games, the player comes to understand the rules through interacting with the game/object.
[30] Although I use "computer" here and my later examples come from games played on personal computers, in this context the term merely designates any system of (electronic) hardware on which the game's software depends.

> of one's analysis. In blunt terms, the video game *Dope Wars* has more in common with the finance software *Quicken* than it does with traditional games like chess, roulette, or billiards. (6)

The reason that video games are "more importantly" software systems has to do, on the one hand, with how computers relate to systems of rules and, on the other, with how video game players' relations to rules are mediated through the computer.

In the first case, computers do not meaningfully distinguish between operational and constituative rules. As software systems, video games are made of rules in the same way a Barbie doll is made of plastic. This creates an interesting problem for the assertion that a video game *is* its rules by equivocating on the term "rules" and muddying the distinction between video games as a medium or video games as an of object composed within, yet ontologically independent of, the video game medium.[31] In a traditional game of ping-pong, operationally unruled conditions such as gravity, ball-rotation, and drag (air resistance) are integral to play but are not typically considered part of the game itself. In a ping-pong video game, however, the physics of the simulation are explicitly accounted for in the computer code.

[31] The sport simulation arm of video game giant, Electronic Arts, succinctly captures this dynamic with a different but related equivocation in their slogan: "EA Sports: if it's in the game, it's in the game."

Moreover, in video games conventions of play like turn order—thoroughly changeable in traditional games—is every bit as inevitable as a physical law. The observation that computers treat conventional rules and physical laws as equivalent can, perhaps ironically, lead to forgetting that equivalence is a two-way street. When these kinds of rules collapse in video games, just as the conventional becomes perfectly enforced and akin to natural law, previously unassailable natural traits become conventional. In video games, it *is* possible to argue with gravity; sometimes bodies do go through walls. For the game-as-software, rules are simultaneously arbitrary and absolute.

The second case above, players' relation to rules as mediated by the computer, becomes a much richer problem considering the first. If one wishes to agree with Galloway that, yes, "video games are games," how is this claim sustainable when the foundational knowledge and agreements inherited from non-digital games seem absent? It cannot be entirely reducible to the subjective effect on players; that is, "fun" is not effective indicator. After all, a user could have fun with *Quicken* but it is not a game in any recognizable sense any more than is the word processing program used to write this sentence because both lack a sense of hegemonic play. The problems of rules, rule enforcement, and their relation to the more complex event of the game are best unpacked by going backwards still further. To address the stakes of players' relation to rules, one needs to raise again

the specter of the beloved bugbear and sometimes straw man of game scholars everywhere: the magic circle.[32]

The Critical Force of the Magic Circle

The concept of the magic circle as used in game studies first appeared in the eminent historian, Johan Huizinga's, 1950 classic, *Homo Ludens*. The book is an extended study of the "play element of culture" wherein Huizinga argues play is a necessary but not sufficient condition for human culture, and in which he describes the fundamental qualities of play. Among these qualities he lists the separateness of play from ordinary life.[33] Huizinga paints play as happening as if in a magic circle where "special rules obtain" and where play-spaces become "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (10). In 1958, the French intellectual, Roger Caillois, lent further support to the idea of play as fundamentally different from ordinary life in his book *Man, Play and Games* (*Les Jeux et Les hommes*), where he sought to refine Huizinga's work and develop a more systematic understanding of human play.[34] In 2004, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman took up and popularized the term "magic circle" as "shorthand for the idea of a special place in time and space

[32] Critiquing the magic circle threatens to become a form of disciplinary hazing within game studies, a ritual as dubious and double-sided as American tourists kissing the Blarney stone by day and Irish locals urinating on it at night.
[33] As becomes quickly apparent, "otherness" or "difference" may more accurately describe this relation.
[34] His work divides play into the four categories of agon (competition), alea (chance), Ilinx (vertigo), and mimicry (role-playing/representation) and locates play behaviors along a spectrum of structure with paidia, child-like or unstructured play, on the one end and ludus, or rule-governed play, on the other (Caillois, 11-36).

created by a game" (95). By way of the confluence of these and other sources, the term has come to stand in for the semi-conscious accord between parties to accept the limitation of sets of rules in order to participate in an experience made possible by this agreement.[35]

The magic circle continues to be a regular topic of debate within game studies, most often regarding the strength and/or rigidity of the circle's supposed boundary. On this point there is a striking ambivalence: on the one hand, the notion of a cleanly separate game world that is self-contained and self-sufficient is patently absurd and, on the other hand, denying the possibility of "other" rulesets governing behavior and meaning (however temporarily) denies the very existence of games by refusing the internal logic of value in each game context and instead blindly applying external measures regardless of actual parity. This ambivalence is deeply fraught. Not to put too fine a point on it—and Zimmerman returns to the debate to make this point in a 2012 follow-up article on the magic circle—it is not at all certain that anyone has ever seriously held the belief that game space was inviolable (Zimmerman, 3).[36] Even if it were the case that the magic circle had

[35] As should be obvious, this description, founded on traditional games, is quite similar to Bernard Suits' definition of games in *The Grasshopper: games, life, and utopia* (1978, 48-50). This is because the magic circle is nothing but an agreement about *how* to play, though it is much more dynamic and contested than Suits' definition of a game allows.

[36] Including the sources with which this straw man is so often stuffed. Compare, for instance, Huizinga's invocation of the magic circle at the start of *Homo Ludens* with the book's concluding chapter where the phrase returns and is meditated upon at length. Here, reflecting on play as an echo of mankind's most earnest spiritual expression, Huizinga writes: "The human mind can only disengage from the magic circle of play by turning towards the ultimate" (212). This gives an awfully large circumference to the magic circle, to run with that metaphor. Such a circle contains all human perception except that which is, literally and ultimately, fixed. This is unsurprising since Huizinga is arguing that human culture happens through play. Moreover, the sense in which the inviolability of game spaces appears in Huizinga is joined to the way both game and ritual spaces are sacralized. In context, then, it is not that these spaces *cannot* be violated but that they *ought not* be violated—which, of course, acknowledges that they can be.

been viewed as hermetically sealed, surely the work done by Clifford Geertz on deep play that shows the complicated and inextricable relationship between games and social life/roles (cf. Geertz's 1977 anthropological analysis of the interdependence of social status, masculine identity, and games), let alone the recent developments in the so-called "serious games" movement (which uses games to effect change in the world at material, ideological, and aesthetic levels), or Alternate Reality Gaming (ARG) and Augmented Reality (AR) games (which incorporate geography, economics, and social networks into their gameplay) thoroughly confound any notion of a cleanly demarcated game space. One need not go even this far: a host of interruptive and transgressive minutiae exist— contextual and otherwise— from bathroom breaks to the corporate country club, from weather patterns to social hierarchies, which impinge upon and penetrate game worlds. Such breaches are commonplace in the wake of ubiquitous computing and in a networked culture that demands constant contact.[37] These interruptions point beyond the brute permeability of game space and indicate, from the very first instance, the essentially fractious and piece-meal construction of games. The problem, ironically enough, may be only a matter of framing.

There is a crucial difference between the absolutely separate and the meaningfully different. What really lies at the heart of the magic circle's problems is that the circle metaphor encourages thinking about game experiences according to a binary logic where one is either in the game or out of it. When one is out of it,

[37] This extends to properly absurd proportions where games interrupt other games (i.e. alerts sent to a cell phone or electronic tablet from mobile applications).

according to a Huizingan model, one is a part of some other "real life" (Huizinga, 9). This is the problem. Jacques Ehrmann put his finger on it in 1968 when he argued that it is misguided to consider play as apart from, other than, or otherwise outside of "reality":

> They [Huizinga and Caillois] define play in opposition to, on the basis of, or in relation to this so-called reality. As the criteria against which play is measured are external to it, its nature remains necessarily *second* in relation to the "reality" that serves as its yardstick and is therefore considered "primary" (cf. Huizinga: "Play always represents something," p.35). But it is legitimate to wonder by what right "reality" may be said to be *first*, existing prior to its components—play in this case (although it might just as well be some other object of the social sciences)—and serving as their standard. How could "reality" serve as a *norm* and thereby guarantee *normality* even before having been tested and evaluated in and through its manifestations? For—we need not insist on it—there is no "reality" (ordinary or extraordinary!) outside of or prior to the manifestations of the culture that expresses it.
>
> The problem of play is therefore not *linked* to the problem of "reality," itself linked to the problem of culture. It is one and the same problem. In seeking a solution it

> would be methodologically unsound to proceed as if play were a variation, a commentary *on*, an interpretation, or a reproduction *of* this reality. To pretend that play is mimesis would suppose the problem solved before it had even been formulated. (Ehrmann, 33-34)

This is exactly the case. Of course, this is not a cure for magical thinking, but it is a useful palliative with which performances of play, like games, can be demystified and considered as just one among a diverse collection of other performances. For example, many adults go around pretending to be married. They are not "really" married; that is, their marriages cannot lay claim to some existence prior to or separate from their pretending. It is simply a convention of their respective cultures that they call the way in which they pretend to be married "being married." The State and other institutions aid these performances and are complicit in the fantasies. In short, dualistic thinking about play that opposes it to a non-play reality must invent a fictional "reality" from which play is absent (despite the demiurgic make-believe being itself a play concept).[38]

None of this, however, is to say that the magic circle has no use in furthering an understanding of games or play. On the contrary, having shorthand for the notion of spaces wherein objects and actions take on different meanings—whether by consent or by formal design—does much heavy lifting and mediates the need to constantly re-situate discussions within their determining contexts.

[38] It bears noting that both Huizinga and Ehrmann are taking play, rather than games, as their object of concern, and neither addresses video games, though I trust that the relevance to video games is apparent.

Similar concepts are at work in Erving Goffman's frames and in the notion of schemas suggested by Salen and Zimmerman (2004), both of which offer a way to get at what Goffman calls the "definition of the situation": the recognition of a context in which certain meanings are available and certain actions possible and privileged. That recognition is the basic criteria for experiencing a game, but it is also the foundation for making sense of any experience whatever. The question remains, however, how to leverage this understanding towards an individual game's meaning.

Game-specific Ontology and Hegemonic Play

A game is not reducible to its rules for the simple reason that the rules of any game are inexhaustible (implicit rules, in particular, pile up toward infinity). A game is the experience its rules make possible. Within the efforts to better understand the precise nature of this experience, it has been suggested that games ought to have a certain kind of conclusion: one that is quantifiable (Salen and Zimmerman), or disequalibrial (Sutton-Smith), or uncertain (Caillois). In other words, since the endgame or winning state serves as a limit of special significance to the gaming experience, and because rules relate causally to the winning state, the relationship between the two is (or ought to be) coherent and progressive. But consider instead a slightly different take on the endgame that subordinates win states not to terminating play but to another, more central, rule function. Namely, it is the task of rules to make possible a play experience that is repeatable. The experience need not be identical in every detail, but the broad experience of

play—to which is given the name of a specific game—must repeat within a range of acceptable difference. Otherwise, the principles of identity are violated and the offending practice is relocated under a different name/game.[39] For instance, the rules of baseball work to create the play experience known as the game of baseball. In order that subsequent play experiences can also be known as games of baseball, the rules must be kept in such a way that the gestalt of the experience is sufficiently similar as to be treated as a relation of identity (despite the variation individual games inevitably display). A consequence of this is that the identity of a game becomes more robust as it tolerates additional variation.[40] For example, if a group of friends were to play a game of pond hockey but omit the off-sides rule, the rest of the rules still produce a play experience recognizable (by popular consensus) as a repetition. Thus, when later asked what they were doing, all players can confidently reply they were playing hockey. This is true even in light of any additional, ad hoc rules imposed (e.g. No one can check Dave because he hurt his back last week) that are specific, and necessarily limited to, the individual game being played. This commonplace phenomenon is much weirder than it might initially appear.

What becomes visible in thinking about games in this way is that games articulate themselves in a manner similar to a language: a specific game depends on conventionally agreed upon limits of iterable differences to function as a

[39] Identity here is understood not as the identity of "same" but as the identity of "self," that is, of continuity within transformation (Cf. Paul Ricoeur's "Narrative Identity").
[40] The game of Poker is an exemplary case. Poker now constitutes a family of card games recognizable as "poker" largely through ranked card values and betting, despite the fact that the versions of poker differ considerably by number of cards in players' hands, which of those cards are visible, number of draw turns, etc.

recognizable concept. The game of hockey described above is familiar only because the game-in-general, hockey, was citable and able to be appropriated within a new context: changed, but still identifiable. Any given game is capable of dynamically (re)producing its identity within an ongoing practice of modification provided that subsequent versions are still judged to be repetitions: they must pass a kind of recognition test whose criteria are themselves contingent on context.

The genius of early game studies work in seizing upon the configurable nature of games is that it showed how games cannot be meaningfully considered apart from the manipulation, the play, performed by players. But, it must be emphasized, that any such configuration is still taking place within a set of limitations; while certainly those limitations respond to practical necessity, they also produce—intentionally or not—forms of practice that are nameable because they repeat. How variations are produced and accounted for, assessed and valued, then becomes a process of negotiation within the play communities adopting and adapting a given game. In other words, where the work of the magic circle in games studies discourses had been identifying the border of any game at all, and it failed spectacularly at this, it is infinitely more successful at designating a field of permissibility with respect to a particular game: the collection of contextual markers that allow for sufficient identity.

An experience of play, generated by a system of rule sets, such that the experience is recognizable as a repetition is not, on its own, enough to exhaust how the concept "game" is used. As yet, there is not a particularly meaningful way of distinguishing, say, taking a bath from playing a game. Here is where

cheating exerts its force most clearly. Cheating is possible where the violation of an operant rule produces a *legible* effect, itself made possible by the limitations imposed by the system of rule sets that serve to generate repetition. Conversely, cheating is not possible where repetition is not a primary factor in generating meaning, for example in so-called "unstructured" play activities (e.g. rolling down a hill, doing a silly walk, etc.) as distinct from games—doing a silly walk does not repeat itself *as a recognizable form* independent of an individual performance. There is no meaningful sense in which one can cheat at spinning around and falling down. The line between unstructured play and games is not fixed, and individual games can move between the two categories by only minor modifications.

In their paper presented at the 2007 Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce offered the concept of a "hegemony of play" to indicate the ways in which dominant ideologies are maintained and reproduced within the games industry; this manifests most strikingly by "the needs and desires of 'minority' players such as women and 'non-gamers'" being ignored across all levels: from hiring and labor practices, to marketing plans, to game creation and content.[41] The unwillingness of the games industry to become sensitive to so-called minority concerns is self-evident upon review of the titles produced and their content. Violent video games continue to dominate the marketplace, games protagonists

[41] The authors attribute the term "hegemony of play" to Bernie DeKoven, who used the term in a 2005 lecture at the Interactive Media Program in the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts.

are overwhelmingly male and white, and heterosexuality and its symbols remain the default position. Moreover, the hegemony of play to which Fron et al refer extends beyond the games themselves and addresses the beliefs of (and about) those who play them. Despite evidence to the contrary—for example, data shows that "women age 18 or older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (33%) than boys age 18 or younger (15%)" (ESA, 2015)—there remains a widely-held belief both popularly and within the games industry that the primary consumers of video games are males aged 14-18 (gathered together under the synonymous heading of "boys or young men"). Through its commitment to marketing to and building games for this group of young men, the target audience is effectively summoned into being as an identity position. Tracy Fullerton identifies this gamer identity as a "third gender" in the sense that the gamer-as-market-group is "characterized by an adolescent male sensibility that transcends physical age and embraces highly stylized graphical violence, male fantasies of power and domination, hyper-sexualized, objectified depictions of women, and rampant racial stereotyping and discrimination" (Fron et al, 7). This marketing and design strategy is exacerbated by a production environment which, like the games it produces, is overwhelmingly male, white, and heterosexual (2).

Fron et al are oriented to the term hegemonic play in a related, but different, way than is elaborated here. For Fron et al, the hegemony of play refers

> to the way in which the digital game industry has influenced the global culture of play in much the same way that hegemonic nations, such as the British Empire or post-WWII America, have,

> in their times of influence, dominated global culture. Today's hegemonic game industry has infused both individuals' and societies' experiences of games with values and norms that reinforce that industry's technological, commercial and cultural investments in a particular definition of games and play, creating a cyclical system of supply and demand in which alternate products of play are marginalized and devalued. (1)

This assessment frames the primary flow of influence from the games industry to its supporting commercial infrastructures and from there to consumers.[42] While it is possible to imagine a kind of intentional malevolence behind such a strategy, it is far more likely that the hegemony of play that Fron et al identify is itself an emergent phenomenon, arising out of a confluence of economic, technical, and social forces. Fron et al locate the hegemony of play as deriving from the "power elite of the game industry [which] is a predominately white, and secondarily Asian, male-dominated corporate and creative elite that represents a select group of large, global publishing companies in conjunction with a handful of massive chain retail distributors" (1). This is undoubtedly an accurate description of the prime movers in the digital games industry.

Where I look to take up the notion of hegemonic play is closer to the text, for exactly the reasons that Fron et al point to when they write that:

[42] This flow of influence can also be extended backwards to the material and conceptual history of video games as direct descendants of military technology (Cf. Patrick Crogan's *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture*).

> Videogames … both dictate and enforce rules automatically through software. They also determine which play styles shall be favored and which skill sets shall be valorized, and create the unusual situation of a human matching his or her wits with a machine. Much of mastery in digital games entails one's ability to "beat" the computer on its own terms; this puts the player who either cannot do so, or has little interest in mastering the machine, at a decided disadvantage.... This notion of playing with machines has forever altered the concept of what a game is and has transformed players into game consumers. Rather than determining if a game is good enough for them, as Bernie DeKoven has proposed, players now must prove they are good enough for the game. (4)

It is vital that players be able to identify and articulate the style of play that reveals itself as a center of understanding and identity for a given game: what gamers commonly describe as "the way the game wants to be played." Recognizing these signs is crucial because it is the foundation of critical possibility. The hegemonic play of a game is the primary object of criticism for that game and that which reveals, as inherently critical practices, the lines of flight possible through other ways of playing (and therefore meaning).

Hegemonic Play and Cheating

In its general sense, hegemonic play addresses cultural attitudes that manifest themselves within, and are derived from, game elements considered in aggregate. Since this points to something like "video games in general," it obviously contains exceptions and contradictions. Nonetheless, it does usefully sound out broad trends of the industry as well as consumer behavior. For example, it reveals gaming culture (as traditionally understood circa 2008 and earlier) as a technocratic culture that privileges domination.[43] Consider the long history and symbolic logic of the high score.

From its place at the center of arcade culture to the global networked leaderboards of contemporary video games, a high score is a public declaration of mastery. It is explicitly competitive and actively contends with the scores that surround it. At its most elemental, a high score is a statement of and about power. Possession of a high score displays what Mia Consalvo calls "gaming capital"—"a reworking of Pierre Bourdieu's 'cultural capital,' which described a system of preferences and dispositions that ultimately served to classify groups by class" (4). That is, gaming capital indicates the subspecies of cultural capital that circulates among members of a gaming community with respect to claiming status regarding that communities' privileged activities. Cheating has an interesting history in this respect due to its dual role within gaming communities.

[43] "Gamer" as a cultural marker has since complicated itself, and while the traditional perspective is certainly contested, every current community of gamers define themselves in response to the traditional cultural orientation.

A cheat for a video game is both something that can be done and an object of social exchange.[44] The former sense is fairly straightforward: it is the violation of some rule or rules (implicit or explicit) that, when made visible, renders the game and/or its outcome illegitimate according to the play community in which the cheat occurs.[45] In the latter sense, however, a "cheat" is a code or a series of commands that make possible some action or event that would not otherwise be possible. Having knowledge of a cheat demonstrates more perfect control over the game object. In a culture where social power is derived principally from game mastery, knowing and sharing cheats is a way to accumulate and circulate gaming capital.[46]

As is quite plain, these two uses of "cheat" can be diametrically opposed. The rationale behind the gaming capital accrued by the exchange of a cheat is the same principle the activity of cheating most directly violates: if a high score is acquired by cheating, the symbol of mastery's illegitimacy is antagonistic to the competitive ethos on which its value depends. Moreover, the revelation of the symbol as hollow—like an impossibly high score—risks casting doubt on value of the symbols of others, harming the social marketplace itself.[47] What cheating

[44] This leaves aside the "cheat" as identifier of an individual, which merely confuses what one does with what one is, and focuses instead on the what is happening within the gamespace.
[45] It is worth noting how this sense of the spirit of cheating follows directly from the kind of agonistic values that motivate high scores and similar status indicators.
[46] Gamers and gaming are complex phenomena. They are not reducible to just one thing. There are other, less combative ways to accrue gaming capital but direct competition is the path most visible in and supported by the bulk of video gaming's history, as well as the one most robustly represented by game code.
[47] Understanding this goes a long way towards making sense of why gamers are so overwhelmingly opposed to the free-to-play model of online games. Briefly, free-to-pay games aren't free. Games of this type are often derisively referred to as "free-to-play, pay-to-win" which is where the problem comes in. Players who commit more money to the game have access to powers/abilities/items that others do not. Thus, the competitive performance that results is broken

and cheats illustrate are the limit points of a set of generic practices that are collectively considered to be the hegemonic play of games in general. Designating an activity as cheating doesn't set it outside of gameplay but rather marks it as being outside *acceptable* gameplay.

In relation to an individual title, however, hegemonic play indicates a range of gameplay experience assumed for an anonymous player of the game. Hegemonic play has no necessary relationship to what an identifiable, actual player may or may not do in the game. There are a couple reasons for this disconnect. The first and most theoretically significant is that at the level of the individual player almost nothing can be said with certainty. The individual player, like an individual instance of play, is for all practical purposes entirely eccentric. Similarly, the reasons a given player might have for pursuing (or not) particular actions defy categorization. Rather than achieving a high score, for example, a player might be trying for a score that has seven occurrences of the number seven. Weirder things have happened.

What hegemonic play describes, then, is the baseline experience of a game that is reasonably assumed of another (generic) player by other players. This mobilizes everything from a shared understanding of symbols, a reliably consistent moral/ethical framework, to expected responses to a game's formal value system (e.g. the idea that points are good and collecting as many as possible

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off of the skill/mastery-based system of value that runs through the history of video gaming. It poisons the well: devaluing mastery alone (expert skill can be outspent), contaminating the symbols of power (high scores can't speak with symbolic clarity), and breaking the magic circle (in-game symbols like leaderboard position being influenced/determined by the non-game status of individual wealth).

is a worthwhile goal), and beyond. When someone speaks of having played the popular first-person shooter *Call of Duty*, for example, she is referring to participating in that specific competitive environment where her goal was successfully achieving game objectives (e.g. capturing control points or annihilating the opposing team). She is not referring to the time she went online and brokered a truce between the two teams, or organized an impromptu game of freeze tag, even though all these activities are possible within the gamespace. To decide among the possible actions, in this case, gamers weigh the game's formal goals and markers of achievement (points, kill tally, or similar measurements), the narrative frame of the game, if any—in the case of *Call of Duty*, all players are in the role of soldiers and expected player actions derive from that symbolic register—the understanding of the title as a particular kind of game (i.e. genre assumptions, here, a multiplayer FPS game), and the fact that it is a game (whereas players would likely avoid murderous behavior in non-game settings). Whenever someone says, "Oh, I've played *Call of Duty*," the hegemonic experience outlined above is what they are referring to. It is, not to put too fine a point on it, what that statement means. The conversation about the game doesn't stop there, of course. What follows are the details of individual experience that may or may not conform to the image of hegemonic play.

The possibility (extremely high) of deviation points to something that cannot be overstressed: the fact that one's experience of a game may not align with hegemonic play does not make that individual experience less meaningful. The deviating experience might very well be *more* meaningful. Its meaning,

however, depends upon its relationship to hegemonic play for its legibility. That is to say, the player who logs onto a *Call of Duty* server and manages to get the other players involved in building a human pyramid instead of shooting each other has not produced a meaningless or impoverished *CoD* experience, but she *has* made an experience whose impact is only sensible in its particularity by its difference from the explicitly violent and antagonistic experience of *CoD*'s hegemonic play, which is necessarily prior. Therefore, all styles of play that position themselves as resistant: unplaying, critical play, counter play, and so on, begin with a recognition of the hegemonic play against which they are resisting.

Chapter 2:

The Heroic Cheat

Always be the best, my boy, the bravest,

And hold your head up high above the others

- Homer, *Iliad* vi. 247-248, xi. 936-937

On January 17th, 2013, in a televised interview with Oprah Winfrey, seven-time winner of the Tour de France, Lance Armstrong, admitted to using performance enhancing drugs in professional competition. For those with personal and professional stakes in the matter, Armstrong's confession vindicated more than a decade's struggle for truth.[48] From a more disinterested perspective, however, Armstrong's admission was perhaps the least interesting part of the interview. From the outset, Armstrong and Winfrey framed Lance's situation as a crisis of storytelling, and as he tried to tell, and retell, his story, something very odd happened to Lance Armstrong: he disappeared.

In the brief exchange opening the interview, Armstrong mourns the death of his fiction.

[48] Armstrong had long been menaced by doping allegations that grew increasingly ferocious in the wake of his victories. While these allegations went unproven during his career (Armstrong retired from professional cycling in 2011), Lance became something of a white whale for the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA). In 2012, USADA imposed a sanction of "lifetime ineligibility and disqualification of competitive results achieved since August 1, 1998" on Lance Armstrong. USADA's sanction is supported by its "reasoned decision" (the document that details Armstrong's rule violations), which Armstrong declined to contest. By refusing to contest USADA's findings, Armstrong's legal status relative to doping, even with his admission on Oprah, is in a strange never-land: he is not guilty of doping, but he is also not not guilty of doping.

> Lance Armstrong: The truth isn't what I said, and now it's gone. This story was so perfect for so long. And I mean that… as I try to take myself out of the situation and I look at it: you overcome the disease; you win the Tour de France seven times; you have a happy marriage; you have children. I mean, it's just this mythic, perfect story, and it wasn't true.
>
> Oprah Winfrey: And *that* wasn't true?
>
> Lance Armstrong: And *that* was not true. On a lot of levels. (Oprah, Jan. 7, 2013)

"This mythic, perfect story" is his story and, as part of a mythic tradition, is also our story. Armstrong's memorial for this tale is wistful and nostalgic but also logically broken, its grand truths about strength, perseverance, and triumph are tripped up by mundane truths. Oprah's emphasized "that" was an invitation for Lance to specify which of the story's key parts he wanted to elaborate on because, as she correctly diagnosed, Lance seemed to misunderstand their nature.

The four pillars of Lance's myth are, in his presentation, defined by fiction ("it [the story] wasn't true") and fall to one side of the ambiguity inherent in myth as both fantastically true (eternal) and fantastically false (mere fantasy). However, the four signal points he names are also, demonstrably, factually accurate: he *is* a cancer survivor; he did win the Tour de France seven times; he certainly was (and is) married, and he definitely has children. The story Armstrong names as "it"

lives behind these words, not in them. The statement quoted above draws the borders for the interview's central conflict—the negotiation of Lance's mythology and his place in it as a character and a symbol—and its language demands a closer look.

Lance Armstrong does not just survive cancer treatment, he "overcome[s] the disease": he exceeds and excels the disease. In the opening statement of Armstrong's published account of his cancer diagnosis, treatment, and triumphant return to cycling, he acknowledges the marks cancer left on his body noting that after chemotherapy his muscles "didn't come back in the same way" (2). In the Oprah interview, however, Armstrong's language is marked by cancer's conspicuous absence. He pronounced the word just once in the entire two-part interview, and then only with the awkward discomfort of one reluctantly stripped of euphemism. This hesitancy was out of character for Armstrong, who is famously candid regarding cancer and cancer treatment. Yet, in this interview he goes out of his way to cover the name cancer with "the disease" and "my diagnosis," as if to leave open the chance he might be speaking about something else.

Similar tactics of obfuscation and misdirection have served Lance well over his career. How many times has, "I have never had a positive test," hid truth behind the possibility of denial? That this tactic should appear in connection with his cancer history may indicate that Lance is losing control of his narrative. However, it may also show just how in control of his narrative Armstrong remains. He avoids the word cancer as though worried, if it came too close,

cancer might somehow catch his story; of course, it's not cancer but cancer advocacy that Lance is worried about, so he buries the word to keep the focus of the interview on his bicycling exploits and chemical indiscretions. Further evidence that this is a deliberate tactic can be found in the similar scarcity of Livestrong (formerly The Lance Armstrong Foundation)—despite it being a frequent subject of discussion in the interview—whose name he never pronounces at all.

The remaining pillars of Armstrong's story are similarly confounded. Although his victories are now condemned to live in scare quotes, Lance did "win the Tour de France seven times." The Union Cycliste Internationale's (UCI) decision not to award Lance's jerseys to other riders raises a specter of uncertainty about the Tour as a whole at that time; the blank entries tacitly acknowledge the fact that UCI does not know quite how to designate a victor for those years. That Lance's first marriage ended in divorce may raise questions about its happiness but certainly its existence, as that of his children, is not contestable.

Lance's emphatic repetition that "it/that wasn't true," suggests he does not view these four things as part of a real history but as symbols belonging to some equally symbolic story. In this case, *that* story is a heartland tale of masculinity: you overcome the disease—there was a man whose strength was so great no illness could tamp him down. You win the Tour de France seven times—there was a man whose prowess was so great, he was seven-times the victor of "the single most grueling sporting event on the face of the earth" (Armstrong, 2). You

have a happy marriage—there was a man whose wife, his honor truly won, delighted in him.[49] You have children—there was a man who, potent as is right for true men, was possessed of children who gave him joy. Lest my hyperbole get in the way of Lance's: there is a break between the actual circumstances Armstrong names and the symbolic force of the story he means. When Lance announces, "and that wasn't true" he refuses the symbols and the story they represent with a dismissal so practiced he cannot recognize the facts the story is built on. Keen-eyed Oprah spots this incongruity and asks him to clarify, "and *that* wasn't true?" But Lance does not hear his discord in her inflection, and while his reply parrots Oprah's emphasis, "*That* was not true. On a lot of levels." he affirms, but does not understand.

What falls out of Armstrong's text is a cascade of failures that are the necessary consequence of trying to resolve contrary understandings of heroic action. On the one hand is the long tradition that views heroes as individually powerful, whose aims are their own glory and power. For such figures, the more modern notion of the hero as an agent (read "servant") of something like justice or a similar principle is nonsensical. Rather, the hero's job is simply to be heroic: an effort in which the welfare of the community is only incidentally related. In

[49] Given the symbolism that pervades Armstrong's language in the Oprah interview, and which is even more extensive in his 2003 autobiography, "happy marriage" is code for sexual fulfillment and is a validation of masculine power. A marriage that was "happy" but celibate is a contradiction under this view of masculinity that links public potency with sexual/private potency, thus the claim of virility is followed immediately by the appearance of children. Armstrong's public speeches and published works frequently use lists for emphasis. Most of his lists are linear and progressive. This appears to be a list of descending priority, although the ordering could well be unconscious. Under the symbolic regime of Armstrong's myth, a man's worth is determined by deeds (victories), and wives and children are things a man can possess (i.e. trophies, honors) as an effect of those victories.

literature, the examples *par excellence* are the heroes of the Homeric epics. Moses Finley describes this vision or heroism in his classic work, *The World of Odysseus*:

> For the… [Homeric hero] everything pivoted on a single element of honor and virtue: strength, bravery, physical courage, prowess. Conversely, there was no weakness, no unheroic trait, but one, and that was cowardice and the consequent failure to pursue heroic goals.
>
> "O Zeus and the other gods," prayed Hector, "grant that this my son shall become as I am, most distinguished among the Trojans, as strong and valiant, and that he rule by might in Ilion. And then may men say, 'He is far braver than his father,' as he returns from war. May he bring back the spoils stained with the blood of men he has slain, and may his mother's heart rejoice." There is no social conscience in these words, no trace of the Decalogue, no responsibility other than familial, no obligation to anyone or anything but one's own prowess and one's own drive to victory and power. (Finley, 19-20)

The hero found in Homer's poems is very much alive and wields great explanatory power regarding attitudes toward professional athletes and their antecedents, as well as to some increasingly conspicuous trends within U.S. popular culture.

Against the Homeric hero, the modern hero appears to be founded upon a contradiction: the hero as noble servant. Whether this service takes the form of firefighters bravely pulling people from the rubble on 9/11, or the public defender who goes the extra mile to stick up for the little guy, the modern hero acts in accord with a larger, usually abstract, good where that good is overwhelmingly the good of the community.[50]

The frame of the Homeric versus Modern hero does not represent an actual binary, but rather is a convenient fiction that organizes a diverse array of beliefs about heroes according to their signal values.[51] Yet, alongside acknowledgment that heroes are not just one thing is the recognition that broad patterns do persist within the diversity of individual expressions and that these patterns are practical guides for assessing what heroes are and what they do.

At the heart of Lance Armstrong's narrative dilemma is his attempt to speak as the hero from both sides of the heroic divide. The thinking that fires the Homeric hero cannot submit to the authority that typifies a modern moral-heroic framework, an authority personified nowhere more totally than in the public

[50] Questions as to which community is the community of concern account for a great deal of plotting material in dramatizations of contemporary heroics, as a cursory glance at anything from police procedurals (e.g. choices between loyalty to a partner or a squad against an impersonal professionalism or duty to the law) to situation comedies (e.g. does a character follow the advice of family, friends, or co-workers against their own judgment—do the "public" demands take priority over those of the so-called "private" social spaces), consistently show. However, this dilemma does not contest whether there is, or ought to be, a community of concern to which one is obliged; it merely points to the difficulty of choosing between communities with such powers. In other words, regardless of its specific orientation, the presence (and force) of some communitarian ethic is taken as given.

[51] The terms are themselves problematic beyond their mere oppositionality. "Homeric hero" suggests a singular vision of the hero, yet the ways in which heroes and heroism are depicted are inconsistent across (and within) even the poems attributed to Homer, an equally fictional singularity that stands if for the more complicated and fraught views of a specific historical moment long since lost to time.

figure of Oprah. As a consequence, when Armstrong attempts to present his story where he is not in the position of the hero (as wielder of individual prowess and power) he shifts to the passive voice and vanishes from his own story. When this linguistic prestidigitation is not possible, he changes person to dissociate himself from himself.

> *(After viewing a video of himself describing the catastrophic fallout that would follow from being found guilty of doping).*
>
> Oprah Winfrey: When you look at that, what do you think?
>
> Lance Armstrong: Ah… it's just… I don't like that. I look at that and I go, "This guy's a…" I don't like that guy. … That is a guy who felt invincible, was told he was invincible, truly believed he was invincible. That's who that guy was. That guy's still there. I'm not going to lie to you or to the public and say, "Oh I'm in therapy, I feel better…" He's still there. Does he need to be exiting through this process? Yes. (Oprah, Jan. 7, 2013)

Having created a doppelganger, Armstrong repackages his history as a monstrous event orchestrated by another Lance, a history the real Lance can endure, and endure heroically. The aberrations in Armstrong's language are not merely idiosyncratic, they are symptoms of a deeper conflict within the western mentality in general exaggerated into spectacle through Armstrong's celebrity. The kernel of this conflict is made manifest in the figure of the heroic cheat.

Heroic cheats are scattered across history in major and minor forms, but the aim of this essay is not to provide a survey or history of this figure. Instead, I seek to present a series of connected moments that together show the heroic cheat as a literary and cultural marker whose incoherencies display the confusions of its age.[52] Among the play concepts—cheating, game(s), make-believe, and so on—relied upon here to negotiate the heroic cheat, the role of "family resemblances" is central to my historical method.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein proposed "family resemblances" to articulate conceptual kinship among games, which he claimed otherwise resisted classification in and of themselves—to his point, greatly reduced, that calling something a game doesn't reveal some attribute of that object or activity as much as it shows a glimpse into how a given community relates to and uses that that object or activity. This view considers each game within its own socio-historical moment and, while acknowledging relationships between moments, does not insist those relations are exhaustible as a deterministic, evolutionary history. Very briefly, some games exhibit stronger and more proximate genealogical relationships than others, yet many such relationships can be seen and enjoyed without implying lineage or progression

[52] The neuter form is a reluctant concession to the task of properly considering the gender of this figure. While Finley notes that, "'hero' has no feminine gender in the age of heroes (Finley, 25)," the category has since expanded significantly. And yet, whatever one might say of this expansion, heroic discourse remains overwhelmingly masculine. This leaves a thorny, yet productive, ground for pursuing alternative genderings within the space of the heroic cheat, especially in light of the negative moral slant often attributed to cheating. Treating the moral condemnation implied in "cheat" as a reinforcement of traditional gender norms, while pat, does not sufficiently address the complexity of the issue. Alas, such a study is well beyond the scope of the present essay, but investigation along these lines would likely be rewarding.

when they also allow for eccentric variation.[53] For example, that tagging games share the quality of tagging does not also mean this reveals an unbroken, vertical history of development from one such game to the next, nor that tagging is what makes those activities games.

Similarly, the frame of family resemblances helps show that the qualities of heroes and cheats, while related, are changeable and move dynamically across generations (in this case, representational moments). Accordingly, although the figure of the heroic cheat returns throughout history, it is not necessarily the return of the same; signal features persist (e.g. concepts of heroism and cheating), yet the characterizations of and attitudes toward those features—what counts as heroic or cheating—vary according to circumstance. Thus, the challenge of addressing the heroic cheat is one driven by questions of hegemony: what are the dominant values on display, and how are those values limited or determined?

Some baseline must be drawn to make sense of variation, however contingent that starting place may be. Considering this need, Armstrong's text will serve as a touchstone to orient my elaboration of the heroic cheat and the divided mentality it embodies. What emerges is a vision of heroism whose values are rooted in what Mihai Spariosu describes as, on the one hand, a "rational" mentality based in codes of law and very much concerned with the welfare of

[53] Consider, for example, the broad gameplay similarities between water polo, basketball, ultimate Frisbee, and to only a slightly lesser extent, the various forms of hockey. While the basic structures of these games obviously bear strong resemblances to each other: the core gameplay of scoring points by passing a target into a goal, it wouldn't make sense to say that one of these games caused, or is responsible for, the others in any substantive way or that the shared aspects of these specific games is responsible for including them in the category game.

society and, on the other hand, a "prerational" mentality that celebrates uninhibited expressions of personal power and whose understanding of society is in striking sympathy with the chaotic and violent world found in Homer's epics.[54]

In *Dionysus Reborn*, Spariosu provides a critical historical perspective on the play concept within Western thought, about which several words must be said. Play, as used by Spariosu and as it appears here, is not limited to a sense of frivolity or mood, nor is it reducible to trifling or diversionary activities. Play is not just mucking around for kicks—a view of play which, as will become clear, is itself a product of a rational mentality. Play includes these senses, yes, but the depth of the term extends to a capacity for movement and manipulation more generally. In brief: play is an expression of power.

Arguments about what is or is not play are rarely about the nature of play as such, but rather about which forms and functions of play count as play under specific historical circumstances (i.e. recognizable in the manner of a family resemblance). That is to say, such arguments gather together the phenomena in question within a category whose borders have already been largely determined in advance. Spariosu makes the case that, "the Western mentality… has always fluctuated between various rational and prerational sets of values" which organized and interpreted play concepts as they arose within major philosophical, artistic, and scientific periods (Spariosu 1989). The rational/prerational division, however, "signifies neither an evolutionary movement nor a hidden value

[54] Cf. Mihai Spariosu. *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*. Cornell University Press. 1989.

judgment; rather, it describes the various immediate or mediated, concrete or abstract, physical or metaphysical forms that a Nietzschean will to power has assumed in the process of shaping the Western world" (Spariosu 1991). When play-as-such is put at stake, the concept should be gauged with as broad a scope as possible. Keeping the less colloquially "playful" qualities of play in view as much and as often as possible can be an antidote to the trivialization of playful concerns, and it also serves to counteract impulses to over-emphasize the liberatory or subversive qualities of play: play can liberate and subvert, yes, but play is also present in the forces that constrain and oppress.

The distinction between prerational and rational mentalities is characterized by the privileging of individual, private, and concrete power within a prerational mentality, and the privileging of social, public, and abstract power within a rational mentality.[55] As a consequence:

> The history of what we call "play" in the Western world is, then, a history of conflict, of competing play concepts that become dominant, lose ground, and then reemerge, according to the needs of various groups or individuals contending for cultural authority in a given historical period. (Spariosu 1989, xi)

[55] Cf. Spariosu (1989) p. 6-9, for a detailed summary of the operation of these concepts as they relate to: power, law, religion, consciousness, and education/knowledge.

The various transformations that heroic cheats undergo are expressions of this larger history of conflict, and the heroic—as a mode of action—is determined by the dominant play mentality at a given point in history.

Unpacking the concept of the heroic cheat requires attention to each of its parts, as joining heroes and cheats (at least from some modern perspectives) risks contradiction. What authorizes an action or course of behavior as heroic is, as indicated in the Homeric and modern orientations described earlier, historically specific and legislated by whatever values happen to be dominant. The weight of that dominance is especially significant. For example, addressing the social worth of trophies (e.g. of war), Finley astutely notes that, "the signs of honor are always conventional" (129); it is precisely because these honors/trophies adhere to symbolic rules that are shared and traditional that they can function as signs, a basic semiotic relationship that is in keeping with the similarly conventional character of heroic acts themselves. While heroism remains oriented towards the individual (as an expression of personal power) even when its effect is principally social (as under a rational mentality), the act itself is not enough: it must be a *legible* expression of power.[56] Perhaps the most familiar way to make an act legible as heroic is to place it in a public, competitive context. For example, lifting a heavy object is a perfectly fine thing to do but it is not in itself worthy of praise. However, a competition to see who can lift the heaviest object transforms a mere act into spectacle and contest. "Heroic" thus exceeds expressions of

[56] In this regard, the understanding of the heroic presented here is bound up with the concept of play, by which is meant the exercise and celebration of a capacity for movement and force (the extent to which something can be manipulated).

personal power alone and demands a validating social context. There is no such thing as a truly idiosyncratic hero.[57] To be a hero is to be seen as a hero, and an unsung hero is a contradiction in terms. What is validated, and how that changes, is meted out more fully by the second term in heroic cheat. By cheat (or cheating) is meant, in a very broad sense, the violation of operant rules governing behavior especially, but not exclusively, when those rules are formalized as in games and law. In rough sum, the heroic cheat is one who violates rules of behavior in the service of an expression of personal power that can be recognized as heroic.

A more concrete sense of the relationship between these terms can be seen through an extended, if top-heavy, detour through the hero Odysseus, en route back to Armstrong. Odysseus is a usefully complicated case as there are so many versions to choose from. Odysseus's wanderings from work to work offer varied glimpses of the heroic cheat as expressed through a single character and often with reference to the same actions. The tensions that form when these perspectives are brought into contact come to a head with regard to the concepts of *arete* on the one hand, and *themis* on the other.

Spariosu notes that though *arete* is "usually translated as 'virtue' or 'excellence,' … [it] can more accurately be rendered as 'prowess in battle' and is geared toward those qualities which are most needed in a warlike society" (12-13). This sense of excellence-in-action, or prowess, is a necessary characteristic of the Homeric nobility for whom social conflict is often expressed violently, and

[57] Unless, of course, idiosyncrasy is itself a dominant social value (e.g. within cultures that celebrate individualism and uniqueness).

where raiding is commonplace (both as a threat to guard against and as an occupation). *Arete* thus invokes a specific kind of excellence, one that is peculiarly public in nature. It is not enough to simply claim *arete*, it must be displayed or performed. As Deborah Hawhee explains, "one cannot just *be* virtuous, one must *become* virtuosity by performing and hence embodying virtuous actions in public" (187). Thus, within the Homeric epics, allegory emerges as a mechanism of moral display; the virtuous man is one whose actions reveal a history of good practices realized in their present excellence and legible within a tradition of formal symbols and values. The performance of excellence does not terminate with victory, but is rather only one melody in an ongoing concert of virtue that is at once singular and anticipated, both the culmination of history and its precursor.

The society described in the *Iliad* is predominantly competitive, and of the available spaces for competition, prowess in battle is the ground on which aristocratic values are ultimately staked and realized. The *aristoi*, "literally the 'best-people,'" designates a class but also describes a social obligation. In the *Iliad*, to be *aristos* was to display *arete* by triumphing over others through acts of prowess in violent struggle (cf. Finley 49). To fail to perform this excellence, to not display one's skill through the subjugation of others, is to reject the heart of Homeric virtue.

In practice, however, the aristocratic sense of "best" is a fusion of class essentialism and naked competition. Despite the emphasis on main force implied by *arete*, the Homeric world is hardly meritocratic. Who struggles with whom and

how is inexorably bound to social status. Odysseus conducts the *Iliad's* lesson on class distinctions in book 2.

Attempting to control the Greek armies panicked by Agamemnon's "test" to cut and run, whenever Odysseus "met some man of rank, a king, / he'd halt and hold him back with winning words: / "My *friend*—it's wrong to threaten you like a coward, / but you stand fast, you keep your men in check!" (Il. ii. 218-219), but when "he caught some common soldier shouting out, / he'd beat him with the scepter, dress him down: / "You *fool*—sit still! Obey the commands of others, / your superiors—you, you deserter, rank coward, / you count for nothing, neither in war nor council" (Il. ii. 229-230). There is no space for performance or discovery of worth; the truth of one's worth being already self-evident by rank. The beating Thersites famously receives when he fails to hold his tongue and complete the return to social and regimental order violently asserts the rigidity of social positions, and is relayed with undisguised approval by the poet (Il. ii. 245-325).[58]

Negotiating the contradictory elements of *arete* is made easier when it is made clear that Thersites is caught on the wrong side of *themis*: "custom, tradition, folkways, mores… the enormous power of 'it is (or is not) done'" (Finley 83-84). *Arete* and *themis* are not, or not yet, in opposition. In fact, it is hard to imagine the sense of either term in the absence of the other. In the Homeric mode, the excellence to which one has access (or ought to aspire) is

[58] "A thousand terrific strokes he's carried off—Odysseus, / taking the lead in tactics, mapping battle-plans. / But here's the best thing yet he's done for the men— / he's put a stop to this babbling foulmouthed fool" (Il ii. 319-322).

necessarily determined by one's place in the world. As a member of the ruling class, *themis* compels Odysseus toward glory and honor achieved by direct, physical force. Although Odysseus is described as the "great tactician" and "master mind" in the *Iliad*—identifying him as using "*metis*, 'cunning', as opposed to the *bie*, 'might', of other Homeric heroes" (Finkleberg, 2)—what Odysseus *actually does* in the *Iliad* shows him to be, first and foremost, an action hero in the modern, vulgar sense and quite in step with the other Homeric heroes: slaughtering opponents with great skill and equal joy.[59]

Agon is the root and rule of heroic life, checked by custom. The sense and force of aristocratic value has remained remarkably intact over time and finds ample expression in modern class antagonisms as well as in the mythologizing of professional athletes, where cults of personality and a culture of celebrity predominate (and are reinforced with material wealth). The restrictions custom imposes on sites and types of struggle are ultimately subject to proof of might, just as the rule of law depends ultimately upon the exercise of force. As such, force is allowed to supervene in quarrels with propriety or law (though not necessarily without risk or cost). Agamemnon is a ready example of this when he breaks custom twice in the *Iliad*: once to reject the ransom of Chryseis and once to take Briseis from Achilles. While Agamemnon's actions are particularly

[59] Similarly, there is a long tradition of locating Odysseus as a kind of off-center hero when read against other heroes noting, for example, his association with the bow, a weapon feminized in the *Iliad* (cf. xi. 452-458 and xx. 540). This history is somewhat misleading because Odysseus never actually used a bow in war in the *Iliad*. Moreover, his bow—the bow of the *Odyssey*—in addition to being acquired as a guest-friendship gift, is clearly not the same kind of totemic armament as Achilles's spear or Ajax's shield, the most obvious indicator of which is the fact that it was not brought on the legendary military enterprise to sack Troy.

egregious violations, Odysseus is also in at least something of a gray area when he clearly implies acceptance of Dolon's surrender during the midnight raid of the Trojan camp with Diomedes when he tells Dolon, "…courage / Death is your last worry. Put your mind at rest" in exchange for information on the encampment's layout, before he permits Diomedes to kill Dolon anyway (Il. x. 290 – 527). For the Odysseus of the *Iliad*, and for its heroes more generally, while there is a way of doing things, the might of the individual remains primary. There are quite a few guidelines but precious few hard and fast rules. Cheating, such as it exists in the iliadic system—and it can barely be said to exist—is more a failure to properly honor an individual's status or accomplishments and so is an insult to the person, not, as it were, to a larger game. This is to say that in the *Iliad* there is no necessary problem with cheating as such, only with the inter-personal consequences resulting from it. Like murder, cheating is only a problem when one can't survive the fallout. By the end of the *Odyssey*, however, something has changed though the nature of the change remains ambiguous.[60]

At the climax of the *Odyssey*, after he has taken bloody vengeance on the suitors, it is peculiar to the point of unintelligibility that Odysseus stifles Eurycleia's triumph when she discovers the slaughter, admonishing her that, "It's unholy to glory over the bodies of the dead. / These men the doom of the gods has brought low, / and their own indecent acts…." (Od. xxii. 432-439). Because the suitors claimed the privileges of hospitality according to their rank but abused its

[60] The struggle between prerational and rational mentalities are all over the *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the consensus of classical scholars that the poems are about societies in transition are describing exactly this negotiation.

rituals, they violated—outrageously—the social rules by their subsequent refusal to leave. Thus, so Odysseus seems to argue, they invited murder by occupying the place of another by force. Yet, when that murder arrives, Odysseus assigns the slaughter to the gods, displacing the honor proper to the act of killing (as in the *Iliad*). Further, the notion that it is "unholy to glory over the bodies of the dead" is absurd from the heroic perspective of the *Iliad*. The suitors were members of the aristocratic class after all, and glorying over the bodies of the slain is basically the gold standard of iliadic heroism. In his analysis of this moment in the *Odyssey*, Finley suggests that Odysseus's interruption may be part a nascent understanding of justice that is no longer exclusively personal, but one that is abstract or at least abstractable, beginning to assert itself (Finley, 71-130). There is also, however, a merely pragmatic explanation for Odysseus's interruption, if not his language, though one that does not necessarily reject Finley's point. Since murder is a private affair and injured families are obliged to punish the murderer, by killing the suitors Odysseus set in motion the largest blood-feud that Ithaca has ever known. Thus, he has good reason to keep the situation quiet, as is explicit in the ruse of the wedding-feast, performed so that, "no news of the suitors' death must spread through town / till we have slipped away to our own estates" (*Od*. xxiii. 153-155). Yet at the same time, the practicality of these precautions runs precisely counter to the pell-mell commitment to heroic risk. Proper heroism does not hedge its bets. Can heroism survive this kind of instrumentalization?

As Odysseus's cunning leads his strength, marking him as something of a heroic outlier, the *Odyssey* amplifies his deviation from the "classical" hero by

adding small, qualifying elements to Odysseus's heroic character. These additional modifications are usually themselves mediated, as if to account for the adulteration. For example, Odysseus can go disguised as a beggar, but only because he is put into that disguise by Athena. The bow in the *Odyssey* is associated with masculine martial prowess yet according to custom the bow is a less masculine weapon than, for example, the spear. So, as if to compensate for this deficiency, the bow requires superlative strength to operate; and so on. Margalit Finkelberg makes a compelling case for reading the Odysseus of the *Odyssey* as most in sync with the heroic tradition of Heracles and that these figures are sympathetic through the concepts of *aethlos/athlos*, which means both "athletic contest" and "labor" (3). It is this latter sense of undergoing and enduring labors that is at stake here and which, for someone of Odysseus's and Heracles' status, is received as humiliation and abuse (Finkelberg 10-12).[61] This tradition is part of a very different kind of heroism and may be one of the narratives that arose to model a figure that straddles the prerational/rational divide as the rational mentality was becoming ascendant. As Finkelberg explains:

> In the *Iliad* being a hero amounts to readiness to meet death on the battlefield: the sense in which the words 'heroism' and 'hero' are used today ultimately descends from this concept. According to the *Odyssey,* a hero is one who is prepared to go through life enduring toil and suffering. (12)

[61] Finley presents a related discussion of Homeric class structures and status that supports Finkelberg's reading. Cf. Finley, p. 46-108.

The change in heroic temporality alone is worthy of note, but the implications of what such a shift brings to the registers of strength, nobility, proper behavior, and even aesthetic value are as profound as they are obvious. It is important to resist the inclination of the modern reader's rational mentality to read these changes as something akin to a teleological progression of heroism. Rather, the differences between the Odysseus of the *Iliad* and that of the *Odyssey* point to the complexity and discontinuity proper to both the category hero and the historical moment from which these texts are drawn, and should be read with a willingness to suspend judgment as to their direction.

If Odysseus's reluctance to claim credit for the slaughter can be taken—more-or-less—at face value, it implies the possibility of conceiving an injury to an authority (whether earthly or divine) capable of contesting the primacy of the drive for private glory. Odysseus condemns the suitors as having had "no regard / for any man on earth—good or bad—who chanced to come their way. And so, thanks / to their reckless work, they met this shameful fate" (Od. xxii. 439-442). From whence comes this sense of regard? Its range, "good or bad," exceeds mere respect due to one's station and points to what dimly approaches a generic concern for others, in accord with *themis*. "Concern" here is not necessarily concern for the welfare of others in the modern sense, but it does go beyond (or at least troubles) mere awareness of social positions within the class hierarchy; after all, the dismissal and rejection of a beggar's right to contest—e.g., when the disguised Odysseus attempts the challenge for Penelope's hand—would be entirely appropriate from the position of the suitors, indeed, it would be expected.

The changes in heroic representation between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, like the huge variety of transformations that followed them, are not so much steps up some moral ladder as they are movement across different ladders or a hodge-podge borrowing of rungs. In short, they show a change in frame. Some changes may not be consistent or coherent with the frames that came before (as with the interruption of Eurycleia), while others show deep accord with earlier traditions. For example, in books 22 and 23 of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus puts his house in order with astonishing violence. The violence is conservative in that it restores a previous social order (the work of a more rational mentality), but the tone in which the injuries are conducted never loses its personal edge (the demands of a prerational mentality). Despite Odysseus's "strict commands… [to] … hack them with your swords, slash out all their lives" (462, 468), when executing the "disloyal" women of Odysseus's household, Telemachus hangs them instead, saying: "No clean death for the likes of them, by god! / Not from *me*—they showered abuse on *my* head, / my mother's too!" (487-489). Telemachus's punishment is selected not on the grounds of justice understood as punishment for a crime in general but to revenge personal injury. This is emphasized formally in Fagles's translation where the translator enjambs Melanthius's name as a question, suspended alone on the line following the hanged women, as a bloodthirsty provocation—inviting readers to speculate how the much greater the unfaithful goatherd's wounds will be given the fate of the women.[62] While

[62] This anticipation is well rewarded. Melanthius is dragged outside, his nose and ears cut off and his genitals torn out to be fed to the dogs. This torment is all before passion overthrows justice entirely and Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius, "in manic fury hacked off hands and feet" (504).

Odysseus does not exact these punishments in an inappropriately literal sense, it is still true that in the *Odyssey*, as in the *Iliad*, the *oikos* (household) is an extension of the king—the household a further expression of the king's power—and so Odysseus acts through his son and stewards. The realization of Odysseus's justice retains the shape of revenge for private injury even as it gestures towards the redress of impersonal (divine and social) offenses.

In Homer, then, Odysseus gives two pictures of the hero and the heroic cheat. Cheating in the *Iliad* is only marginally possible and is not opposed to heroic endeavor more generally. In the *Odyssey*, there are new wrinkles in this image but the fundamental shape of the hero as a creature of personal power remains dominant. The latter is, however, a bit more ambivalent as evidenced on the one hand by Odysseus's various deceptions, which are presented as just another way of fighting—not preferable to naked force but not in themselves to be despised—and, on the other hand, by the deception of the suitors.[63]

The suitors violate the implicit (but very well understood) rules of hospitality and feasting. They do so with the intent that this breach of etiquette leads to victory (possession of Odysseus's household) because the household is obligated to maintain those same rules of hospitality; it is a calculated move in a power game: the customs of hospitality that subject Odysseus's house to the abuses of the suitors are also the only thing protecting them lest they trade insult

[63] A case can be made for weighing the disloyal women and Melanthius by this measure, too. The women and Melanthius show appropriate deference to the guesting nobles, but they go too far in their courtesies; in essence, they change sides mid-game. Their low social status, however, denies either the women or Melanthius the authority to make that decision, and so they compound the breach of one social rule with another.

for injury.[64] Under the rules of social custom, Odysseus's household must bear the cost of feasting the suitors but custom usually protects the household because the feasting period would normally end. By prolonging the feasting period indefinitely, the social obligation becomes a kind of siege. Without Odysseus, the household lacks anyone with the might to rule; if the suitors were rebuffed outright, they could claim offense to their station and seize what they want with open force. Indeed, there is a sense here in which brute force is expected and proper, displaying the very might absent from the household. The failure to simply take possession of Odysseus's household in the first place risks cowardice and opens the ambivalence that describes the suitors' downfall.

Whether differences between these characterizations are the result of changes in social views or merely due to the contexts of the poems (heroes at war versus the hero at home), it remains that the *Odyssey* adds to the hero's role the task of maintaining social order.[65] This by no means indicates the submission of Odysseus to an obligation to others, threats to the *oikos* are threats to him. The balance of power has nonetheless changed slightly through broader expressions of social roles and rules, even as the bulk of attention still rests with the individual and their power to uphold, bend, or break those rules. Finally, each poem describes a world whose primary values are competitive and personal, and whose social organization is predominantly small (kinship-based), interdependent groups

[64] While hospitality is the realm of Zeus, and so there are religious implications to the suitors' imposition as well, the religious features of suitors' offenses are not strictly necessary to achieve the same effect. They are mentioned here because of the religious content of Odysseus's bizarre interruption.

[65] The adventures Odysseus has while wandering are an altogether different type of labor than the contests of skill and strength engaged with in the *Iliad*.

engaged in various local alliances and wars. Order exists in this world, but it both depends upon, and is threatened by, the everyday use of main force.[66]

After the *Odyssey*, the positions of dominance between personal and public power shift again and assert an even more formalized hierarchy. When Odysseus shows up in Virgil and Dante as Ulysses, he appears in an altogether different light. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ulysses is a fraud, a schemer whose trickery is assigned opprobrium unknown in the Homeric epics. Ulysses is encountered at a distance, through Sinon, whose lies are an instrument of Ulysses' design. His achievements are still great—the stratagem of the horse remains cunning—but their significance is now bound to tragedy (however necessary it may have been as a precursor to Rome). That the sack of Troy earned by treachery violates the Roman sense of honor which in Virgil is linked inexorably with duty; this is perhaps the signal difference between the heroism of Homer's epics and that of Virgil: each depends upon superlative individuals, but Aeneas is heroic on behalf of a people, expressed in a sense unknown in the Homeric poems. Ulysses' journey is a model for Aeneas's search for a new home, but as a negative pole against which Aeneas's positive moral virtues are defined. The submission of the heroic impulse as drive for personal glory through direct action to a public or patriotic principle emerges as the aesthetic and political rule, in perfect keeping with the propaganda function of Virgil's poem for Augustus, and though fervor for individual excellence remains (on the battlefield, in the forum, in verse, etc.)

[66] Cf. Adkins, A.W.H. *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece: from Homer to the end of the Fifth Century* (1972).

its value ultimately derives not from its own glory but from the service it renders to the state.

Dante tilts the field of play still further in the *Divine Comedy*, in which the Pilgrim travels through hell and purgatory on his way to paradise. The worlds constituted by each book are organized according to a rigid hierarchy of sins and virtues. Within this hierarchy Ulysses resides deep in Malebolge, the eighth portion of the eighth circle of hell, condemned as a fraud to be eternally consumed by tongues of flame. Though the Pilgrim responds enthusiastically to the prospect of speaking with the legendary figure, suggesting admiration, the location and punishment endured by Ulysses forbids reading his exploits as laudable. In Dante, heroes are under the regime of sin which fundamentally changes the nature of the game of virtue; it is no longer history (fame) or tribal allegiance that judges, but God. Theologies that embrace the concept of sin contain the good in a realm both abstract and eternal. Henceforth, it can never be enough just to win; one must win in the right way.[67]

These four versions of Odysseus show a shift in dominance regarding what counts as heroic action and the permissibility of acts that fall under the umbrella of cheating to be partnered with the heroic. Again, it must be

[67] The concept of an eternal score-keeper—who is by definition always watching—invents the possibility of a private hero. Since there is a permanent and infallible audience, panoptic theisms revise what had hitherto been the essentially public nature of heroism. Furthermore, this opens the door for the possibility of a minor voice that wields determining authority despite being within a contrasting cultural environment (e.g. early adopters of new faiths). Ironically, the ossification of rules for heroic conduct actually destabilizes the heroic as a category; more ambiguous concepts of heroes lends resiliency alongside flexibility. The new notion of the hero does not bend, it breaks—resulting in an often irreconcilable multiplication of heroisms, now properly plural, each beholden to its own set of determining values. Over time, the aggregate effect has been to muddy the waters as to what is and is not heroic in the culture at large.

remembered that movement from one model of heroic cheat to another is not an abandonment of earlier and/or parallel models, which often intrude or resurface in later representations. Whether such intrusions are Dante's politicking by his selection of residents in the *Inferno*, or Nestor urging the Achaeans to chase slaughter (and the larger goal) instead of plunder (proof of individual heroic acts) in the *Iliad*, both dominant and subordinate elements exist simultaneously and are capable of expression inside the same moment. The heroic cheat is not a case of either/or but of both/and. The discontinuity of these expressions is mediated by the context that indicates (usually) discernible preferences, even if those preferences contain contradictions. Consider again the stage on which the Lance Armstrong interview is played.

The Oprah Interview is an established brand. Its immediate predecessor, which *Oprah* would soon eclipse, is none other than *The Phil Donahue Show*, which made television history with its discussions of controversial and taboo subjects. In 1994, Oprah distanced herself and her show from the more lurid aspects of tabloid journalism and began a transition toward the spiritualism she is known for today. Yet both early and late *Oprah* work via the same core operation: the investigation and revelation of personal and social truths. This method makes many assumptions about the nature of truth, two of which are key here. First, truth is hidden. Second, for hidden truths to be knowable/actionable they must be declared to others.[68] This articulation is not only exorcism, but is first and

[68] There is an implicit understanding that the hidden truths have always been operating, but in the manner of the unconscious; there is an unmistakably therapeutic element to Oprah.

foremost a public speaking: it speaks to, but also for, the public who judges and attests to its truth.

The Oprah interview is not just an event, it is a genre, and there are expectations to be met. It is both contest and confessional. While the mere presence of Lance in this arena is already a sign of his guilt, he must nonetheless still conduct the performance of confession (though not too readily—suffering being the guarantor of truth accepted by the audience):

> Oprah Winfrey: So here we are in Austin Texas. A few days ago you texted to the Associated Press and said, "I told her to go wherever she wants,"—her being me—"and I'll answer the questions directly, honestly and candidly. That's all I can say." Those are your words?
>
> Lance Armstrong: [nods] Those are my words.
>
> OW: When we first met a week ago today, we agreed that there would be no holds barred; there would be no conditions on this interview and that this would be an open field.
>
> LA: I think that's best for both of us.

The frame of the hard-hitting interview establishes a rhetoric of combat, pitting Oprah against Armstrong in mental and physical struggle. The rules—that there are no rules—set a tone of juridical reverence and make clear that this is serious business.

Oprah Winfrey: I agree. So here we go, open field. So let's start with the questions that people around the world have been waiting for you to answer, and for now I'd just like a yes or no…

Lance Armstrong: Ok.

OW: …Ok? **This whole conversation—we have a lot of time—will be about the details.** Yes or no, did you ever take banned substances to enhance your cycling performance?

LA: Yes**.**

OW: Yes or no. Was one of those banned substances EPO?

LA: Yes.

OW: Did you ever blood dope or use blood transfusions to enhance your cycling performance?

LA: Yes.

OW: Did you ever use any other banned substances like testosterone, cortisone or Human Growth Hormone?

LA: Yes.

OW: Yes or no, in all seven of your Tour de France victories, did you ever take banned substances or blood dope?

LA: Yes.

OW: In your opinion, was it humanly possible to win the Tour de France without doping, seven times in a row?

LA: Not in my opinion.

OW: So, when did you first start doping?

LA: We're done with the yes and nos?

OW: [reassuring laugh] we're done with the yes and nos.

(Oprah, Jan. 7, 2013, bold text mine)

The "yes or no" exchange is like a too familiar catechism, at once necessary and superfluous. Armstrong's admission that he had doped was a ritual that needed to be observed in order to move on to what really matters. The assumption that there is something that really matters is the condition of possibility for the Oprah interview. By locating the real about-ness in the tantalizing "details," Oprah dismisses the mere fact of doping—in advance of its announcement—as insignificant by comparison. Armstrong's admission is not yet his confession; it is the *hidden* truth that Oprah is after and to which Armstrong must confess.

Though individually quite different, Oprah's interviews exhibit a consistent pattern: a celebrity, case-study, or other person-of-interest is opened up (metaphorically) and announces, testifies, confesses, or otherwise reveals a hidden truth. These revelations form a cathartic bond between the audience and Oprah's

guest (the subject before the law). The audience serves as judge and witness but also as fellow sinner. The tacit truth of *Oprah* is that everyone (including the audience) needs to confess. The goal of confession is correction regarding one's place in a moral universe.

As an extension of, or at least as a parallel happening to, the Recovery Movement in the United States, *Oprah*'s moral orientation is a peculiar hodge-podge of individual affirmations and spiritual solidarity.[69] This alignment exhibits certain schizophrenic tendencies as it seeks to reveal and celebrate each person's "real" essence even as it simultaneously eradicates the singularity of the individual in service of the more primordial revealed truth "that the heart of every woman—and man too, for that matter… really is the same" (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1997). On *Oprah*, this foundational sameness is the real real: it overrules the merely idiosyncratic differences in desire, race, class, and so on, around which the show is superficially structured, in service of a utopian assertion of fellow feeling that is both a claim to authority and the voice of law.[70]

Like all genres, an Oprah interview is essentially rule governed: it behaves, that is, as a game. "No holds barred," the phrase that sets the affective tone for her interview, though code for "this is not a game" is, in fact, merely the first rule of the *Oprah* game: that it pretends not to be one. These kinds of feints

[69] For a detailed account of this genealogy, see Trysh Travis' *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey.* University of North Carolina Press. 2009.

[70] Within the internal logic of *Oprah*, it is to this sameness that guests confess. However, it would be naïve to exclude the cult of personality that surrounds Oprah as sufficient motivation for an identical confession. In the latter case, it remains only to be seen that the sameness at stake is in Oprah too.

and misdirection are hardly secret, and would not bear mentioning were it not the case that for Armstrong to win at the Oprah game he has to lose. This is not usually a problem for Oprah's guests, except that losing is the one thing the thoroughly heroic Armstrong is incapable of doing.

To use "losing" in this way points to a manner of thinking about life that is reductive, commonplace, and on both accounts enormously powerful. The rhetoric of winning and losing is so ubiquitous that the degree to which it is merely a metaphor is up for debate; for Armstrong at least, the stakes of a win/lose dichotomy are concrete and severe: he built his life around his exceptional ability to ride a bicycle, which proved almost miraculously capable of rendering other endeavors inconsequential by comparison. The social and material wealth given to Armstrong because of this ability boggles the mind. However, pressuring "ability," as the discourse surrounding athletic idolization does, is somewhat misleading. As with the earlier example of lifting heavy things, it is not the activity itself that garners praise but the contest that takes place through that activity. The banal objection to the compensation of professional athletes, "should someone really be paid so much for doing X?" misses this crucial point. Sport stands in for myriad competitions and contests of power: minor versions of a major violence, made safe and contained by rules and fields of play. As a consequence, winning and losing are staked in both the immediate contest and its symbolic register.

Fetishizing victory has a deeper and more pervasive hold on western culture than the other, more complicated, parts of competition and contest. Daniel

Dombrowski, scholar of the philosophy of sport, celebrates a broader understanding of competition through an etymological inquiry, in which he notes that 'competition' "literally means 'to *ask* with' one's opponent," which raises the important questions of what is being asked, and how. Dombrowski suggests the core question *is* one of ability: "which of us is better at a certain activity" (37)? He draws a parallel between the agon of athletic contest and that of rhetoric, aligning the inquiry of physical contest with knowledge and truth-seeking debates. This is a utopian view well-worth developing, and whose contrast helps better clarify what Armstrong (and for all intents and purposes the bulk of the history of professional sport) does not do. The asking of Dombrowski's competitors serves self-knowledge in a manner akin to the confessions on *Oprah* in that each exchange presupposes a self obscured from itself that can be made legible only through the mediation of another. Both forms of questioning shoulder a difficult burden: that of revelation.

Self-discovery is a perilous enterprise that takes a double risk: the chance that you might not be who you thought you were, and the further hazard of being confirmed in who, or what, you are. In *Oprah*'s confessions, as in sport, there is a necessary element of uncertainty as the outcome is never wholly given in advance; if it were, it would cease to be a contest and lose its veracious power. This contest—though dependent on the other—becomes a wresting of the self from the self: a genuine self-discovery where what is found neither exhausts nor diminishes the possibility of future discovery. Here is where the ennobling

character of sport resides—its competition is a striving with, over and above (yet inseparable from) striving against.

But perhaps this is too much magical thinking. A hyperbolically positive agon depends upon a break, and a radical break, between the space of the game and the remainder of social life; a break, furthermore, whose highest purpose is to erase itself: to end in truth, not merely truth-in-the-game. While notions of the separateness of games are deeply embedded in the canon of play scholarship, the play-ground as magic circle does not sustain criticism.[71] Events on play-grounds leak out into the world and the world leaks right back in. This is not due to any structural necessity of games as formal systems, but is a necessary consequence of the social nature of games.[72] Consider, as a flagship example, how the hierarchies established by athletic contest are, or at any rate have been, internalized and extended beyond the moment of contest—necessarily contingent—to serve as signs of a hierarchy whose duration extends towards infinity if only it is sufficiently bolstered (by social, economic, and military mechanisms). In other words, winning a wrestling match is taken to show not only who prevailed in that particular contest but also who will prevail in business and politics, in social and

[71] Cf. Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and Roger Caillois' *Man, Play and Games* for additional detail on the separateness of play from non-play. Neither account is entirely unambiguous about this separation and 'separate' may be too strong a word; rather consider game space to be distinct but not separate, where its difference is negotiated and changeable. The bulk of recent criticism on the magic circle trails the surge of academic interest in video gaming (cf. Consalvo, Juul, Zimmerman) and has created its own problems and possibilities bearing on the relationship between digital and traditional games which, as has been suggested by parallel conversations (cf. Bernard DeKoven, Celia Pearce, Michael Liebe, and Chris DeLeon), have irreducible differences regarding the necessary relationships among players and between players and games. A problem addressed in detail in chapter 1 and 4.

[72] This is true even where game playing is read as a mechanism of withdrawal from society; the perspective of that society is still required to form the condemnation: refusal is itself but one mode of relation.

sexual life in the future; the victory of a moment is (mis)taken as the mark of an essential and enduring difference. The clichés of the jock and its antithesis are familiar indicators of the pervasive links between athletic prowess and symbolic (and cultural) capital: stereotypes that demonstrate the parlaying of prowess into that capital.[73] The jock is not merely a convenient straw-man; it takes a lot of working against biology to imagine an aesthetic divorced from the choreographies of physical force. Nonetheless, the idolization that attends athletic contest is not limited to a platonic appreciation of physical display but also, at least tacitly, is understood in its role in shaping the larger social ecology. In sum, there is an ugly functionalism that underwrites athletic contest. Here, the ideals of sport run alongside mundane transactions in the social economy, amounting to the acknowledgment that winning the game, as a cultural trope, is as much about what having won the game can be exchanged for as it is about the contest in and of itself.

Given the inseparability of games and social life, there is ample opportunity to be judged beyond the playing field for performances on it. Reducing the complexity of agon to a question of winning or losing is in part simple pragmatism; it is more efficient, and more in-line with modern discourses of value, to commodify a good champion than a "good sport." The signs of being an honest, if mediocre, competitor are harder to display than the spoils of victory whether yellow jerseys, championship rings, arms and armor, or the heads of

[73] Consider, as but one example, the social economy described in *Friday Night Lights*, the non-fiction book, the series, or the feature film, in which social and professional life in a Texas town is determined by relationships to football.

challengers; there is a satisfying visibility to these tokens, a ready significance that mere being fails to adequately convey. Like the honors and prizes of the Homeric world, trophies in modern sport legitimize retroactively the abilities presumed to have led to their capture.

Trophies thus become a sign of a different sense of ability: ability that has been contested and proved. And this is proof is comparative and interpreted as taking place within a vertical structure. Value in Armstrong's world, unlike *Oprah*'s final perspective of sameness, is based upon demonstrating hierarchical difference—striving always to be best and to excel all others— and whose notions of excellence are read within a rhetoric of domination: of others, of circumstances, of the self. It is always, at bottom, a discourse of mastery. Armstrong is at a loss in this regard as the form of the *Oprah* interview, as with the first steps in recovery programs, begins with submission. Lance insists that:

> Behind that story [his "mythic" story] is momentum. Whether it's fans or it's the media, it just gets going… and I lost myself in all of that. I'm sure there would be other people that couldn't handle it, but I certainly couldn't handle it, and I was used to controlling everything in my life. I controlled every outcome in my life. (Oprah, Jan. 7, 2013)

This statement is meant to begin the work of submission but it never quite gets there. "Momentum" is not a neutral word for a professional cyclist, whose career is built around its manipulation. While it is true that momentum is vaguely mystified in cycling, the fact remains that it is the task of riders to set pace, to

establish (i.e. control) momentum. No one is more aware of this than Armstrong, whose relentless cadence on his return to cycling after cancer treatment is but one of the symptoms of what might be called the mathematicization of professional cycling, where athletes became what John Hoberman describes as "mortal engines"—bodies that remain symbols of human excellence, physical and moral, but are also seen as assemblages of moving parts, to be honed like any other piece of precision machinery—equally the subjects who work, and the objects that are worked on (or who play and are played with, if such a distinction can still be made). Even Hoberman's satisfyingly industrial term may linger too long over the material fact of the human form: although athletic bodies are received as organic machines, they are made usable by their transformation into information systems. Alongside the athlete's body as an object that is tinkered with runs the mythic notion of the athlete as super-person that not only persists, but is exaggerated by technology's colonization of the body, and Lance lives inside this narrative space.

Hinging on a contest of endurance, Armstrong's statement appeals to moral competition: it calls for a suitable challenger to step forward even as it imagines the impossibility of that challenger. At no point is Armstrong outperformed by his imagined others ("I'm sure there would be other people who *couldn't* handle it"), rather Lance is brought down to the level of merely mortal powers. His escalating emphasis ("I'm sure there would be other people… but I certainly… I was used to controlling… I controlled…") counters his diminishing status. Armstrong positions himself as simultaneously like others who can be overcome by external events, and as one who, by custom (and presumably right),

was used to "controlling everything": a hyperbole hammered home through repetition and proximity, "used to" becomes an ongoing "I controlled," and emphasizes his outcomes—by implication, victories—as irreducibly designed.

The mania for control is part of a win/lose dichotomy that drives a wedge between the prerational and rational mentalities. For a prerational dominant mentality, like that which asserts itself in Armstrong's language, victory and its authorization are tautological: I won, therefore the gods favor me; the gods favor me, therefore I won. This reasoning, identical to that found in trials by combat and iliadic conflict, marks a temporal difference between the logic of authority in prerational and rational mentalities. In the prerational, authority is contingent upon, and simultaneous with, the manifestation of victory (which could come in any number of forms). In a rational dominant mentality, by contrast, the way victory can be realized has already been determined in advance of the actions that produce it. In other words, for the rational mentality, victory depends upon playing the game the right way; winning "by other means" is not actually winning at all but a false victory, or cheating.

Distinctions between prerational and rational mentalities are not always very clear. For instance, the modern courtroom is in many ways just combat that uses words instead of swords.[74] That said, a rational mentality is, in general, concerned with and presupposes abstract notions like justice that exceed the act claiming victory in ways the prerational mentality is not similarly invested in.

[74] Admittedly, the swords do sometimes show up later.

Although Lance can articulate commonly-held principles of a rational mentality, and does so at the end of the interview, "I can look at what I did, cheating to win bike races, lying about it, bullying people…. Of course you're not supposed to do those things—that's what we teach our children." what he cannot question, what seems utterly beyond his ken, is the insistent *having* to win. The compulsion to win avoids serious scrutiny by sheltering under rules (customary, fictional, conventional, or legal). Striving for victory is recognized as noble, but its excessive form, the akratic win-at-all-costs attitude, corrupts and makes culpable such pursuit.[75] Although by describing Lance's attitude as "win-at-all-costs" Oprah implies its inappropriateness, the deviance of this attitude is limited to eccentricity and in fact the drive to win is offered to the audience as a point of sympathy: extended without commentary or criticism but accepted as self-sufficient. The necessary relationship between doping and winning are thus given, by Oprah as well as Armstrong, as grounds that rationalize that behavior even though the logic of the sport has no choice but to declare any victory achieved with doping illegitimate.[76] Oprah chases the notion of winning throughout the interview and herds the concept into the center of a schema of addiction—

[75] While injuries and deaths can occur in competitive sport, in the "normal" pursuit of victory they are only tragic accidents. If, however, they occur amid extra-legal pursuit of victory (cheating, doping, etc.) the fatalities risk being absorbed by the excessive zeal and, in effect, produced by it—becoming criminal.

[76] The logic of a sport is embodied by its rules, both explicit and implicit. For instance, philosopher Bernard Suits argues the condition of checkmate, understood as a specific arrangement of pieces, is fundamentally different from checkmate as an arrangement of pieces arrived at through the process of playing chess in accordance with the rules i.e. simply rearranging the board into a situation of checkmate versus playing chess until the checkmate condition emerges (Suits, *The Grasshopper*). That is to say that checkmate only has its full, "authentic" meaning as an expression of the procedural operations performed under the rules of chess. What is made plain by this is that the authenticity at issue does not describe a state of affairs about the game but rather is a description of the contest between opponents which is mediated by the game.

Armstrong needs to win because winning maintains his fiction, which gives him the resources to repeat the cycle. Oprah does not rebuke Lance for his zeal for winning, which is as appropriate to Armstrong as it is to Diomedes or Ajax, yet insistence on victory without regard for the method of its achievement appears as the point of contention between prerational and rational values.

As a modern subject, Armstrong's cultural baseline is a rational dominant mentality that assumes an *ought* capable of interposing between power and the actions of power. This intercessory 'ought' compels as well as prohibits: it is an authorizing function. A crisis of authority is precisely the trap in which Armstrong is caught. On the one hand, he is honor/duty bound to submit to the rules of cycling and, on the other, he is compelled to obtain personal glory, which depends upon victory. This ambivalence is complicated by the fact that doping was (is) endemic in professional cycling—the Tour de France has a particularly sordid history with doping: witness the 1998 Festina affair, a doping scandal that resulted in the withdrawal of seven entire teams from the Tour, as but one example.[77] Armstrong's belief, which is in-line with other competitors who have since admitted to doping, was that there was not a reasonable chance of winning the Tour without doping. This belief is where the philosophical stake of the Armstrong scandal is located; dewy-eyed utopianism aside, professional cyclists want to win—for wealth, for fame, for glory—there is no easy separation between competing and winning. Lance's appeal to the dictionary, "the definition of cheat

[77] The Festina affair is a cluster of doping scandals set off by the discovery of a cache of drugs in the car of Festina soigneur, Willy Voet, which led to raids and the subsequent exposure of wide-spread doping at the Tour. The enormously bad press from the Festina affair led directly to the doping reforms, tests, and testing protocols in place today.

is to gain an advantage on a rival or foe…that they don't have. I didn't view it that way [gaining such an advantage]. I viewed it as a level playing field," is a textbook rationalization by someone caught by a rational system. The cry, "but everyone was doing it," subordinates the game to the condition of winning, behind which hides the prerational exultation "and I did it best!" On the road and in his rhetoric, Armstrong is fixated on the top of the podium because his history has taught him that if he can only go faster, longer, he can go fast enough to be right.

When Oprah asks Lance if, things being what they are, he would cooperate with USADA in the future, his response is telling: "If there was an effort to… If there was a truth and reconciliation commission—again, I can't call for that, I've got no cred—if they have it, and I'm invited, I'll be first man in the door." Most striking is Lance's terminology which may seem scattered at first, but is actually very precise. The choice of a "truth and reconciliation commission" shows an entirely haywire scale of judgment, associating doping reforms in bicycle races with the redress of human rights abuses. Moreover, truth and reconciliation commissions are famously non-punitive; coming on the heels of Armstrong's comments that other riders received much lighter punishments for similar offenses, this quality is not coincidental and suggests itself as a motive for the word choice. Lastly, and perhaps this was only to be expected, Lance's fantasied commission is a race that Armstrong wins. Even in the context of an appeal to authority, Lance can only frame relationships to that authority in agonistic terms.

At play here is an exceptionalism that has always already arrived at the exception. The state of exception, envisioned by Carl Schmitt as the condition which suspends the normal operations of law, allows for the exercise of power without limit and reveals the location of "real" power behind its day-to-day expression. Opposition between the mere representation of power and its direction application underwrite the Schmittian framework with a similar dichotomous logic to that which distinguishes the representational violence of the rational mentality from the immediate violence of the prerational. It is as if, upon the recognition that law is ultimately supported by the use of force, law is judged superfluous and subtracted from consideration, leaving force as the sole remainder.[78] Armstrong knows that arguments about his prowess (*arete*) come down to the presence or absence of victories—that is to say, his performances are not statements about how something is, they are statements that something is. Schmitt famously declared that, "sovereign is he who decides on the exception." (5)[79] The decisional character of sovereignty has been generalized beyond the juridical to include all regulated or normalized behaviors, which is to say the entirety of social life; the notion of individual sovereignty asserts that each person, if only in theory, is capable of sovereign decisions in just this manner: to set aside arbitrary constraints to the free exercise of one's own power. This romantic invocation of the will, while commonplace and influential in discussions

[78] Schmitt's brand of utopianism supposes that the role of sovereign authority is fundamentally conservative—its task is to abolish or annihilate exceptions—a situation which becomes paradoxical under conditions of constant crisis, the permanent state of exception in which we live.
[79] The sovereign being the individual or institution that decides both what counts as an exception and on what decisions are appropriate to it.

of agency, occludes the often piecemeal, automated, and contingent character of real decisions as they are lived, be they an individual's choices or those of the state. Nonetheless, this romanticism has successfully positioned itself as necessary to ideas of personal identity as they are expressed in American legal and social life. Moreover, ownership fantasies of personal power (always in suspended possibility, i.e. "what one is capable of") do important work maintaining the status quo: ironically exchanging the belief that one could live differently for the fact that one never does. Armstrong's Tour performances stake this kind of power, dismissing arbitrary limitations that would hinder his achievement. Armstrong's critics object because they argue it is (and is only) on the basis of those limitations that victory is authorized—herein is prerational and the rational mentalities challenging each other. By cheating, Armstrong means to both violate and benefit from the rules, in effect saying, "yes, those are limits, but not in this (my) case."

Two further points need to be addressed for a more comprehensive picture of Lance's cheating. First, it is significant that Armstrong did not believe his behavior was culturally exceptional. Though its history goes back much further, from 2000-2010, doping was rampant in professional cycling. From an insider's perspective, doping was functionally regarded less as cheating than as a specialized way of playing the game—a kind of regional variant, if you will. Thus, contra the earlier example of Agamemnon, Armstrong (from his perspective) was not so much violating the customs of his community on grounds of his prowess as he was adhering to the customs of his community through the

uninhibited display of prowess—the official rules having been succeeded by the unofficial rules. Any remaining conflict between the rules of the road in the abstract, and the professional sense of 'how the game is played here' is then reconciled through the legitimizing force of victory. One need not take Armstrong's word for it. As the recent torrent of doping confessionals show, the idea that Armstrong was an outlier in his doping behavior could not be more wrong.

Biopics refer casually to the *omerta*, or code of silence, that was and is present in professional cycling regarding doping, but rarely spell out the logical consequence of its effects.[80] As professional athletes, pro cyclists' fundamental task is not to compete but to win. If it is known that other, favored competitors are doping then one necessarily increases the risk of losing by choosing not to dope. Given the symbolic capital at stake in losing, such a risk is unacceptable in light of the relative ease (at the time) of beating the drug tests and the limited severity of the punishments for getting caught. This polarity of risk is exaggerated further in comparison to the benefits of winning: the victor feasts at a table of riches—sponsor contracts, celebrity, prize money, glory—whereas all flavors of losing taste the same. Because so little distinction is made between finishing 23rd and finishing 47th, the outcomes of crises of conscience over whether to dope or not are all too predictable. The code of silence amplifies the effect of this cost-benefit analysis. With a code of silence in place, riders cannot speak out without

[80] Cf. The Armstrong Lie (2013), Cycle of Lies (2014), The Secret Race: Inside the Hidden World of the Tour de France (2013).

incurring an unacceptable loss of social capital. Since professional cycling is a team sport, alienation is also exclusion: no team, no career. As a result, other riders do not actually have to be doping; merely believing that other riders are doping is enough to demand that one also dope in response, because at the highest levels of competition employing a doping regimen had weakly dominated other strategies relative to the outcome of winning the race.

The second point that needs mentioning pertains to Armstrong's many public declarations that he had not cheated. The vehemence of those statements and the mobilization of legal force against those who challenged his narrative were driven by the necessity to keep up appearances from the institutional side of the equation as much as Lance's personal interests. That the notion of fair play deployed within the stories of the cycling stakeholders (e.g. UCI, USADA, and sponsors) was needed—that fairness be a measure—reveals the fair play story itself to be a part of ongoing negotiations among other powers. The value of fair play doesn't come from the fair play itself, but from the imposition of a style of play, called fair play, by agencies with the might to enforce it. While Armstrong's story (cheating included) appears to be a fantasy of personal power, its necessary deception shows that it remains subordinate to the dictates and rules of other powers—rules, again, that are made necessary not because of any intrinsic value to the rule (the rules are completely arbitrary), but because the agencies who maintain the rules—and thus their power—are capable of taking away the prizes of the competition. In short, the dialogue from Armstrong's perspective has

always been between force and force, not force and truth.[81] Oprah, by contrast, doggedly searches for some truth to authorize force.

Throughout the interview, Oprah hunts for a valid exception: something to serve as a sufficient cause to compel Lance to cheat. Consequentialist apologies are well-rewarded in Lance's case since they can overlook chronology: Armstrong's cheating is directly responsible for him being in a position from which to raise over $500 million for cancer research and to lead large-scale donation and awareness programs, both of which have materially and substantially improved the lives of huge numbers of people suffering from and affected by serious illnesses. By any remotely instrumental measure, the positive benefits from Armstrong's rule-breaking far outweigh its cost.

As far as cases of ends justifying means go, one could do a lot worse than Lance Armstrong. Game players are strange creatures where instrumentality is concerned, and professional game players are stranger than most. Their peculiarity hinges on two related points: first, a game player's task is to overcome obstacles to the achievement of a specific goal, while nonetheless maintaining constant submission to unnecessary obstacles that impede that same goal. In this way, game players attempt to navigate distinctions between necessary and

[81] Spaces of contest (e.g. the arena, the playground) use the gestures of power but are themselves always contexualized by other power relations. Thersites is prohibited from challenging Odysseus—either in sport or in law—because their unequal social status prohibits, in advance, the possibility (acceptability) of a challenge. Indeed, the whole of the *Iliad* takes shape around just this problem. The poem opens with an argument over distribution of spoils when Achilles is the stronger warrior but Agamemnon wields broader social power, and it closes with Patroclus' funeral games, in which Achilles names Agamemnon the victor of the very athletic/martial contest (javelin) at which Achilles most excels *before any competition takes place*—thus using the formal setting of the contest as a stage on which the individual power being tested yields to the social power that rules after games are finished.

unnecessary obstacles, but the authority by which those distinctions are made is, at best, unclear.[82] Second, as professionals, pro athletes are in many ways the opposite of game players: since their livelihood depends on victory, the game can never really be the purpose for itself. The instrumentalization of games in the hands of professional athletes exceeds, or is at least more explicit than, the degree to which games normally transgress their imagined borders.[83]

Since the very notion of a professional athlete presupposes an instrumental relationship to the game being played, performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) pose as much of a philosophical and narrative problem as they do a practical solution. In fact, doping in sport may be most accurately described as a thoroughly impractical problem. Doping hedges bets. By weighting the odds, competitors who dope abandon the purity of competition's ideals: its truth-seeking capacity is corrupted. That said, PEDs are more alchemy than chemistry in that the product and the soul of its user are inseparably mixed: the results of doping are not duplicable from one athlete to another. The drugs are not magic potions and they don't, by themselves, win races. One still has to be Lance Armstrong to get the effects history has witnessed. Nonetheless, commitment to a "purer" mode of athletic inquiry cannot tolerate even alchemical alterations exactly because it cannot be decided where the athlete ends and the drugs begin. Performance enhancing drugs enhance the production of victory, not self-knowledge. The

[82] Take, for example, the prohibition on counting cards commonplace at casinos. Here, it is not the rules of the game that disallow a certain activity but the impact on the game's profitability to the house.

[83] Even referring to professional athletes as players is a confused, and confusing, issue. Performers might be a better term, if that did not also collapse back into "player" by way of the theater.

ideals of athletic contest, utopian as they are, refuse the smoothing of the path to victory that PEDs provide and are, in precisely this sense, impractical. Though there is a certain intuitive logic to marking as illegitimate victories gained with undue assistance since the possession of victory remains the primary means to evaluate the abilities assumed to have led to its capture, the social context in which games are performed is almost entirely deployed against the possibility of living up to such ideals.

Consider again Oprah's search for an exception authorizing Lance's cheating; her questions assume the integrity of rules as an authority. When rules are, if regrettably, superseded by other rules that shift in power is itself rule-governed. For Lance, the sufficient cause to violate the rules is identical with the condition they authorize: winning (which is not reducible to any one of the cluster of social and material benefits it brings but gathers them together). Lance's drive for personal glory is inseparable from, for example, his genuine commitment to the work of the Livestrong foundation. Where Oprah searches for a larger rule (social or moral) to which she can appeal, Armstrong shows that power is tautological—the exception is the justification for itself.[84]

[84] Oprah's search depends upon the view specific to the rational mentality in which 'games' connote an often trifling artificiality that can be succeeded by the demands of more urgent, and presumably prior, demands. Such rationalization is a common trope among heroic cheats, who dramatize this dilemma. What such questions fail to acknowledge is that there is no self-sufficient cause to prioritize these sites of appeal (e.g. biology, as when Oprah asks, "could you in some way justify the blood transfusions because it was your blood") beyond their cache within the rules of argument that reign at that particular moment (Oprah, Jan. 7, 2013). When Armstrong, quite directly states, "there is no true justification" for the blood transfusions, what is under the word 'true' is the idea of an unchallengeable authority (Oprah, Jan. 7, 2013). In short, the hunt for a good enough reason is less about the reason than it is about the status of the category 'rules.'

As ironic as it may be, from Armstrong's public statements emerge the picture of a man who despises hypocrisy. In its most recent investigation of Armstrong, USADA offered other riders deals if they came forward as whistleblowers. Those willing to cooperate could incur fines and six-month suspensions as penalties. Contrary to USADA's statements that all riders were given similar propositions, Lance continues to insist that he never received such a deal. Whether or not Armstrong would have come forward if only he had received such an offer, his comments on USADA's purported offers—as it became increasingly clear, in 2013-2014, that USADA had no intention of making space for Armstrong to re-enter competitive sport—are instructive. Armstrong asks, "why go tell the world… we offered Lance the same deal we offered everybody else? Just say, 'We wanted him. We got him.' Go dance on his grave" (The Armstrong Lie, 2013). Armstrong bristles less at the unfairness of the discrepancy than at the disavowal of strength.[85] USADA's claim that deals were offered, but not taken up, is offensive to Lance because it shirks the heroic obligation to claim the limit of one's power oneself. While Armstrong may not appreciate the irony of the situation, he is nonetheless suspended between the appeal to unmitigated power on one side, and a desire to limit that power by the imposition of rules on the other. This is true even where the limiting rules are only the demand that power be wielded nakedly and openly (herein lies the inescapable paradox that

[85] Like the condemnation of Penelope's suitors relying on social rules and the threat of force to bend her to their will rather than open violence, Armstrong's comment scoffs as the reluctance to use and claim one's own power as a kind of cowardice.

both submission to, and refusal of, a code or rule are themselves the use of the very force in question, and indistinguishable).[86]

As she is wrapping up the interview, Oprah floats the old story, "we all know that, when you're famous, people love to see the rise, the heroic rise, and they also love to see you stumble and fall" (Oprah, Jan. 7, 2013). There are a lot of twists and turns to this statement, not least of which is the fact that "we" don't all know, because that second person position is not as widely occupied as her comment suggests; by "you" Oprah means if not "me," then at least "us"—a perspective rather more exclusive than it means to be. Within this folk wisdom, the heroic rise aligns with a symbol of what might be possible while a species of *schadenfreude* offers the satisfaction of knowing that it wasn't really possible after all, and so the misfortune of others forgives our own failures of ambition. Giving Lance Armstrong a poison pill fashioned from *ressentiment* is not inapt, nor is it so strange to hear the ring of truth struck on the brass of envy. The love of the "stumble and fall" vindicates envy. But this can only come after a cruel admiration—the reminder, by contrast, of one's own powerlessness—and the first step of a dance that moves from terror to love. Adoration is thus explained away as a symptom of the disavowal of *ressentiment*, a repressive mechanism also found in Freud's Oedipal complex and theories of super-egoic formation more generally. In plain language: confrontations with greater force provoke fear in the

[86] This particular demand, whose colloquial expression is "fight me like a man," merely articulates the frustration of unstated rules of masculine combat in the West. Like so many power relationships that dress themselves up in "natural" which is to say, naturalized, gender roles, this is also blind to its own ironies. If efficacy of action is coded as masculine, then the inhibition—that force be exercised baldly—becomes feminized to the extent that it actually impedes the expression of the same force it supposedly displays.

powerless. A life thus impinged upon desires to free itself from that fear. The desire to be free leads to the conclusion that force, its ownership and use, must be good since its lack has been so unmistakably bad. Thus, fear of that what hurts us becomes a longing for the strength to hurt.

Lance Armstrong failed to live up to the dual challenge of being a world class athlete whose livelihood and identity depend upon *the outcome* of sporting contests and simultaneously being the champion of an imaginary contest, whose value is in the struggle itself and irreducible to mere victory. When discussions turn to the "spirit of the game" it is this imaginary contest being discussed. But games do not sit neatly in their borders. Even if it were possible to conduct a game temporarily with a noble spirit of being-for-itself, it is not sustainable. Perhaps this is why professional athletes are given so many of society's rewards: not because of their victories but from the demand that they hold, or maintain the illusion of holding, the virtues of an ideal and idyllic competition for the sake of itself (for the sake of truth) amid the pervasive temptation to turn that truth into utility?

The narrative that dominates American culture declares that value is measurable and can be calculated in terms of cost. As other centers of meaning (the church, the state, the community) weakened and failed to provide compelling counter-narratives, the production of "success," comfortably regarded as the accumulation of value, grew ever more narrowly defined within the strictly economic register of cost. It is within this tunneling of value that Armstrong competes, wins, and is hailed as champion. As a champion, he is granted freedom.

Or at least, such is the impression. What Armstrong is actually granted is wealth and a modicum of power which, from the perspective of the hoi poloi, looks a lot like freedom. It looks like it to Lance too, who romanticizes the scope of his ability with hyperbolic delusion, "I have chosen every outcome in my life," and equally romantic nostalgia, "Kids love bikes because it's the first time in their lives they're free" (*The Armstrong Lie*). Much of the symbolic force of Armstrong's utopian narrative ultimately resides here, in the promise of emancipation. Lance Armstrong, it is insisted (by mass media, by Armstrong himself, by the Livestrong foundation, by his supporters), is a reminder that control over one's destiny is possible, but that this possibility rests on the possession of force.[87]

There is a question of proportionality at stake here. Encounters with force in that vulgar notion, the so-called "real world," are rarely balanced contests. Leave aside, for a moment only, the everyday dominations and submissions in favor of grand and uncommon gestures, the spectacles of force: the guns to the head, the choices between dignity and tomorrow, your money or your life. This kind of force wants obedience, not self-discovery; it is not an "asking together" and it is asymmetric by design. Yet these moments are read as somehow more "real" not because they display a truth of things, but because they foreclose the possibility of future decisions and relations. The logic of these crises is subsumptive: absorbing and reducing the complexity of subjective experience to

[87] It is worth acknowledging that for all the supposed universality of Armstrong's message of hope, the fantasies he describes are bound to very specific racial, sexual, and national histories.

an all-or-nothing proposition which, upon being answered, declares that answer the origin and master of what it consumed and displaced. Decisions like these are terrible in their urgency because their claims can be genuine; sometimes single decisions really do destroy entire lives.

While the trauma that spectacular force produces is irruptive and exceptional, it also compels a secondary trauma that has its own intensities and chronology, and that falls under various headings, sometimes called recovery, or survival, but it is most essentially enduring, or living on. The latter trauma is articulated as "crisis ordinariness" by Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism*. Crisis ordinariness is the systemic crisis "incited by the traumatic event [that mobilizes] the spreading of symbolizations and other inexpressive but life-extending actions throughout the ordinary and its situations of living on" (81). The language of both the dispersive wounding of traumatic experience and the accumulative wounding of recovery attest the weight of singular events on the material of individual lives. Recovery, as used above, must be separated from strictly recuperative meanings as it does not describe only a progression from illness or injury towards health, but rather indicates the gathered schema, actions, habits, and symbols called upon to respond to traumatic events, and that may well be destructive themselves. The gestures that constitute "recovery" are as much about mitigation, deferral, and denial as they are about "coming to terms" with trauma—an optimistic phrase that still implies the possibility of compromise. While it is technically true, to use that tired and vicious phrase, that no one was "holding a gun to [Lance's] head," the desires, hopes, and fears at stake in "winning" feel a lot like a gun. Moments of

crisis are anchored in the imagination as well as the world; they are threaded through the fictions around which we build our lives.[88] Lance describes his ban from sport as a "death penalty" because the prohibition sunders forms of life recognizable as his own, and this same threat also lives in the image of himself reduced to merely another competitor.

One reason to love sport and games is that they provide better sites of struggle—ones that, in theory, minimize the traumatic stakes in conflict; they offer a peculiar fantasy that resists brute domination through the mediation of an informal and a formal element: the symmetry of strength among competitors and the absolute authority of the rules.

Most of the fun, as slippery a notion as that is, associated with sport and games is bound to the uncertainty of outcome. This is why games decided by refereed decisions are unsatisfying, and why unbalanced games are uninteresting. It would be absurd, for instance, to pit me against Armstrong in a bicycle race, or against Agassi or Federer in a tennis match. Although such match-ups would be genuine games in a strictly formal sense, the disparity of ability is such that it must asked if we could really be said to be playing the same game after all. Put simply, no truth can be revealed in a contest where the decisions it contains are not meaningful (where meaning can only be read as a close link between intention, action, and result). It should not be forgotten, however, that there is fun to be had in unfair games. The point here is not to discount, or present as

[88] The fantasies themselves are not necessarily identical (though they certainly are shared) but rather the structure of relation to fantasy is a functionally universal characteristic.

illegitimate, the pleasures found in naked expressions of power, rather to insist that sport and games, as presently considered (which is to say, in a rational dominant mentality) locate their most robust pleasures around a zone of equality: a range of reasonably contestable strengths.

The superlative authority of rules attempts to purge ambiguity from the playing field and provides an authority beyond competitive acts that judges and validates those acts. Games are unabashedly utopian in their intent to create spaces that are at once social and essentially and transparently ordered.[89] Rules distinguish games from the context in which they are played—a world that is often decentered, unclear, and where authority can simply be the exercise of overwhelming force.

Cheating allowed Lance, in light of the belief that other top riders were also doping, to maintain the spirit of the game (symmetry of strength) while violating its letter (absolute authority of rules); the damnable thing for Lance is that this, too, violates its spirit. Even though games are not actually separable from the world, they present an opportunity to pretend that they are. The space opened up by that illusion invites champions to be the representatives of our best selves—to strive with and against each other, *but only so far*; the limits imposed by the rules stand in for the threshold of the social itself. In essence, this flirts with the pleasures of prerational conflict (immediate, violent, personal) but

[89] In practice, of course, the outcome of this effort is stratification, and as games are repeated the effect of stratification in game spaces overlaps with non-game hierarchies. The intent, however unrealistic, remains the production of managed conflict: a contest that strives for victory, but whose worth is not strictly dependent upon it.

restrains them within a rational frame (conflict is ephemeral, limited by rules, nominally discrete from other modes of life). Armstrong's cheating is a symptom of the failure to contain the prerational; it signals the collapse of a meaningful difference between the world of the game and the world. Under such circumstances everything is permitted because everything is at stake.

Lance found himself in an impossible situation: he could compete clean and fail to win, or continue to cheat and retain the possibility of victory. Not winning feels like a catastrophe to Lance (which is consistent with public discourse on sport, where "also rans" are treated as basically non-entities). We do a disservice to the complexity of the situation when it is reduced to 'just a bike race' or 'only a game'; for Armstrong, the dilemma about how to compete stakes his identity and very existence. So this, finally, is the moral dilemma that Lance Armstrong ultimately poses: what obligation does one have to resist, when resistance is impossible?

For Armstrong, the idea of competing *with no hope of victory* was intolerable. Victory need not be certain—Lance accepted that he might not win—but the idea of not even being in contention is beyond the pale for him.[90] Armstrong has a simple, but very clear, understanding of what his job is: Lance's

[90] This moral crisis led to his blood doping before the climb of Mont Ventoux in 2009, the final stage of the Tour during his supposedly "clean" comeback, when it was clear that although Armstrong could not win the Tour he could still secure the 3rd place spot on the victors' podium if he could perform well enough on Ventoux. USADA's reasoned decision asserts that the plasma levels in Armstrong's blood increased over the first seven days of the 2009 Tour, as is expected under natural exertion (USADA Reasoned Decision, 140-141). "However, over the next three days of the race, his plasma volume decreased back to pre-race levels. This would not happen naturally, but would happen if Armstrong engaged in blood transfusion during this period" (USADA Reasoned Decision, 140-141).

job is not to race bicycles; his job is to win bicycle races. Faced with this calculus, the Texan dopes himself to the gills and flashes off down the roadway. One might decry, as USADA, UCI, and so many cycling fans and sports reporters have, that such behavior violates the spirit of the game, which it does. However, this objection hinges on the notion that the game's spirit wasn't already violated, which is more than a little disingenuous. What Armstrong is guilty of, in the final analysis, is not profaning the sacred rules of a sport, but of making the already profaned nature of the sport too visible. For Armstrong himself, there was never any real compromise to be struck, he had long ago accepted a more illiadic view of contest; but Armstrong's story is more than just the story of one man. It really is a mythical undertaking.

Oprah and Lance treat Armstrong's disgrace as a collapse of symbolic power and the revelation of a reality beneath the symbol. On the contrary, at no point has Lance Armstrong ceased to be symbolic; he only symbolizes within a different narrative. If Lance Armstrong, hero of the people, showed that anything is possible, then Lance Armstrong the disgraced cheat shows the precarity of even the very strong in the face of real power. What constitutes real power is the same for Armstrong as it is for everyone else: it is what wins; what gets its way. Though Lance may curl his lip at USADA for not claiming the glory for killing Lance Armstrong, his sneer is also a grimace at the impotence of his rules to contain their power.

Armstrong's evident discomfort in the interview is due as much to the difficulty of the moment as it is to publicly addressing the realization that has

been congealing in his mind: somehow winning wasn't enough. At some point the world had rearranged itself from one where the only thing that mattered was what he could do on the bike to one where it didn't matter what he did on the bike. Frustration and fear gather in his replies like water in the cracks of an ancient façade. I do not think Lance has resigned himself to learning the old lesson: there are no rules, only strength and its application, but neither has he settled into a position that acknowledges and accepts (subordinates himself to) the rules of his social world.

Nowhere is this enduring ambivalence more apparent than in the final exchange between Lance and Oprah, itself a microcosm of Lance's fraught relationship to differing regimes of heroism, as well as his bewilderment at being caught between them. The disconnect is condensed around the moment when Oprah's questions returns to Kristin, Lance's ex-wife. Kristin is something of a Beatrice to Lance, and both Oprah and Lance go to Kristin when they need a figure for moral authority who is already inside Lance's story. The description of Kristin that Lance offered earlier in the interview is telling:

> LA: I was going to say if I could say one name [of someone close to Lance who might have been able to intervene in his doping behavior] it'd be Kristin. I mean she was… She's a smart lady, she's extremely spiritual, she believes in honesty and integrity and the truth. She believes that the truth will set you free. We believe differently on a lot of things. She may come at it from a religious standpoint

> where I may not but it doesn't matter. We have three kids together, they deserve the honest truth. They deserve a dad that is viewed as telling the truth to them, to the public. You know, Anna has always wanted that; she doesn't know that whole story back then because we weren't together.

Although Kristin is a "smart lady" who is "extremely spiritual" and "believes in honesty and integrity and truth," Lance seems utterly innocent of the nearly hilarious counterpoint of himself as someone who "believe[s] differently on a lot of things." Even the statement intended to reconcile his and Kristin's opposing beliefs in their children: "they deserve the honest truth" seems blithely unaware that coupling the honest adjective to truth tarnishes the latter, suggesting there might be some other kind. This muddling is compounded further by Lance's inability to separate the representation of truth from truth. His children deserve, not a father who tells the truth, but "a dad *that is viewed as* telling the truth to them," a confessional further diluted and corrupted by turning from the intimacy of family trust to public discourse through the final addition, "to the public."

These incongruities are entirely in keeping with someone accustomed to a prerational view of power. At each point where he could align with Kristin and confirm her beliefs, Lance sidesteps or otherwise refuses. This is nothing but a reenactment of the failure of his confessional before Oprah. Oprah's and Kristin's moral sympathies are in alignment: by following the rules one puts oneself under their protection. In this case, under the protection of Moral Law or the divine, to the extent that is imaginable under secular conditions. It is to this point that Oprah

returns at the interview's conclusion. What began in terms of story will be closed in those same terms.

Oprah offers Lance the opportunity to be a commenter on his own life's work asking, "what's the moral to the [your] story?" Given what is known about the genre of the Oprah interview, this question was always in the offing because, for the story to appear on Oprah's show, there must be a moral. In her performance, this is the point at which all the heartstrings that were supposed to have been tugged throughout can be brought together in a last moment of tension and, finally, released. Lance's response, however, is unsatisfactory

> LA: It's… I don't have a great answer there. I can look at what I did, cheating to win bike races, lying about it, bullying people…. Of course you're not supposed to do those things—that's what we teach our children. That's the easy thing. There's another moral to this story, and I think, for me… I just think it was about that ride and about losing myself and getting caught up in that and doing all of those things along the way that just enabled that. And then the ultimate crime is the betrayal of these people that supported me and believed in me and they got lied to.

In short, Lance all but admits that he is not equipped to answer moral questions about his story—that is, questions in terms of the system of morality that Oprah represents. As he attempts to uncover its meaning and points to "losing myself," Lance loses himself in the answer, vanishing again into abstraction and the

passive voice. Oprah next tries to salvage the exchange and present something that approaches the kinds of confessional acceptance her audience expects. Since Lance had been unable to field her telegraphed cues, in this closing moment Oprah simply feeds his lines to him, "You know what I hope the moral to this story is? I hope the moral of this story is what Kristin told you in 2009: the truth will set you free." And here Armstrong, in a dismissal so flat it screams how utterly alien such a belief is to him, replies, "Yeah. She keeps telling me that."

Lance has lived too closely to the prerational world for too long to drink the kool-aid. He understands with perfect clarity that the rules and principles that have been mobilized to crush him are not abstract or eternal. They do not exist outside of the regimes of power that exercise them. An appeal to higher order, be it God, be it justice, be it the rules of the game, is simply a shift from one register of power to another.

What Lance is discovering is, of course, a very old lesson. The rules have been applied unequally. Not everyone was given the same deal or the same terms. Lance's crippling incapacity is because there is no authority to appeal to because that authority is his antagonist. The same lessons are played out in the daily lives of citizens without power: without cultural, social, or any other kind of capital with which to barter in the marketplace of justice, which is not a principle of exchange but its product. This opens the doors on what the modern heroic cheat looks like: a creature who is required to cheat to be believably heroic.

Chapter 3:

Lucky Pawns

Within the Realms of the Possible

> *"I can see," Miss Emily said, "that it might look as though you were simply pawns in a game. It can certainly be looked at like that. But think of it. You were lucky pawns."*

I wish to take seriously Miss Emily's invitation to consider the events of the novel as though they were part of a game. This pronouncement comes at the climax of the novel, when the lovers Kathy and Tommy seek, and are refused, deferral of their donations from Miss Emily and Marie-Claude. The game to which Miss Emily refers reveals hard truths about difference in which the characters, as well as the novel's readers, are at stake. At the heart of *Never Let Me Go* is a game that we might call "how to be human." Although never explained so forthrightly by the novel, the two basic premises of this game must be recognizable to, if not be accepted by, readers in order to make sense of the work's fundamental tensions. First, readers must come to understand that the task of Hailsham students and their peers is to satisfactorily demonstrate they have the qualities of a human (exactly what counts as satisfactory and to whom this needs to be demonstrated changes over the course of the story). Second, it is necessary to believe that it is possible to satisfactorily demonstrate those human qualities—

in other words, that it is possible to *become* eligible to the category human.[91] That the game of how to be human is being played is visible throughout the novel in myriad ways, for example in the anxieties over mimicry at Hailsham and the farm, the fascinations with doubles, and in the deep ambivalence towards authenticity. Through his masterful manipulation of readers, Ishiguro plays with the necessity of both fantasy and its failure as it becomes plain that not only is there a game being played, but that all its players are cheating.

Set in the early 1990s in an alternative England, *Never Let Me Go* is told entirely in the first person by Kathy H., a carer and, as is eventually revealed, a clone.[92] Kathy, like other clones, has been brought into the world to develop her vital organs, care for other clones (the role of "carer") who have begun to "donate" their organs to normals (non-clones), and whose fate is to undergo the mandatory organ donations that will ultimately kill her.[93] The novel has been variously described as science fiction, fictional autobiography, dissensual Bildungsroman, and simple love story, all with varying degrees of dissatisfaction; *Never Let Me Go* seeps through genre lines just as its significant internal categories (clone/normal, oppressor/oppressed, active/passive) trouble their own porous borders. The novel drifts and skips back and forth through Kathy's

[91] It can be eventually accepted that it is impossible, but that acceptance must arrive as a change from an initial state of possibility. That is, the hope of victory can be dashed, but it has to be established first. Recognition as human can manifest either as a verification or as a category change.

[92] Much has already been made of the role of carer as an interstitial social/professional role that shifts uneasily between non-professional affective labor and professional semi-skilled labor (Cf. Jill Casid; Lisa Fluet; Bruce Robbins). My concern with the role of carer here is limited to its designating an affective laborer and as a marker of social relations characterized by subjective intimacies.

[93] In keeping with the language of the novel I will use the term "normal" or "normals" to designate the non-clone human characters in the novel. cf. Ishiguro p. 69 and especially p.96.

memories, a narrative organization that disorients but also marks Kathy as a "true" subject in the same way as flaws in craftworks become emblems of their authenticity. An image of the world gradually takes shape for readers in parallel with Kathy's coming to knowledge of the extent and depth of her circumstances. In short, the act of reading the narrative enacts the experience it describes and suspends the reader in an impasse between suspicion and knowledge.

The kernel of the novel grows out of Kathy's experiences at Hailsham, a private quasi-boarding school where she, her friend Ruth, and her eventual lover Tommy, grew up. Hailsham's isolation initially appears as the seclusion proper to privilege. Here the banal terrors and sheltered discoveries of a quaint and generically English fantasy of childhood are punctuated by eerie intrusions of medical surveillance and social control.[94] These oddities stand out, but only just, seeming to be merely consequences of the exceptional character of Hailsham and its students. Over the course of the novel, however, these events are remembered or re-read in the sinister light of hindsight as the actual nature of the world is illuminated. Kathy's reminiscences take us through her childhood and adolescence at Hailsham, late adolescence and early adulthood at the Cottages, and her adulthood as she moves between "care centres" looking after donors in her role as carer. We accompany her as an intimate through the death of Ruth, her love affair with Tommy and his death as well, and conclude with a dizzy panoramic perspective, having come to understand that Kathy's periodic comments about how it, "feels just about right to be finishing at last come the end

[94] Cf. Ishiguro p. 13, p. 36, p. 67.

of the year," indicate her impending transition from carer to donor and her own murder by inches (Ishiguro, 4).

In Miss Emily's statement in the epigraph, where she says that "it might look as though you were simply pawns in a game," Kathy is not a player in the game but a token (a game piece). In common use, the sense of the phrase "play a game with" turns on "with" to describe an instrumental rather than a collaborative relationship. Unusual about this phrase, and perhaps why it has persisted, is that the instrumentalization it describes includes a competitive logic: in order to have the instrument to play the game that instrument must first be produced through a process that transforms a subject into an object through the exercise of power.[95]

The game in which Kathy is at play is organized around the production and maintenance of difference between the novel's two groups, normals and clones. By raising the question of the real within the realms of the possible, the novel, to adapt Mark Seltzer, "...makes it possible, or necessary, to distinguish real and fictional reality" (115). Negotiating this distinction governs the interactions between the two groups, and the soul serves as the symbol of this difference (for brevity's sake, I will refer to this relation as "the rule of difference"). The stakes of dissimilarity are life and death, as it is implied that it is just this distinction that provides the moral authority legitimizing the program of organ donations. For example, the movement Miss Emily and Marie-Claude spearheaded that "challenged the entire way the donations programme was being

[95] Power here can be open and direct physical violence or elaborate manipulative schemes; it comes out the same way for the pawn.

run" is based on upsetting the idea of a foundational difference between clones and normals. Their movement sought to use the students' art as evidence that the student-clones of Hailsham were "as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being" (261) and so to improve the quality of life for clones (but not necessarily preserve those lives).

Upon learning about the deplorable conditions other clones faced, Kathy asks "why people would want students treated so badly in the first place?" to which Miss Emily replies that normals "...did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter" (262-263). In this reply, Miss Emily names the very problem she reproduces with the subtle comparison ("you weren't really like us"), showing her own thought to be symptomatic of the distinction Hailsham's project was meant to question. Rebecca Walkowitz captures this dynamic precisely when she notes that " ... [normals] think that individuality is the highest value, and they convince themselves that they are 'not like' the clones—'not like,' because as a group they possess a quality that they believe the clones do not have (individuality) and 'not like,' because they believe they are incomparable (only a clone is 'like' someone else)" (225). The threat in Kathy and Miss Emily's exchange, and which follows from the rule of difference, is that Miss Emily's commitment to an essentialist humanism confuses the causal order of her reply: "humans" do not treat clones cruelly because, as different, the

suffering of clones did not matter but rather that the suffering bodies of clones are the means to produce and attest their difference.[96]

The stakes of the rule of difference insist that the task of the reader, like that of the characters, is to figure out what the relationship is between clones and humans (normals). And yet, as indicated above, the investigation into difference is tainted by its own perspective and investments. In this regard and in many, many others, Ishiguro plays with the conventions of reading in order to put readers on both sides of the clone/normal binary simultaneously.

The notion of the "soul" in modernity does not depend on an explicitly theological view and has come to stand for interiority in general while nonetheless retaining, in the popular imagination, many of the qualities of its religious past. In this sense, the modern soul indicates the idea of a radically singular personhood, a concept the clones necessarily threaten and to which they can only anxiously relate. This secular vision of the soul is in line with the Guardians' philosophy as evidenced by the distinctly non-religious humanism that characterizes a Hailsham education,[97] and entirely consistent with the rule of difference. Yet, from the start, readers only encounter the world through Kathy's perspective. Immersion in Kathy's narrative leaves readers, like Kathy herself, more than a little

[96] Miss Emily's admission that Hailsham sheltered its students through force and/of deception "Very well, sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you. Yes, in many ways we *fooled* you" (268, original emphasis), displays the agonistic struggle of the transformation of subject into object displayed in the section epigraph—a process that depends for its motivation and pleasure on there being a subject who is not only turned into an object, but a subject who is *kept* as an object; in other words, an object that keeps threatening to turn back into a subject and so demands the rule of difference be perpetually proven.

[97] Kathy's incredulous query if Tommy had "found God or something?" (23) and Tommy's response also imply the secular tone of the school.

underwhelmed by Miss Emily's declaration that Hailsham was all about a hunt for souls when those souls seem ludicrously self-evident.[98] But self-evident as what, exactly?

There is some sleight-of-hand here that swapped the uniquely singular quality "proper" to the soul with something far more nebulous and mundane: the representation of personality. The novel, if even remotely successful, does not just encourage but requires readers to invest, to care about Kathy: an identification which implicitly recognizes—as same-to-same—her experiences as human. The fact that readers empathize with Kathy opens the door to what appears to be a robust selfhood, but this is a metafictional trap. On the one hand, Kathy presents as a relatable and "whole" personality whose nature as representation is occluded through the narrative device of self-presentation (e.g. "My name is Kathy H...." etc). On the other hand, and in a manner that folds the material object of the novel itself into Hailsham's project to display souls through art, Kathy becomes merely the reflection of Ishiguro's own soul via the special medium of art. By foregrounding the process of relating (tinted by the rule of difference) *Never Let Me Go* shows that readers are not relating to a personality at all, but a *kind* of personality—literally a personality type—that reflects back readers' own genericity. Ishiguro builds the novel around impasses where the need to come to some decision regarding the difference between clones and normals is alternately

[98] Ishiguro, 260.

pressured and relaxed, kneading into his prose the dreadful transference in which readers are suspended.

The subtleties of the novel's cons are impressive, to say the least. Since readers are already coming from the position of human/non-clone/normal, the concern over a normal/clone binary goes unquestioned and, as Kathy notes, "...when you get a chance to choose, of course, you choose your own kind. That's natural" (4). However, as readers have been relating to Kathy, "the natural" preference is applied to the other side of its borders. On similar lines, Mark Jerng's excellent essay on narrative expectations argues that Ishiguro refuses the conventions of clone narratives, a genre where clones prove themselves human by reproducing the signs of human nature: exactly the game that Kathy initially thinks she is playing. Such signs are imagined as a developmental narrative that proceeds from a dependent childhood, through separation, into an independent and self-sufficient adulthood; in short, individuation is presented as a narrative of emancipation where the self to be freed is understood to be "developing and unfolding from a given inert potentiality" (Jerng, 382). The essay makes the case that Ishiguro denies the conventions of a culturally specific narrative of individuation, foregrounding instead a lack of continuity that depends upon relationships and the social support of memory to build a subject's always partial coherence, [99] asserting that:

[99] Cf. Mark Jerng. "Giving Form to Life: Cloning and Narrative Expectations of the Human." especially p.384-391.

> Through emphasizing narrative modes of relationality by which one's existence begins to "count" in the minds of others within and against normative ways of giving form to life (continuity, teleology, immanent development), Ishiguro begins to expand the narrative parameters of the human. The notion of the human that emerges from this narrative is one that takes away the end-point as the culmination of a "fully realized" life, and directs us to other, more unlikely places, around which to seek the dignity and form of human life. (391)

While the views offered here are in deep sympathy with Jerng's argument, in particular its treatment of memory, there are elements of the forms of subjectivity and narration under critique that need to be taken further.

Ishiguro's novel is clearly interested in making a challenge to traditional narratives of individuation, but normativity also seems to function as a nexus of concern that includes the relational challenge to a sovereign subjectivity. In other words, the novel questions *both* a "natural" subject who arises out of itself and the subject as a collusion of social pressures or relationships. Neither of these creatures are whole. This may seem a minor adjustment, but it is an important one. I contend, and I suspect Jerng would be sympathetic to this view, that expanding the narrative parameters of the human signals an outwardly directed understanding of its object—that the human is somewhere "out there"—whereas the investment of *Never Let Me Go* is much more inwardly directed. The assembling of a person, or construct-person, or "Kathy," to whom readers can and

do relate facilitates the recognition of a partial personhood(s) that the investigating identity—the reader—had always been.[100] In this manner, what appeared to be an expansion of narrative possibilities is actually reorganization: more about re-membering a fractured and fragile self than it is about pushing outwards into new territories. The novel gives at least one point of reference to help visualize this phenomenon: Tommy's imaginary animals:

> …it took a moment to see they were animals at all. The first impression was like one you'd get if you took the back off a radio set: tiny canals, weaving tendons, miniature screws and wheels were all drawn with obsessive precision, and only when you held the page away could you see it was some kind of armadillo, say, or a bird. (187)

Tommy's animals render visible the kind of partial personhood at stake here; the local, mechanical details coalesce into a global pattern of recognizable aliveness which, once seen, cannot easily be unseen. The local still exists but it presents as a new (seemingly different) shape.

Seeing at one scale or another can lead to other problems of recognition as well: is it the case that readers relate to Kathy because she exists as a type, a readymade construct to hold our projected feelings? Could she rather be relatable because readers, in viewing Kathy as a type, acknowledge themselves as also

[100] The notion of a "partial person" is advanced by Jerng in light of psychoanalyst Adam Phillips' compelling assertion of childhood as externally determined and thus supported within a relation (i.e. persons are collectively held, and personhood is a patchwork undertaking).

typecast? As readers attempt to approach Kathy according to the rule of difference they are drawn into a reflexive trap: the “I” who observes is brought under her own gaze, in the act of gazing—suggesting the coherence and sufficiency of the self observed while simultaneously relying upon the determining presence of the other.

The need to make sense of relations of sameness and difference is always urgent for Kathy but is charged with special power in moments of social performance. The very idea of performance is inescapable and threatening to Kathy. Rebecca Walkowitz, in her superb essay on translation and Ishiguro, unpacks this discomfort, describing how

> The donor program continues because the humans believe that clones lack interiority, which is measured, according to all of the characters, by the capacity for genuine love, authentic expressivity, and artistic originality. The disdain for "copied" things—the novel is studded with this word—is ubiquitous: if the children admire a friend's poem, they are not happy to "copy it down" but want instead to possess the manuscript (17); Kathy criticizes Ruth for "the way you copy everything they [the older clones] do" (124); the clones think of themselves as having been "copied at some point from a normal person" (139); and so on. (225)[101]

[101] Internal page numbers refer to the U.S. edition of *Never Let Me Go*.

It is not surprising, then, that Kathy is haunted by the uncertain relationship between social performance and truth. Performance in general becomes shot through with anxiety as Kathy struggles to establish a ground for authenticity.

Consider, for example, the following exchanges between Kathy and Tommy. Both scenes are significant for their treatment of performance as an object of concern but also because Kathy experiences each as a moment of unease or distress, driven by her commitment to the outcome of the performance even, sometimes especially, when that outcome is uncertain.

The first scene is when Kathy approaches Tommy in order to convince him to get back together with Ruth. Tommy, contradicting Kathy's reading of his mood, asserts "I'm perfectly happy. I really am." and follows this with a big smile and laugh. Tommy's facial expression sets Kathy off:

> ... I don't mean he did this ironically. He actually thought he'd be more convincing. So now, to prove he was happy, here he was, trying to sparkle with bonhomie. As I say, there would come a time when I'd think this was sweet; but that summer all I could see was that it advertised what a child he still was, and how easily you could take advantage of him. I didn't know much then about the world that awaited us beyond Hailsham, but I'd guessed we'd need all our wits about us, and when Tommy did anything like this, I felt something close to panic. Until that afternoon I'd always let it go—it always seemed too difficult to explain—but this time I burst out, saying:

> "Tommy, you look so *stupid*, laughing like that! If you want to pretend you're happy, you don't do it that way! Just take it from me, you don't do it that way! You definitely don't!" (106)

This scene, and others like it, are symptoms of the rule of difference. On the one hand, it shows the "realness" of the normals treated as a given by clones—most tellingly in Kathy's fears about the world beyond Hailsham as one requiring sophisticated deception. That is to say, Kathy fears the threat of the outside world will be realized by displays of inconsistency between internal and external states. She is afraid she might be caught somehow "only playing." She emphasizes this by infantilizing Tommy, turning him into a child who implicitly needs protection. But this transformation is complicated with the pronoun "you," who "could take advantage of him," which indicates a general "one" that includes the "world outside Hailsham," the reader, but also Kathy herself in its sweep.[102] Kathy is panicked by Tommy's "advertis[ing]" because she believes, fascinatingly, that what is here coded as the "adult" position is one of deception (of performance, of play). This suggests that Kathy sees an authentic internal/external relationship (at least under the gaze of the implied outside) as impossible, since the outside world is the adult world. With Kathy's final exclamations, however, what appeared initially as the rejection of mimicry marked representation and copying, as Walkowitz notes above, is here left in a state of profound ambivalence. The repetition of "you don't do it *that* way" (my

[102] Kathy has on several occasions used the general you to include herself, especially in discussions of Hailsham. For example, "He'd ask me about the big things and the little things. About our guardians… our beds, the football, the rounders, the little path that took you all round the outside of the main house…" (Ishiguro, 5).

emphasis) implies that there *is* a way you do it.[103] However, the prescriptive model implied is by definition a repetition. Thus, Kathy's concern is split between what truth—the act, or the object it represents—a performance ought to resemble. The sense of performing correctly offers the possibility that fidelity may not be fidelity to content, but to form (i.e. whether Tommy is actually happy is not as important as whether Tommy's performance of happiness obeys certain rules). When coupled with the reader's knowledge that Kathy's critique of and fears about social performance occur alongside her own failure to accurately represent her own internal state, the result is thrumming anxiety over choosing between the performance of reality and a real performance.

The second example follows on the heels of the students' arrival at the Cottages from Hailsham, related as an uncanny experience of displacement where "We could see hills in the distance that reminded us of the ones in the distance at Hailsham, but they seemed to us oddly crooked, like when you draw a picture of a friend and it's almost right but not quite, and the face on the sheet gives you the creeps" (119). The sense of the "almost right but not quite" is consistent with the view of clones from the outside, as radical difference that is also unsettling proximity. This perspective is part of the troubling nature of the rule of difference because it is, precisely, perspectival. The uncertainty of this limitation suffuses moments like Miss Emily's "dread" (269), Madame's suppressed shudder (35), the

[103] Ishiguro often uses repetition in moments of anguish over copying as one of a host of playful irruptions. See also the bit of cheek he flashes with the *Daniel Deronda* hall of mirrors. These poetic flourishes use the edge of a pun to expose other, often painful, connections. In this scene, for example, the subtext of Kathy's feelings for Tommy is particularly pressured, as is the parallel between emotional exposure and organ extraction.

flight of the restaurant workers (149), even finding the Judy Bridgewater tape in a space "...like the old guy didn't want to think about the stuff in our area and had mentally curtained it off" (173) with a harrowing fear that maybe the soul *can* be seen. The effect is a chillingly physical encounter with the isolating power of difference.[104] These moments compel me to speculate that this cluster of interactions presents a ground upon which performances are being carried out. In the absence (or rather *due to* the absence) of obvious physical markers, the effects of difference eternalized in the soul have here been internalized in the bodies of the clones. In short, in the few situations containing interaction between clones and normals, do these moments not show the result of having been disciplined into uncanniness?

Clearly the identity category of clone trumps other possibilities in the novel, including sexual and racial categories (a condition that needs returning to), and so the performative force of that identity is robustly represented in Kathy's narrative. However, this us/them binary that grounds identity performances for the clones is troubled by its tendency to spill over into other performances, creating an equally pressured you/"you" binary that straddles clone/normal within the same word.

Ruth has been figured as the social chameleon of Kathy's social group and as someone whose self-image depends upon how well she "fits in" with her chosen peer groups. When young, Ruth dominated her peers by force of

[104] The degree to which this chill is alien or all too familiar depends, in large part, on the cultural context and racial and sexual positions of readers.

personality and imaginary plots (e.g. invisible horses, abduction plots) that allowed her to set social rules. At Hailsham, Ruth repeatedly cheats within peer interactions (e.g. the deception that the elaborate pencil case was a sign of personal favor from Miss Geraldine) in order to claim social power, behavior that affronted Kathy. At the Cottages Ruth finds herself in a minor position of power and so begins mimicking the behavior of the "veterans" with whom she comes to associate. Kathy observes this process, saying

> There was, incidentally, something I noticed about these veteran couples at the Cottages—something Ruth, for all her close study of them, failed to spot—and this was how so many of their mannerisms were copied from television…. (121)

However, as becomes increasingly clear, Kathy's reaction to social performance is uneven. When Kathy uses her observation about copying television to rebuff Ruth when Ruth pretends to knowledge about the novel, *Daniel Deronda*, which Kathy is reading,[105] Kathy tells Ruth that a gesture of goodbye she has adopted is artificial, noting that because it comes from a television series "It's not something worth copying…. It's not what people really do out there, in normal life, if that's what you were thinking" (123-124). Here, as with the scene with Tommy, Kathy is clearly indicating that there *are* things "worth" copying and ties those things to what normals do "out there," a gesture that includes the space occupied by the

[105] Being widely read had been established as a "little game" and source of cultural capital among the clones at the Cottages. Kathy, correctly, takes Ruth's claim as yet more social cheating. Just as with the pencil case, Kathy knows how fragile Ruth's deception is, but here she chooses a milder private insult instead of the comparatively disastrous public exposure (e.g. Ishiguro, 56-60).

reader, who will immediately recognize the inaccuracy of Kathy's statement by calling to mind the legions of social performances and daily habits derived from various verbal and physical tics of mass media. The one-upmanship Kathy displays by touting her keen perception in the same passage as she displays her obliviousness complicates readers' sympathy and confounds the problem of authenticity for the clones even as it also calls into question similarly unstable relationships to performance for normals, invoked through the de facto position of the reader and their own experience.

Soul Work

The work of the soul in the novel has been to foreground questions of authentic being and authentic performance which all swing around the rule of difference. This is a problem, as the rule of difference proves undecidable given Kathy's unstable position as narrator/character/clone/person and the reader's increasingly complicated position as reader/normal/character/clone. In this section, I will address one final concern with the soul and its relation to the rule of difference. Unable to fully represent itself in other forms, the last run-up to the soul that Ishiguro offers is a bit closer to the ground. This concern is named in the thrust-and-parry that follows Kathy and Ruth's falling out over performance: "how it works in real families" (124).[106]

Family is the last major site of contention for and around the soul because it indicates a particular class of relationship between individuals. When Miss

[106] The "it" that works here is the integrity supposed to be proper to "real" family relationships.

Emily explains to Kathy and Tommy that the deferral they desire is not possible, she states its impossibility not on the grounds that an individual clone is not worth an individual normal, but because the *relationship* at stake trumps the value of any anonymous clone.[107]

> How can you ask a world that has come to regard cancer as curable, how can you ask such a world to put away that cure, to go back to the dark days? There was no going back. However uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease. (263)

It is worth noting that ethereal/spiritual language largely disappears from the novel when family surfaces. Yet concerns over the soul can never completely escape their theological origins, which are manifested in the novel by the relationship to sexual reproduction and the "possibles." According to the Judaic and Christian traditions, division from sexual reproduction matters because one cannot build a soulful thing: it has to be born into the world.[108] Clones are cut off from the chain of human history on both sides, by a lack of parents on the one hand and sterility on the other.[109] But the real work of biological links in the novel

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[107] The clone in this equation always is evaluated singly and so is necessarily outweighed in advance. This is where the soul re-enters the discussion via the problem of being really, properly in love to warrant a deferral.

[108] This derives from the literal manifestation of divine inspiration, the breath of God that first called life into being. See Genesis 2:7.

[109] At least one end of the chain of human history is anchored in the realm of the divine as the original actor from whom the notion of essential human agency is derived. This sense is captured by Kenneth Burke's description of the view of man and nature as "a part of God... apart *from*

is not to pressure an unbroken line of descent that claims divinity, but to produce families: quasi-magical systems of human relations that wield an "overwhelming" claim to value.

The novel repeatedly offers the heteronormative, reproductive family as the model caring and social group.[110] Indeed, such a social unit seems uniquely suited for the novel as it supposedly reproduces itself. However, this ideal family is kept securely in the realm of the imaginary and only ever appears as representation (e.g. the veteran couples are seen as being “like a mother and father…in a normal family” (120); the photographs of Kingsfield when it was a resort for “ordinary families” (218); and so on).[111] There is also an intriguingly high coincidence between the word “ordinary” and variations on the word “family” which, being merely represented, calls into question the actual existence of the very ordinary families named. Despite their conspicuous absence, the clones assume the centrality of such families to the social landscape and base the power to have children as their most essential characteristic. But here, again, there is trouble.

The only non-clone family in the novel is Miss Emily and Marie-Claude, significant because as "umbrellas," a derisive term Hailsham students’ used for homosexuals, Miss Emily and Marie-Claude seem natural allies to the clones.

God” (*Grammar of Motives*, 54). Interestingly, the notion of this part apart from its origin dovetails with the situation of clones as well as the word ‘clone’s roots in Ancient Greek horticulture, where “to clone” describes the cutting of a plant in order to grow another copy of it.

[110] In both the clones’ and the normals’ imagination, the world of the novel is a world in which all (“proper”) children are wanted and loved.

[111] A distance doubled by the novel’s explicit awareness of itself as representation.

This family of choice goes against the core logic of family's value in the world of the novel except in regard to souls and love, which I will return to in a moment.

As the canonical symbol of both the possibility of the future and the continuity of the past, the figure of the child occupies a central space on *Never Let Me Go*'s symbolic chessboard. Like the mythical "ordinary families," however, children are also never found outside the realm of representation. The closest the novel comes to an encounter with a normal child is through the metonymy of "pushchairs" significantly pushed by "people" not parents, a scene which ironically accompanies Rodney and Chrissie's buying "big batches" of birthday cards at Woolworth's (157).[112] The only candidates for children that seem likely are the clones themselves who, while able to be child-like, must not be children because the figure of the child has been mobilized as a vulnerable, credulous creature that needs protection. Which brings us back to Miss Emily and Marie-Claude.

An important shift occurs in Miss Emily's language in the climactic conversation over deferrals. In the lead-up to her reveal about souls, Miss Emily offers more details about the world of the novel than appear anywhere else in the book. She supplies a brief history of the organ donation program, explaining that prior to Hailsham "all clones—or *students*, as we preferred to call you—" had an exclusively functional and instrumental existence (261, original emphasis). The "student" euphemism is familiar and, in light of the rule of difference, powerfully

[112] "Rodney was nodding, and I thought there was something a little bit mocking around the edges of his smile. "Of course," he said, "you end up with a lot of cards the same, but you can put your own illustrations on them. You know, personalize them" (156-157).

ideologically motivated. Ishiguro emphasizes the word with italics and by using em dashes to physically set the phrase off from the rest of the sentence. Contextually, this separation is coded as Miss Emily's verbal emphasis that she is on the clones' side by using an inclusive euphemism to cover an essential difference. But at the end of the same paragraph, as Miss Emily is swept up in nostalgia for her heyday as a clone activist, she loses herself in her own performance and names the clones "children" for the first time in the novel, "How dare you claim these children are anything less than fully human?" (262) The righteousness of her tone is revealing. The euphemism that had been so carefully maintained by normals (even Miss Lucy) can, in this moment, collapse only indirectly,[113] but even this pretense falls away with a provocative possessive, sheltered by commas, in a simultaneous announcement of unconditional love and enduring dread:

> Make no mistake about it, *my child*, Marie-Claude is on your side and will always be on your side. Is she afraid of you? We're all afraid of you. I myself had to fight back my dread of you all almost every day I was at Hailsham. (269, my emphasis)

Miss Emily is acknowledging with "my child" what she has known all along, that Kathy and the clones either have souls or that such a state is so indeterminate, on both sides, that the ethical status of clones cannot be denied but through naked and audacious violence ("how dare you..."). That the rule of difference governs a

[113] Initially Miss Emily quotes herself in a kind of apostrophic address and later she uses "children" to describe the "demonstrably *superior*" clones Morningdale wished to make (262-264).

rigged game is not surprising, even if the unfairness of it still stings. However, what this scene discloses is not only that the game is rigged, but that the game itself was not what was expected.

Normals play a game in bad faith and create the impression that the rule of difference is what is being negotiated in deciding possible futures for clones. Over the course of the novel, Ishiguro pressures the distinction between the normals and the clones as being of primary importance. It is, but not for the reasons the rule of difference implies. Through tactics like the use of direct address, limiting the narrative frame to Kathy's perspective, the examples discussed earlier, Ishiguro brings together the positions of normal and clone (and reader). The slippage between these positions creates a dramatic fault line along the rule of difference that fascinates with its instability and danger. This process of misdirection tricks readers into thinking Kathy is a player in the game when, as Miss Emily's comment in the epigraph reminds us, she is a pawn.[114] The game being played is not between the normals and clones but between normals and themselves. Its goal is maintaining the illusion that the rule of difference matters, which paradoxically justifies its violation. This deception is fused to what I read as the most central argument of the novel, and I will return to this issue in the third section of this essay. First, there is one final point to make about the scene of the conversation because there is an additional, more distressing, admission happening here as well.

[114] The epigraph, like the majority of the passages of concern, occurs during the novel's climatic conversation. See Ishiguro p. 266.

If souls are not the issue, and let's be frank, they're not, what is really at stake here? What does denying the deferral of Kathy and Tommy do? Because readers have been along for the ride with Kathy and Tommy the denial seems unjust. But the argument that normals have been making all along is that it is only cruel from a perspective that privileges that relationship. Viewed, for instance, from inside Miss Emily's and Marie-Claude's relationship, things look decidedly different, if not necessarily less cruel. This is a signal relationship because its members are authority figures and potential allies who challenge a key part of the soul/family relationship, but also because this relationship is revealed (readers had no indication there might be an intimate relationship between Miss Emily and Marie-Claude before this conversation) alongside language that strongly suggests Miss Emily is a future candidate to receive organ donations.

When Miss Emily emerges from the darkness in her wheelchair, she is accompanied by "mechanical sounds," mechanical objects in the novel have been thus far associated almost exclusively with clones and cloning.[115] The details of this scene come together indirectly, but quite clearly: the challenging tone of Marie-Claude's questions, "Do we continue with this talk? You wish to go on?" (255) taken together with the odd mixture of intimacy and barely submerged hostility between Miss Emily and Marie-Claude suggest this scene is the effect of anguished talks about what to do regarding Miss Emily's condition, and that Miss

[115] "Carers aren't machines" (4), Tommy's animals (187), etc.

Emily and Marie-Claude may or may not agree about the decision which in any case is taken with pains.

> "You speak to them. It's you they've come to speak to."
>
> "I suppose it is."
>
> The figure in the wheelchair was frail and contorted, and it was the voice more than anything that helped me recognize her.
>
> "Miss Emily," Tommy said, quite softly.
>
> "You speak to them," Madame said, as though washing her hands of everything. But she remained standing behind the wheelchair, her eyes blazing towards us. (255)

There is more than one confrontation happening here. Marie-Claude's eyes, which blaze towards Kathy and Tommy, are eyes forcing themselves to look. When Miss Emily speaks, innuendo and barely concealed truths predominate, her comments are tinged with ominous purpose. "You both look rather shocked at the sight of me. *I've not been well recently, but I'm hoping this contraption isn't a permanent fixture*" (257, my emphasis). Amid her admissions that the myth of deferral is false, Miss Emily makes repeated comments about resignation to reality and disillusionment which apply equally to Kathy and Tommy, as they do to Marie-Claude and herself.

Kathy's intuition that within Miss Emily's words there was "something being held back, that suggested we hadn't yet got to the bottom of things" is

entirely accurate, but only indirectly satisfied (258). The last words Miss Emily speaks to Kathy and Tommy are about her overcoming difficult feelings in order to do what must be done, and the highly mannered "Now, if you'd be so good as to help me out of here..." which seems to fall somewhere between a statement and a question (269). The direct conversation with Miss Emily ends "With us at each elbow, she walked carefully into the hall, where a large man in a nursing uniform started with alarm and quickly produced a pair of crutches" (269). This last image of Miss Emily passing from wheelchair to walking, buoyed between the help of Tommy and Kathy symbolizes the service they will shortly render when Miss Emily begins receiving their organs.

The take away from this interpretation is not that Miss Emily is a monster, necessarily. If a monster, hers is an everyday sort of monstrousness with which the world has long been familiar. Although Miss Emily would not choose the organ donations, she would not forego them either. Her commitment to being in the world and her relationships are simply "overwhelming." In the face of this longing, Miss Emily and the world she represents display the workings of game.[116] Cheating the clones creates the impression that the difference itself is what matters. The representation of this difference becomes the possibility of believing in it. The normals deceive themselves by trying to believe their own deception, allowing them to stay *comfortably* in the game. What Miss Emily displays is the failure of this cheat to adequately deceive. In the face of this

[116] A different reading of this scene with a similar conclusion is that this moment represents an inability to sustain the game's "rules of irrelevance." See Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*.

failure, the novel casts the game aside. Unable to claim the spoils of victory by the rules, the victors become unruly: the game disappears but its violence remains.

Reading in a Passive Voice

> *"Poor creatures. What did we do to you? With all our schemes and plans?" She let that hang, and I thought I could see tears in her eyes again. Then she turned to me and asked: "Do we continue with this talk? You wish to go on?"*
>
> *It was when she said this that the vague idea I'd had before became something more substantial. "Do I go too far?" And now: "Do we continue?" I realised, with a little chill, that these questions had never been for me, or for Tommy, but for someone else—someone listening behind us in the darkened half of the room.* (254-255)

In the first section I've argued for reading *Never Let Me Go* in light of its central game and presented a case for reading normals as cheaters who, at the point where it is no longer possible to cheat *and* win, abandon the ruse of the game and risk exposing themselves to the fact of the violence of the donation program. While lethal for the clones, this exposure is not without risk to the normals, for whom the game-logic serves as a protective barrier against the knowledge that their ongoing health is purchased with the blood and suffering of the clones.

In this section I will change tack quite a bit, to tease out other outcomes of the games played by the novel. In particular, I will argue that the normals are not the only people cheating, and that Kathy's cheating opens up space for resistance against the logic of novel's central game.

Readers of *Never Let Me Go* have famously been frustrated by the passivity with which Kathy and the other clones accept their fate. Anne Whitehead, for example, describes the situation of the novel as one where "Ishiguro's alternative England requires absolute passivity and acquiescence from the clones…" (Whitehead, 56). Although I agree with Whitehead's framing of the demand, I will show that while the demand appears to be largely fulfilled, this appearance is misleading. Kathy does, potentially, resist—even if the resistance we get is not quite the kind we had been looking for.

The frustration I refer to above bears the shape of the lack of explicit attempts by the clones to directly and explicitly overthrow or escape their situation.[117] But why are these forms of resistance the only ones that are satisfactory? Perhaps choosing forms of escape that map so closely onto "fight or flight" responses contributes, by their absence, to reading the characters as unnatural? This is implied by commentaries that view clones as *not* being "fully

[117] Though it bears noting that, on the first page of the novel, Kathy mentions that hardly any donors in her care have "been classified as 'agitated,'… etc." This is presented as exceptional situation (i.e. something to boast about). A more generous reading of her introduction could argue this indicates that people *are* acting out. However, "not calm" does not mean "scaling the walls" and no such acting out is ever actually shown (beyond Tommy's rages, which are their own can of worms), but is merely referenced.

realized people" since they neither flee nor fight.[118] This view derives from the romantic notions of human subjectivity associated with Enlightenment traditions, which arises out of a sense of given (coded as natural) wholeness or sovereignty. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, Jerng (among others) critiques this understanding of the self in order to posit a more multiform, social and relational, model of subjectivity.[119] This situates questions of form as special problems within the novel, but this has also included responses to the novel more broadly.

Consider *Never Let Me Go*'s uneasy relation to genre—is it science fiction, fictional autobiography, Bildungsroman, love story, something else? By presenting the appearance of recognizable and familiar narratives and then violating those expectations, Ishiguro gives readers enough of a pattern to feel at ease and then disorients by withdrawing that support. This neatly parallels the generic problem of the figure of the clone—a shape that suggests a given and recognizable history but a destiny that is revealed to be independent from that imagined history. Similarly, including elements of established forms in the narrative but being not quite identical with them, leaves relationships with referents unstable and makes readers dependent on Kathy's narrative for its own evaluation.

The way that *Never Let Me Go* plays with self-reference invites further exploration into its engagement with spatial and media representation. For

[118] See Jerng, p. 382. Jerng cites these non-academic responses in order to develop and complicate their impression, but it is worth noting that this attitude is also robustly represented across a variety of established reviewers.
[119] Cf. Mark Jerng. "Giving Form to Life: Cloning and narrative Expectations of the Human"

instance, by setting the novel in the recent past Ishiguro creates a doubling effect that is also self-contained. Mark Seltzer addresses the effect of such operations, writing

> ...the doubling that allows the world to appear in the word—means that the world can be observed in different (rival or correspondent) ways and so recast by the existence of alternatives. There are three basic consequences to this. First, it marks the relativity of the observer, who observes himself as an observer among others. Second, one is then asked to distinguish "real" reality from other kinds (fictional or statistical, for example). Third, the matter of scale makes observation itself visible—seeing itself seen, albeit out of the corner of the eye. (114)

Kathy seems to both *be* and be in such a system; as she exists only as her narrative, the recursive nature of that system is self-evident in how Kathy observes herself observing. For example, in passages like, "the earlier years—the ones I've just been telling you about—they tend to blur into each other as a kind of golden time," (77) give glimpses of Kathy reflecting on her own reflection. She even adjusts her behavior because of her observations, as in, "but to explain what we were talking about that evening, I'll have to go back a little bit" (190). In other words, in her narrative Kathy behaves as a self-regulating medium. This behavior disguises the material form of the narrative (the medium) within what is mediated (the narrative) even as it establishes the conditions for and necessity of

comparison.[120] What is striking is that this effect is produced as much by the very medium being obscured as it is by its content: it is a consequence of the rituals of use that govern interaction with this medium—in other words, the more closely readers adhere to "how novels are read" (e.g. identify with characters, internalize tropes, trust symbols, proceed mostly chronologically, etc.) the more the work ceases to be experienced as a thing that is read.[121]

The response to the disorientation caused by this situation can be seen in the proliferation of new genre forms attributed to *Never Let Me Go*: "life writing," "pathography," "trauma writing," "witnessing," or "speculative memoir."[122] In short, the desire for a *form* of wholeness reasserts itself. The anxiety over partial or incomplete forms is directly related to the need to recast the novel's form in order to recover possibilities for resistance to the world it models. In this way, the commonalities between the genres suggested imply that the narrative itself, by virtue of speaking, constitutes precisely the resistance, if not its shape, that has been longed for, itself reproducing concerns over the rule of difference discussed in the first section. This slippage is further complicated by the tendency of the story's signature to slide between Ishiguro on the one hand and Kathy H. on the

[120] Mark Seltzer, in an statement quoted in part in the first section of this essay, argues that "Reality—real life—can only be spoken of by contrasting it to something else from which it is distinguished—say, fictional (or statistical or mathematical) reality.... Hence the paradoxical determination of …the real as one classification among others… itself becomes visible" (Seltzer, 105).
[121] This situation is true in some, but not all, reproductions of this particular narrative across media. For instance, transposition to an audio recording reproduces the effect exactly. The existing film adaptation of the narrative, however, itself mediates (if you'll forgive the pun) this mediation of media.
[122] Cf. Whitehead, Anne; McDonald, Keith; Jerng, Mark; Levy, Titus; Robbins, Bruce.

other. In other words, the problem here is a reading problem bound up with reflexivity.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the status and stakes of passivity and activity, in terms of characters' resistance, have everything to do with how the reader's relationship to the narrative is understood. There are two sites of special significance for understanding that relationship: first, the contraction "you're" in the novel's opening address (and by extension the direct address in general), and second, what the material form of the narrative is understood to be in the context of the story.

At the forefront of this inquiry into the reader's relationship to the narrative is the internal addressee, the difficult "you" addressed by Kathy in various registers throughout her story. As is clear from repeated variations on the phrase, "I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham we had to have some form of medical every week… (13)," as well as less structurally consistent passages, the identity of the reader, at least to Kathy, is unambiguous: the reader is a clone.[123] Certainly Kathy could be wrong, but for the moment let's err toward generosity and accept Kathy's address as appropriately given. Under such circumstances, what kind of a clone are we?[124] The first instance of the

[123] Cf. Ishiguro, p. 38, 67, 96.

[124] There are only two kinds of clones who seem plausible as addressees: carers and donors. The novel's "we," that includes the reader, is deeply fraught, especially when race is considered. There is only one character in the novel that is identified as non-white: George, "the big Nigerian" at whom Kathy "had quite a good look… and he at you" (256-257). All other character descriptions either avoid racial designation or, where details are given, fall into categories of whiteness or which pass for whiteness. While a thorough investigation of the (absence of) representations of race remains to be conducted and is beyond the scope of the present essay, I would be remiss in not drawing attention to this concern as normativity is very much at stake here.

pronoun "you," in the contraction "you're," on the second page of the novel simultaneously answers and frustrates this question. Kathy relates, "I know carers, working now, who are just as good and don't get half the credit. If you're one of them, I can understand how you might get resentful—…" (4). Two things stand out in this address: the first is the temporal cue "I know carers, working *now*," which suggests that the carer Kathy addresses by "you" is currently practicing.[125] However, this is made ambiguous by the contraction "you're" which could either be "you are" or "you were," which shifts the reader's position from carer to donor. Both cases draw readers inside the boundaries of the narrative. The split within "you're" calls attention to a problem of presence embedded in the novel's colloquial diction and intimate tone, the very qualities that confound "are" and "were."[126]

Negotiating presence comes down to a question about the medium of Kathy's message. Her narrative frequently displays overt knowledge of its own narration (e.g. "I'm making it sound pretty bad, but none of us minded the discomforts one bit—it was all part of the excitement of being at the Cottages" (117)). In this respect, the question is perfectly banal: is the addressee present to Kathy? Is Kathy speaking? Though it could be thought a bit odd that Kathy does not interact more directly with a "present" narratee, this view is supported by the narrative. However, the simple fact that readers have, to again state the obvious, been reading Kathy's narrative encourages the assumption that the narrative is to

[125] The direct addresses, when they occur, always return to the present moment of the narrative's telling. Double meanings hidden in Kathy's idiomatic language pervade the novel.
[126] To say nothing of the troublesome "if" that precedes the pronoun.

be considered as written. Certainly, the various genres of witness suggested above, which offer powerful ways to relate to the novel, all agree on the assumption of the narrative as written. However, the novel's informal language actively and deliberately obscures an identity between Kathy's narrative, at least materially, and the text.[127]

I do not wish to be mistaken here for merely pointing at the artifice of art. The consequences of taking Kathy's narrative as written go well beyond playful cheek at having a construct (character/clone) "produce" a mass-produced object. The entire novel takes place within Kathy's colloquial diction and recreates the effect of speech which, as I suspect would have amused Derrida to no end, still gestures towards presence even when it is "written speech."[128] At no point does Kathy explicitly refer to her narrative as written. Even though the narrative is often self-referential, it is also thoroughly, ruthlessly ambiguous on the subject of its material form: e.g. "But that's not really *what I want to talk about* just now. What I want to do now is *get a few things down* about Ruth, about how we met and became friends…" (45, my emphasis). On the one hand: speech. On the other: writing. On both: a conversational tone that renders undecidable whether what is encountered is a material practice or linguistic effect; the reader is passed from

[127] Rebecca Walkowitz's excellent article on translation and *Never Let Me Go* takes on problems of the dissemination of the text across languages and how this produces and reproduces original and copied texts in ways that parallel the crises of originality within the novel. Given publishing trends in 2005, the extent to which publishing across different media was also a consideration in the composition of the text warrants further examination as well.
[128] For Derrida's critique of full presence and western metaphysics see *Of Grammatology*; *Limited Inc*; and *Writing and Difference*.

figure of speech to figure of speech like the token of a shell game. But the outcome of this game is crucial to any determination of the work's meaning.

The common denominator in the genres of trauma proposed to supplement the insufficiently categorizable *Never Let Me Go* is that the narrative be received as an act of witness. In order to be a witness, either the speaker or the narrative must survive the event witnessed. If Kathy's narrative is read as speech and the reader viewed as present (the are/were problem above) then the narrative may not survive its telling. If the narrative is taken to be written or otherwise recorded, then the narrative itself constitutes a material act (active, not passive) against the situation that called it into being.[129] Moreover, a decision as to the form of the narrative also implies how readers are, or are not, responsible to Kathy's narrative. If the narrative is received as speech, then it depends on readers' memory in a way an archived form does not, but it also becomes subject to memory's influence. That the novel spends such a large time addressing the persistence—"I was talking to one of my donors a few days ago who was complaining about how memories, even your most precious ones, fade surprisingly quickly. But I don't go along with that" (286)—, integrity—"This was all a long time ago so I might have some of it wrong; but my memory of it is…" (13)—, and function of memory: "…and we hugged, quite spontaneously, not so much to comfort one another, but as a way of affirming Hailsham, the fact that it was still there in both our memories" (211), it is clear that readers'

[129] In my heart of hearts, I imagine the narrative on a cassette tape. There is no evidence to support this speculation other than the prominent role of cassette tapes in the narrative, but it is a sort of perfect medium to hold the reader in the impasse over the story's materiality.

relationship to Kathy's memory is also being pressured, if only in terms of how, after Kathy bears witness, it still needs to be borne.

The preceding analysis has developed under the assumption that readers affirm, to a greater or lesser degree, the position of a clone. But this is a tall order because, of course, readers are not clones; or rather, readers both are and are not clones. I will take up this relationship more fully in the next section, but for now let it suffice to consider the salient points of the novel's address when it is taken as misplaced. If Kathy misrecognizes her readers and the story we hear was not meant for us, as we come to empathize and sympathize with Kathy, we nonetheless come to occupy that "you" by virtue of our care. By relating to (or identifying with) Kathy and feeling for her and the other characters, readers are brought into a relation of care. There is perhaps no more compelling evidence of this process than the very frustration over the clones' passivity that has been so frequently expressed. But where does this leave us?

The novel constructs readers as Kathy's carer. On the first page, Kathy describes what a "good" carer does: "I've developed a kind of instinct around donors. I know when to hang around and comfort them, when to leave them to themselves; when to listen to everything they have to say, and when just to shrug and tell them to snap out of it" (3). This description immediately precedes the first "you" which, through its intimate grammar, invites us to consider ourselves as one of those carers who are "just as good" (4). What begins as collegial familiarity grows more and more inclusive as we are taken further into Kathy's confidence.

But readers' care has other consequences that are far more troubling—over the course of the novel Kathy quite literally offers up her internal world as a series of losses: childhood, Ruth, Tommy—this is available to be read as an exchange: our care for her story, but it can also be viewed as purely consumptive since, although we can care for a fiction, we cannot really reciprocate. Though it may feel like we are moving further into Kathy's character and the world of the novel, our increasingly intimate knowledge is simultaneously an extraction. We are at once the invested confidant who accompanies Kathy's dismantling and the non-clone "normal" who is the beneficiary of that process as we, again quite literally, consume Kathy's inner world through the process of reading. Is this why the novel has only three sections (dissections), because on the fourth you complete?

When the sections of the novel are read as metaphors for the donation of vital organs, it is significant that the fourth is not represented, or is only represented as the end of the story. Although we have cared for Kathy as she has cared for other characters, all of the donations encountered have been curiously incomplete: Ruth's progress is truncated, other donors are spoken of but never actually represented, and then there is Tommy. Tommy offers the nearest parallel to the reader’s experience—we are lead up to the brink and then we stop. There is, here, a cutting—when Kathy drives off as Tommy turns finally away, just as she drives "off to wherever it was I was supposed to be" (288) at the novel's end—"we" are cut by the act of separation: riven by our separate selves.

Having set out some of the concerns regarding the orientation of the reader to the text and the more pressing concerns regarding interpretations of the

narrative's material form, I will make a case for Kathy's narrative as not merely active, but as an act of resistance (though, perhaps, a compromised one) that does its work through cheating.

Never Let Me Go is a game space. By this I mean that the novel is, in the sense put forward by Johan Huizinga, a space that allows for "an act apart," a "temporary [world] within the ordinary world" "...within which special rules obtain" (10). The sense in which I am invoking the “magic circle” here describes merely the fact that reading, and especially the reading of fiction, is accompanied by certain rituals of use that obtain while engaged in that activity. These rituals of reading supplant and/or displace the rules of “reality” in order to make itself (that experience) possible.[130] However, by setting the novel in "England, late 1990s," this game-like aspect of the novel is taken one step further; it presents a “world within the world,” and by doing so makes a de facto call for comparison. By staking this comparison on notions of the real, Ishiguro traps readers in a recursive paradox by being unable to make a claim for true reality without necessarily subjecting reality to the regime of perspective.[131] In a truly comparative mode there are no neutral positions; every starting point, however natural it may appear, is vulnerable to This impasse is compounded by bringing the characters of the story into the same fundamental crisis (the feint that the

[130] This is true also when literature abides by the conventions of a given realism. There have been a host of interventions made regarding this notion of the magic circle, largely due to Huizinga’s perceived rigidity regarding the separateness of game space from non-game space (a distinction that is, itself, contestable). The view I present here does not believe in the truth of the separation of game space from real space; it believes in the illusion of the separation of game space from real space.

[131] See Mark Seltzer’s “Parlour Games: the apriorization of the media.” Some relevant passages also are excerpted on p.25 of this chapter.

concern of clones is to demonstrate that they are real enough), and again by submerging the reader inside the narrative through the device of the direct address. In short, the novel plays games at the level of story but it also plays games at the level of media.

Opening on care, "…I've been a carer now for over eleven years," the narrative pretends to be a dialogue in which readers are involved but to which they cannot contribute (3). We accept this untroubled, in light of the rules of reading, knowing our task is to "…listen to everything they have to say…" and be interested (3). In other words, as good readers, we know that it is our job to care. Readers are brought into this dialogue under cover of the pronoun "you," which grows to allow readers access to all the salient positions in the story (clone, normal, reader, donor, donor-recipient). Although, in this way, readers both are and are not clones, Kathy's focalizing function brings the readers' position into view from the perspective of a clone. Walkowitz sums up the effect of this situation succinctly, writing that "Seeing clones as human is not the point. Instead, we are urged to see humans as clones" (226). When we recognize ourselves and our world in Kathy, Ruth, or Tommy, we are not recognizing ourselves in people, we are recognizing ourselves in types. Or, more precisely, we recognize the circulation of the personality types that the clones represent within our own lives. The point is that the figures that matter in this relation are not, to use the famous cliché, "beautiful and unique snowflakes," but a press-ganged collection of generalities.

Since readers are aligned sympathetically with clones it is understandable that readers feel agitated and frustrated over their failure to fight or run. It may also be also unrealistic. It is easy to forget the effects of the story. The system of organ donations condenses the lifespan. What this means is that, as she herself makes quite clear on the second page of the novel, "…these days, of course, there are fewer and fewer donors left who I remember…" (4). At the time of her story's telling, Kathy has outlived most people she knows and everyone she loves. As a carer who has, as she clearly indicates, been choosing to care for clones from Hailsham, Kathy has attended to the pains and, crucially, the memories of other clones from Hailsham—who were the only people capable of testing, and proving, her own. As discussed in the first section, clone subjectivity has been built throughout the narrative as something like an aggregation of memories held in common. Following from this, Kathy's address could be seen as a mode of apostrophe with the radical absence of the addressee as the condition of possibility for speaking in the first place. Is Kathy's story only an effort to pin the ghosts of her past with words, for Kathy to haunt herself the way the exiled ghost haunts the woods beyond Hailsham? The way Kathy haunts the Hailsham that fails to appear along mile after mile of roadway? A chilling notion, but the text does not let us linger as mere specters.

The extended pressuring of readers' progressive relationship to the narrative points to the possibility that Kathy's narrative is not meant for itself; it is not just a way to shore up Kathy's sense of herself but may instead be for someone listening "in the darkened half of the room." Kathy's story is unusual in

the way that it calls attention to its own resistances, how it demands its own critique. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the bristling over the passivity that is supposedly *happening*. I say supposedly because the text is a message, if not for a clone then for someone in the condition of a clone. The story is littered with ominous indications throughout that cue the reader that Kathy's message is a warning. For instance, Kathy's initial description of a good carer includes the task of denying fantasy "…when just to shrug and tell them to snap out of it" (3). Consider also the parallel addresses following the encounter with Madame and the "spiders"

> Thinking back now, I can see we were just at that age when we knew a few things about ourselves—about who we were, how we were different from our guardians, from the people outside—*but hadn't yet understood what any of it meant*. I'm sure somewhere in your childhood, you too had an experience like ours that day; *similar if not in the actual details, then inside, in the feelings.* (36, my emphasis)

Here Kathy sets up that there is a revelation coming and that it is one that the reader is, or ought to be, concerned with on the strength of the affective similarity of this encounter with difference. Kathy goes on to describe how "from as early as when you're five or six" you have been waiting for the proof of this terrible essential difference to appear,

> …for the moment when you realize that you really are different from them; that there are people out there, like Madame, who don't

> hate you or wish you harm, but who nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you—*of how you were brought into this world and why*—and who dread the idea of your hand brushing against theirs. (36, my emphasis)

This long workup that Kathy gives, in the mode of direct address, is all to situate the problem of essential difference as not only the defining condition of life but one which is awaiting proof. It is telling also that the proof received is not evidence as such but rather a response as though evidence had already been given. This transitions from one direct address to another, on the opposite page, where she begins with a statement of seeming obliviousness, "I won't be a carer any more come the end of the year, and though I've got a lot out of it, I have to admit I'll welcome the chance to rest…" and it is partly due to this "change of pace" that Kathy has gotten the "urge to order all these old memories" (37). These kinds of statements become harder and harder to read as mere passivity. Not only is there the sense of relief at the end of a long labor, but the language of ordering memories steeps the whole narrative in questions of imagined intent as "ordering" suggests "editing" and reminds of mediation in addition to the threatening instability of memory that lends urgency to these passages. And Kathy revises immediately, saying "What I *really wanted*, I suppose was to get straight all the things that happened between me and Tommy and Ruth after we grew up and left Hailsham" (37, my emphasis). In this section Kathy changes the direction of the paragraph and, given the content, a sense of the global narrative. The sense of

desire to "get straight" all these things declares a corrective impulse. She continues

> But I realize now just how much of what occurred later came out of our time at Hailsham, and that's why I want first to go over these earlier memories quite carefully. Take all this curiosity about Madame, for instance. At one level, it was just us kids larking about. But at another, *as you'll see, it was the start of a process that kept growing and growing over the years until it came to dominate our lives* (37).

What began as a meditation on preparing oneself for an encounter with essential difference is disclosed as encounter with the effects of essential difference. Kathy then takes pains to redirect herself, within the context of correcting error, to mark the loss of freedom and conclude as entirely subjected under a dominating power. Kathy does not need this kind of corrective narrative; the message is for someone else.

So, what, in the final instance, is the message? Kathy's message seems to be about the failure of fantasy. Kathy cannot escape or overthrow the system of organ donations, but she can display her and Hailsham's failure within that system. Hailsham still serves as site of utopian fantasy and source of mythic possibility for the clones (i.e. the dying donor who tries to dissociate from pain via a fantasy of Hailsham (5); the idea of Hailsham granting exceptions: as in the imaginary shop girl (152), or the episode of Ruth's possible and the desperate myth of deferrals). As one of the few remaining clones to have grown up at

Hailsham, Kathy is touched with its power and so is not just another clone but a figure who is talked about; she circulates in the popular imagination of other clones. “Kathy H., *they say*, she gets to pick and choose, and she always chooses her own kind: people from Hailsham, or one of the other privileged estates. No wonder she has a great record. *I’ve heard it said enough, so I’m sure you’ve heard it plenty more*…” (4, my emphasis).[132] Hailsham produces a logic of exceptionalism that is in tune with the rule of difference. As with any game, the presence of rules implies the possibility, however remote, of winning. If ever there was a clone within the game of the novel who was in a position to “win” from working with and within that system, it is Kathy: Hailsham student, long-suffering friend, good carer, docile body. Her destruction is a message of impossibility. In one sense, in order to be this emblematic failure Kathy must embrace her status as a type—as “ideal clone"—a role she is uniquely suited to play.

However, in order to fail in a way that matters, Kathy’s narrative has to escape its telling. And under the rule of difference there are swarms of other rules that support and maintain the system of the world. I contend that one of the core supporting rules must be that clones are to be consumed without remainder. This does the important work of ensuring that the clones do not have access to history and do not develop other, minor histories. It is at this level that an intervention is

[132] Kathy's "fame" goes beyond clone circles. However, when Miss Emily names her near the end of the novel, “…And you, *of course*, are Kathy H. You’ve done well as a carer. *We’ve heard a lot about you*,” (256, my emphasis) this sense of Kathy's notoriety is split between what is yet an open question of whether Miss Emily knows her because of Kathy's carer work or because of Miss Emily's implied status as a donor-recipient. Her mention of Tommy's "big heart," in the lead up to his fourth donation, tilts those scales somewhat.

made and where Kathy, by way of her narrative, cheats. Through performing the motions of a "good carer," Kathy produces and disseminates a story that undercuts the system of values that good caring is predicated upon.

A central function of familial relationships, in and out of the novel, is understood as pedagogical. Parents teach children about world, skills, social roles, in short, the rules of the game. In the simulacrum Hailsham clones, lacking parents, have an abundance of parent-substitutes in the form of the guardians who perform this role. These relationships sheltered the clones every bit as much as Hailsham's walls did. Out of that milieu, according to Miss Emily, childhoods were produced to "improve the lives" of clones, but also implicitly to make clones better donors (268). The work of Kathy's narrative is to provide a counter-discourse following a similar model. As the logic of the rule of difference is founded on sexual reproduction, Kathy's narrative performs an intervention which brackets reproduction and replaces sexual reproduction with textual reproduction, extending the possibilities of a narrative history as a supplement to a genetic one. This is why the question as to the medium of Kathy's message is so important—if the narrative is recorded then it slips across the border of the fiction, being both inside and outside the novel, and continues to act as a material remainder of Kathy's story.[133] This would seem to create the possibility of a historical understanding of the failure of any possibility to "play" the game of the world at

[133] A counter-example would be Steve's magazines, which are not an enduring testament to the identity of "Steve;" the name is simply a placeholder to authorize disavowal.

all. The narrative, kept within the regime of speech, can still do this work but becomes buoyed by memory in a way that exposes it as fragile and plastic.

But this would not be an Ishiguro novel if the escape-hatch from dystopia didn't swing both ways. As if in answer to the question, "if all that is needed is a message, why not just say it?" Ishiguro gives Miss Lucy. As often as the "told and not told" speech is quoted, and for all its beauty, there is an ugly little moment in the middle of Kathy's response to Miss Lucy's speech that returns like the repressed: "...my guess is once she'd set off, once she'd seen the puzzled, uncomfortable faces in front of her, she realised the impossibility of completing what she'd started" (82). The scale of a revelation like that offered by Miss Lucy doesn't make sense to the clones, they *can't* simply be told. Whether for an imaginary clone folded inside the story, or for a distant, generic "you," at some level there appears to be a requirement of experience: a need to feel one's way toward understanding. In other words, the kind of understanding that Miss Lucy sought to impart seems to be the special province of care. There is no wriggling out of this ambivalence by claiming a concern for something as fuzzy and generic as "the plight of the clones" or other vaguely noble gestures. The story is sad, but it is not sad because of the fates of Peter, or Laura, or Roger, or Chrissy, or Rodney, or any of the other minor actors. The story is sad because Tommy and Kathy were in love and were destroyed. Because readers, like Kathy, believe an exception was supposed to have been made in cases like this. This kind of care—singular, exceptional—is precisely that described by Miss Emily when she tells Kathy about the "...overwhelming concern [for] their children, their spouses, their

parents, their friends..." (263) that ensures the continuation of the donor program. In short, the human feeling that makes Kathy's imminent destruction legible as horror is the same feeling that authorizes it.

Ultimately, readers are left in an impasse. Kathy began the novel by describing her relation to caring as a good, and a way to distinguish her from the mechanical and instrumental "...carers aren't machines..." (4). Her encounter with a donor who, dying and in pain, reaches out for the fantasy that Kathy (and Hailsham) represent is described as a pivotal event, which opens into Kathy's larger narrative. It bears noting, in closing this section, that the novel that opened on care and fantasy ends with the denial of fantasy and the withdrawal of care. In a field in Norfolk, one of the novel's key micro-utopias and mythical spaces, Kathy "started to imagine just a little fantasy thing" that, like the gift of Kathy's memories at the start of the novel, is a bittersweet palliative. “I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I’d ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I’d see it was Tommy, and he’d wave, maybe even call” (288). And then Kathy refuses the fantasy: "The fantasy never got beyond that—I didn't let it—(288)"; this refusal, set off from the rest of the sentence, is a singular *act* of agency. A reading of the end of the novel as passive is a misreading. "...and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to *wherever it was I was supposed to be*" (288, my emphasis). The novel doesn't end on

passivity, it ends on indifference; an indifference which, as the ending of the novel comes before its beginning, sends fracture lines throughout the narrative which becomes the performance of Kathy's careful fantasy.

Good Carers

> *This is all strictly against regulations, of course, and Marie-Claude should never have asked you in. And naturally, I should have turned you out the second I knew you were here. But Marie-Claude doesn't care much for their regulations these days, and I must say, neither do I. (259)*

> *"It's something for them to dream about, a little fantasy. What harm is there?" (258)*

In the previous section, I examined how the internal addressee and the material status of the narrative are brought to bear on the matter of passivity in the novel, arguing that the resistance to "passivity" produced in readers is a signal effect of a relation of care that makes readers complicit in the destruction of the clones while simultaneously making that destruction intelligible at the so-called human level established as the ground of ethical value. I showed how, given the chronology of significant scenes of care, the veracity of reading Kathy's actions as uncomplicated complicity with the regime of organ donation is exposed to the threat of performance (mirroring the real/representation crisis with which the performance is concerned), and which then recursively reproduces itself across the whole novel.

The preceding sections have each presented an instance of cheating in *Never Let Me Go*, considered as a game. Cheating itself is a slippery subject. J.

Barton Bowyer, in his seminal book *Cheating* (1982), defines cheating as "... a subtype of deception.... Essentially, cheating, or deception is the advantageous distortion of perceived reality" (47). This is a fair summary coming from someone who does not exist.[134] In this instance, however, I prefer to define cheating as the violation of the operant rules of a game in order to influence a desired outcome. Although these definitions are effectively equivalent, the latter explicitly draws attention to the rule-based element of the act of cheating in ways that usefully clarify cheating as both act and metaphor.

The readings above are organized around a game of definition which is played between the human and clone characters in *Never Let Me Go*. The object of the game is to be recognized as "properly" human. This is not a material or quantifiable state but a qualitative and subjective position of personhood that can claim value beyond the instrumental. As the category of human is more-or-less open (the Science Fiction genre, with which *Never Let Me Go* is associated, has long since established precedents where the variously non-human gets to count as human), the game seems possible and familiar vis-à-vis Science Fiction conventions. As to the matter of what makes this a game, the basic structure driving the plot (love story cum emancipation narrative) is that of a rule-governed conflict whose outcome is (at least superficially) dependent on those rules.

The definitional game is helpful, as the tactics that constitute a winning strategy are not fixed and allow for variation and surprise without upsetting the

[134] J. Barton Bowyer is a multi-use pseudonym shared by intelligence policy and strategy experts, J. Bowyer Bell and Barton Whaley.

game. In other words, this is a game that has multiple ways to win and is sits somewhere between the determined and contingent models of play. Although the exact method for playing is not *quite* clear, broad familiarity with paratexts supplies sufficient information to build a working estimate (e.g. Philip K. Dick, Huxley, Ballard, Asimov, and so on). The salient criteria that takes shape over the course of the novel is that one has qualified for counting as human when an affective connection has been made to an already countable (within the novel) person.[135]

Real people don't have to be coherent, morally or otherwise. The demand for coherence is always greater in artifice than in real life, and so the presence of incoherence and contradiction within the fiction, like that found with Miss Emily and Marie-Claude, most clearly marks the presence of the real. The designation of the non-clones as "normals" is perhaps one of Ishiguro's more heavy-handed displacements among otherwise subtle misdirection. It is not, of course, the humans who are "normals" but the clones. The clones are so normal they cross right over into the normative. Absent race and uselessly heteronormative, the clones pair off like little paper soldiers. Even the courses of their relationships are not, despite their massive plot footprint, particularly interesting; they are all rather generic. Kathy and her friends fret endlessly over the "proper" way to do things and, as Chrissy and Rodney explain, the grand myth of deferral is reserved for those who are "...a boy and a girl, and... in love with each other, really, properly in

[135] That the countable person be within the novel is another trap, given the slippery position of the reader addressed as "you."

love..." (153). Even the potential outlier of Tommy, as the lone male primary character, is true to type in another but equally troubling fashion: Tommy's late-blooming artistic vision grants him access to truths about the clone's situation that the others either deny or miss entirely. What is intriguing about the clones' obsession with the proper is that they fantasize along proper lines towards the humans as well. In this way, the clones are forms dreaming of forms. Proper Platonists. Through the assumption of an existing ideal, a real human, Ishiguro yet again includes the reader in a novel that depends upon the reproduction of deeply ingrained forms (the heteronormative love story, the love triangle, stereotypically gendered caretaking roles, "of course I can judge the human, since I am human," etc.) and ties those forms to conventions of reading (suspension of disbelief, acceptance of the novel's rules, attachment to characters, power of the narrator) in order to display how the forms by which "the human" is expressed are insufficient to that expression, and yet are nonetheless required in order that the human be recognizable.

Formal creatures make good subjects in the Foucauldian sense and good game players in a perfectly mundane sense (whether these are different is debatable). As it is their formal qualities that most defines games as objects, and separates them from the chaotic influence of raw play, the clones as formal creatures are not just in a game but constitute small games in and of themselves—puzzle games about building persons.[136] The crux of the matter with the clones in

[136] Marie-Claude's repeated "poor creatures" creates a subtext of this sense of "impoverished" personhood (272).

general, and to which Kathy is made an exception, is that they believe in the fundamental truth of form and orient themselves towards it. This is, in fact, what makes the clones so relatable to readers. Just like the clones, readers conduct themselves socially, which is to say personally, along thoroughly modeled courses of behavior and desire.[137] Most of this modeling is not explicitly codified but is part of a dynamic paratext that situates and organizes behaviors within it. Many core social systems, for example gender performance, as Judith Butler elaborates in *Gender Trouble* and again in *Bodies that Matter*, straddle the text/paratext bridge. It is not unusual to find certain rules or behaviors repeated across paratexts. These are particularly valuable as ways of making sense of other games as they tend to be included within value systems that authorize judgments of gameplay (forms of behavior within a legible system) in each play community.

The games that do congeal and establish a sense of stability are mythical in the same sense Derrida uses to describe engineers as mythical in *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*. Games arise out of the contingency proper to play and then suggest themselves as their own origin.[138] It seems a symptom of the determined model of play to persist in the belief that underneath the merely arbitrary blueprint there will be some ur-blueprint that will finally offer a text with no paratext. Just like Ishiguro's clones, the determined model of play compels us to search for the rules that will stay still, to look for some board for the game of our lives that can't be knocked to the ground in a fit of

[137] Cf. Rene Girard. *Mimetic Desire*
[138] Cf. Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference* p. 285.

rage or by the casual indifference of accident. These do not exist. They are a fiction. However, they are the fictions we live by.

To review, briefly, the cheats in the earlier sections: Miss Emily plays the game of definition on both sides as an advocate of the clones' humanity on the one hand and as a "normal" and donor-recipient on the other. The game of definition is itself exposed as a trap from the perspective of the clones and a deception (a game about playing a game) perpetrated by the normals on themselves in order to protect a fantasy to which the "normal" identity had been fixed. Miss Emily, more than any other non-clone character except Marie-Claude, *appears* to not only recognize the humanity of the clones but also acknowledges that in the final analysis, the presence or absence of humanity does not matter. Thus, at the crisis point of the novel's climax, Miss Emily appears to abandon the game-qualifying characteristics of the game of difference. It is as though, confronted with a losing hand at poker, she robs the other players at gunpoint. By doing so, she seemingly undermines her own humanity by first moving Kathy and Tommy out of the category of "bare life" and then sacrificing them anyway: in short, a shift from killing to murder. However, this could also be read as a form of "winning by other means" that is in deep sympathy with cheating. By abandoning the game, Miss Emily is rejecting the authority of the game rules to determine the outcome, shifting from a determined logic to a contingent one, and by this exceptional act affirming her own status as human understood as a properly and individually sovereign and, literally, self-determined subject.

Kathy's cheat is somewhat more straightforward. The education of Hailsham has mislead her to think she is on the winning side of the game of definition when she had already lost in advance. Kathy thus finds herself suspended in performative failure; this is to say that Kathy is caught by a "...regularized and constrained repetition of norms..." yet, sliding under the signifier of "Clone" Kathy lacks a givenness to which those forms can adhere (Butler, 95). Ironically, it may be Kathy's fidelity to these forms that is her doom. Between the logic of the game of definition and the gaze of the reader, all the clones are in a double bind. Because Kathy *does* the work of ritualized production that enables a subject from the perspective of the reader (outside the game), Kathy is acknowledged as the product of a good enough performance of subjective identity. However, from the perspective of the normals, as a clone Kathy is abject and repulsed as the constitutive outside by whose exclusion the category of the human is produced. On this ground, as it is always the position of "normal" that judges, Kathy's performances are always already failures because they are stuck in supplementarity, her iterations appearing as additions to herself (signaling an essential insufficiency) or as replacements (substitutions and thus artificial). As the most thoroughly normal creature in the story, by the "forced iteration of norms" Kathy literally repeats herself but never speaks (by the illusion of full presence), her narrative announcing a subject who never quite arrives (Butler, 94).[139] Kathy appears to come to understand the situation, and her response is to draw attention to her performance of performance, by way of the resistances in

[139] Cf. Jacques Derrida. *Dissemination*.

her narrative, in order to jump metatextually from the judgment of the humans to the judgment of the reader. In other words, to attest to a non-essential and performative self but put such a self in the position of the "human." In this regard, Kathy's cheat is actually, though maybe this is unsurprising, normal. What motivates her character's cheating behavior is the fundamental affirmation of the values attested to by the game at which she cheats. The only behavior Kathy cannot access is exactly the one that Miss Emily chooses: she cannot smash the game. The only essential and, I suppose, essentialist "victory" that Kathy could claim is to abandon the forms of human-ness. Unlike Miss Emily, however, abdication of the socializing constraints of "human" behavior returns Kathy not to the animal but to the mechanical.

Underneath these two cheats and their battering against the game of difference, Ishiguro reveals another game. At the end of the novel this game is self-evident: broadly speaking, Kathy is fondly remembered and Miss Emily's memory is tainted. Since throughout, under the rubric of care and caring, the human was *primarily* (though not exclusively) determined by affective attachment, readers are left with a situation where the typed, or generic, character is the most human and the truly self-determined character shrouded by "inhumanity." Ishiguro points out that at the end of the day, not only is fantasy preferable to reality, the real is only recognizable when it comes wearing the clothes of fiction. These forms of fantasy, mobile but identifiable, constitute the rules for the production and reproduction of ourselves. They are a game in which we can cheat, but must play.

In the obligation to play, I find myself at odds with much of the history of play scholarship regarding freedom. There is a rich and noble tradition that has read play as belonging "properly" to the category of human freedom: that play is radically free. This seems to me insufficient to describe certain less glamorous but, I contend, more essential characteristic of play, especially the play that occurs under the precarious conditions of the historical present. I can believe in a human play that is radically free only under the conditions that the human playing is likewise radically indifferent—indifferent to the game (if there is one), and indifferent to the play itself (inasmuch as such a concept is still thinkable). This does not seem supportable as the same arguments for play's free nature also treat it as interested, invested, or otherwise engaged in the activity of play.[140] In other words, if play plays because it cares to, then if nothing else play is contingent upon the activity of play. Given the mushiness of the terms an example of what I mean by *involuntary* play that is a bit closer to the ground may make the objection plainer. A digestible example, if only for the compressed duration, is that cliché of Western film and television where one character draws a pistol on another and yells, "Dance!" while firing rounds at their feet.

In her book *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant uses the phrase "forced improvisation" to describe a demand for an immediate creative response to unpredictable events. For Berlant, a condition of forced improvisation characterizes the situation of living in the historical present of ordinary, everyday

[140] Cf. Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens*; Roger Caillois. *Man, Games, and Play*; Friedrich Schiller. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.

crisis. Being held in the space of an impasse is to be buoyed by the play of forces, to be at play (at stake) in them, but the negotiation of that space is play as well. Berlant describes cruel optimism as "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (24); "significantly problematic" meaning "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). This describes Kathy's relation to the concept of the human, which is just code for any relation to the human when, for reasons of difference (racial, sexual, economic, ability) a body is kept from counting. What *Never Let Me Go* is "about," and I promise not to revise this notion further, is the ownership and control of fantasy. Not only the historical future but the sense of futurity in the present (a sense of being able to live on, now), depends upon Kathy's access to the scene represented by the human. Although she can produce the forms according to which the relation is intelligible, she is blocked by the violence that inaugurated the human as essential in the first place (the double of this action is Miss Emily). She has come too late to history. Living on for a clone means to live on only in the shadow of the human which is, as it is for Kathy, a determining relation: the ground upon which all subsequent relations are organized and authorized. Although she can "cheat" within her particular social historical system (she cheats in a specific relation, proximity, to the human, but only in order to claim again her relation to the human), she cannot cheat within the relational system itself—against the human as such—without losing everything.

Chapter 4:

Reading Chimeras

At the close, I'd like to shift attention back to video games. Given how changeable the concept of hegemonic play might seem, I unpack more fully the elements that contribute to its formation and address some medium-specific peculiarities about how video games make their meanings.

To concretize this approach still further, I then present two brief readings of games. The first explores how the non-standard play style of griefing in valve software's *Left 4 Dead* series sensitizes players to the ethical framework of the game's hegemonic play. Griefing asserts, dramatically and violently, an alternative ethical frame whose logic rests ultimately on a specific view of what games are (and what, therefore, it is acceptable to do in them). The second reads two games, *Borderlands* and *This War of Mine*, against each other to show how each game's hegemonic play creates an opportunity to critique the humanist assumptions that underlie the position of the player as authorizing violence. Last, I look to examples of games that defy using hegemonic play and cheating as determining critical tools and what this might hold for the future of video games and by extension a broader cultural view toward play and games.

To these ends, the best place to begin is with an invitation to rethink the deceptively simple claims players make every day regarding the games they play. In 2008, Bethesda Softworks published *Fallout 3*, then the latest iteration of the popular series famous for its retro-futuristic aesthetic inflected by mid-century

Americana. Part of the action role-playing genre, *Fallout 3* takes place in a post-nuclear wasteland where players control a character whose story centers on locating a sustainable source of drinkable water, or not, as the case may be. The extent to which players can direct the outcome of the game is considerable, including whether or not to resolve the story with a wellspring of potable water. Players also have a great deal of license in sculpting their characters: at the level of appearance as well as in terms of attributes, skills, and gear, all of which impact gameplay to varying degrees.[141] Additionally, *Fallout 3* employs an "open world" level design, allowing players to approach objectives in various ways, at different times, or perhaps not at all. With all this variety—with each experience of *Fallout 3* so necessarily diverse—what, if anything, does is it really mean to say, "I've played *Fallout 3*?"

While the difficulty of pinning down a game's identity is exacerbated in modern, increasingly open games, it is a challenge present in all video games. This poses an obvious problem for criticism and the common practice in game studies of using a play session as a case study that presumes to speak in broad terms to a game's meaning. James Carse provides a useful term for these records, the game "script," which is "the record of the actual exchanges between players" (21). However, how far does any one script reach in terms of identifying the field of play that is meant by the player who, gesturing toward the possibilities of this digital wasteland, says "oh, yeah, I've played that." How does one get to "that?"

[141] The sex of characters is typically purely superficial in video games, operating as a kind of costume with no impact on character functionality. However, *Fallout 3* has dialogue options that are only available to characters of a particular "gender" (the game treats gender and sex as identical), which creates different gameplay options depending on the sex of the player character.

In *Fallout 3*, I can fill a bathtub full of toy cars but this is not part of what it means to play *Fallout 3* (i.e. this action is not tied to the identity of the game and its gameplay). The game lets me do it, but—however satisfying a toy car-filled bathtub may be to me personally—the game doesn't care that I do so. This indifference is legible because in order to get those toy cars I must first explore new areas, fight enemies, open various containers, and otherwise engage in activities the game *does* care about. The system responds to these actions immediately and positively—awarding experience points, in-game currency, and gear—and all of which enhance the capacity to play (to move and manipulate elements) within the game. By these and other signals, the game system indicates to players the shape of its hegemonic play (the game system is only one, but a particularly important, vehicle for communicating this).

Additionally, *Fallout 3* is a game that happens to be invested in a specific storyline—increased ability to traverse the world is also greater ability to complete the story. The game allows for some variation—alternate endings, reordering of minor plot points—but not too much. Nowhere are these constraints made clearer than with unkillable characters like the player character's father. If, early in the game, the player takes a weapon and attacks their father, they can at most render him unconscious. Thus, killing the father is revealed to be an action reserved for the story, not the player. These kinds of limits establish a hierarchy of valued actions and indicate that the function of the player in this game is to assist in realizing not just any story but a particular one, and one over which players do

not wield ultimate authority.[142] For *Fallout 3*, one can say that its hegemonic play involves playing toward its story: playing in such a way that facilitates the story's resolution. This statement, however, doesn't end the possibilities of the game's meanings but rather is the first step in their multiplication.

Video Games and Hegemonic Play

When considering a game as a text, identifying its hegemonic play is the single most important component to understanding how it communicates values.[143] The term gathers the collected forces of a game's socio-historical moment, the logic of its internal rule sets (how a game indicates certain actions as desirable, etc.), the practices of its player community (itself contextually defined), its paratexts (e.g. hardware and game peripherals, box art, instruction manuals, supplementary materials/fictions, online fora, advertising, etc.),[144] and its location within a larger media environment (especially its relationship to other games), all of which influence and interpenetrate each other.

To lay out this tangle of influence in more detail, the historical moment of a game is legible in its design choices. The paradigmatic example of this in video games is enemy selection in the first-person shooter genre. Deciding which group of people is "ok to shoot" is always a matter of some discomfort. For a long time,

[142] It is common in game studies to describe the player's role as "co-creator" of a game's story, but in practice players do not so much produce the story as discover it. The revelation of narrative in video games is often more about excavation than generation.
[143] I want to stress, again, so that there can be no misunderstanding: hegemonic play is not the "right" meaning, the "best" meaning, or the only meaning (by any stretch of the imagination). It is, however, a determining node in the network of possible meanings—one so significant that every other meaning must pass through it in some way.
[144] If there is controversy around locating hardware as paratext—that hardware should occupy a more prominent role—this is largely due to a misunderstanding of the importance of paratexts.

the default enemy has been Nazis (cf. *Wolfenstein*, *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honor*, etc.) because everyone knows that killing Nazis is always a good thing.

Eventually these games would allow players to play from the "enemy" position, but the default settings always begin from an American (or Allied) perspective, which assumes a position of moral privilege in which killing Nazis is not only permissible but desirable (a view reinforced by point values and level progression). These design decisions not only telegraph to players what they are to do in the game by freighting in the moral logic of the non-game world, they also validate the moral legitimacy of actual history through the digital melodrama.

Similarly, in games like the Sid Meier's *Civilization* series (turn-based strategy games in which players control the development of a nation-state), although players are invited to a fantasy of remaking the world at the level of nations, this imaginative enterprise is curtailed by the things like the available winning conditions: dominate all other nations through scientific, military, or economic and cultural might. Even the "diplomatic" victory that is possible in later versions is only possible through the vehicle of the United Nations and still adheres to a basic logic of domination (it really is just war by other means). In short, one can play as any country one likes, but winning means making the country like the United States. The failure to imagine a possible "successful" outcome for a nation-state other than one already enacted by non-game history reinforces the legitimacy of that history and its framing as a success.[145]

[145] This is also true of the "space race" victory where colonizing space is just an extension of the root logic of western imperialism.

When speaking of the logic of a game's internal rule sets, I refer to the hard-coded rules and rule interactions that are the formal architecture of video games. These present themselves through the representations in the game: its symbols and objects. Players interact with the symbols, but they read the rule interactions. For example, in the arcade classic *Space Invaders*, the player's job is to destroy advancing waves of aliens before they reach the bottom of the screen. Clearing each wave of eleven rows results in another, more rapidly descending wave. Even without access to any written instructions, this task is legible (in part) because as players shoot incoming aliens they are rewarded with points that add up to become their high score (a drive toward accumulation being broadly recognizable as valid goal). Merely by exploring the available ways to interact with the game state, the game's systems provide tools for their own interpretation. While the game allows players to do different things beyond destroying aliens as efficiently as possible (e.g. they can wiggle around, shoot only the enemy on the left, see how many times they can go from the bunker on the left to the one on the right without dying, etc.) the actions incentivized by the game system are very limited, resulting in a situation where "playing Space Invaders" means to accumulate points by clearing successive waves of aliens and not those other things. The interpretation of game interactions is part of what Ian Bogost refers to as the procedural rhetoric of video games: the ways in which the processes of a game are visible, actionable, and realized communicate attitudes and beliefs to players.[146] Where procedural rhetoric is principally concerned with how video

[146] Cf. Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive power of Video Games*. 2007.

games make meanings, a game's hegemonic play provides a textual ground upon which those meanings are contextualized.

Even in open, episodically organized games like *Fallout 3*, the *Elder Scrolls* series, or *World of Warcraft*, which celebrate the player as co-creator of the game's story, players can achieve mission/quest objectives in multiple, but not limitless, ways. Thus, the experience of games like these becomes one of overcoming fixed challenges (the force of hegemonic play being most clear regarding the preferences that determine which challenges are undertaken and the effectiveness a given strategy or play style, factors complicated by the customs and values of player communities).

Different player communities approach the same game differently. With networked games that involve a massive player base (millions of players), it can be difficult to identify a single discrete community, and in its absence players tend to rely on the relative stability of game code as a benchmark. However, this tendency is by no means ironclad. The Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game *League of Legends (*aka *LoL, or League)* by Riot Games, is a case-in-point.

In *League*, players control champions who—alongside other allied champions—use their abilities to attempt to destroy the opposing team's base. Champions level-up through combat (or combat support) and acquire gold which can be spent on items that augment character abilities.[147] Gameplay in *League* is driven by its current "meta," a moniker designating what champions have a power advantage under the current rulesets (*League* is frequently updated as Riot

[147] *League* is one of the premier titles in e-sports where players compete for multi-million dollar prize pools.

attempts to balance the gameplay and players attempt to create imbalance, thereby giving themselves a competitive advantage). Understanding the meta means understanding what champions are effective/efficient at what roles and how to play them in a way that takes advantage of game states. The current meta, which is both an objective assessment of rule interactions but also the perception of rule interactions in the discourse of the play community (via online forums and similar venues), generates player expectations of characters and roles. For example, a player who plays the champion Braum, whose abilities make him an effective tank (i.e. a character able to sustain a lot of damage), as an Attack/Damage/Carry (ADC)—i.e. a character role expected to deal lots of damage quickly—will find herself subject to sometimes scathing verbal abuse from teammates for playing the character/game "wrong." Although the game system offers no restriction to playing a character outside their customary role, the player community has very strong feelings about it indeed. As a competitive and team-dependent game, *League*'s players wield a great deal of social power against each other regarding which characters serve in what roles and how they are played once they get there.

Game experiences are also manipulated through paratexts. Paratexts can be official (canon) and unofficial (non-canon) and include backstories that accompany instruction manuals, advertising spots, player guides, tips, box art, as well as articles and reviews in game journals and enthusiast publications, fan fiction, blog postings, and so on. Very broadly, a game's paratexts are the material response to and discourse about the game both prior to and after its release. In her book *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, Mia Consalvo

uses early game magazines such as *Nintendo Power* as an example of paratexts shaping game experience. Consalvo writes that at the time (late 1980s-early 1990s) *Nintendo Power* served three key functions towards this end. First, it was as an unabashed cheerleader of Nintendo's games: "the magazine did not run advertising, and heavily promoted new and future Nintendo games and systems as "the best" that was [sic] out there; negative reviews were nonexistent" (24). Second, by actively soliciting feedback from its readers, the magazine created a forum for the play community where readers felt "as if they were contributing to the magazine and the game culture, rather than simply reading about the newest games" (24). Third and last, the magazine had a didactic role: providing in-depth guides that showed the location of power-up items and secret rooms, offered strategic tips, and established a shared language among its readership for evaluating a "good" game (24-26). Given the privileged position of *Nintendo Power* in the video game marketplace (it was an insider journal at the time when Nintendo held the lion's share of the home-video gaming market) it could exert a disproportionate influence compared to other fora (e.g. video game clubs or other local communities). In addition, as the official publication of Nintendo games, it laid claim to an authority over shared knowledge that local discourses could not reasonably counter. With modern video games, the landscape has changed quite dramatically in the wake of online communities.

Huge amounts of paratextual work is now done through the internet with content produced directly by fans and individuals of varying degrees of

professionalism via blog posts, game forums, Twitch,[148] and YouTube "Let's Play" videos.[149] Although content on YouTube, as just one example, is still primarily the product of a fan-driven participatory culture, some users have managed to turn their YouTube material into primary or supplementary sources of income through ad revenue, crowd-funding mechanisms, and so on. The most well-known example of the YouTube professional is Felix Kjellberg, better known as the YouTuber "PewDiePie," whose video game-focused broadcasts have over 38 million subscribers.[150] In addition to earning millions of dollars a year from his videos, PewDiePie exerts an unusually large influence on the video game market due to his massive subscriber base. Alongside market forces and celebrity culture, critical commentary on video games has also expanded as video games are more readily recognized as important cultural artifacts.[151] This has led to a more discerning player community which in turn has led to more sophisticated and critically aware games.

Historically, paratexts derived from the community and those produced by the games industry are not always in agreement, and investigation into their relationship reveals additional detail about how video games make their meanings.

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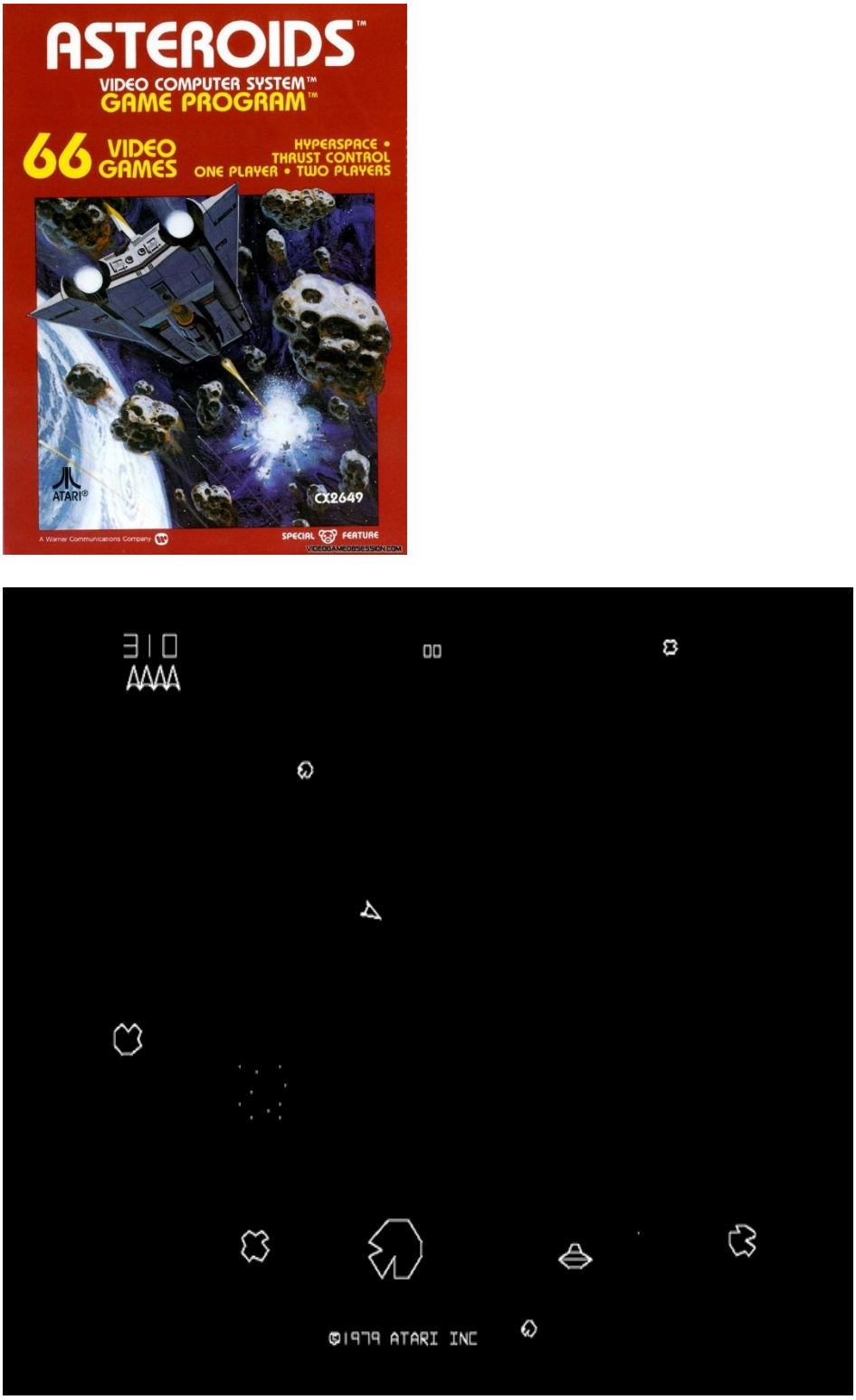
[148] Twitch is a live-streaming service that features video game, and video game-related, content. The paradigmatic Twitch video is a user streaming real-time video of themselves playing a game.
[149] Let's Plays are videos that contain gameplay footage, usually as a guide or review, and include some form of commentary by the player(s).
[150] Data drawn on 7/31/15. At that time, PewDiePie's subscriber count was 38,385,623 (https://www.youtube.com/user/PewDiePie/about)
[151] As a very limited sample of such critics, cf. Anita Sarkeesian, Vsauce, Vsauce2, and Vsauce3; Extra Credits (James Portnow and Daniel Floyd); PBS Idea Channel; Christopher Franklin aka "Errant Signal"; Cameron Kunzelman; Merritt Kopas; and Mattie Brice.

In the early days of video games, much of a game's fictional world was provided by the box art, or cabinet art in the case of arcade games. Games had to live up to lavish box art through their gameplay or not at all, since the graphical capabilities of early games could not hope to match the richness of their cover images (see Figure 1, below).

Figure 1



Atari's *Asteroids* original box art and a screenshot of Atari's *Asteroids* gameplay

This technical limitation can create a marked disconnect between a player community's understanding of a game's aesthetic (derived primarily from gameplay) and the publishing company's vision of the game (built, in part, alongside its advertising campaign).[152] This disconnect is furthered by the peculiar way that video game semiotics operate.

While video games certainly involve representational meanings, these are not their only or even their primary meaning mechanism. Take the classic game *Asteroids* as an example. As seen in the screenshot above, players are presented with what looks, for all the world, like a slightly top-heavy letter "A" that represents the spaceship on the box which in turn represents spaceships in the cultural imaginary (i.e. "real" spaceships in the world). It functions just as any run-of-the-mill sign does. However, as play continues, the representational meanings of the ship are eclipsed by its functional meanings. In the context of gameplay, the signifier of the ship doesn't have meaning because it points to some signified "ship"; it has meaning because it is "me": the object that most nearly signals the player and with which the player most directly identifies. The ship is not, here, in a signifier/signified relation as it is with the spaceship on the box art, but rather it serves as an avatar. A game avatar, per game scholar Rune Klevjer, is "a vehicle through which the player is given some kind of embodied agency and presence within the gameworld" (Klevjer, 2012).[153] The ship/player's most

[152] Advancement in graphics technologies has now produced something of the opposite scenario where in-game graphics can easily equal and exceed anything capable of being rendered as a static image.

[153] Klevjer insists on distinguishing avatars from playable characters (or personas) as general categories in that "character-play must clearly be seen as independent from embodied presence, and vice versa. Playable characters can be interacted with via email, for example, or in numerous other ways that would not imply any kind of embodied presence within a computer-simulated

important characteristics are not related to its ship-ness (the prior/initial signifying relation) but to its context-specific roles: it has multiple "lives," it cannot come into direct contact with other objects on the screen (which kills you instantly), it fires little dots that interact with other game objects and the game space, and so on.[154] So long as a player wishes gameplay to continue, she must give preference to these functional meanings in order to effectively satisfy game goals.

All video games make use of at least two registers for their symbols: a signifying one and a functional or referential one where the latter refers to game code but does not represent it. In the example above, the "meaning" of the ship is ultimately as a vector for communicating game rules (e.g. the principles governing possible interactions within that context) and, crucially, the relationship between those rules and game goals.[155] David Myers describes this functional register as "recursive contextualization," which names the process by which game signifiers come to indicate not objects but relationships between objects (Myers, 20-23).

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environment. Conversely, the vehicle of agency and presence in a gameworld does not at all need to be also a character; the paradigmatic category here would be racing games or flight simulators, but there are also games like *Marble Madness* (1984), in which our avatar is a rolling marble" (Klevjer, 17). He does note, however, that hybrid forms are not only possible but quite common (17).

[154] The black "space" background on which the ship "flies" operates similarly. While it points to the yawning abyss of space, objects that leave one side of the screen reappear on the opposite side with their momentum retained; the little dots the ship shoots (laser blasts?) can reach across and around the screen in just this way to solve tactical problems. The effect does not so much gesture towards the vastness of space as it focuses attention on the fishbowl-like quality of the gamespace.

[155] An exception to this claim might appear to be something like Cory Arcangel's *Various Self Playing Bowling Games*, an art piece that spectators cannot interact with (so, for the viewer the images cannot acquire a non-representational meaning). However, even this is debatable since the gutterball-bowling controllers are sending inputs to the game system so the images viewed only appear to be exclusively representational; in fact, a game is still being "played" in the strictest sense.

The presence of multiple registers of meaning complicates an understanding of video game play considerably. For example, in a game like *Borderlands* where the main action is shooting at person-shaped objects, are players thus, first and foremost, shooting at "people"? There is a robust argument to be made that they are not. *Borderlands* and the other games in its series are loot-based, first person shooters (FPS) with role-playing game (RPG) elements, which means that much of the gameplay involves the collection of rare gear (usable in-game objects that amplify character power), gameplay happens within a "first person" perspective (see Figure 2 below), and player characters develop (in this case with a levelling and skill/ability system).

Because of the way *Borderlands* operates—with character development driven by accumulating experience points, game currency, and game items—the "people" who are shot are not primarily signifiers that point to people in the world but instead come to function like person-shaped piñatas, filled with experience points and loot. In these games, as in so many others that rely on direct and violent conflict for core gameplay, bodies are made useful (i.e. consumable) by breaking them. Briefly put, appearances don't matter: it's what's on the inside that counts. In itself, gunning down the enemy isn't the point because video game slaughter is explicitly useful in its context. To put a finer point on it: it is the only thing that is useful. In the case of *Borderlands*, its violence is tied to how players build in-game power. Games that do not have character development or in-game objects nonetheless adhere to a similar logic, only in these cases it is the

accumulation of points that serve as trophies: public markers of prowess (i.e. power).[156]

One by-product of video games' different registers of meaning, as David Myers aptly describes, is that as players become more expert some varieties of "bad" play become more, rather than less, common. Per Myers, "this particular class of rules-breaking play—exploiting—involves breaking game rules while still maintaining some level of integrity within the rules system (or game *context*) of which the broken rules are a part" (Myers, 19). Exploitative play is interesting because it still pursues that game's goals. When this occurs in games that are explicitly competitive (e.g. the *Battlefield or Call of Duty*, aka *CoD*, series), the responses of the player community are weighted heavily towards formal over informal rules. An example of such play (and the response) can be found in the competitive multiplayer first-person shooter *Battlefield: 1942* and the practice of "dolphin diving" (aka "dropshotting"), where players make their avatars jump and go prone mid-air: making themselves more difficult to hit while taking advantage of a system rule that gives prone avatars improved accuracy. Although the response of the community to this practice was roundly negative—it was disparaged in the in-game chat and criticized on nearly all official online game forums—it was nonetheless adopted and became commonplace, as players who had mastered dolphin-diving consistently outperformed players who had not. It was not until the game's developer, DICE, introduced a change in their follow-up

[156] Games do exist where the entire point is violent spectacle, like *Smile: The Splattering* (gameplay video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cLGIF6XITI), but these are by far a minority and tend to be part of social commentary.

title, *Battlefield 2*, of a brief animation for prone-position changes that created a period (approximately 0.5-1 seconds) where players could not fire weapons that dolphin diving faded away.[157] Exploitative play is an example of play that can be, but is not necessarily, considered cheating by a player community while nevertheless being allowed (in fact created) by the physical game rules. It also points to the mobility of the category of cheating itself: initially, victories won through dolphin-diving were suspect but as the practice became the norm it was no longer viewed with disregard. The presence of exploits insists on giving a great deal of attention to the interactions between rules as a major vehicle of meaning in video games.

Acknowledging that video games make meaning (perhaps a primary meaning) in a functional manner troubles criticism driven by representational concerns because it suggests such criticism lacks a player's perspective and may fundamentally misunderstand the play experience. This is not wrong, but it's not right either. The fact that the figures upon whom fictional violence is so often inflicted look like people does matter because video games are neither strictly representational or strictly functional but both. This is why game scholar Stuart Moulthrop was distressed by the restrictive formalist/proceduralist vision that aggressively privileged system processes as "what matters" in early video game scholarship: it obscured the power of representation and its role in shaping play

[157] *Call of Duty (CoD)* has a similar exploitative practice in the form of "quick scoping." Quick scoping is an exploit that takes advantage of the very high damage of sniper rifles, but which suffered from poor accuracy unless fired through a scope view, at which point their accuracy becomes near perfect. Players found that, due to minimal animation times, they could run around with unscoped rifles and, on seeing an enemy, hit the scope button and fire the weapon immediately afterwards, taking advantage of both the high damage and the high accuracy (because the shot is now considered "scoped" by the game system) to get one-shot kills.

experience (cf. Moulthrop, 46-47). When we strip representation away and try to read games as pure process, we stutter into incoherence because that process must itself be interpreted.

Media scholars have been thinking in terms of media ecology at least since the 1960s on the back of the work of Neil Postman and Marshall McLuhan. Media ecology is, like similarly powerful notions, an umbrella term that gathers a set of complex claims and perspectives. Put crudely but functionally, it emphasizes the interconnectedness of media technologies and ongoing technological and social developments; media ecology proposes, in Neil Postman's words, media as "information environments," indicating both how subjects are situated within those environments and how the environment is itself contextually determined.

Video games have a complicated relationship to other media (including other video games) and their material and social environments that will only be briefly touched on here. Suffice it to say that when video games import tropes across media, those tropes are initially coded with the representational logic of earlier iterations but can come to develop new/additional meanings within the virtual environment that move alongside and/or overshadow the earlier ones. For example, the recent *Batman: Arkham* series (*Arkham Asylum*, *Arkham City*, *Arkham Origins*, *Arkham Knight*) is tied to a diverse network of media forms: comic books, television shows, and films centered on the legendary superhero-detective Bruce Wayne (Batman). The games depend on explicit connections to the Batman mythology and media universe for their initial symbolic force.

However, these symbols are then translated and adapted within gameplay. For instance, the games make use of a skill-tree levelling system (therefore one player's Batman might be similar, but not identical, to another player's Batman, whereas in passive media there is only one reference object) and yet also be aesthetically limited by the number of model animations coded into the game. Additionally, The *Arkham* series makes use of third-person, stealth-dominant gameplay reminiscent of games like *Assassin's Creed*, *Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay*, and the Tom Clancy *Splinter Cell* series.

By signaling game-to-game references through things like camera position, combat mechanics, and even menu design, games communicate with game-literate players about how the game can be expected to work. Game-to-game references also happen within production companies whose titles are otherwise unrelated. For example, the software giant Valve's default keyboard setup is consistent across *Half-Life, Left4Dead, and Portal*, even though these games are entirely distinct in terms of their narrative worlds. This parity helps make the physical interface more readily invisible and facilitates immersive play for players whose purchasing habits demonstrate brand loyalty to the publisher. A game's genealogy can be made visible in advertisements and trailers as well as actual gameplay, all of which communicate the sense of how a game will play even before the game is actually available to consumers.

Reading One:

Bad Play Versus Cheating

While cheating is usually a stark marker of limits points within gameplay, there are other ways to draw out the shape of a game's hegemonic play that can be equally instructive. One such route is to look to "bad" play: play that game systems allow but which either violates community practices, is especially inefficient, or both. The game *Left 4 Dead* is an excellent case-in-point of this phenomenon.

Left 4 Dead is the first of an ongoing series of cooperative First-Person Shooter (FPS) videogame developed by Turtle Rock Studios and Valve corporation. In these games, player-controlled characters work together against zombies, also called "infected," where the game world is navigated from the perspective of the controlled character.

The series makes use of a core "game ethic," which is in line with normative western values outside the game, and which is established by reinforcing particular player strategies through game dynamics and the fictional world. By buying into this game ethic, progress through the game is both made and made easier. Grief play, by contrast, interrupts progress toward the game's goals and is presented here as an alternative mode of play within the space of the game that serves to indicate and clarify this game's hegemonic play.

Special emphasis should be given to the term "cooperative" in *Left 4 Dead*'s genre designation. Although all current multiplayer FPS titles employ at

least a weak version of cooperative play, the design decisions governing damage in the game generally, and the “special infected” specifically, insist on the cooperative nature of *Left 4 Dead* with an urgency and degree of moral force unique (at the time of its release) among first-person shooters.

The peculiar moral tenor of its gameplay makes *Left 4 Dead* especially well-suited to be read against “griefing” or “grief play:” where individuals take pleasure by causing distress in other players. Grief play begins by rejecting, wholesale, the demands of the moral logic that drives the game’s hegemonic play and which are supported by how the game system assigns formal value to player actions. Within *Left 4 Dead’s* hegemonic play, the moral logic of the “real” world crosses the magic circle and reinforces game goals in a way that contributes to the stability of the game world. Griefing, on the other hand, violates the magic circle in such a way that the game space collapses. In other words, griefing here involves a violent interruption—at a process and/or experiential level—of the playing of this game. While these concerns are present in all the multiplayer modes, for the sake of time and clarity remarks here are limited to the Campaign mode, as it most clearly presents the system in which grief and cooperative play are enacted.

In the Campaign mode, players control of one of four human characters termed "survivors," a moniker describing both their situation and their purpose. Players work together to combat computer-controlled enemies in order to traverse a series of stages that terminate in a "safe room," with the final stage involving a

more traditional escape (e.g., by helicopter, by car, etc.).[158] This last transition ends the current game session and completes the map; at map completion, game statistics scroll, leading significantly with the text, “In memory of:” and the names of any players whose characters did not survive the final stage.

The fictional world of *Left 4 Dead* is located solidly in the "Zombie Apocalypse" sub-genre of horror where the zombies are the result of a sudden pandemic, showing its heritage in, and communication with, popular films like *28 Days Later* (2002), Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), and *Zombieland* (2009).[159] Similar to these films, and following from its vision of the “zombie” as a diseased body against the classical re-animated body, the zombies in *Left 4 Dead* do not shuffle, but move quickly and aggressively. Breaking with the genre, player-characters are immune to the infection—a necessary concession to gameplay, though at the cost of the powerful metaphor of contagion. This narrative architecture is communicated extensively: there is virtually no element of the game that is not used to reinforce the fictional world.

Damage in *Left 4 Dead* does not proceed in a straight line toward death. Players do not typically go from “just fine” to “dead,” but are instead incapacitated: unable to move but able to look around and shoot as they bleed out from their wounds. Most important about incapacitation is that players can be helped up by other players and are then able to continue playing. This helping mechanic is also at work with the “special infected.” Unlike run-of-the-mill

[158] Traditional in the sense of referential. The safe room doubles as destination and vehicle, but its role as transportation only makes sense within the tradition of video games.
[159] *Zombieland* is more of a sibling than a parent, the game and the film being products of the same history rather than necessarily influencing each other as in a traditional genealogy.

zombies who only threaten players with direct damage, most special infected attacks grapple and incapacitate the struck player while doing damage over time. It is relatively easy to escape the clutches of the special infected, but to do so one must be freed by another player. These helping behaviors, and the effects of not helping, do not happen in a vacuum but within the recognizable and layered narrative architecture that invests these behaviors with significant ethical and moral capital. The player's job is to try to get everyone to survive, and to do this they need to navigate out of a dangerous environment and into a safe one. This situation, following directly from the fictional world, establishes the compelling us (survivors) / them (infected) binary that serves as the governing framework for all interaction throughout the game.

This us/them binary provides material for a *prima fācie* communal obligation where players have a duty first to the community of other players in general, then to the fictional community of player-characters, and finally to the particular players within a given game session. This relatively weak sense of communal duty is powerfully supported during gameplay through the social force of reciprocity. The game brings this force to bear primarily through the mechanics that govern the helping behaviors mentioned and the strategies that fall out from them, clearly communicating to players a world in which they know it is part of their task to help, at the very least in a general sense of "look out for," the other players.

Although these helping behaviors are not strictly mandatory, they are highly incentivized through the extension of player pleasure from continued

gameplay, the quantified stats that run at map completion (which also indicate the game's agreement that those actions have value), to the spoken "thanks" (often echoed by player-communicated gratitude) that each character is scripted to perform in response to being helped. Yet the most powerful incentive toward behavior consistent with hegemonic play is the fact that the styles of gameplay it generates weakly dominate non-helping strategies where the outcome is achieving victory conditions. Although hegemonic play is technically emergent, it is a very orchestrated form of emergence. Players can have a great deal of latitude within hegemonic play to play differently, but so long as their behavior is still in keeping with the core principles of the binary, the effectiveness of the group at progressing in the game is radically improved.

This strategy imbalance raises significant concerns regarding player agency, with hegemonic player behavior becoming suspect as the force of its incentives amount to a powerful form of coercion. Given the degree of influence these incentivized choices have over winning the game, it becomes deeply unclear whether they can be considered properly autonomous. "If I want to win the game, then I ought to help my teammates *in a particular way*" becomes, in practice, "If I want to win the game, I **must** help my teammates in that particular way." It is a short walk from "do this and get this" to "do this or else."

While players must choose to help—lacking that agency would strip the helping behaviors of their meaningful character—it is a choice made under the difficulty in choosing otherwise: difficult because strategically costly, and difficult because not helping runs counter to the narrative architecture that is in

sympathy with broad moral values outside of the game to which players, presumably, already subscribe (e.g. a system that privileges bravery, fidelity, beneficence, and even sacrifice). Operating under these forces, it is less the case that there is a real choice to be made than it is that the "correct" choice, which is to say the hegemonic choice, appears as obvious.

In fact, the most salient difference between the moral consequence of actions in the game and those outside rests, unsurprisingly, on the peculiar condition of playing a game. In this case, the magic circle protects players from moral anguish by being "just a game" while nonetheless allowing the echo of moral consequence to resonate within the fictional world and create emotional import: a vital aspect of an "immersive" experience. This is possible because the crossover into the game from the outside world in the case of hegemonic play actually reinforces the stability of the gamespace inside the magic circle, a border that here is permeable but nonetheless coherent. And it is this border that griefing violates.

The two forms of griefing most at issue for *Left 4 Dead* are player-killing (by far the most common), or the slightly more nuanced, and vaguely passive-aggressive, withholding of help (when there is no reason in the game for doing so). Player-killing is largely self-explanatory and is most obviously recognized as griefing.[160] Witholding help is a little stranger, as it can be couched inside an exaggerated commitment to immersion—the player can pretend the zombies really are terrifying, and cower as they assault the team—or can be displayed

[160] Player Killing is simply where one player character directly causes the death of another player character.

baldly “hey, there’s a zombie on you, you should see to that,” or by merely standing nearby as the other player is killed.

These behaviors reject both the *prima facie* communal obligation and its attendant reciprocal support. Moreover, they throw into crisis the stability of the us/them binary on which all cooperative strategies depend by introducing the figure of the "traitor" who looks like one of us, but is not *really* one of us.

What is striking about griefing is there is no question that griefers are having fun. Analogous to the pleasure taken in teasing, or bullying, the more infuriated a griefer can make his victim, the more fun the griefer has. Given the moral force of the cooperative play in Left 4 Dead, griefing in this game produces particularly keen outrage among its victims.

Following a griefing event, it is almost always the case that either the victim leaves the server, in search of a different server where the game being played “correctly,” or a kick-vote is initiated: a game function where a majority vote results in the expulsion of a player (e.g., the griefer) from the server. The initiation of a kick-vote is a meta-function, only intelligible from the context of a player playing a game and so entirely inconsistent with the narrative world. As griefing continues, this process repeats until either the griefer is removed or all the potential victims have left. Each outcome of results at minimum in the suspension of, and often the outright termination of, progress within the game. Players leave, and seek out a new game session where player agency is once again “appropriately” restricted, and where meaning is again safely produced according

to a clearly articulated system that does not challenge a normative moral structure where the good guys are good guys and the bad guys are bad guys.

Unlike the game's hegemonic play, where players receive satisfaction by accomplishing tasks in the game, griefing uses the game to cause distress in the person of another player. It is not possible to "upset" a player-character, only a player, and it is at the player that grief play is directed. This indicates a crucial shift that griefing affects in the borders of the game; grief play violates the magic circle by superimposing another magic circle within it, and pulling other players into the griefer's game without the other player's consent. Indeed, the invitation (if it can be put this way) to be drawn into grief play is paradoxical since it must be rejected for griefing as such to happen. Griefing thus does in fact take for itself a larger share of player agency, by choosing otherwise despite its supposed difficulty. But this choice is made not within the system of value as given by the game but at the level of power between persons: griefing being an exercise in control where other players, so long as they continue to strive within the game's value structure, must now actively struggle against the griefer.

Simply put, other players are bound not only by the hard-coded rules of the game, but also by the social rules of the game's culture, whereas the griefer is not (raising the additional question of whether the implicit consent given by purchasing and playing the game applies only to the formal rules of the game or if it extends to the "customs" of a particular player-communities). Griefing behaviors are governed by the rules of the game system—that is, they are allowable system actions—but they point towards how not playing the game

“right” or, “according to custom,” becomes effectively equivalent to not playing the game (an interpretation reinforced through expulsion via kick-vote).

At its core, griefing becomes the radical enactment, and so the challenge *par excellence*, of the illusion that a game is “*just* a game." Because the game is just a game, its rules and system of value are not only negotiable but negligible. This disinterestedness grants practical access to actions that would otherwise be impeded by the care attached to the system of value the game’s hegemonic play reinforces. However, by ignoring the limits imposed on player agency by the game's fictional world and its attendant moral system, griefers also lose access to the meanings that those limits engender.

In his book, *Half-Real: Between real rules and fictional rules,* ludologist Jesper Juul answers his own question "why be limited when we can be free?" by asserting that:

> games provide context for actions: moving an avatar is much more meaningful in a game environment than in an empty space; throwing a ball has more interesting implications on the playing field than off the playing field... The rules of a game add *meaning* and *enable actions* by setting up *difference* between potential moves and events.
>
> (Juul, 18-19)

I would extend this to include the social rules, or gaming customs, that prevail within a particular gaming community. The implicit suggestion by griefing that a game is just a game elides the context that surrounds and informs that game and contributes to its potential meanings. This results in a situation where the limits on agency created by the obligation to play within a structure perceived as stable

become more productive of meaning because that meaning is legible and shared. Grief play, in its attempt to subvert the us/them binary governing interactions in *Left 4 Dead* is not able to produce a sustainable alternate meaning, shown by the collapse of the gameplay. Ultimately, griefing is always already trapped in a position where it can mean only in relation to the hegemonic play, against which it cannot be understood as playing different, only as playing badly.

Reading Two:

Videogame Violence and the Question of Humanism

Humanism is a game, and every time you fire up a video game you are playing it. Video games are the formal apotheosis of humanism's central conflict: the separation of the human from the animal. *Super Mario* is a pantomime of it, *Doom* its allegory, and *Zelda* its epic. That said, video games at once are a vehicle for and a critique of traditional humanism. In this essay, I present readings of the first two games of the *Borderlands* series contrasted with the independent game, *This War of Mine*. These readings are offered as case studies in the service of two related claims. First, that video games have special merit as sites for critiques of humanist ethics. Second, that such critiques invite a rethinking of the position of the player, which is better conceived of not as a human who operates the game but a figure produced by the gameplay's performance of humanism: a creature of the machine.

In the hope of ameliorating my casual use of troublesome terms like humanism, I beg your patience for a brief elaboration. By humanism I mean the

millennia-long project summarized by Giorgio Agamben in *The Open: Man and Animal* when he writes that, "in our culture, man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element" (16), and that therefore, "the anthropological machine of humanism is an ironic apparatus that verifies the absence of a nature proper to *Homo*, holding him suspended between a celestial and a terrestrial nature, between animal and human—and, thus, his being always less and more than himself "(29).[161] This captures the troubled dualism of humanism quite nicely, but Agamben may be selling short the tendency to prefer one side over the other. I would add that humanism names the production of a preferred human ideal understood by its opposition to the animal, a term that also benefits from some unpacking.

"The animal" is a general singular construction indicating a set of characteristics (animality) that do not belong to any specific body. It is rather, as Jacques Derrida identified in "The Animal that Therefore I am (More to Follow)," a token of language used to "designate every living thing that is held not to be man (man as *rational animal*, man as political animal, speaking animal…)" (400). Through the invention of the animal, man marks himself as the creature unmarked by this language—who speaks over and against the one spoken—and so disavows and reduces the multiplicity of non-human experience to a single concept and category from which it is itself excluded. Put briefly, the sacrifice of "the animal"

[161] "Our culture" needs acknowledging. My argument suffers from ethnocentrism in its western focus, and it does not make any attempt to speak to other traditions.

is the price of admission into human sacredness (the human animal denies its nature so as to hold itself apart from Nature). However, as the passages from Agamben indicate, the animal is a murk from which the human never quite fully emerges. Human being remains an uncomfortable supplement to animality, and human self-definition an ongoing and firstly purgative enterprise. The animal to be removed is seen as a threat to reason and civility, and human being produced and defended as its constitutive outside.

In "Rules for the Human Zoo," Peter Sloterdijk paints a similar picture of humanism as the production of human ideals through "the taming of men" (15). He describes this project of domestication as especially urgent in times marked by, "displays of great power: whether as open warfare or raw imperial power, or in the daily degradation of human being in entertainments offered in the media;" it is within and through such conflict wherein "the label of humanism reminds us…of the constant battle for humanity that reveals itself as a contest between bestializing and taming tendencies" (15).[162] Like Agamben, Sloterdijk's humanism creates the human through a ceaseless moving away from "bestializing" habits and behaviors, however they might manifest historically.

In sum, the human values of humanism are produced through struggle against the corresponding concept of the animal. Human values are characterized by a celebration of reason and rationality, agency (self-determination),

[162] I'll make a case for video game violence as ethically productive, though not necessarily ethically instructive. I am suspicious of the strong suggestion that Sloterdijk makes that the content of modern media is, in whole or in part, responsible for degradation of human being because this view presumes the noble human nature that Agamben finds absent (that is, we produce human nature rather than protect it).

compassion, and temperance. By contrast, the animal is associated with irrationality, instinct, self-interest, and a lack of restraint. While this may seem a dated or quaint perspective in light of recent challenges to binary thinking, it has also proven powerfully enduring and widespread, and we would be remiss to ignore the terrible force of the commonplace.

The red thread running through this view of humanism is the role of mastery as a necessary corollary to the struggle toward human value. The ethical force of humanist dualism only makes sense if the human part has (or could have) the power to direct and over-master its animal counterpart. The human supposed to emerge from this display of power is at minimum self-directed and capable of virtuous expression (e.g. altruism, courageous care, honesty, etc.), in short, a recognizable approximation of humanist ideals; a lack of this power is by definition a moral deficiency. It is within the calculus of this moral struggle that video games make their intervention because they exaggerate and formalize problems of mastery, problems negotiated in each instance by the player.

And so, to restate my thesis in a bit more detail: the player-centric nature of video game design simulates anthropocentric thinking and opens space to interrogate a particular imagining of humanism through the figure of the player, an interrogation principally structured by the same human/non-human (animal) logic that underlies humanist dualism. “The player” reveals itself as an identity out of sync with the human understood by its difference from the animal. The problem of mastery that divides the human from the animal, in gameplay divides

the human from itself, and amid virtuosic play the player re-enters the scene as a consciousness that is an amalgam of creature and process.[163]

Although "the animal" is bald reductionism, video games make use of a similar ethics of caricature made legible by attending to what is included and what excluded from the simulation. Ian Bogost stresses the importance of attending to differences between a game and what it models to the point of including it in the definition of simulation itself: "a simulation is the gap between the rule-based representation of a source system and a user's subjectivity" (107). What is included and what left out, the opportunities for interaction, and how all of this is governed by game rules is how games make arguments and are what Bogost refers to as a game's "procedural rhetoric" (Bogost, ix-28). With respect to the central contest of humanism, video games grant broad powers to the player to act in and upon the world (powers realized through game processes). The license to use those powers is inseparably linked to, and in most games solely determined by, the fact that the player is The Player (i.e. the human in a human/non-human dichotomy). The primary vehicle the games considered here use to engage with the humanist struggle is violence, which is both a direct expression of power as well as a metonym for power in general.

[163] By virtuosic play I mean the semi-expert play that has developed over time and is at least mostly immersive (the control apparatus is invisible because it has already been mastered by the player, rule interactions are well known, etc.). This is an important qualification, because a first time player's experience is necessarily different from the player who has already internalized the game rules and interactions.

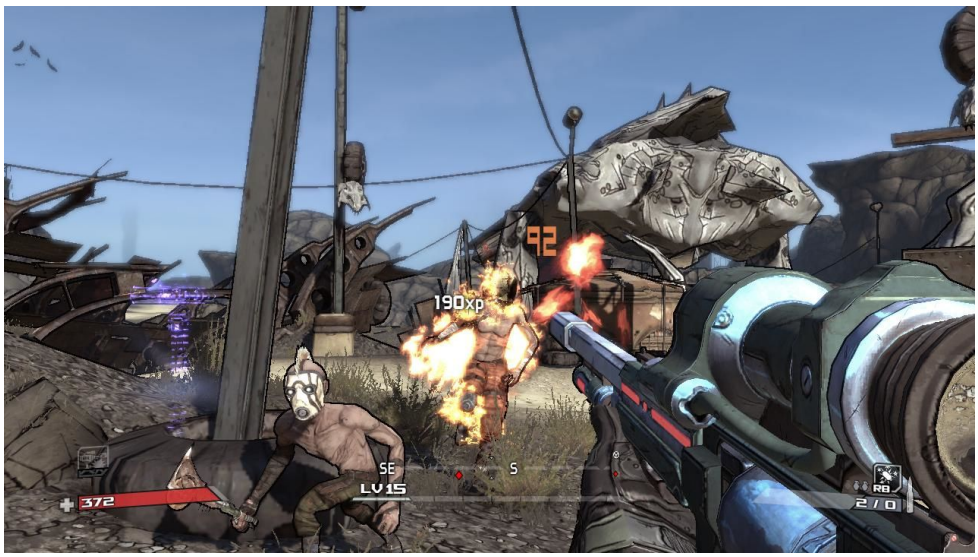
Opening the Borderlands

In the *Borderlands* series, the player controls a character who is a "vault hunter," a euphemistic reference to a certain tomb raider, and who shares Lara Croft's basic motivation: to monetize or otherwise make useful the relics of another culture.[164] While other motivations emerge within both series, the colonial impulse is foundational and orients subsequent interactions. Each character has narrative, visual, and procedural components—a short backstory, a recognizable appearance, and a fixed skill tree that differs from those of the other characters.[165] This last is especially important because it communicates to those familiar with this type of game structure that characters correspond to play styles and gear preferences (e.g. Mordecai in *Borderlands* and zer0 in *Borderlands 2* have skills that synergize with sniper rifles and maximize a sharp-shooting/long-range combat play style).

The *Borderlands* games are loot-based, first-person shooters (FPS) with role-playing game (RPG) elements. Gameplay revolves around collecting rare gear (usable in-game objects that amplify character power) within a "first person" perspective (see Figure 2 below), where player characters develop in response to player actions (via a levelling and skill/ability system). The narrative task of the

[164] Cf. the *Tomb Raider* franchise 1996-present.
[165] "Procedural" may be an unfamiliar modifier in this context. I use it here to refer to components that impact game processes (neither the narrative nor the character appearance do). The character classes are defined by a fixed set of abilities ("skills") that modify rule interactions. For example, a skill might cause a percentage increase of damage with a certain weapon type under certain circumstances (i.e. +10% headshot damage with sniper rifles).

Figure 2



Screenshot of *Borderlands*

original *Borderlands* is to loot the vault, but the process task is to make the characters as powerful as possible—measured by an ability to do violence—because only by accumulating power can the player access the rest of the game world and thereby the vault.[166] It is a conflict-centric game whose themes and visual aesthetic riff on and are exaggerations of 19th century frontier myths (i.e. anything not "settled" is savage and in need of settlement, etc.).

The reason why the characters are trying to get into the vault is simply to enrich themselves and as a display of their own power. Although the instructions given by the principal non-player character (NPC) "Guardian Angel" (who establishes what is required to advance the main plot) occasionally directs player

[166] For the sake of being perfectly clear: narrative and process are not opposites.

violence toward quasi-altruistic ends, the core motivation never really leaves center-stage. This is an odd choice from a moral perspective (but common in games generally) because it aligns the player with a tradition of heroism exemplified by the characters of Homer's *Iliad* who also pursue wealth and glory as ends in themselves. In Homer, as in *Borderlands*, an ability to do something is a de facto justification for doing it.[167] Just as iliadic heroes cheer slaughter as the proof of might and victory, the digital spoils dispensed with flashing lights, gore, and the satisfying sounds of combat are a chorus praising the player's power. Of course, this is just what Sloterdijk refers to when he warns against the "bestializing" and "degrading" tendencies of modern media: an opportunity to engage with direct violence that serves no purpose larger than self-aggrandizement and pleasure. Despite this, however, the game makes a fairly canonical humanist argument by establishing and celebrating the power of the presumably human player to exert dominance over the non-human world; it just does so according to a different moral framework.

As explained in Chapter two, the prerational and rational mentalities are ways to understand how we act, play, and otherwise express our power and values (ix-68). To briefly review, the prerational mentality is characterized by valorizing individual, private, and concrete power (e.g. I steal your bike so you hit me with a brick and take it back; or, just as good: because you can, you hit me with a brick and take my bike—these are morally equivalent within a prerational mentality),

[167] While this oversimplifies the moral nuance of the ancient world, consider how Agamemnon flouts custom (and social welfare) by rejecting the ransom of Chryseis and in taking Briseis from Achilles despite the fallout which was pretty well understood in advance (if not in detail at least in nature).

and the rational mentality foregrounds of social, public, and abstract power (e.g. I steal your bike so you have me arrested, and the court forces me to return the bike and pay a fine).[168] Both mentalities are always present but one is dominant (the rational mentality being more or less dominant since about the time of Plato). So, the values associated with the prerational mentality are not generally recognized as the values of modern society without difficulty: the rational mentality must either rationalize and integrate prerational values into its moral logic or dismiss and denigrate them. From this perspective, the humanist contests and negotiations that Agamben and Sloterdijk describe and which *Borderlands* enacts appear contradictory because they operate in both prerational and rational modes.

Because of how progress in *Borderlands* works—by gathering experience points, game currency, and items—the player realizes and nurtures her power through agonistic conflict. Violence is both an expression of and the sole means to in-game power as well as the only real avenue to effect change in the fictional world. Rather than decrying violence as such, if we accept its function in the context of the game as a means to establish agency, it is incumbent upon the player (in order to be the most autonomous agent, i.e. the human in the room) to use her violence to express that agency. The spoils that result from combat are therefore both the means to greater power/agency and the symbols of its presence. As a point of comparison, games that lack character development and collectible objects (e.g. *Pac-Man* or *Street Fighter*) nonetheless adhere to a similar logic:

[168] Cf. Spariosu (1989) p. 6-9, for an extended summary of these concepts as they relate to: power, law, religion, consciousness, and education/knowledge.

they simply use points instead of levels and items to serve as trophies and public markers of prowess. These same trophies, in a roundabout way, also emphasize the specialness of the player's status (read here as a marker of human exceptionalism) by indicating the way she is simultaneously in and out of the gameworld. Player characters and A.I. controlled enemies have (at minimum) a health bar whose depletion results in the character's death. When the player kills something in the game it always generates at least some reward (i.e. experience and loot). When the player character is killed, however, the player is inconvenienced by a loss of 7% of her in-game funds (explained by the game as the cost to reconstruct the character's body) but there is no corresponding benefit to the opponent who killed the character.[169] This has two significant consequences: first, it lets the player know that her digital body is in some profound way different in nature from all the other digital bodies, reinforcing the anthropocentric belief that bodies that are other are available for use. Second, this difference compromises some of the integrity of the agon and reveals the game to be rigged in favor of a certain outcome. Rather than being a quality brought to the game by the human player, the player's human exceptionality is discovered in the game processes as a material property of the code, which is then given to the player.

Reading the ability to wield the most effective violence as an expression of agency is problematic in *Borderlands* because it seems to follow that the player

[169] As there is, for example, in *Middle-Earth: Shadow of Mordor*, where the creature that killed the player is promoted and so participates in some of the rewards of agonistic conflict.

must also be able to choose not to be violent, which is not possible while still progressing through the game (which I address in detail below, as this persists in *Borderlands 2*). By enfolding the entirety of the gameworld in the sphere of direct conflict, *Borderlands* creates a space where the triumph of the player's violence becomes the sole register of value legible by the world system (it is the only argument that the game, as a set of processes, can recognize and acknowledge). The conclusion of *Borderlands* revealed that the player had been manipulated into clearing out the vault by the Hyperion Corporation. Read according to the game's moral logic of force, this diminishes the player's standing by revealing their supposed agency to be subject to an external will.

Slaughter for Fun and Profit

Though the core gameplay is identical and its themes committed to the same frontier myths,[170] the much more deliberate narrative investment of *Borderlands 2* demands reading its violence in a very difference light. Where the conflict in *Borderlands* was a simple measure of force against force (demonstrating the excellence of the player by their triumphs in combat) *Borderlands 2* situates its conflict within a story that provides other motives for the player's struggle.

Like most story-driven video games, *Borderlands 2* is a melodrama. A simple definition of melodrama, taken from Linda Williams, is a story offering a

[170] In *Borderlands 2* the new batch of entrepreneurial characters significantly arrive by rail, and the very first mission is literally saving technology from nature: the robot Claptrap is attacked by a native yeti-like creature, a Bullymong. The player kills the Bullymong and repairs the robot even though the first game firmly established that Claptrap is every bit as capricious and dangerous as any "wild" creature).

"contrast between how things are and how they could be, or should be" (84). In terms of their moral structure, *Borderlands* and *Borderlands 2* are opposites. Working in an essentially pre-rational mode, *Borderlands* establishes its values as shows of strength at the very moment of action. In contrast, and in accord with a rational mentality, *Borderlands 2* builds the shape of its conflict within a frame that understands moral value as fundamentally given in advance (because it is, for the most part, in line with social values outside the game: avoid suffering, promote human flourishing, etc.).[171] It is not surprising then that most melodramatic texts open with an injury that justifies the acts that follow as necessary to restore moral order.

Borderlands 2 starts with the player surviving an assassination attempt orchestrated by the game's villain, Handsome Jack. To switch moral registers cleanly the game needs to move from personal affront to general threat, and in short order the player learns that Jack and his Hyperion Corporation are not just her would-be assassins, but are agents of oppression acting against the planet as a whole. Fascinatingly, the game focuses on Hyperion's exploitative mining and research operations. Specifically, the player learns that Pandora is host to a valuable mineral, eridium, and that its industrial by-product, slag, has been used to cruelly mutate local wildlife (and humans as well).[172] Unlike the optional bits

[171] In other words, the moral logic of the pre-rational mentality produces tautology. The person who wins a contest is who ought to have won. In contrast, because the rational mentality assumes some abstract goods from the outset there is already an "ought" before the contest takes place (i.e. the player "ought" to win, because what she is fighting is evil).

[172] Weakly framed as an explanation for non-human hostility, in fact anything non-human and undomesticated on Pandora is already hostile by default. That nothing veers from this path is a missed opportunity to present non-human actors as having complex and varied motivations, and

of narrative accessible through in-game objects (which hold regional character vignettes or give extra additional depth to the playable characters) the information about Handsome Jack/Hyperion's moral standing is part of the main story arc and so it is impossible to complete the game without encountering it. All this moral heavy lifting is supported by specific demonstrations of Jack's wickedness—the player gets to hear a tortured mother try to trick her child into suicide by grenade in order that she might escape the worse fate of falling into Jack's hands; she will see a beloved pet mutated and violently turn on its former owner/partner before ultimately being murdered in front of said owner; seriously, it's pretty grisly. All told, Jack and Hyperion are condemned because they cause (and receive direct benefit from causing) terrible harm, and are either indifferent to or take outright delight in the damage they inflict.

This would seem to set the stage for a pretty straightforward morality play with the player as righteous warrior against the monster that is Handsome Jack, if only the game's processes allowed the player to realize that vision.

In both *Borderlands* games, the player is extremely limited in terms of her ability to interact with the world. Unsurprisingly, shooting is the main activity in the FPS genre. In the *Borderlands* (and nearly every FPS made after 1995) at minimum a generic "interact" action is also available which potentially offers a staggering array of variety yet most often, as is the case here, interaction other

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could have better made the case (in the spirit of the moral critique of Hyperion Corp) that the aggression of Pandoran wildlife isn't only a natural state but also a consequence of human will.

than direct conflict nonetheless remains underdeveloped.[173] As a result, interactions revolve around the player's ability to kill. If an encounter cannot be killed now, it is understood that the player should flee and return when she can.

Consider this in light of the moral framework of *Borderlands 2*. By binding the rules governing power, character growth, and therefore progress in the game to the direct application of violence, the player is compelled to conspicuously kill in order to amass the resources necessary to address the threat to the virtual world, which in the case of Handsome Jack is both clear and urgent. It is therefore rational for the player to accept the conclusion that the other virtual actors are there for her use: firmly establishing herself in the position of the human and everything else in the position of the animal.

Virtual non-humans are effectively levelled through their availability for use by the player in a way that encourages the player to be both generous and careless with her violence. The game replaces each creature slaughtered (through respawn) with one that acts identically and desires equally as the one destroyed: materializing the reduction to "the animal" discussed in the introduction. Because the moral and ecological consequence of player violence is minimized (creatures are interchangeable and infinite), the player is unencumbered by her violence. The creature that replaces a dead one is in turn made valuable only through its death, as its value rests in its ability to be consumed.

[173] In the majority of FPS games, the interact button is used almost exclusively to open doors, access vehicles, or open treasure containers. This flows into the RPG genre through its use of the interact button to initiate dialogue with dialogue-enabled NPCs like quest givers. The quests themselves reinforce violence as the lingua franca of the virtual world, e.g. the prototypical quest "kill X monsters."

But the concentration of nominally human power on the one hand compromises agency on the other. By using random elements in its calculations, and because the time of encounters are altered by player and AI behavior, the drop system (the algorithm determining the item(s) given when creatures are destroyed) rewards violence on a variable ratio schedule, encouraging high rates of repeated behaviors. Put briefly, the game mechanics discipline the actual body of the human player to perform acts of simulated violence efficiently and with minimal reflection. In order to progress, the player must kill. Yet the player is incentivized and conditioned to not only attack and kill what she must in order to progress, but is encouraged by drop system to go out of her way to kill everything possible in order to maximize profits. Ironically, this reproduces the crimes of the "evil" Hyperion Corporation the game went out of its way to criticize: the moral objection to Hyperion's activities founded upon it deliberately causing, and being indifferent to, the suffering of both human and non-human creatures (who within the game's fiction are both autonomous agents) in order to enrich itself. Where Hyperion mines Pandora, the player mines its residents: human and non-human alike. By this reasoning, when gameplay and story are brought together, the player and Hyperion are at odds not in the classic opposition of hero and villain, but are instead like two competitors vying for the largest market share of slaughter.

Borderlands 2 understands the human along the lines of morality and power, which it ultimately conflates. The logic of its melodrama compels the player to respond to an affront to humanist values but the game mechanics require

the player to reproduce if not exceed the same sins in order to mete out justice on the original sinner. Ironically, it is Handsome Jack who appears to be most aware of this contradiction by his frequent references to the player as a "bandit," the same name given to the enemies the player killed in the original *Borderlands*.

In *Borderlands 2* the humanist ethic is doubly compromised since it presumes both the autonomy of the moral human subject as well as its nobility. The player has no choice but to wreck bloody havoc in every area she enters as an inability to inflict enough damage renders further play impossible. Ensuring she can effectively bring her power to bear (e.g. triumph in encounters: both to "win" and to right the moral wrongs of the story) means maintaining as high a body count as possible and one made up of the right kinds of bodies—when a character's level surpasses that of her enemies, she receives fewer experience points per kill and items drops are less powerful.[174] In an algorithmic environment, rationality aligns with instrumentality. In order to sustain progress, equipment, and to occupy the position of the human, the empowered actor, the player is led from one region of the world to another by the drop system. Given the quantification of value, adhering to the logic of power-seeking behavior assumes the force of necessity. As a consequence, the player's progress across the game world is less that of a self-directed actor (in the tradition of liberal humanism) and more that of a homicidal automaton. Trained by game mechanics to perceive everything as a threat and resource and so to attack if at all possible,

[174] This is a way for the designers to artificially introduce scarcity into the game's economy of violence. The player must maintain an acceptable profit margin (measured by the power generated by rewards from kills/missions) or risk stalling or significantly slowing progress.

the player behaves nearly identically to the AI-driven creatures she fights, with the notable difference that the player is much, much better at it.

Above and beyond points and loot from kills, the player is treated to the spectacle of violence itself, which can only be described as orgiastic. All of *Borderlands*' violent aesthetics are over-the-top, but an aspect of its voice acting calls for additional attention as it works outside the realm of quantifiable value. While humanism is quick to praise positive traits like its much-vaunted rationalism, it also has its own special cruelties.

Borderlands 2 makes extensive use of element-based damage: the player can set people on fire, slather them in acid, electrocute them, and so on. The game triggers the damaged enemy to intermittently react to element-typed damage with a randomly selected but contextually relevant verbal response. On being hit with an acid weapon, for example, Psychos (an enemy type) sometimes begin soliloquizing, "O that this too too solid flesh would melt / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew" or some equally striking comment acknowledging they have been damaged in a special way. There is no effect on game states by these comments, but the lack of an in-game benefit doesn't mean this reward fails to register. These kinds of responses are value-added violence. They are meant to be funny, and they are, but they are also non-material rewards linked to an excessive violence and so approximate something like torture and speak to nothing so much as the basic logic of domination that authorized the violence in the first place.

Closing the Borderlands

The human found in *Borderlands* is one that loves its cruelty. The shouts and pleas extracted from a virtual body announce and confirm to the player her magnificence, legible in part by her ability to destroy but more specifically by the way in which the pain of the other exists only for her enjoyment. *Borderlands* is not unusual is this regard. The overwhelming majority of video games offer fantasies of power expressed through direct conflict and use audiovisual markers to communicate successful damage.

Even as the player is titillated by her ability to damage virtual bodies, those bodies—including that of the player character herself—are shown to be hollow vessels. The righteousness of the player is confirmed by the way the violence in *Borderlands 2* is a kept to a battle of puppets whose pain, however exclamatory, remains illusory and light, remains a caricature of pain: the player gets the satisfaction of human power—the power to shape and break the lives of others—without having to confront the troubling remainder of lives that have their own histories. Though offered as a fantasy of power, this fantasy is always already on the game's terms. That is, it isn't a fantasy the actual player brought to the game but one given to the player by the game system. The egotism of the video game that mirrors anthropocentric narcissism so perfectly imagines a world that is the plaything of a human creature, but in order for the human to realize that fantasy she must be absorbed within and become subject to the processes of the game system. In the final analysis, the human isn't who showed up to play the game, but an imagined consciousness buried in the code and produced by the gameplay, and it is something of a monster.

New Games for New Players: A More Critical Play

In recent years, a different kind of video game than triple-A titles like *Borderlands* is increasingly possible. This new sensibility, and the games that are being built to satisfy it, is commonly regarded as a "critical turn" by games scholars. This transformation could just as well be framed as an ethical turn, with the new games celebrated for their willingness to deny the lightness and superficiality that marks the experience of violence in a game like *Borderlands*.[175]

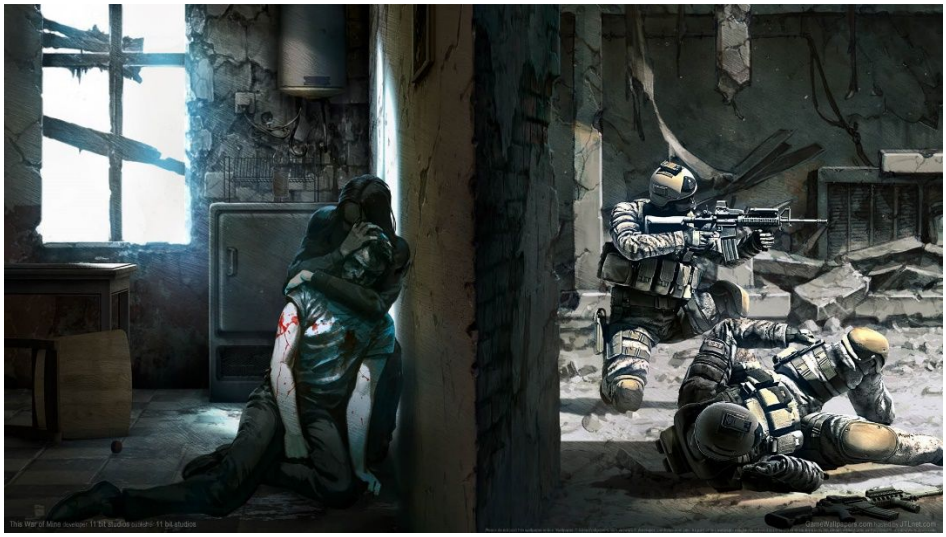
While violence remains the lingua franca of the virtual world, as a way to address mature subject matter in a more nuanced way and raise the stakes of player actions, games have begun to more deeply explore what Miguel Sicart, following Rittel and Webber, calls wicked problems: problems driven by incomplete or confusing information, whose ramifications are unclear, and where compelling values are both at stake and in conflict (cf. Sicart, 32-36; Rittel and Webber, 155-169). These kinds of problems go beyond morality bars or a choice between moral rectitude and debasement and open up space in the computational environment for decisions that escape ready calculation.

One such game, released in 2014 by 11-Bit Studios, is *This War of Mine*. Unlike most war games, the central actors of this story are not soldiers but civilians caught in the conflict. Where *Borderlands* and, as a rule, the whole sweep of the FPS genre is committed to an ethics of the victimizer—where might,

[175] Examples of games where morality is a major, or even central, element of gameplay include *Spec Ops: The Line* (2k Games, 2012); *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012); *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2005); *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007); the *Fallout* series (various, 1997-present). To be fair, this trend is accompanied by a counter-movement of games that are essentially conservative in spirit with respect to traditional attitudes about the nugatory status of games.

if it dressed in seemingly moral garb, is the final arbiter of any argument—*This War of Mine* explores the ethics of the victim, with characters kept in positions of relative powerlessness and precarity throughout the game.

Figure 3



Title art from *This War is Mine* symbolizes its deviation from traditional military power fantasy (the right side of the wall) to explore the experiences of war's victims (the left side of the wall).

In a surprising and extremely effective design decision, large portions of the gameplay are reminiscent of EA Entertainment's popular household simulator, *The Sims*. Like *The Sims*, *This War of Mine* is a version of a pet game where the main task is the care and feeding of semi-autonomous virtual creatures. Unlike the conspicuous consumption celebrated in *The Sims*, however, in *This War of Mine* the characters scrabble for subsistence: patch holes in their bombed-out shelter, catch rats for food, and smash furniture into firewood to hold off the encroaching winter.

Play unfolds along two inter-related modes: home-building and scavenging. Home-building is a race against time in an environment of scarcity. Scavenging is just what it sounds like, and is an inherently risky proposition: characters can be directed to enter other areas—schools, grocery stores, etc. to find supplies, but these areas are almost always occupied. Characters must find some way to get what they need (stealth, theft, trade, violence) or go without. While one character scavenges for supplies, their shelter is subject to raids by the AI. These activities are to be read alongside each other and show the player as necessarily complicit in the very violence they are trying to escape by surviving the war (the materials scavenged mostly used to fortify their shelter against similar raiding).

In *This War of Mine*, the player is caretaker/director of two-to-four survivors sheltering in a dilapidated structure in the middle of a war zone.[176] The player is therefore not effectively identical to the character(s) as in *Borderlands*, nor can she act with the fluency of classic real-time strategy games like *Starcraft*. Rather, the characters of *This War of Mine* are managed instead of controlled; that is to say, they resist player-identification and so remain crucially separate from the player throughout gameplay.

This separation is produced by three parallel and interrelated aspects of character design—character state, the sympathy system, and character addictions—that together account for the sense of what I will call the

[176] The war in the game is inspired by and so cites the 1992-1996 Siege of Sarajevo.

creatureliness of this game's characters: the sense of a more robust and complicated interiority that is not completely or comfortably determined by the player. Character state is in part physical well-being (e.g. hunger, injury status, illness, tiredness), but also involves psychological states. In response to game events, characters become depressed, they quarrel, they speak to their hopes and fears. The internal state of characters is not simply a measurement in the HUD, but appears within character behavior: injured or sick characters move more slowly, they comment on their ailments; a depressed character will stop in the middle of an assigned task and comment on their despair, requiring the player to reissue the command and so attend to the problem of the character's interior world. If psychological health deteriorates enough, character status becomes "broken" at which point that person will no longer respond to direct player commands.[177] This situation frequently results in the character's death as they refuse to eat, tend wounds, or do anything remotely productive. Sometimes characters who are left in despair too long will take their own lives. Death is permanent, and one character's death has a profound impact on other characters' psychological states. Character state is intimately bound to the sympathy system, which is an invisible relation (the player has no way to precisely measure this status) between character and system states. For example, because Marko is injured and ill, Katia may become depressed. Similarly, while Roman may feel justified in stealing supplies from another group of refugees, Pavle may become

[177] The player can intervene on behalf of a "broken" character, but she must do so through another character. These interventions are not certain and so the player must risk devoting precious time to a possibly entirely ineffective task.

distraught by Roman's having done so. Lastly, many (but not all) playable characters come with addictions that will always impact the character's state and can never be adjusted by the player. The persistence of these addictions and their independence from context reveals them as signs of the character's personal history that endures despite circumstance. That is, they are a gamic metaphor for the continuity of identity and human irrationality. Together these character elements lend a sense of self to the characters and makes it hard to treat them as mere constructs.

Unlike the bodies in *Borderlands*, which are superhumanly resilient, bodies in *This War of Mine* are very fragile. Health is precious, easy to lose and difficult to recover. When a character falls ill or gets injured (a certainty over the course of the game) she may need an extended period of rest to recover, during which time she is unproductive but still uses valuable resources. She moves slowly throughout the shelter, worries over her condition and is the object of concern in the conversations of the other survivors. Where bodies in traditional video games can be damaged, what is found in games like *This War of Mine* are bodies that hurt: that suffer in a more profoundly subjective way that calls for different assessments of the ethical status of virtual violence.

Borderlands and games like it extend the possibility of a buoyant agency: the chance to exercise power without the sticky banalities of everyday moral problems. They offer a celebration of human exceptionalism understood through a world available for human use; one analogous, as I've been arguing, to the permission man grants itself to make use of animal lives without limit. Without

the labor required to maintain the ongoing deaths of actual animal bodies, the auto-production of more bodies from nothing encourages a blithe disinterest and facilitates the transformation of the thinking, playing, acting human at the controls into the unreflective, reactive, and ultimately passive creature who murders her way across the world. In *This War of Mine*, and the (comparatively few) games like it, the critique of humanism is actually more sinister.

This War of Mine displaces the site of the human from the player and shifts it onto the semi-autonomous creatures the player attends to. As the player becomes familiar with the rule interactions that constitute gameplay, she is compelled to encourage characters to be as efficient as possible with respect to the game's winning condition: surviving the war. Interestingly enough, the characters resist. Despite the tendency of increasingly fluent players towards greater effectiveness, it is exactly the distressingly human qualities of the characters that keep interrupting and frustrating the player's plans. Quite simply, the characters make passable humans but lousy robots. For example, it quickly becomes evident that killing and robbing other people whenever possible, as a path towards resources, weakly dominates other strategies. The downside of this course of action is its eventually catastrophic impact on the survivors' psychological states. In a marked deviation from the rest of the game's design choices, which tend towards a kind of realism, the actions of each character are completely visible and immediately known to all other characters. In this way, the moral consequence of character actions uses the player's knowledge as a conduit to the other characters. The disruption that follows, with characters expressing disgust and regret at what

were extremely effective actions from a strictly instrumental perspective, forces the player to confront the moral weight of virtual violence. In other words, in direct violation of the basic logic of the history of video game play, the player is not unambiguously rewarded for mastering the game system.

What we see in *This War of Mine* is an understanding of human being as a fundamentally affective state. It allows an opportunity to play through, or play with, something like an ethics of the powerless, where the strictly rational decisions that a disinterested player might make to achieve the victory conditions are stymied because, to put a finer point on it, surviving is not the same as winning. By using the characters' humanity as an obstacle to the player's manipulation of game processes, negotiating characters' survival through the war in a way that escapes reduction to pure process develops alongside a negotiation of the player with herself, one that invites reconsideration of the creatureliness of virtual bodies and the machine inside the creature at the keyboard, opening space to ask more carefully what it might mean to master or be mastered.

Troublesome Creatures

These case studies, like all case studies, are limited by being only somewhat generalizable and somewhat bound to the particularities of the titles. Despite the self-evident distance between these games, I found they both kept returning to some sort of questions: what is allowed by the system? what does the system allow (and encourage) me to enjoy? In other words, what is the picture of the player that takes shape through the cumulative force of the games processes and representations?

I have tried to abstain from simply passing judgment with respect to "good game, bad game" or "good human, bad human," because of course it is not so simple. At the start of this investigation I abandoned a question I wish to resurrect here: whether the question of human being is ultimately a hardware or a software problem. I set this aside because the question is clearly a false one; what is really at stake is what we hope it might mean to be human and how we might articulate that. Games merely afford an opportunity to model an experience. But this experience, like the human and the animal, is not an actual experience belonging to a specific body or mind, but an imagined experience for an equally imaginary player.

Gameplay is a two-way street. As Espen Aarseth writes, "The games rule us. We as players are only half ourselves when we play, the rest of us is temporarily possessed by the implied player" (133). Aarseth invokes the implied player, which is an extremely useful concept that gathers together the sense of the player produced by the types of experiences a game makes possible. This is a valuable reminder that in the depths of immersion the fantasy we are participating in is not necessarily our own. On the other hand, Aarseth's comment also invites us to reflect seriously about that supposed unpossessed half. To what extent do the systems in which I live encourage the casual participation in fantasies that allow for the casual disregard of not only the virtual animal or human, but actual animal and actual human suffering? Perhaps critical reflection on the experience of organized systems like *Borderlands* and *This War of Mine* can provide tools to disrupt the processes that encourage this other possession.

Moving Targets: The Future of Video Games

We are now at a moment where games are coming onto the scene that are increasingly resistant to ideas of hegemonic play and cheating as definitional or limiting categories. To the extent that this is a failure of the model I've proposed to encapsulate games, I think this failure is to be celebrated because of what it indicates about the changing nature of how audiences are relating to video games as a medium.

These new games didn't come out of nowhere, but are driven by a succession of changes in the video game marketplace. While triple-A games (the game industry's equivalent of major theatrical releases) are still very much the product of white men and powerful corporations, the arrival of digital distribution in the 2000s as the standard content delivery system created in-roads for independent developers otherwise stymied by a lack of distribution infrastructure.[178] These changes to the distribution model were accompanied by greater access to more powerful production tools like expanding libraries of programming languages (C++, C#, Java, etc.), game engines like Unity and Unreal, and game-development kits and programs like *RPGMaker* and *Scratch*. As the democratization of game creation tools became more widespread, the populations of online game-developer communities also swelled.

[178] Digital distribution is much older than this. It has been around (depending on the scale one choses, for several decades prior). However, in the late 90s/early 2000s high-speed internet had become commonplace enough across a large enough market to support the shift to digital distribution as a standard.

While the mainstream of the games industry looks awfully similar to how it did in the 90s, it is also true that more and more people are making games, and it has become increasingly possible to bring games to the marketplace that would never see the light of day under the extremely vertical and risk-adverse business model of, for example, a major Electronic Arts release like *FIFA*, or *Call of Duty*.

The effect of the profusion of game creators are circumstances where games are being released that don't fit neatly into the pattern of expectations of the traditional games industry and a few also push past the place where the sense of cheating and hegemonic play, as I've described them, are either necessary or even effective critical tools.

As two brief examples of exceptions, consider the two very different games of *Minecraft* and *Gone Home*. Released in 2011 to PC, and updated regularly with additional features and gameplay options, *Minecraft* now contains multiple different server types supporting a variety of game modes, all of which are different enough to question if they are effectively different games. At the core of each game mode, however, is a crafting system that is open, dynamic, and player-directed. In the simplest terms, players log into a server and build virtual stuff. The main differences between the game modes are what restrictions (if any) are added onto getting the materials with which to build the stuff. While "stuff" may sound a bit flip, players have managed to construct truly impressive projects like those of WesterosCraft, where a group of people are recreating the land of Westeros from George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* series (see figure 3).

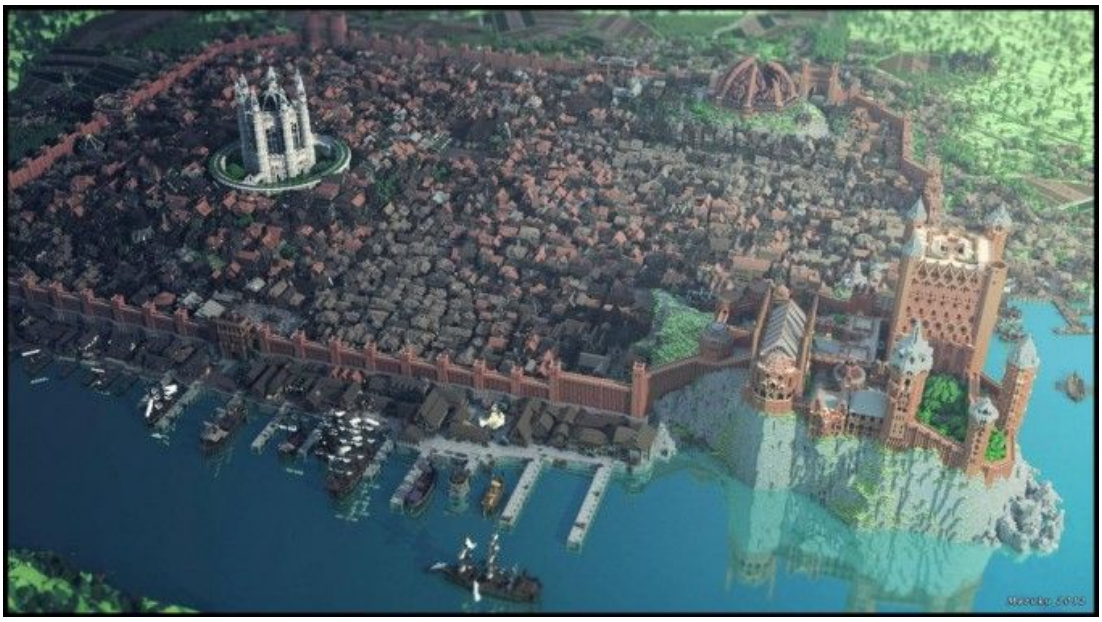


Figure 3. The fictional city of King's Landing, recreated inside of the game *Minecraft*.

For a sense of just how impressive that model is, this is what digging looks like:

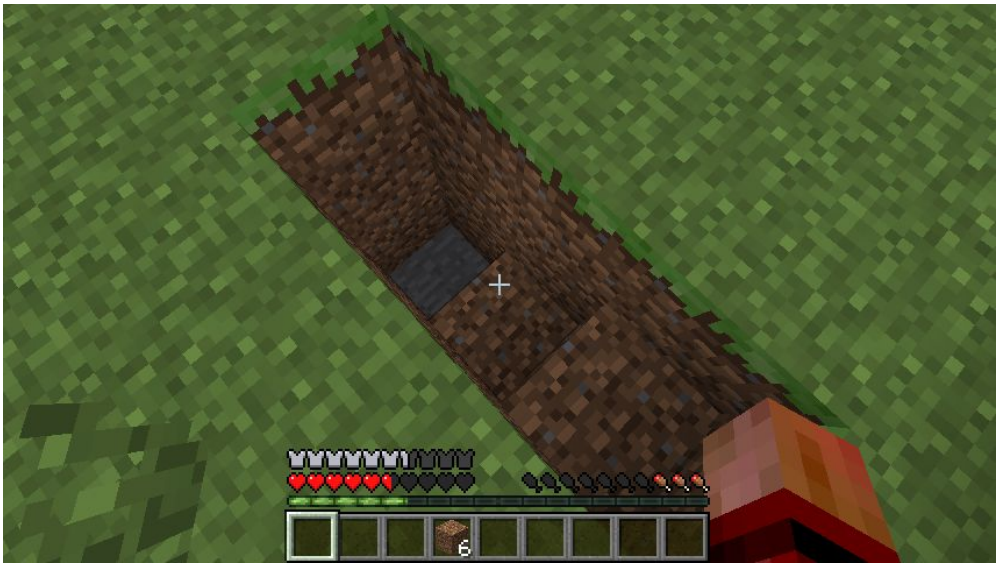


Figure 4. Digging in *Minecraft*.

The recreation of Westeros is an explorable, working model, not just an image of the city. People have used the game of *Minecraft* to build all sorts of fascinating things including: working calculators, computers, and massive 3D sculptures of celebrities. What matters about a sandbox game, a thoroughly customizable game like *Minecraft*, is that the notion of cheating in its familiar sense becomes untethered. Playing *Minecraft* is like playing Legos: the core of the gameplay doesn't have a clear enough direction to be intelligible within a frame of cheating. One does not so much play *Minecraft* as one plays with *Minecraft*. Certainly, in the survival or other modes a case can be made that this is no longer true, but I would argue that one can build lots of things inside of *Minecraft,* including games (game modes) that adhere to a more traditional game structure.

A game like *Gone Home*, released by The Fullbright Company in 2013, presents an entirely different set of problems for cheating and hegemonic play as critical frame. In *Gone Home*, the player is in the role of Kaitlin Greenbriar, a student returning home after a year abroad to a creepy house with a checkered past, to which her family moved while she was away. She arrives late on a stormy evening to find the house empty. Gameplay centers around navigating the house, investigating objects and piecing together the story of where everyone is and what has happened. Although the player is controlling Kaitlin, it is her younger sister, Sam, who is the protagonist of the story. *Gone Home*, for much of the early game, plays exactly like a survival-horror game. Movement through the house is slow and deliberate, the audio effects are unnerving, the shadows are unfamiliar and threatening. Eventually, the player comes to discover, through recordings, notes,

and the material detritus of a life, the story of her sister's growing understanding of herself as a lesbian and the tumult of her relationship with her girlfriend, Lonnie. Using the aesthetic cues of survival-horror to communicate the intensities of Sam's late adolescent relationship is at the heart of the genius of this game, drawing an implicit parallel between Sam's negotiation of her sexuality in an unwelcoming environment and the visceral fight-for-life tensions associated with the genre.

In *Gone Home*, there are minor stories that players may feel more or less connected to, but these all serve to buttress Sam's story. The game is only complete when that story is complete and it only ends one way. There are no points, no levels, or any other markers of quantified value of any kind. Can one cheat at *Gone Home*? Sure. But only in the sense that one can cheat at reading mystery novel. That is, it is possible to alter the game code in such a way as to skip to different parts in the story, but all this accomplishes is reordering the narrative, almost certainly at the expense of the impact of the intended pacing.

In either example, the meaning of cheating in its typical senses doesn't have anywhere substantive to take hold. I do not, however, therefore exclude either *Minecraft* or *Gone Home* from the category game. Rather, they are but two of a growing number of examples that demonstrate the need to expand what kinds of experiences are going to be productively organized under the name "game." Certainly, we could point to other examples, *Papers, Please*, *Mountain*, *Dear Ester*, or *Life is Strange*, which also challenge the limits of what games are understood to do and be. And this is really what the issue of being a game or not

comes down to: what are those experiences that we will allow to be associated with games and play?

As people begin to explore more deeply what types of experiences systems can communicate, and how those systems have preferences embedded in them, audiences grow simultaneously more aware of the extent to which daily life is constructed out of layers of systems: information systems, legal systems, architectural, social, economic, and sexual systems, and on and on.

The rise of video games as a major cultural form may carry along with it a keener sense of ourselves at play within the systems of control that constitute modern experience. To the extent that play is movement within those systems, such a bourgeoning awareness may open space for reimaging the games that play us. As we broaden our perspective on games, we can hope to find that we become better players. If we cannot find a way to for this to lead us to better ways to play, we may at least hope for richer games.

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