

A Refusal To Play Along  
Videogaming and Ludic Thought

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to John Grey.



## Abstract

In this dissertation, I analyze the videogame as a way of approaching emerging forms of selfhood, as well as new models of technological innovation, economic activity, and artistic production, utilizing writings by theorists of visual culture, in particular Theodor W. Adorno. By evaluating the media phenomenon of the videogame, I assess the new ludic individual and elucidate the problems and possibilities that accompany her. I propose that games be played critically, not simply as expressions of culture or as products for consumption, but as objects through which we can *think*. In this way, games function much like artworks, as pieces of visual culture that allow us to explore different avenues of reflection. Games can be catalysts for deliberation on a variety of topics, from aesthetics to constructions of selfhood. Individuals often play the role of the gamer even without knowing it, due to the unavailability of games on phones, computers, TV, etc. The individual as a gamer is active, but entrapped; she has choices, but they are from a menu; she has a purpose (or a quest), but its outcome is predetermined. My project is to scrutinize this tendency in order to explain how technologies have shaped us and, more importantly, how we can reclaim play for our benefit.

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## Introduction

The unreality of games gives notice that reality is not yet real. Unconsciously they rehearse the right life.<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation, from Theodor W. Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, is, as the full title of the book suggests, a reflection on damaged life. Games, he says, provide a parallel, mimetic world that acts as a sort of portal or window on utopia. What he refers to as “right life,” free from debasement, inequality, and ignorance, can be imagined and, more importantly, performed through games. Play and games can provide a means for resisting dominant ideologies and reflecting on one's real existence in the world.

Such an optimistic view of play seems almost naïve in light of contemporary digital gaming, where the main activities are killing, destruction, and the collection of worldly goods. Adorno's position, however, allows hope for a more thoughtful, engaging play. In this dissertation, I will examine ways that play and games have been corrupted by corporate interests; I propose that play and playfulness are means through which individuals can glimpse the “right life” and, further, contemplate a better world.

Videogames command a share of the entertainment market unparalleled in recent technological history, and that market is growing exponentially. Yet despite videogames' claim on U.S. culture, games have primarily been studied by developers and academics alike in order to make them “better,” i.e., more fun.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia; Reflections from Damaged Life* trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2002), 228.

<sup>2</sup> Even theorists allegedly interested in Adornian critical theory, such as

As an art historian, I propose that they be, ideally, read and played critically, not simply as expressions of culture or as products for consumption, but as object-events through which we can *think*. In this way, games function much like artworks, as pieces of visual culture that allow us to explore different avenues of reflection.

Games can be catalysts for deliberation on a variety of topics, from aesthetics to constructions of selfhood. Individuals often play the role of the gamer even without knowing it, due to the unavailability of games on phones, computers, TV, etc. The individual as a gamer is active, but entrapped; she has choices, but they are from a menu; she has a purpose (or a quest), but its outcome is predetermined. My project is to scrutinize this tendency in order to explain how technologies have shaped us and, more importantly, how we can reclaim play for our benefit.

In this dissertation, I analyze the videogame as a paradigm for emerging forms of selfhood as well as new models of technological innovation, economic activity, and artistic production, utilizing writings by theorists of visual culture, in particular Theodor W. Adorno. By evaluating media phenomena such as videogames, interactive art installations, and machinima films (movies made inside videogames), I assess the new ludic individual and elucidate the problems

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Graeme Kirkpatrick, fall into this trap, directing their comments towards game developers so that we might partake in games that “make us dance” and “give us post-modern cynics a more optimistic feeling, though one that is short of the sin of affirmation.” While I support Kirkpatrick’s claim that games may have social power, I contend that the way to this power is through philosophical reflection, not through feelings given directly to us through technically masterful game design. Graeme Kirkpatrick, “Between Art and Gameness: Critical Theory and Computer Game Aesthetics,” *Thesis Eleven* no. 89 (2007): 90.

and possibilities that accompany her.

By reframing the study of players, I shift the emphasis from the game onto the *gamer*. The majority of current writing on games surrounds the debate between “ludologists,”<sup>3</sup> who wish to study the formal, structural aspects of games, and “narratologists,” who use techniques of textual analysis to study games’ stories. Much of this work boils down to prescriptions for what games should be like. These approaches are misguided to the extent that they ignore the crucial and active role that the player has in game formation. By accepting the idea that players are incidental to game design and that the power appropriately lies in the hands of the programmer, theorists capitulate to the idea that top-down, hierarchical structures are all that matters. My study focuses on avenues open to players for critical engagement with the games they play. The best way to achieve such critical thought is through a sort of “meta-gaming,” or playing the game of the game, an exercise in which players at once maintain critical distance while engaging in game play.

Play can be used as an analytic tool, but it also has a creative aspect. Playful activity engenders openness and fruitful promiscuity, often in the face of strident rules and regulations. Johan Huizinga, in his book *Homo Ludens*, asserts that civilization itself was created through play. The play instinct, he suggests, provides the raw material for endeavors from the performance of sacred rituals to the medieval cult of chivalry and beyond. He defines play as:

a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding,

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<sup>3</sup> The term “ludic” is derived from the Latin word for play, *ludus*.

having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is “different” from “ordinary life.”<sup>4</sup>

Play is often reduced to the inadequate term “fun,” which trivializes play.

Huizinga argues that human beings employ play in order to craft culture. For Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* is man the player, man who has imagined the world otherwise and made it so. The ludic thinker is an extension of man the player, she who not only creates the world through playful engagement, but who actively contemplates her creative exploits and potential.

Instead of investigating identities and situations that are dissimilar to quotidian existence, play is often consigned to a bland mimesis of the tedium of bourgeois capitalism. Mimesis, or the imitation of reality, is the main technique that videogames utilize to create virtual realms. In a videogame, characters are not simply described or recounted, they are embodied in avatars. Games are not historical tales that are told or reported, but rather present, parallel, mimetic worlds in which players may experience a life very different from their own, a life defined by the ideological presuppositions of the game’s creators.

Mimesis is a powerful means of identity formation, which, when it is used in service of the status quo, can be detrimental to the creativity of contemporary subjects. Of television, Adorno says:

[It] is a means for approaching the goal of possessing the entire sensible world once again in a copy satisfying every sensory organ, the dreamless dream; at the same time it holds the possibility of inconspicuously smuggling into this duplicate world whatever is thought to be advantageous for the real one.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 28.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Prologue to Television,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University

Adorno's account of dystopian mimesis applies equally well to videogames. Ideology enters television and games through the putative back door and typically supports powerful hegemonic real-world structures. Games require active participation; however, when they eschew it in favor of passive consumption, they lose their ludic character and become mere vessels of propaganda.

By recovering play from forces that seek to stifle it, players can discover innovative means for constructing identity and for reshaping society in imaginative ways. In this dissertation, I will examine how play has been artfully co-opted by capitalist culture. In order to recuperate play and to experience it as liberatory, I contend that we must channel the productive abilities that it offers for reflection instead of domination. To accomplish this goal, I offer the example of the ludic thinker as a model for critical engagement with games and digital technologies more generally.

Play has always had purpose and meaning; it can be very serious business. Play can be bloody and deadly; people may play at war just as they play at love. From potentially deadly medieval to painful rituals of initiation, play character can be brutal even as it produces moments of ecstasy. The common element in all play, as Huizinga describes it, is a sense of the “unreal,” radically and knowingly separated from quotidian existence. I will examine how digital games have veered away from Huizinga’s sense of play and have become something altogether different: a hyperreal space that, instead of creating playful



subjects, creates better workers. Commercial videogames have repressive tendencies that value efficiency above all else and, while they seem to represent an exotic realm of freedom, actually mimic the exploitation and subjugation that defines contemporary corporate society.

During play, a new reality beyond mundane life is fantasized: games are sites of make-believe that often requires a player to hold two mutually contradictory roles simultaneously. According to Huizinga, ludic rituals require that participants believe and do not believe at the same time. “Whether one is sorcerer or sorcerized one is always knower and dupe at once. But one chooses to be the dupe...The behaviour of those to whom the savage community attributes ‘supernatural’ powers can often be best expressed by ‘acting up the part.’”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in masked ritual, the participants are well aware of the identities behind the disguises, but pretend otherwise.

Videogames are marked by their agonistic character. Agon, term is often used to describe physical contests, is also connected with argument and philosophical disputation. In the agon, competitors strive for inventive ways by which to foil an opponent. High value, in cultures of play, is placed on quick wit and the ability to conjure up questions or riddles to baffle one’s adversaries. Concomitantly, linguistic manipulation led to an exalted status for wordsmiths everywhere, from bards to scops to court jesters.

Play, may be comic; it may likewise be tragic. Either way, play is performance, an “acting otherwise.” Huizinga calls it the “performance of an act

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<sup>6</sup> Huizinga, *Homo*, 23.

apart.”<sup>7</sup> It is distinctly outside one’s normal purview new rules and regulations apply: rules specific to the game. Play is a powerful force, for it unfetters the player from the “tyranny of causality” that structures normal existence.<sup>8</sup> It is a captivating forming heterotopias where things may be other than they are. A player may experience transformative or supernatural processes that change her sense of self in unusual ways. Escape and metamorphosis were not merely attractive to practitioners of archaic ritual. Play is still intriguing for contemporary subjects in need of change, even if only in fantasy, that a game affords.

In 1944, John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, ushered in an era of mathematical precision where algorithms were utilized to conceive nuclear strategies.<sup>9</sup> Their work had the overt effect of allowing games to serve as a mathematical framework for all manner of social interactions. This manifested itself in the field of cybernetics and its cousins, modeling and simulation, which utilize algorithms and war game structures in order to plan military ventures.<sup>10</sup> The repercussions of game theory are readily apparent in the instrumental, militarized culture that informs most games on the market today. That said, play cannot be reduced to the mathematical descriptions of rules and strategies

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.,16.

<sup>9</sup> John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Additionally, governments use what is known as “reverse game theory” in order to manipulate the contractors who are bidding on high-stakes armament deals.

prevalent in game theory.

An alternative mode of studying play and games has been developed in the past several decades under the moniker of “games studies.” By no means a unified field, the scholarship locates itself within two principal, and opposing camps: the narratologists and ludologists. The former views games primarily as representations of stories that may be read like any other text employing theoretical models from media and literary studies. Ludology, by contrast, contends that games are, after all just games, insisting that rule structure and types of internal movements are what is significant, external story structures being secondary at best.

An example of the narratological method can be seen in the work of Tanya Krzywinka,<sup>11</sup> who argues games result from an intertextual amalgamation of various popular and mythological stories ranging from that of Conan the Barbarian to the traditional hero quest as elaborated by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Seeing the game as a translation of another type of story, she claims, allows us to thoroughly describe the game world as it transcribes a multitude of myth structures into one coherent world.

Krzywinka’s account is primarily descriptive and concludes with the idea that creating a myth-based world has “a significant impact” on the types of play allowed in the game. The nature of this impact is remains unclear, but her commitment to narrative as a structuring force is not. She insistently separates herself from ludologists:

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<sup>11</sup> Jenkins is the founder of the online gaming journal [gamestudies.org](http://gamestudies.org) and both Murray and Krzywinka are on its editorial board.

Although the mythological and magical/supernatural might be regarded as masking the technological underpinnings of the game, I regard their primary importance as providing a symbolic language, a sense of 'worldness,' and a combination of otherness and familiarity and otherness for players, like myself, to 'think about and through'.<sup>12</sup>

In Krzywinska's view, the story told by a game is more significant than the platform of the game itself, for it is the story that unites people and allows them to conceptualize themselves relative to an overarching and uniting myth. Serious shortcomings become evident in narratological analysis. For example, by treating narrative as relatively unproblematic and unified, a multitude of possible interactions and identifications are foreclosed in favor of a normative reading.

By contrast, Espen Aarseth argues that games are not primarily textual.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, some games do not rely on narrative at all and others only weakly. Attempting to find a storyline in the puzzle game *Tetris*, for example, would be fruitless. Instead, he believes that the character of games can be revealed fully through simulation. To Aarseth, this means that "knowledge and experience is created by the player's actions and strategies, rather than recreated by a writer or moviemaker."<sup>14</sup> He claims that games are autonomous objects that have a

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<sup>12</sup> Tanya Krzywinska "Blood Scythes, Festivals, Quests, and Backstories: World Creation and the Rhetorics of Myth in World of Warcraft," *Games and Culture*, 1 no. 4 (October 2006): 395.

<sup>13</sup> This is enough to qualify him as a ludologist for my purposes. However, Aarseth claims that he is not a ludologist at all and says that all so-called ludologists are actually working within narratological analytic structures.

<sup>14</sup> Espen Aarseth, "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 52.

“teleology” different from other media and must only be analyzed on their own terms, without reliance on external stories or trajectories.

An orthodox ludological view such as Aarseth’s is likewise problematic: to claim that games are not texts is dependent on an extremely narrow definition of textuality. Aarseth’s solution, simulation, stops short of any possible fruitful connection between the game and the outside world. A game must simulate *something*; even if it simulates a hyperreal model, it remains always haunted by the real. Aarseth insists that simulation is always “bottom-up” and that stories are “top-down”: preplanned. While the aleatory has a role in games, his picture precludes all of the assumptions, strategies, and prior knowledge of the players themselves. Games *are* texts and in order to read them, players must use a sophisticated, dialectical method that admits that games are a very distinctive kind of object while remembering that they are not objects in a vacuum. At the furthest extreme, games introject the world, even if as a present absence.

The “purist” methods of both narratologists and ludologists are self-limiting and essentializing. My own concerns are different from those who study individual games. I am not primarily interested in looking at the games as such, but rather propose that one of the most informative ways to study society is to examine how it is becoming modeled more and more on the videogame structure even while the games are modeled on what we may tentatively call “real life.” Our relationship to media consumption is dependent on the imbrication of game world and real world.

My purpose is not to claim that the videogame form is inherently

repressive or evil, or to make facile claims about how bad things happen because people “think they are in a videogame.” This approach is essentialist; it also says but little about how our interaction with technologies is changing the way we conceptualize subjects and objects. A more interesting phenomenon is how games encourage players to renegotiate their relationship with technological objects. Just as people had to be taught how to read the two-dimensional space of the photograph, people are learning what it means to exist in virtual space. Our future interactions with technology are being prophesied today by how closely we associate our selves with our digital manifestations.

The question will undoubtedly arise: of all the theorists with whom to study play, why Adorno? Adorno has a deep respect for play and playful attitudes. Through play, he contends, we may glimpse a re-enchanted world. Adorno claims that playfulness is a way that one may defend against the onslaught of the culture industry, commodity fetishism, and means/ends rationality more generally.

In *Minima Moralia* he notes:

Children, however, are not so much, as Hebbel thought, subject to illusions of 'captivating variety', as still aware, in their spontaneous perception, of the contradiction between phenomenon and fungibility that the resigned adult no longer sees, and they shun it. Play is their defence.<sup>15</sup>

In this passage, Adorno extols in children the virtues that Huizinga values in *Homo Ludens*. The child is analogous to the knowing player: he who is able to imagine the world otherwise. Just as for the ritualist, success is not a matter of being gullible or simply of “pretending,” but of recognizing the magic and

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<sup>15</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 228.

joyfulness of the world. The enchanted world does not exist for a specific or instrumental end. In such a world, objects are not defined purely by their utility, but by their potential for ludic engagement, the very notion of which troubles the concept of utility. By avoiding the trap of fungibility and maintaining a playful attitude, children complicate the binary of use value and exchange value. For example, play money is used for mimetic exchange; however, it is also used by children to make clothing, origami, confetti, sketch paper, etc., uses that would be illegal with actual currency.

Ludic thought, as I imagine it, channels playful interaction into the critical appraisal of cultural artifacts. The player/thinker uses techniques of play such as agon (competition or debate),ilinx (vertigo), and mimicry, in order to generate critical distance. It may seem that ludic thought is in direct opposition to play. If one sees play as ultimately purposeless, then such a criticism remains valid. However, I side with Huizinga in maintaining that play is a significant, purposive practice. Play is not defined *purely* by its utility, for that would make it instrumental, but that does not mean that play is pointless or without value. Its value lies in how it promotes thoughtful interaction and reflection on the conditions of one's life. Instrumental activity closes off avenues of engagement in favor of a single message or ending. Instead, ludic thought is a means by which the player may expand her own potential for creative and philosophically significant play.

The move towards ludic thought is in line with Adornian cultural criticism. Though he was principally interested in high modernist art works, Adorno's

aesthetic theory may apply to games because of the emphasis that he places on philosophy and the role of thought on the part of the beholder.<sup>16</sup> Art, Adorno claims, must be accompanied by philosophy in order to be valuable to society. Similarly, I propose that play provides both tools for interpretation and cultural artifacts through which to philosophize.

While he does not specifically formulate a theory of play, playfulness is central to Adorno's theory of art by way of the "enigmatic." An artwork is a riddle that the viewer must toy with, tease out. As Adorno says, "It [the artwork] makes itself dark."<sup>17</sup> Artworks worthy of the name have a quality that cannot be deduced or categorized by scientific means. Its enigma functions as a kind of puzzle or game and begins to reveal itself through the exercise of critical engagement manifested through the ludic. A viewer may fully cognize the intended "message", but this is insignificant. What matters about the art work is the resistant, puzzle-like quality that continues to goad and vex us long after we have cast our last glance or heard the final note.

By contrast, mass culture is typically somnambulant; it conceals the need for critique of society or of itself. Consumption and passivity are often associated

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<sup>16</sup> Graeme Kirkpatrick, "Between Art and Gameness," 76-77, claims that Adornian theory is applicable to digital games because of how the concept of "form" pertains to both art and games. He says, "It is as an aesthetic form that, I will argue, the computer game emerges at the end of art in the traditional sense. This is not to say – foolishly – that the computer game supplants or replaces art, but it is to suggest – playfully – that it occupies some of the ground where art once stood."

<sup>17</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 115.



with games and it is true that much of corporate gaming is dedicated to easy pleasures and the creation of docile, imbibing subjects. The conventions and mechanics of commercial gaming support Adorno's concept of "pseudo-individualism," where every product is fundamentally repetitive, each promoting the same false (capitalist) needs. I can levy against most contemporary games the same critique that Adorno had of television and other mass media: the very form of the work promotes intellectual, social, and emotional laziness. The social interaction that takes place in, for instance, Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs) is mechanical, instrumentalized, and puerile. Instead of conversation, the chat interface contains a bevy of insults and battle commands. Technology puts humans in contact with many more humans than ever before possible; but something is wrong when all they have to say to each other is "GG nub."<sup>18</sup> Adorno, at length, from the essay "Prologue to Television":

Commercial television atrophies consciousness, but not because the contents of its programs are any worse than those of film or radio... Nonetheless there is something to the claim that television makes things worse and not better...though such a claim should not imply demanding the resurrection of silent film or the abolition of television today. The responsibility lies with the How, not the What. That awkward "intimacy" of television, which allegedly engenders a community through the effect of the television set around which family members and friends sit idiotically who supposedly would otherwise have nothing to say, satisfies not only an avidity that allows no place for anything intellectual unless it is transformed into property but, moreover, obscures the real alienation between people and between people and things.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This is leetspeak for "Nice work, jerk." Leetspeak substitutes various alphanumeric characters for standard spelling. 1337, for example, stands for "leet," a term that means "elite" as in an "elite hacker."

<sup>19</sup> Adorno, "Prologue to Television," 52-53.

The imaginary community created by games often functions the same way. When consumption and performance are the main topics of conversation, other, more intellectual pursuits are ignored. In a parallel move to Adorno, I will argue that such pursuits are still possible within the technological framework erected by videogames. Though Adorno seems to say that mass media is doomed because of its very form, he does not relinquish hope.

Adorno realized that popular culture might have redemptive value.

Through ideological critique and the injection of philosophy, mass media may actually help to vaccinate people against media's own repressive tendencies. In "Television as Ideology" he says:

However, one should resist being driven into defeatism and being terrorized by that well-practiced demand for positive results, which usually only wants to thwart any change in the state of things. It is far more important, first of all, to raise consciousness about phenomena such as the ideological character of television, and that not only among those on the production side but also in the public... If the ideology, which avails itself of a truly modest number of endlessly repeated ideas and tricks, were taken down a peg or two, then perhaps the public could develop an aversion to being led around by the nose, no matter how much the ideology gratifies the dispositions – themselves produced by the societal totality – of innumerable viewers. It would then be possible to imagine a kind of inoculation of the public against the ideology propagated by television and its related media.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Television as Ideology," *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 69. Adorno, "Prologue to Television," 51, notes that the culture industry's ploys, although actually feeble, are difficult to resist. "The seamless world of images turns out to be fragile. On the surface the public is hardly disturbed by this. But it surely recognizes it unconsciously. The suspicion grows that the reality being served up is not what it pretends to be. But the first reaction is not resistance; on the contrary, what is inevitable and what one loathes in one's heart of hearts is loved, with clenched teeth, all the more fanatically." That the suspicion exists at all provides hope for resistance and retaliation.

Adorno suggests that the public may overcome the injurious character of mainstream culture. If people are shown how media encourages harmful behavior, they may realize that they have been duped and subsequently resist domination. Exposing the strategies of pacification and affirmation that lull the populace into accepting the status quo would help to create a more active and thoughtful citizenry. In this vein, my dissertation aims to take videogames “down a peg or two,” as Adorno suggests, by exposing their ideological rigidity. When individuals begin to see the ideological character of the media they enjoy, they may discover alternative ways of thinking and living and thus begin a more fruitful dialogue with the technologies that surround them.

Adorno admits that individuals are never *completely* fooled by the culture industry; there is always some residual doubt in the efficacy of the system, even if individuals typically go along with the status quo. In his essay “Free Time” he states:

Thus, if my conclusions are not premature, whatever the culture industry sets before people in their free time is indeed consumed and accepted but with a kind of reservation, similar to how even ingenuous people do not simply take events in theater or cinema to be real. Perhaps even more: such things are not completely believed. Apparently the integration of consciousness and free time has not yet wholly succeeded. ... I think that there is a chance here for political maturity that ultimately could do its part to help free time turn into freedom.<sup>21</sup>

Because the populace is not wholly subservient to mass culture, there is an opportunity for critical consciousness to emerge. The image of the “knowing

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<sup>21</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Free Time,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 175.

consumer” who is not a zombified believer in the status quo is strikingly similar to the “knowing player” who is part of the ritual and yet separate from it as well. Recalling the opening quote, we may say that in games, “reality is not yet real.” If a consumer comes to see that reality (i.e., repressive, capitalist society) is not the way the world *must* exist, she can begin to experiment with alternative ways of living. By channelling the ludic spirit already present in the world (albeit in miniscule proportions) the consumer may begin to discover the right life, a life of freedom, creativity, and genuine happiness. Embracing ludic thought will help make games inspired and innovative and keep them from becoming the new “music of slaves.”

### **Chapter Precis**

In chapter one, “The Point of Experience,” I examine the class of computer game known as Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG), an offshoot of the Roleplaying Game (RPG) genre. MMORPGs construct a social environment that seems to be a completely fantastic realm wherein heroic quests and deeds may be enacted, and where fictive lives having little or no connection to the alleged real world may be lived. These adventures at once give the illusion of escape and even, perhaps, transcendence, while reifying both labor and personal growth into a system that makes both progress and work “scientific” to the extreme. The “fun” of these games is founded on repressive ideologies that limit the possibilities of games and are often an insult to players’ intelligence.

Popular media assume that games are (and should be) completely

intuitive and, in a sense, “free.” I contend that games are a series of complex learned behaviors that are bounded by technology and social convention. Just as viewing a painting never occurs without prior knowledge, games are connected to a larger cultural milieu. This chapter grounds a new theory of play that identifies the constraints of instrumental culture and reveals the schema of repression constructed in game worlds.

While the RPG genre seems to allow for interaction and fulfillment otherwise disallowed by the strictures of society, it actually replicates the conditions of the world one is supposed to be escaping. Structures of power and domination are not eliminated from these fantasy worlds, but rather given new facades bespeaking adventure and mythical heroism. The staggering popularity of games such as *Everquest*, *City of Heroes*, and *World of Warcraft* raises the questions of why and through what mechanisms “fun” is constructed in contemporary society. Moreover, such popularity poses an implicit challenge: game worlds clearly have the potential to be positive social forces, but how can this potential be realized? Can this format be appropriated for progressive causes or is it, in its intense structuration of the world, so mired in instrumental reason as to be unsalvageable? Artists such as Natalie Bookchin and writers such as Celia Pearce, Greig de Peuter, and Nick Dyer-Witheford are examining the implications of the current gaming world in an effort to reconceptualize it along progressive lines. In this chapter, I evaluate the effectiveness of these projects in light of games' penchant for normative hegemonic structures.

The rigidification of the game world bears witness to the manipulation of

the subject and his/her confinement within the system of instrumentalized reason elaborated by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and essays by Adorno such as “Free Time.” The accumulation of knowledge and the process of labor are ossified into a schema of points that presupposes a telos of work and character development resembling the corporate world and rungs on the ladder of success. Free time and leisure thus become mere caricatures of the capitalist world of exchange and equivalence; social relations become exercises in team building with the purpose of further accumulation of goods and points. These points witness the fate of knowledge and labor in contemporary society.

Despite this somewhat bleak view of instrumentalized society, videogames are not entirely monolithic structures and can in fact represent radically opposed theories of relation to the world. Games bear witness to the possibility for innovation and yet often effect a strong ambivalence towards the promises that technology makes. In chapter two, “A Refusal to Play Along,” I will discuss this ambivalence and how it lurks in the very structure of games. In game worlds, time and space are manipulated in order to produce a self-contained realm in which the rules and structure determine players’ strategies.

The game as an object depends on player-based interaction as an integral part of its being in a way that other art objects do not. In most video games, such as those discussed in chapter one, game time and space are structured and given meaning through their approximation of outside life and activity. Games, in this sense, are representations of life in a totally administered, totally structured world. Contemporary subjects have a complex

relationship with structure, both loving its stability and hating its strictures. The ambivalence in question, then, is an analogous conflict of interest, and can be found in the spatiotemporal structure of games, constructed from the ground up by humans and hence reenacting human fear of and desire of control.

Chapter two builds on Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* to advocate a critical way of playing videogames. I posit that aesthetic deliberation can be appreciated as an active process of playing. My approach focuses on aporias and gaps in games, encouraging players to use them to break down the seamless world of the game. Instead of being submerged in activities similar to those of daily life, the player sees the game from both inside, as intended, and outside, where she may be estranged from her own playing. Alienation of this sort can help players explore innovative ways to think through new media. By recognizing the potential of games as objects of contemplation, I extend games theory beyond its current limits and postulate new means of interacting with digital technologies as cultural objects.

This study focuses primarily on a singular game, *Shadow of the Colossus* that is somewhat anomalous in mainstream gaming due to its representation of time and its potential for interference with the standard picture. Were one to play a game in a world freed from time, the player would lose grounding and the purpose of the game become questionable. *Shadow of the Colossus* creates such a realm of empty time. The player, instead of being fully immersed in verisimilitude and saturated by convincing simulation or submerged in activities akin to daily life, is always estranged from his own playing. By treating such a

game as an artwork that is negotiating this rift, I will investigate innovative conditions of possibility for thinking through new media. Instead of mapping real time in the virtual world, *Shadow of the Colossus* creates critical distance that allows for the player to contemplate her relationship to time instead of being drawn into the flow imposed by the game.

In addition to manipulating players' sense of time, games often conceal the connection between the natural world and the world of representation. Chapter three, "Rubbing on a Wound," will focus on the question of the "natural" in videogames. I use the ideas elaborated in the first two chapters to analyze images of the natural in virtual worlds. Employing Adorno's theories, I explore what role natural beauty plays in our conception of virtual worlds, particularly that of *World of Warcraft*. Virtual worlds are often visually stunning examples of landscape construction. They utilize methods of image-building that are specific to digital media, though they often borrow techniques from more conventional artistic practices, such as painting, to create convincing and compelling realms. Using visual analysis and Adorno's writings on the art object, I show how a player might utilize the virtual landscape as an object for critically contemplating both digital media and the environments in which we live.

First, I argue that game landscape *is* landscape. Thus, we can use contemporary landscape theory to guide our experience with games. Second, landscape is ideological. I have already argued that the tasks and themes in games are ideological; I extend this to the analogous claim that the shape of digital environments can manipulate players. Game environments can falsely



empower the player. Though she gains no currency in her real life, a game realm may promise bounty and freedom. Such magical realms conceal the careful calculation that goes into their design.

By reexamining how landscapes are constructed in games and how players are either permitted or forced to interact with them, players may begin to reverse the ideological mystification perpetrated by games. Landscape theory suggests that people can become reinvested in the environments that surround them by embracing the “scape” in landscape, a suffix that originally referred to the active relationship between individuals and the land. If players apply this idea to game landscapes, it opens up new possibilities for meaningful engagement with the game environment. I use the game *Portal* as a touchstone for such engagement and suggest that it offers a more truly ludic means of interaction than many commercial games. When players find ways to trouble the ideological nature of game landscapes and creatively to explore and reflect on their environment, they will interact with games in a different, and freer way.

In chapter four, “A Slave Obeys,” I address the notion of selfhood and videogaming. I draw on theories of self developed by J. David Velleman and Daniel Dennett in order to suggest a model of self-construction compatible with contemporary digital interaction and communication. Both Velleman and Dennett contend that the self is created through the accretion of narrative elements. While Dennett proposes that the self is a fiction, a so-called center of gravity around which stories are constructed, Velleman claims (and I agree) that the self is an entity that possesses enough agency to act in the world, to recall past

actions, and to project future behaviors. I refine Velleman's theory of self to suggest how small narrative units may act as the basis for self-knowledge and the ability to act in the world.

In instrumental society, it is difficult to ascertain how much agency an individual possesses. This problem is addressed particularly adroitly by the game *Bioshock*, which I will examine, along with games from previous chapters, in terms of self-determination. No game alone provides an adequate prescription for self-determining behavior; ultimately the player has to determine her own position in society. I suggest that she may use digital gaming in order to cultivate an active, ludic, and progressive approach to self construction and self knowledge. I also examine contemporary research into videogames and psychological schemas to show how such scientific results are consistent with my theory of a narrative self.

The implications of my dissertation reach beyond one medium; games are changing things as fundamental as the way we communicate and relate to language as well as what this language is deployed to do. Our levels of attention and distraction are being radically altered by the pervasiveness of games. Because of this, all of our expectations about interactivity, viewership, and consumption as a whole are changing. My work enhances current theories of attention and distraction, which are radically affected by the pervasiveness of games. Play is, as Huizinga has said, creative and not just an amusing way to spend one's free time. My dissertation is a step towards rescuing play from the corporate model of videogames, where play and work are indistinguishable. "A

Refusal to Play Along” offers ways for players to reclaim the creative power of play.

## Chapter One

### The Point of Experience: Playful Subject, Ludic Thinker

#### Player as Worker

The communities of affinity within Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) usually do not promote innovative interaction. Instead, players in such games spend most of their time being trained as ideal workers. The proliferation of menu-based interfaces creates the atmosphere or sensation of play while robbing it of the creative possibilities that play affords. Games like *World of Warcraft* and *Neverwinter Nights*, set in medieval swords-and-sorcery style realms, display a putative desire to return to a way of life that was permeated by the play instinct. Instead, they indoctrinate subjects into a world of instrumental rationality that strips them of their creative capacities. Many games fetishize progress and teach players how to increase productivity in their free time as well as at work. These games do less to advance leisure and function more as a form of corporate training. In fact, the appellation “player” is misleading, for contemporary videogames are intentionally discounting the active play factor of games in favor of technological competence.<sup>22</sup>

Users flock to online realms such as *Second Life* and *There* – games without plots – merely for the chance to create a new persona, a mask to wear

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<sup>22</sup> Many texts use “gamer” as an equivalent to “player.” The connotation of this term is that these individuals have mastered a set of skills that allow them to succeed in digital games. I prefer the term “player” for it retains the sense of otherness and possibility that is lost to the instrumental gamer. Just as many students, in this age of standardized testing, found that they were not becoming smarter individuals, but rather better test-takers, players are becoming adept at games without the necessity for creative play.

during the ritual of interpersonal communication. It is not an accident that the game is a *Second Life* and not a first, that it exists *There* instead of here. *Second Life* and *There* are marketed as realms of play, not of normal dwelling. However, the gap between real and virtual narrows more and more as individuals set up real estate agencies and clothing shops inside virtual realms. Players work and earn money as in the real world. Ailin Graef (better known as Anshe Chung), for instance, has achieved a net worth of over a million dollars by developing virtual real estate in *Second Life*. In play spheres, there are winnings, but not earnings.

To claim that making work playful is a liberatory move is disingenuous. The issue is not that work should be desultory. The issue rather is that work packaged and marketed as play disguises social reality, creating an illusory relationship between the “player” and her job. Real play is a voluntary activity; real employment is not. A worker may win a “spiff” for selling a certain number of lamps, but making this a game or contest distorts the reality of the situation. She is earning a living, but has become alienated from her own labor when it is masqueraded as play. The retail worker who becomes a “contestant” as part of her job and the gamer who sells her virtual creations are both “playing.” As the boundary between the realms of work and play is obscured, both modes suffer from an imposed falsehood. Labor is discounted, for one loses a sense of contributing meaningfully to society, and play is diminished as well, for it is sullied by the actual involuntary nature of work.

An objection that might be raised to this binary is that it is more useful to

find a playful interpenetration of the two spheres. However, when work takes on the image of play, it is typically to the detriment of the workers who are being exploited under the guise of enjoyment. Whether it is customer service representatives engaging in a sales contest or programmers being convinced that their work is just a game, the laborers are led to focus on the immediate enjoyment of the game and encouraged to forget that their actions are actually benefiting their employer (instead of the player). The worker cannot extract herself from the work sphere without sacrificing her livelihood. There is the unspoken threat that if a retail worker who is told she is playing a game “loses” or performs her job poorly, her real life will suffer. Needless to say, this eliminates the joyful otherness of the game.

The utilization of “points” to quantify behavior is a common technique in contemporary digital games. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes how similar points systems are used in penal justice. He says, “...all behavior falls in the field between good and bad marks, good and bad points. Moreover, it is possible to quantify this field and work out an arithmetical economy based on it.”<sup>23</sup> The economy that Foucault suggests is not limited to the eighteenth century military schools and prisons that he describes. The thesis is perhaps even more applicable today, as life becomes more and more instrumentalized. It is significant that this passage comes from the chapter entitled “The Means of Correct Training,” for games are often pedagogical vehicles for training and

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<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 180.

manipulation. Both Nick Yee<sup>24</sup> and Steven Poole<sup>25</sup> have suggested the work-like nature of games. (Poole even imagines Adorno's displeasure at the current state of affairs.) This chapter will expand on their work by examining in-depth how contemporary gaming reflects instrumentalized society.

In a similar vein, theorists such as Celia Pearce, as well as economists such as Edward Castronova, have investigated the economics of play and work as schematized in Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs). While Greig de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witford find the most compelling connection between capital and subject formation in the machinations of the game-production industry itself, I find that, by examining specific games, much is revealed about the principles at work in the ways that players are both drawn into the games and ideologically shaped by them. From the games themselves, we can reverse-engineer the process that creates worker/players. Jesper Juul, in his analysis of narrativity in videogames, states:

Using other media as starting points, we may learn many things about the construction of fictive worlds, characters...but relying too heavily on existing theories will make us forget what makes games games: such as rules, goals, player activity, the projection of the player's actions into the game world, the way the game defines the possible actions of the player. It is the unique parts that we need to study now.

The study of games utilizing theoretical constructs surrounding leisure may help to explain how game worlds at once reflect and generate socioeconomic

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<sup>24</sup> Nick Yee, "The Labor of Fun," *Games and Culture*, January 2006, 1 no. 1, (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications): 68-71.

<sup>25</sup> Steven Poole, "Why Games are Like Boring Jobs," <http://stevenpoole.net/trigger-happy/edge-124/>, last accessed 29 December 2008.

structures. Videogames operate mimetically as well as generatively; they witness and perform the contemporary subject.

While there are many genres of videogame on the market today, I focus on the MMORPG due to its immense popularity and increasing market share. It demonstrates certain features of social interaction that are coming to define online communication in general. MMORPGs have also managed to break the typical boundaries of computer-related nerd-dom to enroll even “normal” people. College students who would be unlikely to read a Dragonlance fantasy novel play *World of Warcraft* (WoW) with the same ease that they comment on friends’ Facebook walls. The previously outsider status of swords-and-sorcery style environments is now fundamentally normalized.

In all role-playing games, one embarks on the process of character creation followed by subsequent attainment of various “levels” of achievement, each bringing more power and new abilities vital to the life of the game, the purpose of which is to complete various quests and adventures, accumulating knowledge of the fantastical realm as well as magical artifacts along the way.<sup>26</sup> One possesses an avatar, a graphical representation of one’s chosen character.

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<sup>26</sup> Other games do not utilize this format. For example, the *Legend of Zelda* games are considered “adventure” games and may use the concept of the quest as a formative structure, but no character creation or leveling up transpires. Puzzle games (*Myst*) similarly do not require this, nor do action games or First Person Shooters (*Half Life II*, *Halo*). Videogame genres involve a good deal of crossover; some of the main categories are: Action or Action/Adventure (*Zelda*, *Barbie Horse Rescue*, *Grand Theft Auto*), Fighting (*Tekken*, *Mortal Kombat*), Racing (*Mario Kart: Double Dash!!*), Shooters (*Doom*, *Quake*, *Counterstrike*), Simulation (*VFR Airfields*), Strategy (*Age of Empires*), RPG (*Baldur’s Gate*, *Neverwinter Nights*), and Sports (*Madden NFL 07*).



She serves as player's means of accessing and interacting with the virtual world (figure 1.1).<sup>27</sup>

When the player creates her virtual being, it will seem to her that she enjoyed unlimited agency within the game. After all, hers is a completely new character, built from the ground up. In reality, her character will function with striking limitation to any imagined powers. *World of Warcraft* has built-in restrictions that are representative of common constraints in contemporary virtual worlds. In *WoW*, one first chooses a racial alignment. In the plot arc of the game, two factions of creatures, the Horde and the Alliance (figures 1.2 and 1.3), held a tenuous truce during a great war against an evil necromancer. Now that the war is over, the factions battle each other once again. The Horde consists of the races of Undead, Orc, Troll, Blood Elf, and Tauren. These generally have a frightful or bestial appearance (save the delicate but deadly Blood Elf) and represent a smaller percentage of players on most servers.

By far more popular are Alliance characters: Human, Gnome, Dwarf, Draenei, and Night Elf. The literature packaged with the game purports that the lines between good and evil are blurred;<sup>28</sup> however, typical perceptions of each

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<sup>27</sup> Everything in the game is made to seem commonsensical, though it is certainly ideological. Even the control mechanism and interface are said to be "intuitive", as if humans simply comprehended such contrived and strange maps, buttons, arrows, windows, chat screens, coded text, distorting perspective, and icons naturally. On the *World of Warcraft* product box, it states, "The game's user interface is so intuitive, you may never need to read the manual." As in much of contemporary life, textual literacy becomes superfluous and the uncontested icon reigns supreme.

<sup>28</sup> See the *World of Warcraft* manual, page 14.

faction pervade the game. The racial tension created by such a bifurcation is extreme and manifests itself through raids on enemy cities and other measures that both camps take to prevent the opposite side from advancing in level such as killing non-player characters (NPCs) necessary for quest completion and, on PVP (player vs. player) servers,<sup>29</sup> simply slaughtering characters from enemy races whenever they are seen.<sup>30</sup> Even on non-PVP servers, there exist battlegrounds, arenas, and “world” PVP (for instance, killing a certain number of enemy NPCs dictated by the game). Such a split results in a mechanistic essentialization of and by both groups: “Alliance players are self-righteous bastards” or “Horde players are cowardly outcasts” that commonly seems to bleed into characterizations of players’ “real life” personas.

After choosing an alignment and race, one chooses a character class. Certain classes are only available to certain races. For instance, only Night Elves and Tauren may become Druids and only Dwarves, Blood Elves, and Humans may be Paladins. Starting attributes are comparable among all starting characters, though it seems counterintuitive that a slender elf is as strong as a

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<sup>29</sup> Players must choose a server, or community, to join. There are several types, each with varying rules. Player vs. Player servers (PvP) are cutthroat and challenging, since players from opposing factions may unhesitatingly attack enemy players. On Normal servers, one chooses to turn this function on or off. Roleplaying servers (RP or RPPvP) require that players be “in character” during any online communication and speak as though they were actually Dwarven warriors (etc.) or be kicked off the server. This type also requires “appropriate” character names; the WoW website gives the examples Slipnslide, Robotman, Technotron as inappropriate names. Splitting up the server types is another example of the rigidification and delimitation of player types and their roles.

<sup>30</sup> A detailed sociological study of the racial tensions and hatreds (even more prevalent in games such as *Warhammer Online*) would serve to decipher the contrived nature of such anxieties.

huge minotaur. A character is defined according to the following five attributes: Intellect, Stamina, Spirit, Strength, and Agility. These points will increase when one's character levels up.

Characters level up by accumulating experience points (XP) (figure 1.4). Killing monsters, completing quests, and discovering new areas will garner a certain number of points based on the relative difficulty of the task. Only certain predetermined activities are productive of knowledge and earn these coveted points. Slaying Young Nightsabers, level 1 beasts, is an appropriate task for a level 1 or 2 Night Elf, but not for a level 6. Thus, the level 1 attains a higher percentage of the required points, allowing her to level up. When one gains a level, HP and Mana increase as well. These numbers are the amount of health and magical energy the character possesses, respectively. Different quests, as well as more difficult areas, become accessible upon leveling.

The player is notified of gaining XP by purple text onscreen. There is also a progress bar that fills with purple or blue as she completes more of the appropriate endeavor. These points mysteriously appear when the player has completed certain activities, as if awarded from on high: the player somehow gains access to the collective archive of knowledge. The player does not have the opportunity to question why admittance is granted; rather, it is simply accepted as how one progresses in the game.<sup>31</sup> Numerous add-on programs

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<sup>31</sup> If a player character has already reached level 80, the limit in the game as of December 2008, receiving XP is not much of a reward. Instead, she will receive a healthy amount of gold for her trouble, instantaneously converting labor into currency where once it garnered knowledge.

exist (such as Omen Threat Meter) to provide more detailed and up-to-the-minute information on everything from the amount of damage done by each party member to recent prices for an item at the auction house.

As we see in figure 1.1, Episteme must acquire 19400 XP to reach level 19. Evidently, she and Latourian must slay more beasts or complete more quests. Such quests are among the most rewarding activities in the game. From them come larger amounts of XP as well as payment in coin and in valuable items that are difficult to attain elsewhere. Some characters in the game are not other players, but rather programmed in as gateways in the plot. These NPCs often offer services such as vending food and drink or giving access to various quests. A golden exclamation point floats above the graphical representation of a quest-giving NPC (figure 1.4). This transforms into a gold question mark when the quest is complete and may be “turned in.”

Even if the player has finished a quest, experience points will not be awarded if it is not recorded by the designated NPC. This NPC functions as an admission point into the annals of selected knowledge. S/he functions as a kind of archivist, deciding what is considered to be worthy of garnering the desired experience points and who deserves access to them. The quest-giver is a guardian and extension of the XP system, the representation of a human (orc, elf, etc.) protector who regards the player and decides whether or not she measures up to the preordained system. Information is gathered together or consigned to this system and a stable, unquestioned archive is created in the game.

In order to understand the import of archival knowledge in the game, it is helpful to refer to Derrida's study of power and knowledge, *Archive Fever*. In this text, he explains how archives maintain their authority; in particular, if they are to be stable and unchanging, they cannot be questioned or dissected.

"Consignation aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration."<sup>32</sup> All knowledge worthy of the name works to support previously established, unified power arrangements. Similarly, what is considered knowledge in the game is trusted absolutely. The information becomes instrumentalized, since everything that players do reinforces its unquestioned nature. XP quantifies the contents of the archive and doles out privileges to those who perform in its name.

When a player receives a quest, a scroll appears on the left of the screen and fills in with the quest information. It is accompanied by the sound of a quill writing on parchment, signifying its presence as an entry into the archive (figure 1.4). If she accepts the quest, it is automatically inscribed into her Quest Log, symbolized by a golden chalice on the bottom toolbar. When completed, it is erased from the log. The archival knowledge has been transmuted directly into experience and is awarded to the quester. That which was once recorded knowledge is changed into points and becomes a quantifiable record of the character's advancement. How she advances and what actions she takes are shaped by this distribution of knowledge. Derrida notes that the archive does not

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<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression", *Diacritics*, 25 no. 2 (summer 1995): 10.

simply record the events, but manufactures them, in the same way that the subject/character is created through her interaction with the archive.

...the archive, as printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique in general is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content of the past which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.<sup>33</sup>

The structure of the game decides what counts as a quest, what gives XP, as well as how much is necessary for character development. It does not simply note that such an incident occurred. Instead of passively beholding events, it forms the subject in its own image.<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately for the player, this image is often one of drudgery. Most quests are rather mundane and involve the collection of various objects and their delivery to a certain party. We see in figure 1.4 that a missing jewel remains to be delivered to Tallonkai Swiftroot (as well as 7 mystical creatures to be slain). Another of the prime activities players use to gain XP is wandering around slaying random beasts, an occupation known as “grinding.” The most startling

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>34</sup> Additionally, the process of leveling up displays the principles behind character formation. During this process, the character is surrounded by a sparkling golden helix, reminiscent of DNA (figure 6). Even in this fantasy world, DNA functions as a representation of the most significant means of carrying and transferring knowledge. DNA does not just hold information, but actively replicates itself according to a systematized pattern. The character, in this way, comes to embody the system itself; she is the avatar not of the player, but of the archive.

feature of grinding is that it resembles work, as in the phrase “nose to the grindstone.” The life of an adventurer is not all fun and games; players must work hard to advance. This means that instead of the constant stream of “high adventure” that the player is promised, many quests involve quotidian activities such as procuring ingredients to cook Goretusk (a type of wild boar) Liver Pie or thinning the Mangy Nightsaber population in order to maintain the balance of nature. Even during leisure activities, a certain amount of tedium is built into the system. Presumably, it would no longer be “fun” if the player progressed too quickly.

This exemplifies what Edward Castronova calls the “puzzle problem.” In this quandary, puzzles that are too difficult are rejected by players, but likewise are ones that are too simple. He states, “Put succinctly, in a normal market the demanders are willing to pay money to have constraints removed, but in a games market, they will pay money to have constraints imposed.”<sup>35</sup> Videogames are a special case, different from a normal economic market, because players actively search for hindrances that may only be overcome through much trial and tribulation. The tedium of slaying a plethora of beasts is but one more step on the road to character development. In the outside world, Castronova says, we pay to make things easier; in games, we pay to make them more like work.

Adorno presages this development in his essay “Free Time” when he notes that people constantly assure themselves that their spare time is

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Castronova, “On Virtual Economies”, *Game Studies*, 3 no. 2 (December 2003): 4.

diametrically opposed to their working hours. This can never be, for even what is considered worthy of being a pastime is structured by the system of work that it is attempting to flee.

...everywhere the spell [of social roles] loosens its hold and people are at least subjectively convinced that they are acting of their will, this will itself is fashioned by precisely what they want to shake off during their time outside of work.<sup>36</sup>

In leisure activities, workers cannot escape what Adorno refers to as the “unfreedom” of contemporary society. Instead of destroying oppressive social roles through play, activities in which one partakes merely replicate the mind-numbing tedium of the repetitive tasks of work, be they pointing and clicking, exchanging money for goods and services, or working the assembly line. Progress requires a certain amount of sacrifice and this means submitting oneself to boring activities for the sake of acquiring knowledge. By not awarding points for what are deemed unchallenging activities, the game allegedly sidesteps this boredom; yet no player likely considers grinding an exciting proposition and it is viewed almost universally as a necessary evil in the building of a character.<sup>37</sup>

The interdependence of work and play has been noted by Adorno in

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<sup>36</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Free Time,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 168.

<sup>37</sup> Some games, such as *Guild Wars*, are attempting to do away with grinding and failing. Grinding seems to be an integral part of the MMOG experience.



statements such as, “Free time is always shackled to its contrary.”<sup>38</sup> Here, he relates how, in a system that necessitates a diversion from unpleasant work activities, one can never actually escape. People will try as hard as they can to perform leisure activities that are diametrically opposed to their jobs, but the ghost of work can never be avoided since, by struggling vehemently to avoid work, play tends to resemble it. He gives the example of sports teams and the social expectation that sports create fitness.

...the physical exertion required by sports, the functionalization of the body within the *team*, that occurs precisely in the most popular sports, trains people, in ways unknown to them, in the behavioral techniques that, sublimated to a greater or lesser degree, are expected from them in the labor process. The old argument that one does sports in order to stay *fit* is untrue only because it pretends that *fitness* is an independent goal; *fitness* for labor, however, is one of the clandestine purposes of sport. (p. 173-4)

Similarly, the game prepares the player for the boredom and monotony required of the working subject in contemporary life. Games define “fit” workers (though not physically, as the overwhelming amount of literature on the correlation between obesity and video games attests), even if this is cloaked in the guise of free play and creative escape.

MMORPGs give a clear example of how games create workers; other game genres do so as well. Simulation games (sometimes called God games) such as *SimCity* and *The Sims* also offer as play thinly disguised work. An artistic comment on the structure of gaming and global corporate life, Natalie Bookchin’s *Metapet* (1999-2003) (figure 1.5) makes explicit this connection and the perversity that accompanies it. Her internet art come work game is a kind of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 167.

*SimOffice* meets Stanford Prison Experiment, where the player punishes and rewards a mutant (made by genetically crossing a trained dog and a human) cubical worker in order to increase productivity. The player may create a comforting environment (with worker achievement plaques and family photos) or a stern one. Efficient work is the name of the game.

Bookchin intended this game to be a comment on the contemporary discourse of genetic manipulation and the “biotech revolution.” She claims that this revolution is merely Taylorism in a new package, a new way of optimizing workers and creating obedient and efficient “Human Resources.”<sup>39</sup> There is a notable resemblance here to Adorno’s comment on the function of sport and fitness in the modern world: both are methods for manipulating humans into a more functional and instrumentalized role in their work environment. Bookchin’s piece makes the player into the manager, the efficiency expert, who controls the workers and sculpts them into more productive representatives of their professions, thus bringing to the fore the relationship of game, work, and output.

The artist comments, however, that the game was designed not only to reveal the perversity of efficiency, but also to subvert it. She wanted people to play the game during working hours and added a “boss button” to hide the screen if your own manager came around. She says that “Winning may be a very dull scenario, and it may be more rewarding to subvert the system.”<sup>40</sup> To Bookchin this does not mean not just playing, but rather playing badly. When the

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<sup>39</sup> See interview at [www.solu.org/text\\_natalie.html](http://www.solu.org/text_natalie.html), by Mia Makela, last accessed 8 April 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

player is a poor manager, the pet slacks off and starts to do things such as play minigames that the player may then enjoy as well. Winning the game (i.e., being productive and accumulating money) is not particularly exciting because this money cannot be used for anything. It is much more interesting to reveal the hidden aspects of the game (minigames, the multiplayer aspect) than to work your Metapets efficiently. *Metapet* appears to work within the typical system of work and profit, but really reveals its strange cruelty and attempts to undermine it. Instead of identifying with the manager, it is more gratifying to align one's playing with the unproductive slacker.

In *Warcraft*, on the other hand, the compulsion to create profitable workers is overwhelming. In addition to the player's class, a character may learn two different professions at one time (plus the minor professions of cooking, fishing, and first aid). The character Episteme has chosen to learn cooking and by either purchasing or finding the correct ingredients may make such delicacies as Spiderleg Kabobs and Charred Wolf Meat. To cook in the game, the player stands before a fire (that she has kindled or is already present) and waits for the progress meter bar to fill. When it does, the character receives the fruits of her labor: food that will restore HP and sometimes increase her Spirit rating temporarily, allowing for quicker mana recovery. Levels of cookery (apprentice, journeyman, master, artisan – the same for all professions in the game) may be purchased from the local cook trainer when the character has accumulated enough points for advancement. More powerful and, one would imagine, tastier dishes become available when she reaches higher levels and receives the

proper recipes. Eating the food can certainly be very useful, but often in the struggle to attain a higher level, the player ends up with a surplus.

The player cooks not purely for points or goods, but also to revel in the hyperreal simulation of an everyday activity that, once translated into a systematic and decipherable method for self-improvement, becomes an enjoyable pastime instead of a chore. The pleasure taken in such activities can be seen by such in-game occurrences as fishing contests, where characters meet in a pre-chosen spot and “fish” in the lake or stream, subsequently comparing the bounty of their catch and improving their skill points at the same time. Attaining the higher ranks is a large part of the enjoyment of such professions.

For her two major professions, Episteme has apprenticed herself in Skinning and Leatherworking. She may skin the beasts she has slain and craft their pelts into various pieces of equipment: gloves, vests, pouches, etc. (figure 1.6). As a druid, she may utilize leather clothing while her comrade, a priest, may only wear cloth.<sup>41</sup> Latourian, by contrast, crafts potions and has chosen Alchemy and Herbalism as her professions. By collecting various herbs scattered throughout the realm, she may brew a number of different potions used for healing, recovering mana, and other tasks such as defense. Those herbs are

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<sup>41</sup> Even activities such as picking a flower or wearing leather boots require adherence to the structure of the world. These limitations are never questioned, but would require a fair amount of rationalization (or perhaps, the creation of a character’s “backstory”) in order to maintain the structure seamlessly. For example, “Latourian has no problem slaying beasts, so she is not a pacifist, giving up leather shoes on those grounds. Instead, she does so out of a sense of humility and submission to her goddess, Elune.” The fact that no explanations are ever offered attests to the rigidity and unquestioned nature of the structures.

visible to all players, but only those with the appropriate profession may collect them. Certain herbs, just as certain animal skins, are difficult to reap properly and require a higher level in that skill.

There are other professions as well: tailoring, mining, engineering, blacksmithing, and enchanting. Each requires numerous applications to master. With mastery comes great rewards in the form of higher quality and more powerful items. Though the player may utilize the products of these skills, a single character may only employ a limited number of leather bracers or magic wands. As a result, such items are crafted for the express purpose of being sold to vendors or at the Auction House. Typically, vendors (figure 1.7) have less valuable wares for sale (vendor trash); players can craft better ones, but the very best are found on the corpses of slain monsters. The game must take some rather suspect leaps in order to maintain its reward system. For example, what exactly was a forest spider doing with a valuable amulet or weapon in the first place? Vendors remain useful, for they allow the time that she has spent, for example, skinning Nightsabers, to be quickly transmogrified into the coin of the realm. Selling the items to other players at the Auction Houses can make more money. Higher quality goods are obviously worth more and thus the time that Episteme spends raising her Leathercrafting profession will amount to greater profits, in turn allowing her to train for higher levels of Leathercrafting as well as to purchase supplies such as magical thread and dye.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> A short story by Cory Doctorow, "Anda's Game," illustrates the structures of power that surround crafting and the quantification of labor in MMORPGs. This is magnified by the latest development in a Swedish game, *Entropia*, where

Possessing money (in the form of copper for lower levels and inexpensive items, silver for intermediate, and gold for advanced) is a crucial part of leveling. Indeed, advancement would be nearly impossible without it. The player buys training at his or her respective class trainer and thus gains spells and abilities such as shapeshifting or summoning demons (figure 1.8). Without increased abilities, a character would be doomed to low-level areas where progress would be painfully slow. Certain skills open up when she has reached a preordained level and there is a tacit assumption within the very architecture of the game that core skills for each class will be purchased. Monster difficulty is set accordingly (figure 1.9).

Also, when teaming up with other players to complete more difficult quests (known as “partying”<sup>43</sup>), there are particular canonical skills that each class is expected to know. The other party members would be disappointed, if not downright angry, that the Priest they have just added to the group does not know the spells Restore and Power Word: Shield. It may seem to a player that her character is unique and utterly personalizable; in reality, she is limited by the constraints of the game and the social expectations that are borne from the necessities of questing. The rate of progress is fixed, as is what the character is progressing *to*. The path of character development has very few forks.

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players can use a physical ATM card to withdraw real-world currency from their virtual account. See New York Times article: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/02/arts/02entr.html>, by Seth Schiesel, last accessed 8 April 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Often the practice of instrumentalization carries over into group situations. Unscrupulous players abound who will use the group for their own agenda and leave without aiding their fellow party members.

Some amount of customization comes in the form of Talent Points, available beginning at level 10. These may be distributed among skills that the character already possesses, giving them more power in that area. Episteme has put her first talent points into the spell Wrath, which inflicts “nature” damage, in order to strengthen its efficacy in battle. These points are awarded only one time within each level and may not be moved unless she pays a certain amount of gold; correct placement is very important. According to where she has placed her points, other abilities will become available later in the game. In the *WoW* forums, players have constructed systems for the best and most efficient usage of Talent Points.

The points are mapped out in the game itself as a flow chart (figure 1.10), the business model for displaying causal development and potentiality. In this world, even talent may be measured quantitatively and graphed according to a preordained model of rational progress. Even in their time outside of the game, players act as efficiency experts, attempting to construct the most effective character and discussing the pros and cons of various builds on the forums.<sup>44</sup>

The very structure of the game creates subjects that are obedient and productive. Character design and development are processes that seem to allow

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<sup>44</sup> There are many postings of ideal character builds in the official *WoW* forums. Here are but two <http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html;jsessionid=DAC6779DABE4BF1B81DDB08D4D8CA82A?topicId=81953310&sid=1>, last accessed 8 April 2008 and <http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=5784520572&sid=1>, last accessed 8 April 2008. One particularly telling quotation from the latter thread (by player Jaggdog,) “This game has been out way too long for you to try your innovative (TERRIBLE) ideas.”

for self-expression and freedom, but are, in reality, tied to schemas that distinctly mold players' desires and pleasures within a plan that conflates play and work.

The industry itself is implicated in this confusion. Greig de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford discuss the phenomenon of game production and note that an atmosphere of "work as play" is perpetrated in the studios.<sup>45</sup> The management actively markets the impression that these companies exist outside of the corporate world. "Fun" offices, full of games and other distractions, bespeak a wonderland of enjoyment and freedom. However, this occludes the fact that programmers are expected to put in mandatory unpaid overtime, transfiguring themselves, as the writers say, into game slaves. The true nature of the industry masks its own agenda under the pretext of free play.

The authors quote theorist Angela McRobbie saying, "[w]hen the individual is most free to be chasing his or her dreams of self-expression, so also is postmodern power at its most effective."<sup>46</sup> Young coders are, they say, thrilled by the possibilities of their play/work, but are nonetheless being overtaken and exploited by the industry that provides these "opportunities." This is not such a far cry from the process of manipulation to which the players are subject.

## **Resistance and The Failure of Subvertising**

The problems to which the industry is subject are unfortunately mimicked

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<sup>45</sup> Greig de Peuter and Nick Dyer Witheford, "A Playful Multitude? Mobilising and Counter-Mobilising Game Labour," *Fibreculture*, no. 5., [http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/depeuter\\_dyerwitheford.html](http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/depeuter_dyerwitheford.html), last accessed 24 September 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.



outside of it. In the aforementioned article, De Peuter and Dyer-Witford mention the culture of game “modding”,<sup>47</sup> user-created modules that alter or enlarge the game world (figure 1.11), a practice that may be as simple as changing the appearance of the characters, adding an adventure, or including new objects. These fan-produced products are simultaneously innovative and normative. Although some mods have progressive (feminist, anti-capitalist, or otherwise revolutionary) themes, most simply add content that is unchallenging to the dominant schema. Not coincidentally, game companies will sometimes purchase rights to a fan’s mod, thereby thus subsuming it into the larger, profit-driven program.

Given the opportunity, the tendency for players to recreate aspects of conventional games is evident in the example of *Myst Online*. Celia Pearce describes how players from a defunct online game, *Myst Online*, emigrated to other online worlds and began to recreate parts of their “homeworld” in their newly adopted communities. In these realms (such as *There* and *Second Life*) players have created artifacts and even homes reminiscent of the *Myst* aesthetic. They participate in the new game economies, but always with a sense of their own formation in the older game. Players have produced new game content and have gained access to *Myst* servers, which are now player-run. Pearce sees this as a positive step towards worlds that are guided by player ingenuity and inventiveness and less by the goals and desires of large corporations. For her, players are producing their own leisure and thus are able to reclaim it from other

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

interests.

Pearce wishes to prove, through her ethnographic study of player use, that games are actually productive of new cultural artifacts and not merely ways to waste time. Older game scholarship proposes that games are, by definition, unproductive; Pearce refutes this idea, claiming that the *Myst* Diaspora has produced much in the way of both plot and artifact. She states:

...neither play nor games is inherently unproductive and furthermore...the boundaries between play and production, between work and leisure, and between media consumption and media production are increasingly blurring.<sup>48</sup>

While it is true that games are objects that prompt production, it is nonetheless important to examine what is being produced and why as well as how this production is related to society as a whole.

Pearce's valorization of production ends up being more celebratory than critical. She sees the blurring of the work-leisure boundary as a liberatory end in itself, to the extent that players wrest control from designers and become a creative force in their own right. But if the new class of player/creator is simply repeatedly reproducing the same game content, where does player autonomy arise and to what end? Pearce seeks to validate games as a subject of study as well as a pastime, but ignores the *source* of this drive towards the productive as well as what it accomplishes for the player. Her study, often insightful, nonetheless embraces production in the game as an end in itself, whereas such games' larger social significance lies in the way that they are able to replicate

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<sup>48</sup> Celia Pearce, "Productive Play: Game Culture from the Bottom Up," *Games and Culture*, 1 no. 1 (January 2006): 8.

and record the unfreedom of contemporary society, not in some kind of pure reveling in a mythical realm of “free production.”

What would happen if the game worlds no longer reflected current society, but instead another vision of a possible world order in which instrumentalized reason was not the rule? Natalie Bookchin’s project, *agoraXchange* attempted to do just this. She is facilitating the open-source development of an entire gaming realm based on progressive geopolitics (figure 1.12). She believes that this game format opens opportunities for more egalitarian social interaction, without the capitalist and repressive structures that are present in the majority of game worlds. Bookchin says of the project,

Thus far, large-scale online game worlds have either recapitulated the status quo or rely on fantasy worlds and escapist scenarios. With *Agora*, our aim is to offer a feasible alternative model for the real world and to witness, through the creative participation of its inhabitants, what that would look like – what alliances, affinities, and conflicts might arise.

She postulates that if the game world is free of the dominating practices that manipulate subjects into good producer-consumers, the communication and relationships that these players maintain will also be more emancipated.

Bookchin, in effect, wishes for the game players to assume the power of creation previously reserved for game companies. By developing and shaping the future of the world, players become more than passive subjects following the whim of the mighty experience point.

*Agora* is set after The Revolution, when the evils of birthright, inheritance, citizenship, and marriage have all been successfully obliterated. This ultra-liberal, utopian schema is projected as the culmination of progressive politics as

a whole, where society has finally gotten it right. The obstacles of borders, discrimination, and poverty have been demolished. It is difficult to imagine such a frictionless world as a game. In a perfect world, what challenges remain to provoke agonistic contest? It is purportedly up to the public to create this new world, but so much of its founding ideology has already been established that it seems less than egalitarian.

This problem did not stop participants from carrying on a lively debate over what the new game world should look like. For example, there was much discussion in the forum about how “winning” and “losing” should be determined, if at all. Some were in favor of a “points” system, others preferred a “percent towards completion” goal structure, and others did not want to be measured at all. One commenter, mmllebrun, states:

I agree that there really is no way to judge what success is. There is also no way to assign points to such an ambiguous subject. I think that the only way that people are assigned "points" in the real world is through money and the salaries they make. I also agree that in our world some are paid more than they are worth, and much more than they need. How and who would decide what is important and what deserves more points than something else. Will educators who are really important to society and the development of its citizens be more handsomely (sic) rewarded than someone is of entertainment value to the society and not much more. I think there needs to be another measure of success in the game. I don't think this can be like any other video game where you kill the bad guys and earn some points. It's supposed to represent real life and real life is much more complex than just killing the bad guy. I don't know if there can really be a winner to this game, or if it can really even be viewed as a game, it seems to be more of an interactive study.<sup>49</sup>

While mmllebrun's statement seems to reflect the majority opinion, there were other forum commenters who thought that the “game” format necessitated

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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.agoraxchange.net/index.php?page=48#48>, last accessed 8 April 2008.

competition; they believed that the game needed some kind of rivalry or struggle in order to be both purposive and enjoyable. This is a reasonable worry, for if the game world itself were a post-revolutionary, ideal space, it would lack the friction and force necessary for revolutionary content. It would effectively lose the agonistic character of play so vital to creativity. If one were content simply to tend one's garden, there would be no impetus to interact with other players at all. The lack of debate and difference would make *Agora* into a dead world, devoid of either conflict or resolution, which the development phase had in abundance. Nothing would differentiate *Agora* from *Second Life* or *There*, massively multiplayer realms without specific plots. In this way, the process of creation and discussion was more stimulating than would have been a finished product.

If the alteration of contemporary society was the goal of this game, it did not reach it, for the game was never actually completed and languished in its initial phases. Even if it had been finished, in order for the game to stimulate progressive political thought it would need to do much more than to expose the alliances that would form in a newly perfected world. That said, the lack of viable outcome does not mean that the project was not, in a way, successful. The true-play phase was not the game itself (which seems like it would have been rather dull), but the process of conversation and communal discussion that occurred during its creation. The development of the game was itself a sort of heterotopia, where the participants reclaimed digital technologies. The exchange of ideas and possibilities for the new world through forums, email, and the website itself embodied all of the qualities of participation, debate, and make-believe that the

actual game would never be able to do.

Through involvement in the process of creation, contributors were able to witness and discuss specific aspects of the game and its organizational assumptions. Many games, however, obscure the important rhetorical structures at work by emphasizing *progress* over *process*. Instrumentalized progress depends on a lack of critical thought about the ways that goals are attained and a fixation on the game's "win condition." Such teleological methods focus on ends much more than means. An example of this is *Progress Quest* (figure 1.13), a lo-fi, primarily text based RPG that was originally created as a mockery of RPG games. This game facetiously glorifies progress for its own sake, reaching for some mythical end that can never exist. The game is so simple that it does not even require input from the player in order for her character to progress.

In this game, the process of leveling up is "streamlined" to the point where the player simply loads the program and it accrues goods and points on its own. It is a game of advancement and accumulation pure and simple, stripping the genre's apparent goal down to its bare minimum. This process will already be familiar to those of us in industrialized society; the game's website claims that "Gamers who have played modern online role-playing games, or almost any computer role-playing game, or who have at any time installed or upgraded their operating system, will find themselves incredibly comfortable with *Progress Quest's* very familiar gameplay."<sup>50</sup> The system at work is the same as that of the

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<sup>50</sup> *Progress Quest* website, <http://www.progressquest.com/info.php>, last accessed 8 April 2008.

more complex games, but reduced to the most essential goal: instrumentalized and purified progress.<sup>51</sup> The processes and the rhetoric that the game uses are opaque; players are unable to see the means by which their fun is constructed.

However, the invisibility of processes in such games does not imply their absence. Ian Bogost claims that games are, at their core, procedural. They transpire over time using coded processes and structures that are typically hidden from players.<sup>52</sup> Games are always making assumptions, teaching players, and guiding their thoughts. Game rhetoric is based on these subterranean formations. For players to think critically about games, they must begin by dissecting the underlying constructions that guide all subsequent processes. Recognizing the game's procedurality is the first step towards contemplating the player's relationship with the technology.

Bogost believes that games that reveal their own structural import are more likely to induce a deep engagement with digital technologies and to support critical reflection. Projects such as the *Howard Dean for Iowa Game* that he created with Gonzalo Frasca are meant to motivate the player to question how games deploy rhetoric. In this game, players perform the role of a grassroots organizer, motivating peers to become involved in the campaign. By implementing in the game the very techniques of outreach that would gain Dean real-world supporters, Bogost believed that he and Frasca were demystifying the

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<sup>51</sup> *Progress Quest* was begun as an ironic commentary on the state of videogames, but gained a serious and dedicated following. This attests to the persistence of progress and the fervor with which people seek it. *Progress Quest* witnesses the bondage of contemporary society to ends-driven play economies.

<sup>52</sup> Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

procedural rhetoric of both the game and the campaign process. (The political procedures they deployed were not specific to Dean and thus did nothing to help Dean's campaign.) Bogost, in future efforts, attempted to make the procedural rhetorics that he uses specific and relatable.

One such case is that of the corporate training game, *Cold Stone Creamery: Stone City*. In this game, meant to teach employees about the importance of proper ice cream portioning, the player must scoop the correct amount for each customer: too much and the store loses money; too little and the customer is dissatisfied. The game mimics the uneven surfaces of countertops and the texture of the ice cream in order to produce the sensation of hands-on training without the expense of wasted product. Bogost claims that the game reveals, by way of procedural rhetoric, the reasons behind corporate policies. The player is allegedly empowered for she is now able to realize the role she plays in the success of the business. The processes of work (and the game) are exposed as merely a set of rules.

Bogost says that games become educational, as opposed to critically engaging, once they force the player to accept the overarching rule structure as truth. This is problematic for *Stone City*; even though the player/employee may gain a modicum of joy from knowing that her scooping skills really *do* matter (or do they?), she is still obliged to work under the corporate model. The temporary empowerment she feels from seeing that the company depends on her work is a decoy. It affirms her wish to believe that she really is a beautiful and unique snowflake while she embodies the role of the menial drudge. She gains no



authentic sense of worth or leverage from this taste of autonomy. Attempting to subvert the system of scoops will, in reality, cause her to lose her job. The game does not specifically prohibit critical thought, but neither does it implement it, as it claims.

A similar phenomenon occurs in the genre of the Anti-Advergame. These games are the most vociferous revelators of procedural rhetoric in contemporary gaming. They are based on, and attempt to subvert, the genre of the Advergame, in which games are used by corporations to promote interest in a brand. For example, the game *Sneak King* for the XboX and XboX 360, was produced by Burger King to increase exposure of their mascot, the King. Advergames uncritically promote products and consumption. Often the games have very little to do with actual products, but are instead vehicles for logos and brand awareness.

The Anti-Advergame, on the contrary, attempts to expose political inequities by allowing the player to experience (and typically to perform) the very processes of repression. An example is *The McDonald's Videogame*, by Molleindustria, where the player manages all aspects of McDonald's food production, from raising and slaughtering cattle to administering corporate offices. She bribes officials, destroys rainforest, and utilizes other questionable business practices in order for the company to succeed.

It is possible for the game to serve different ends, indeed ones opposite to those its creator wishes to support. If value is placed on industriousness, problem solving, and the entrepreneurial spirit, a player could very easily

sympathize with the enemy. By striving against innumerable setbacks, she could witness the difficulties of maintaining a business and admire those who are able to thrive and to build a prospering brand. Yet this is exactly what the authors do not want. Their sympathies lie with the acres of viable land ruined, the decimated indigenous populations, and all those who are exploited by the ruthless company.

McDonalds certainly has a dubious reputation when it comes to human and environmental accountability. That is not the issue. The question is whether or not this game accomplishes the goal of increased awareness and subsequent activism. Measured on these terms, it falls quite short. Those who already sympathize with the cause do not need to be recruited; those who require conversion are likely to miss the point and simply enjoy the challenge of the God game. Either way, possibility, creativity, and critical thought are fundamentally eschewed. Even though the game purports progressive, liberatory goals, its message is entirely predetermined and made to be consumed, not to be contemplated.

While Molleindustria believes that the form of the videogame is one of the most important in contemporary society and needs to be harnessed for political purposes, its stated objective offers little more than an ambivalent account of games. On the Molleindustria website the group states,

Molleindustria aims to reappropriate video games as a popular form of mass communication. Our objective is to investigate the persuasive potentials of the medium by subverting mainstream video gaming clichè. Anyway you can just play this stuff without thinking too much about it.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> From the Molleindustria website, <http://www.molleindustria.org/en/home>,

This remark may be flippant or facetious, but it contains more than a grain of truth. Molleindustria is using tried and true rhetorical techniques, such as those found in *Street Fighter* and *Sim City*, to support its political agenda. The format of these games is complicit with the very machine they are attempting to subvert. By mimicking games that do not emphasize critical thought and, indeed, suppress it, they are using the same methods as the very system they wish to destroy. Ironic commentary or no, the game still holds the power in this relationship, not the player.

One may parse this relationship in terms of Actor-Network Theory and its insistence on the agency of non-human actants. The game offers “interessement” in the form of familiar work experiences and is thus able to easily “enroll” players as laborers. Even if the labor is purportedly progressive, the workers still function passively or receptively and are not mobilized to change real conditions of labor.

The founder of Molleindustria, Paulo Pedercini claims to be a ludologist; in other words, he is interested in the form of videogames and believes their power is in their underlying structure. It is puzzling, then, that he chooses not to change that structure or make it more active and creative. Instead, he maintains the typical relationship of passive consumer/player to active instructor/game. The “progressive” content is merely a new skin or façade on a reactionary model of game interaction.

This discrepancy explains why anti-advergaming are not generally

successful in critically engaging players or inviting critique of the actual conditions of later-modern labor. Anti-advergaming uses the same hierarchical structures that have encouraged passivity in mainstream games. Writers for the online gaming magazine *The Escapist* have commented on the inconsistency and failure of anti-advergaming, noting how playing *The McDonald's Game*, for instance, made them crave fast food.

Jared Newman, author of the article "Persuasion is Futile," says

By all measures, *McDonald's Videogame* is a good anti-advergame. Players witness the restaurant's misdeeds through a set of rules, offering an explanation of the problem unlike any other medium. But honestly, it hasn't quelled my desire for the \$1 McChicken sandwich."<sup>54</sup>

Subversive advertising, including earlier culture jamming such as in the magazine *Adbusters*, fails to affect any real change because it is meeting corporate rhetoric with more rhetoric.

Another example of this failure is the PETA game *Super Chick Sisters*, where the goal is to rescue Pamela Anderson from a robot spider with the head of Colonel Sanders. The game is based on the iconic Super Mario Bros., a format familiar to most internet users, even non-gamers. Joel Bartlett, PETA's marketing manager, said, "People don't want serious news conferences – they want to be entertained."<sup>55</sup> If the true goal of the game is to make people think

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<sup>54</sup> Jared Newman, "Persuasion is Futile: The Trouble With Anti-Advergaming," *The Escapist* (19 February 2008). [http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue\\_137/2938-Persuasion-is-Futile](http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue_137/2938-Persuasion-is-Futile), last accessed 8 April 2008.

<sup>55</sup> Chris Lavigne, "Super Chick Sisters and the Rise of the Message Game," *The Escapist* (18 December 2007). [http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue\\_128/2725-Super-](http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue_128/2725-Super-)

about animals, it seems to come up short. However, if it is a branding move that uses traditional means to increase exposure of PETA itself, the game is on target. The game's designer, Karen Nilsen says, "I believe videogames are like humor. When you get it right, you'll get your audience to like you before they even realize what you are saying."<sup>56</sup> The designer realizes that the manufacture of mindless allies is the goal and that how she conscripts players is unimportant. As with any draft, thinking is not required; all that is needed is compliance.

Kentucky Fried Chicken utilizes grotesque and objectionable practices in their pursuit of prosperity,<sup>57</sup> however *Super Chick Sisters* does not expose the underlying structures of domination. Instead, it reinforces them by maintaining an intellectually passive role on the part of the player. By basing the game on *Super Mario Bros*, designers made the game feel familiar and created a comfortable, nostalgic atmosphere. By stressing catchy "main ingredient is cruelty"-type slogans, the game works as an ad for PETA and as an unthinking repetition of vegan catechism. The game is even less innovative than *The McDonalds Videogame*, which incorporates at least a nod to the process through which McDonalds exploits workers and the environment. *Super Chick Sisters* is

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Chick-Sisters.2, last accessed 8 April 2008.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Videos of animal cruelty abound on the internet, such as a tape released in 2004 where an employee of a meat processing company from which KFC purchased poultry, swings live chickens by the neck into a wall. There are numerous examples of chickens being scalded to death, debeaked, and otherwise mistreated. The following YouTube video shows chickens at a Tyson's factory having their wings broken while still alive. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPaxE9ouHpl>, last accessed 29 April, 2008.

not more than a slightly grotesque mask for a commonplace game. The addition of bloody KFC buckets is merely an aesthetic flourish and not a provocation to either thought or action.

Ayşe Binay, in her 2005 doctoral dissertation, explores the efficacy of “subvertising” in damaging well-established brands. She concludes that subvertisements are “unintentionally and unexpectedly working in favor” of the brand.<sup>58</sup> She conducted interviews with viewers of Absolut ads and anti-Absolut ads and gauged how the subversive ads changed (or did not change) beliefs. She says,

We found that attitudes toward either Absolut advertising stimuli positively affect brand attitude after exposure. Although two out of three subvertisements had negative correlations with brand attitude after exposure, the cumulative effect for subvertisements was positive and similar to the effect of original advertisements. As a result it is possible to say that brand attitude effects of subvertisements are similar to the effects of original advertisements.<sup>59</sup>

Viewers who saw both ads were likely to assign positive valence to all of the ads, even those that were spoofs or satire of the product, suggesting that passive viewers imbibe information passively and thus never become politically motivated actants. The subvertisements that purport to foment change in fact uphold the status quo. They address viewers using the same methods as traditional advertising and do not stimulate change in the standard picture of production and consumption.

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<sup>58</sup> Ayşe Binay, *Investigating the anti-consumerism movement in North America [electronic resource] : the case of adbusters*. Doctoral dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin. Available electronically from <http://hdl.handle.net/2152/953>.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 79.

Similarly, anti-advergaming often have an effect diametrically opposed to their intention, functioning as viral ads for the products they wish to vilify. A viral ad or game is circulated primarily by word of mouth and uses previously defined social networks for its propagation. For instance, emailing a friend a link to the website for *Subservient Chicken*, a Burger King promotion, may expose her to the marketing campaign. The site features a man in a chicken suit who will perform various commands for the viewer. She will view the site and pass it on to others. This type of marketing is circulated by the viewers themselves and can reach millions of people. The sites are typically humorous and seem to be playful, but they are functional extensions of the brand.

Games, such as *Cold Stone City*, that display the procedural rhetoric intrinsic to videogames are more open about their purpose and means. However, they provide only a brief moment for critical thought about the structure of such rhetoric before the player is whisked back to her real work. On one hand, by hinting at the possibilities of ludic structure, games can begin to disrupt play based on exploitive labor practices. On the other hand, one of the many problems with this scenario is that too much stress is put on the game itself and not enough is put on the player. Games such as *Cold Stone City* and *The McDonald's Videogame* adhere to a didactic strategy similar to *World of Warcraft* by providing a ready-made "message" instead of an open or creative one.

I am not suggesting that games should have no aim. As I said earlier, play does and should have a purpose. That purpose need not be bounded by the fancies of game creators; I am not interested in providing a formula for "proper"

game design. I am interested in how the spirit of play can be utilized in any game to promote critical thought. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say a spirit of play, for play is multifarious. Its resistance to totality is part of its broader significance and social import. Play's many aspects include the game of chance, the contest of will or of skill, and make-believe. By channeling play, individuals can avoid being repressed by hegemonic structures that seek to control them.

Ideally, a knowing player is able to maintain her joyful otherness in the game without eliminating her outside self. She takes the form of the playing child who creates and maintains fictions but does not become overwhelmed by them. Elements of this player can also be seen in the ritual worker who knows which neighbor is behind which mask, but uses the ecstasy of play to allow her to experience a life apart from the recognized norm. Huizinga alleges that acting up the part, or playing, can prompt an expansion of the self that may be experienced as magical or religious. The expansion is reflective. My player realizes the power that make-believe has in creating truth and reflects on the distinctions and gaps between her "real" and "play" lives.

I do not attribute some kind of supreme omniscience to my ideal player or to the ritual masqueraders that inspire her. Neither do I claim heretofore-unknown insight into the state of mind of original practitioners of sorcery. I do suggest that they are not the backwards ignoramuses that some sociologists (including Roger Caillois, established theoretician of play) allege. Caillois states that mimicry, one of his four types of play, stands squarely in the way of



civilization.<sup>60</sup> He says,

Wearing of masks permits Dionysian societies to reincarnate (and feel imbued with) powers and spirits, special energies and gods. It covers a primitive type of culture founded, as has been shown, on the powerful association of pantomime with ecstasy. Spread over the entire surface of the planet, it seems to be a false solution, obligatory and fascinating, prior to slow, painful, deliberate, and decisive social progress. The birth of civilization means the emergence from this impasse.<sup>61</sup>

According to Caillois, the fatal combination of mimicry and vertigo prevent civilization from progressing. It is only when competition and chance enter the picture that culture flourishes.<sup>62</sup> Before such a situation arises, superstition and ignorance rule. The shaman and ritualist deceive their congregation with illusions and force them into subservience through terror. Only weak-minded individuals who do not realize that their beliefs are mere confabulation could possibly participate in such trickery.

In Caillois' picture of primitive society, the self is disjointed and can do little but mimic the imaginary powers that it fears. People are not yet really individuals, for they lack clear-cut distinctions between self and other. They are incapable of the unifying thought that defines a person as a unique totality and thus cannot hope to create cultural artifacts that stand the test of time. Caillois' ideal player is

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<sup>60</sup> The remaining categories are *ilinx* or vertigo, *agon* or contest, and *alea* or chance.

<sup>61</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 99.

<sup>62</sup> Caillois' categories are interesting heuristics effectively describing different aspects of play. I am interested primarily in how what he terms *agon* and the combination of *mimicry* and *ilinx* can be used as a means of reflective thought. The categories of *ilinx* (by itself) and *alea* certainly play a role in the development and consumption of videogames, however, they lack the intentional character that I wish to harness for my ludic thinker.

the bourgeois subject, defined by his separateness from nature and natural energies. This individual contributes to society not by blurring the boundaries between self and other, but by insisting on his unification in the face of the unknown. Progress, in this model, is defined by the subject's separation from the unfamiliar and his commitment to the rational uncovering of facts. The rational agent is directly opposed to the primitive individual who does not rely on reasoned, factual explanations.

His parsimonious view of make-believe and altered states of consciousness stands opposed, and in response, to Huizinga's proposal that play brings about civilization. Caillois believes that vertiginous make-believe is irrational and a detriment to the development of serious culture. His attempt to reveal play's underlying configuration reifies it into standardized (and thus conquerable) units. Caillois is mistrustful of happenings that do not appear to supplement man's advancement.

While Horkheimer and Adorno are certainly not proponents of superstition and fear, they recognize that the quantifying impulse of the hyperrational method is equally debilitating and is often used in the service of repression. They discuss how rationality attempts to do away with primitive beliefs, often at great cost.

Enlightenment detected a fear of the demons through whose effigies matter was finally to be controlled without the illusion of immanent powers or hidden properties. For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 3.

When people become little more than numbers in an actuary's chart, they are easily exploited and disposed of. Rationality's dark side induces as much fear as any shaman's tranced pronouncements.

In the Enlightenment ideal, the individual's reason prevails and prevents him from succumbing to the fervor of an ecstatic state. Ecstasy is not productive, and Caillois has claimed from the beginning that, "Play is an occasion of pure waste," in which nothing useful occurs or is produced.<sup>64</sup> Even as he claims that play is unproductive, he praises the conquering of primitive impulses that prevent meaningful, enduring culture from being created. This contradiction reveals a fissure in Caillois' theory and the Enlightenment ambivalence towards play.

He dismisses primitive peoples because they do not subscribe to the logic he finds central to civilization. However, these peoples perform a complex negotiation of identity that is nigh impossible in contemporary (enlightened) society. Instead of taking the self to be a given, they explore, through ritual ecstasy, the possibility of being a spirit, an animal, an inanimate thing. In this way, they investigate the chasm between subject and object that exists in instrumentally rationalized, bourgeois society.

### **The Ludic Thinker**

In place of a full interpenetration of work and play, which often destroys both, what I seek is an enlightened player or ludic thinker. This can be read as

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<sup>64</sup> Caillois, *Man*, 5.

the mingling that I disavow, but it has a very different purpose and means.

Retaining play as an alternate sphere is important, for it keeps alive the idea of heterotopia and the possibilities of difference. The temporary autonomous zone of the game allows for consciousness to shift among different registers and for the player subsequently to apply the knowledge she has gleaned to her “real life.”

My ideal player channels the rapture or otherness of ritual play and uses it for critical reflection. By being open to the miscellaneous nature of experience instead of constantly in command of it, my player navigates the complex terrain of subject and object. She does not seek ultimately to dominate either realm, but instead to discover the profound overlaps, inconsistencies, and gaps that make up the game experience. Mimicry is, from childhood, an important means of exploring alternate identities. The ludic thinker uses mimicry (or roleplaying) combined with the vertiginous experience of the videogame to produce innovative thought.

When I look to the ritual player for inspiration, I see a person who is willing to become temporarily alienated from herself (as a unitary being) and to experiment with alternate epistemologies. She retains the knowledge that she is playing, as Huizinga says, “acting up the part,” and does not give in to the siren call of immersion. When a player is fully immersed in a game, she is likely to lose sight of the apparatus and structures of power that are shaping her experience. By remembering that she is playing, she can gain a unique perspective on her actions as well as those of the game in which she plays.

We can call this technique “going meta.” The player, in a sense, plays the

game of the game. This entails viewing the game from outside of its confines and remarking on the rule structure or narrative schema. Sometimes this is in order to improve her score, a phenomenon that I discuss more fully in the following chapter. I am not interested in metagaming as a technique used to win, but instead as one that allows for a critical view of the gaming situation. By taking the player who maintains dual (sometimes dueling) identities as a model, individuals can go beyond mere number crunching and engage in reflection.

There is much discussion in games studies about the degree to which games promote “meta” thinking, for critical approaches or otherwise. John Beck and Mitchell Wade explain this phenomenon as “taking a step back from the immediate situation, analyzing the choices and the odds, and finding the right strategy.”<sup>65</sup> As I have demonstrated with my discussion of *World of Warcraft*, these are all techniques that are directly applicable to contemporary capitalism. Ian Bogost dismisses Beck and Mitchell’s assertion as overly simplistic. He believes that a game’s rhetoric necessarily incorporates its subject matter, and insists that one cannot be separated from its other. Games, to Bogost, are always specific and must be analyzed with form and content in mind.

[T]hey offer meaning and experiences of *particular* worlds and *particular* relationships. The abstract processes that underlie a game may confer general lessons about strategy, mastery, and interconnectedness, but they also remain coupled to a specific topic.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> John Beck and Mitchell Wade, *Got Game: How the Gamer Generation is Reshaping Business Forever* (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 2004). Quoted in Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 240.

<sup>66</sup> Bogost, *Persuasive*, 241.

Games, for Bogost, are pedagogical. To teach well and to reveal the procedural rhetoric of games, abstract ideas should be grounded in specific subject matter.

If one takes the criterion of practical lessons taught as a way to evaluate games aesthetically, Bogost is correct; getting rid of the subject matter minimizes the expressive potential of games as artworks and teaching tools. However, in gameplay, the game itself is only half of the story. The singularity of the game does not imply a singularity of interpretations available to players. In game forums, multiplicity is readily evident. Different players will see the same game as an epic fantasy realm, a poorly designed combat simulation, or just numbers in a database.

Even if we remember a game's particularity, there are processes present in digital technologies that are related, and often created with reference to, contemporary capital. To deny this correlation is to undervalue the cultural importance of games. I do not suggest that we entirely ignore the subject matter and view such games merely as business textbooks. The setting and specificity of *World of Warcraft* is important to keep in mind as well, for both display a longing for a world shaped directly by play. Going meta does not necessitate the abolition of subject matter; when this occurs it promotes progress only instrumentally. In fact, it is important for the ludic thinker to be able to hold both subject and form in mind simultaneously and not just to focus on the economic structures the games mimic.

Bogost offers the model of "procedural literacy" as a remedy for uncritical consumption of games. He quotes Michael Mateas' definition.

By procedural literacy I mean the ability to read and write processes, to engage procedural representation and aesthetics, to understand the interplay between the culturally-embedded practice of human meaning-making and technically-mediated processes.<sup>67</sup>

Bogost goes further to say that one “should use such an understanding to interrogate, critique, and use *specific* representations of *specific* real or imagined processes.” I agree that understanding processes is an important first step towards “going meta,” however, the emphasis that he puts on specificity is dubious.

Bogost is a proponent of Serious Games, a movement that wishes to use games for training and teaching purposes. It makes sense that in order to learn something specific, one needs to interact with something specific. However, if the goal is not learning a predetermined lesson, as it is with his game *Cold Stone Creamery: Stone City*, specificity loses its primacy. The broad-ranged critical apprehension of games that I am interested in does not necessitate particular subject matter to encourage thought. In fact, I doubt that critical thought is actually the outcome of any of Bogost’s projects. Internalizing techniques is emphasized more strongly in his work and it seems that, as for the beautiful and unique ice cream worker, the nod to critical thought is negligible.

The ludic thinker uses the techniques of play to dissect games, as opposed to the procedurally literate player, who may understand the structure in which he is trapped but still have little hope of critiquing. A game such as Bogost’s *Take Back Illinois* purports to expose the logic of games. Unfortunately, it falls into the same trap as the anti-advergame and subvertisement. The laws are only as transparent

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 245.

as they were before one began playing and the message being “critiqued” is often simply consumed by the player. The critical thought one is supposed to gain is predetermined by the game; thus a game about laws reveals how arbitrary laws are. Any time a game is didactic or has a particular lesson, it has begun to shut itself away from engaging reflection. Additionally, one does not even need to play the game in order to comprehend its message. Bogost is interested in explaining what videogames teach; I am suggesting that the proper question is, “what can players *learn* from games?”

I can describe methods through which my ideal player aspires to innovation, but by her very nature, it would be unjust to finalize or stabilize her. To begin, the player does not become lost or immersed in games. She recognizes that the persona she temporarily inhabits is an alternate and she does not lose herself. Doing so would allow the game to play her, when she should be reclaiming the active role in the relationship. So many writers extol the virtues of successful immersion in games and, truthfully, it can be an enjoyable experience. However, enjoyment for its own sake is not the goal of the ludic thinker. She is committed to recognizing the vexed nature of identity in virtual games. She may derive pleasure from this knowledge, but it is a mindful pleasure.

Ludic thought may still seem a hazy and rickety proposition, so I will narrate a possible game encounter. The player John has a paladin in *WoW*, Girard. While playing Girard, John notices how many visuals and icons in the game are typically accepted without question. This is mainly a problem when one



is forced to remember a large number of commands, and John does not think much about it until his character meets another character, Kralnor, whose player lives in Korea. After Girard suggests that he and Kralnor spar, a flag descends from the sky and a duel begins. Girard eventually wins the duel, at which point they attempt to discuss their respective strategies and techniques. They have a stammering conversation, partially in English, partially in leetspeak<sup>68</sup>, and partially in emoticons, wherein Girard discovers just how foreign the typically accepted icons are to his new friend. All of the images, commands, quests, and even colors used have a different valence for Kralnor. John then contemplates the constructed nature of game iconography, computer programming, interface design, and language more generally. John realizes that he himself would not even understand all of the icons and actions that Girard grasps easily.

It is not the game itself that has taught him about the arbitrary nature of language, but his active encounter with another player. The game and its specific content played a role, but it was the interaction between lively players and subsequent contemplation on this interaction that was significant. The agonistic quality of the duel provided an exchange that John was able to capture for reflection. He was, simultaneously, both Girard and himself and able to operate in the world and also to reflect upon the peculiarity of language. Whereas the procedurally literate player always seems to be playing “as himself,” the ludic thinker applies the principles of mimicry and ilinx to give his reflection a decidedly playful spirit. Additionally, procedural literacy stops when a player has identified

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<sup>68</sup> See Introduction, footnote fourteen.

the structure in which she plays. Ludic thought goes further, using actual play to induce reflection unforeseen and unforeseeable by the game.

Ludic thought is well suited for our everyday interactions with technology; since these interactions are so often modeled on an image of play, recapturing play's spirit is more important than ever. Games and technologies invite passivity; by using techniques of active play to decipher games, we mediate the spell of immobility that they cast. A large part of this activity is due to the agonistic character of play. The struggles that occur between and among individuals, and between an individual and her environment, are crucial for promoting thought and action.

Reflection is often set opposite to action and yet, for the ludic thinker, action is vital. Game theorists/designers often say that for a game to be successful it must make the player feel as if her choices matter. There are various strategies and algorithms that give the illusion of choice or individuality, such as when a non-player character responds to a character according to her earlier statements or demeanor. Because the game is a finite, discrete entity, there must be some limit to the choices available. However, if a player simply accepts this as the final word, she forfeits her agency. If she consents to be driven by the menu alone, the player maintains her passivity in the face of hegemonic control.

Ludic thought is one way to keep from being imprisoned by the menu. Gas, the gas station attendant in David Cronenberg's *ExistenZ*, embodies the fear that digital technologies will create complacent, immobile consumers. Gas

says that Allegra Geller, a game designer, has changed his life. Before playing her games, he was merely the owner of a gas station. The character Ted Pikul reminds him that he is *still* the owner of a gas station. “Only on the most pathetic level of reality,” he replies. In his mind, he is an Art God, creative and omnipotent. Gas is a victim of his own passivity; he may be active in the game world, but is inert otherwise. Thinking and acting in the spirit of play may help individuals to rediscover their capacity for change. The following chapter discusses this phenomenon at length, using a particular game, *Shadow of the Colossus*, as a case study of the process of reflective play.

Ludic thought focuses on the inventive aspects of play instead of those determined by chance. Caillois scolds Huizinga for failing to discuss games of chance. While the aleatory is certainly an important part of life, overemphasizing games of chance (and the players that abandon themselves to them) does not place sufficient stress on the player as an agent. It is the desire to be free of responsibility or choice that draws people to games of chance; this is not the player in whom I am interested. Structures that allow individuals to rely on chance, such as the lottery, are vehicles of repression and false hope. Videogames are very rarely games of chance. They can, however, make players similarly passive. It is the job of the ludic thinker to keep games from making her into a passive object that merely follows the mechanical steps necessary to complete a task or consumes a game’s message unproblematically. Games require the input of players and the vicissitudes of interaction.

I want to emphasize the importance of player thought and action in games

as ongoing processes that are constantly changing the game experience. Certain games are more likely to provoke critical reflection but, in the end, the game alone will not thrust us into enlightenment. Games must be met with socially engaged philosophy in order to experience the dialectics of their agency. The question remains, “Why would a player choose to be engaged instead of an automaton?” This boils down to, “Why would a person bother to think about anything?” The answer to this is simple and is the same as for any object: she must want to. Critical thought is not required for base existence and does not serve instrumental rationality. It is, to most contemporary subjects, a hard sell.

Adorno notes:

Anyone who defends a cause deemed obsolete and superfluous by the spirit of the age places himself in the most disadvantageous position. His arguments sound halfhearted. “Yes but...,” “Consider, however...” he says, as though trying to talk his audience into something they don't want. Anyone who doesn't want to be dissuaded from philosophy must take this misfortune into account. He must know that philosophy is no longer applicable to the techniques of mastering one's life – techniques in both the literal and figurative senses – with which philosophy was once so closely entwined.<sup>69</sup>

Such is the philosophers' lament. How does thought arise, however, if not through philosophy, broadly understood?

Looking at a painting or listening to a fugue does not automatically produce enlightened or critical thought. Why ought games? In order for reflection to commence, players must be open to the idea that the game might change them. If not, so-called progressive games can never rouse them from

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<sup>69</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Why Still Philosophy,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 5-6.

their slumber. The games should not program the player with the directive of what or how to reflect, for that defeats the purpose of the reflection itself. To begin, what players need is the desire to look for something outside their quotidian experience. If this is incited by aspects of a game, all the better. However, social change does not arise merely from play, but from thought.

The question of implementation will undoubtedly arise. This is not a technique that can be taught definitively in classrooms or a 12-step program that miraculously cures all. It is a constant struggle of the player against the game structures and often against herself. Going meta all of the time is an impossible task. Even the most committed academic will not be able to subvert the pacifying, immersive tendencies of games and other digital media all of the time. It is a process that occurs in fits and starts, piecemeal. Underneath it all, though, the premise is very simple and can be communicated very simply: don't let the game play you.<sup>70</sup> This implies all of the activity and thought that I have emphasized as well as the repressive character of much contemporary media. We can only do justice to this message if it remains a suggestion and not a command. Once it becomes an obligatory dictum, it has destroyed itself.

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<sup>70</sup> Conferences, forums, viral videos, word of mouth, and email are all appropriate media through which to transmit the proposition of ludic thought.

## Chapter Two

### A Refusal to Play Along: Videogaming Beyond Distraction

I spent most of the last chapter describing how videogames embody the most pernicious aspects of the culture industry. People often theorize play as a realm of freedom, devoid of social consequences. This is not the case and only by studying the intricacies of acculturation in games can we begin to unravel the myth of total freedom. Most games create coercive totalities that support the status quo and reactionary political agendas. Progressive games fare little better, for they make many of the same false assumptions about the role of the art object in a free society. Videogame theory often relies on and promotes immersion in games, which advocates unproblematic identification with characters and their situations. If games encourage immersion over more engaged, thoughtful practices, they discourage players from theorizing about their own playing in ways that challenge the naturalness of immersive involvement.

In an attempt to circumvent the accusations of triviality typically directed at videogames, theorists in the nascent field of game studies have suggested many different approaches to the question of the “serious game.” Some feel that this is a contradiction in terms and that games should be lauded for their opposition to normative labor practices; others wish to promote games that raise social consciousness and spur players into action in the real world. The “Serious Games Initiative” (SGI)<sup>71</sup> represents the latter and many academics have

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<sup>71</sup> *The Serious Games Initiative*, <http://www.seriousgames.org/index2.html>, accessed 30 March 2008.

hastened to promote “useful” and “progressive” games.<sup>72</sup> This move, however, promotes praxis before there is actually theory sufficient to support it, call for socially responsible games in the absence of a thorough understanding of how these virtual realms change our appreciation of what “action” even means. I argue that at this juncture, games theorists<sup>73</sup> should consider games in a broader, more conceptual space that postulates how videogames function as aesthetic objects. Only after this has been begun can we discuss a future for progressive gaming.

The most intriguing measures through which to understand these objects can be found in writings on aesthetics by Theodor Adorno. His dialectical approach to artworks offers many different avenues of exploration for comprehending the social and aesthetic nature of games and their relationship with the larger world. Only after examining the complex, enigmatical nature of game objects can we begin to theorize about how individuals may use them for progressive ends. This first step will allow players an entry point into philosophizing about their own playing and its subsequent impact on the larger

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<sup>72</sup> Games theorists such as Alexander Galloway, Gonzalo Frasca, and Ian Bogost, to name only a few, have all called for games that direct the player towards critical intervention in the outside world. See Frasca, Gonzalo “Videogames of the Oppressed,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 85.

<sup>73</sup> As opposed to “game theorists” who are mathematicians interested in the economics of game interaction. Game theorists’ primary work is to determine winning strategies for various games, most often seen in the context of economic and political gain as well as in military simulation.

world.<sup>74</sup>

### **Immersion and Critical Thought**

The most fruitful place to begin such a study is not with the immersive aspects of games (either narratological or visual) but instead the sites where continuity and verisimilitude fail, where the logics of progress and stability are ruptured. By investigating the inconsistencies and lacunae in games, players read beyond the predetermined rules and purpose and discover aspects of the games that the developers strive to conceal. These aporias are often most visible when they are contrasted with a prior state of immersion or captivation. When the flow of a game is broken it can reveal why and how one has lost oneself in playing. In the majority of games today, the goal is to create a seamless, unproblematic world that can completely encompass players.

Games such as *World of Warcraft*, with its rigid structure and absorbing play experience, do just this. It is difficult to find sites of rupture in games like these that are not subsequently explained away (as loading screens, glitches, etc.) The truth that games reveal may, in the end, be a negative one: a list of qualities that describe our consent to domination and the insidious advance of exchangeability. However, there are sites where this absolute control falters, creating breaks or gaps that allow players to think, so to speak, outside the Xbox. If we players want to go beyond mere distraction, what we must cultivate is a

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<sup>74</sup> This, of course, makes the assumption that people want to think about things they do instead of assuming that they do them out of pure, unsullied freedom of will.



dynamic refusal to play along.

Adorno explains that art performs a similar refusal. Artworks are complex objects that require dialectical interpretation, for they never commit wholly to one reading; there are gaps that resist total categorization. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* provides techniques for investigating the gaps that are present in artworks. It is a short leap from artworks to other cultural objects, and applying Adorno's ideas to videogames allows players to appreciate them as aesthetic objects. *Aesthetic Theory* situates art objects as catalysts for contemplation on the viewer's place in contemporary society. It will seem quite contrary that I utilize Adorno to revitalize gaming instead of simply to condemn it. Adorno realized that artworks were the crystallization of many struggles: form and content, objectivation and ideal, interest and autonomy. These conflicts can also be seen within games, to various ends. Games may (and often do) promote complete affirmation of contemporary consumptive practices, but they may also radiate with the power of the enigmatic, a force that encourages contemplation. By developing strategies of play similar to meditation on art, players can appreciate the games more fully.

Videogames may seem to be the complete opposite of artworks; they are designed as a diversion, not as art. It is dangerous, however, to pigeonhole games in terms of what they are "supposed" to do, for this obscures the valuable information they contain about how people relate to digital technologies. Just as a painter may have little insight into what his work represents, developers do not have the final word as to a game's meaning. Instead of "playing for the plot," or

succumbing to what the artists' intention is, it is best to focus on the potential that games have for igniting critical consciousness.

Even "fine" art can never be completely rid of its associations with the non- or pre-artistic. Art that attempts to erase its origins in debased forms is mendacious; it is never ahistorical or entire unto itself. Adorno states,

Forms of the so-called lowbrow arts, such as the circus tableau, in which at the finale all the elephants kneel on their hind legs, while on each trunk stands a gracefully posed, impassive ballerina, are unintentional archetypal images of what the philosophy of history deciphers in art; from its disdained forms much can be gleaned of art's secret which is so well hidden back of its current level of development, as if art had never been otherwise.<sup>75</sup>

Art's secret is its unbreakable connection to society. If it claims to be wholly a part of society, it loses its autonomy and becomes merely an object. Yet art that claims to be pure, with no ties to prior culture, will be pointless. In our contemporary moment, the videogame is the circus, in all its gaudy, costumed splendor. Games are popular entertainment and often revel in their mass appeal. We are faced with the choice of just admitting shamefully to the existence of the unwanted lowbrow in art, or to studying why this aspect of life is so important.

Games, quotidian objects, embody our everyday fascinations and fears.

Through them, players perform dramatic rituals that act out these anxieties.

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<sup>75</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 287. Adorno, 81: "Important artworks nevertheless seek to incorporate this art-alien layer. When, suspected of being infantile, it is absent from art, when the last trace of the vagrant fiddler disappears from the spiritual chamber musician and the illusionless drama has lost the magic of the stage, art has capitulated."

What is so remarkable about games is the combination of interactivity and temporality that is absent from other media. Games use various techniques of time management to influence players. Play time and game time are measured on multiple registers; players must be constantly aware of the temporal shifts occurring in the game if they are to succeed. *Resident Evil*, for example, forces players to react with precision if they are to avoid being eaten by zombies. There are a number of games in this series and even the early ones, with little graphical fidelity, succeed in producing a tense and responsive player. If she cannot act quickly enough, she may become frantic and decrease her chances for survival. *Resident Evil* is a fast-paced environment that exploits players' fears about time to compel action on the part of the player.

Disturbing or skewing time can have a traumatic effect on individuals; this concern is certainly not new. Adorno states in *Minima Moralia*:

...truly terrifying are the sleepless nights when time seems to contract and run fruitlessly through our hands...In this state of complete powerlessness the individual perceives the time he has left as a brief reprieve.<sup>76</sup>

In this passage, comprehension of time turns into a nightmare where the dreamer is manipulated by an outside influence against which she is impotent. A similar anxiety over agency is displayed and conquered in the game *Max Payne* through the introduction of what is called "bullet time." While playing the game, the character accrues the ability to retard time for a short period, much in the form of a slow motion action sequence, the better to shoot his enemies.

After using the ability, the meter is reset and the player must wait again to

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<sup>76</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia; Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2002), 165.

use it. It is a cycle of collection and dispersion that functions as a disciplinary method of controlling the player and his actions. Under the guise of total control, the player can manipulate time, but only with the permission of the program. If he acquiesces to the rule format of the game, he will be rewarded by the ability to manipulate one of the most significant structuring principles of contemporary life. His agency is not unlimited, certainly, but his capability as a motive force within the gameworld becomes manifest through his aptitude at influencing the flow of the game. He does not stand outside of time or negate it, he is able to use time to his advantage in order to achieve his goals.

Literally, the player uses bullet time in order to best the thugs on his tail; but slowing the march of time references something more. Digital artist Victoria Vesna, in a discussion of time, art, and computing, points out that “Art, traditionally a resort of meditative stillness, became preoccupied with motion early in the twentieth century, and we are inheriting a world that is trying to catch up to computing speed.”<sup>77</sup> In *Max Payne*, the player is attempting to recapture the speed and time that he has lost to the computer. By slowing the game down, he is able to affect change in a way that has eluded him in actuality since the beginning of modernity. Anxiety over being powerless to the pull of time is mitigated through his ability to halt time at will. The enemies controlled by the computer are simply stand-ins for the computer itself and the fetishization of speed that it has cultivated. Controlled and created through AI programming,

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<sup>77</sup> Victoria Vesna, “Community of People with No Time: Collaboration Shifts.” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 252.

they are slivers of the larger mechanism. Thus, anxiety over technology and the strictures it has created for contemporary subjects governed by the clock is assuaged by the player's temporary dominance over time itself. This is, of course, ironic, for all the while he is still subject to the computer's authority. The illusion of mastery is created and allows the player effectively to release his tension without critical intervention.

That is not to say that there is no possibility for serious thought in the game, simply that the provocative gaps that stimulate this thought have been so well hidden (in the guise of goals and triumph) that it is difficult to penetrate the surface of the game in order to reevaluate how we utilize -- and are utilized by -- time. The game functions so seamlessly that we become immersed in it instead of gaining perspective on the medium and our own playing. The seductive ironic-noir atmosphere of the game hints at the existence of a brutal, uncaring universe. There are billboards that advertise freedom and redemption through products that, in reality, make junkies of users. Players of *Max Payne* are meant to see the destruction that comes from blindly believing in corporate promises. The clever images are designed to reveal the detrimental effect of advertising on consumers. However, such subversive advertisements function like a wink on the part of the game creator and do not necessitate a critical change in worldview. Adorno:

For the culture industry is not at all disturbed by the idea that one of its creations are serious, that everything is simply merchandise and entertainment. Long ago it made this a part of its own ideology. Among scripts analyzed, several consciously play at being kitsch, and they give the less naïve viewer a knowing wink as though saying that they do not take themselves seriously, they are not that stupid; they take the viewer,

as it were, into their confidence by flattering his intellectual vanity. But a shameful deed is made no better by denouncing itself as such; one must do the offense the honor it refuses itself and take it at its own word – the one that sinks into the viewers.<sup>78</sup>

Such moments of self-consciousness seem to be built into the architecture of the game, already accounted for by the institution and conscripted as an alibi for the game's function as a control device. Thus drained of their critical potential, the "winks" work as window dressing for a store that sells just enough sustenance to let the player live to play another day.

By displaying a dystopian present, *Max Payne* hints at the problems that a lack of critical thinking will cause. Here the question of immersion versus engagement arises, a question that has repercussions for the construction and study of game time. If a player takes *Max Payne's* cues about advertising and corporate culture seriously, she may become distanced from the narrative of the game and pause to consider it as a cultural object. If she takes the billboards as just another part of the scenery, she will remain immersed in the game that becomes normalized or transparent.

Examining problems that come with immersive texts will allow me to propose a reading strategy for games based on consciousness of skewed or manipulated time. By reflecting on the shifts and irregularities in time as games portray it, we will gain insight into how our desire for immediacy shapes our interaction with technological devices.

A number of theorists offer descriptions of how time functions in various

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<sup>78</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Television as Ideology," *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 68.

games. Mark Wolf, for example, offers the difference between “game time” and “real time” and accounts for cyclic time in games and the pressure of the ticking clock.<sup>79</sup> Ludologists Jesper Juul<sup>80</sup> and Markku Eskelinen<sup>81</sup> have both charted different modes of time used in games and suggested classifications for them. Eskelinen attempts to recast the traditional narratological categories Order, Frequency, Speed, Duration, Time of Action, and Simultaneity as open ludological structures that create space for play and dynamic interaction. Order refers to completing tasks in a certain way in order to propel the game; frequency deals with how often a player repeats certain activities; speed is the variable that sets the pace of action; duration defines the temporal limit within which any activity takes place; time of action deals with when a player may or may not act on the game state; and simultaneity explores how events may be layered within the game structure. Temporal manipulation is used to strategize and to choose the best move. Games are active processes within which the player performs; she understands time as a means to win the game. It is not merely an unchanging structuring device, but a fluid principle that is encountered and often manipulated by the player as she moves through the game.

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<sup>79</sup> Mark Wolf, *The Medium of the Video Game* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 77-91. In chapter 4, Wolf gives an analysis of game time that describes mostly older videogames and compares/contrasts them with the time of film, a choice that is problematic at best.

<sup>80</sup> Jesper Juul, “Introduction to Game Time,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

<sup>81</sup> Markku Eskelinen, “Towards Computer Game Studies,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

Time shifts and temporal registers change during the game as “play time” converges and diverges from “event time.” This can be very flexible and games consume time in myriad ways. The temporal scale the game uses may not line up with real time and must be “mapped” differently according to the type of game. Simulation games such as *SimCity* or *Civilization* may compress years into a minute, while *Max Payne* uses bullet time to suspend moments and expand game time beyond the limits of real time. First-person shooters, such as *Counterstrike*, seem directly to conflate real time and event time, though this mapping is not as exact as Juul’s criteria might have us believe. If one is performing an action such as shooting an opponent who is playing half a world away, one’s movements certainly seem simultaneous with the character’s, an illusion that makes game time appear to be indistinguishable from real time.

### **Like Unto a God**

The quickness of the games’ response promotes a sense of “immediacy” that effaces the electronic medium through which all of the player’s commands pass. A player performs within a game and instigates responses from it that often appear to happen by her will alone. It is only at the moments of breakdown that she may notice the difference and the mediation of the game: when the mouse does not move the cursor, when a key sticks, when a slow processor lags or low-quality graphics card causes jagged edges and images lose their fluidity of motion. Juul does not claim that the different registers line up perfectly, but rather wishes to do away with any gaps or discontinuities in the game, creating a



sensation of time that is complete and immersive.<sup>82</sup> This, for Juul, is the primary goal of theorizing videogames.

Bolter and Grusin examine the rhetoric surrounding the “immediate” or “transparent” in digital culture.<sup>83</sup> They discover that proponents of virtual worlds often claim that the goal should be the complete disappearance of the interface.<sup>84</sup> Such an effacement would allegedly give users a completely intuitive understanding of these new, perfectly formed, realer-than-real worlds. I have already mentioned this phenomenon in chapter one, when I point to *World of Warcraft* and how the controls are supposed to be completely intuitive and not require any specialized knowledge to operate. If we can understand technology without training, then the barriers between us and the data disappear. We can then commune directly with the information and achieve absolute understanding. There is no data loss, no ruptures, no space for alternative interpretation or the unidentifiable. Everything is knowable and unambiguously clear to the viewer; she is in complete control of her relationship with technology and is not being ruled by it.<sup>85</sup> The interdependence of man and machine becomes erased. As we have seen in chapter one, this is a problematic view of human-computer relations to say the least.

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<sup>82</sup> Juul, “Game Time,” 136.

<sup>83</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>85</sup> A Latourian view of this relationship is exceedingly more complex and assigns agency to both parties, regardless if one is “alive” or not.

Obviously, representing humans as subservient to machines (or in a complex dynamic where each, variously, has the upper hand) is not exactly a profitable marketing strategy for game designers. It is far more effective to depict technology as humanity's ultimate triumph over material, a scenario wherein the gamer becomes like unto a god. In this view, machines do our bidding without even being noticed; they are perfect servants. Using these faithful workers, we are able to discern worlds that are "more exciting, lively, and realistic,"<sup>86</sup> than ever before, as Bolter and Grusin describe digital images. Technology becomes less an external substance and more an expression of our pure will to communicate and to conquer the physical world.

In this model, we seem directly to face the contents of digital technologies without the need for a medium. At times, it may appear as though digital technologies have neither physical substrate nor philosophical underpinnings; they become completely naturalized and invisible. Donna Haraway warns us about these "machines made of sunshine"<sup>87</sup> and the webs of power that they obscure when she speaks of the Informatics of Domination in "A Manifesto for Cyborgs." Technologies, when they are miniscule or invisible, seem to be non-threatening. When immediacy rules, the ideological structures that have supported the various practices become even more shadowy and sinister.

Contemporary society's focus on information and coding is an excellent

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<sup>86</sup> Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 23.

<sup>87</sup> Donna Jeanne Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

example of this situation. Computer users very seldom see or even understand the inner workings of their hardware or software and for many users it seems to work seamlessly or “intuitively.” Similarly, instead of building machines, experts create “black boxes” (to borrow a term from science studies and engineering) that appear from the outside to function without regard to internal structures.<sup>88</sup> Once the authority of a machine was undoubtedly visible and its physical presence proved its dominance -- for example, the way that a factory assembly line physically forces people into certain behaviors. New technologies obscure the means by which they dominate subjects; the coercion that was so evident in the factory becomes hidden. Manipulation remains, but its mechanisms are secreted inside the black box.

Novel methods of distributing power have replaced typical hierarchical structures and are obscured by their very novelty. In a society always in search of technological salvation, new objects continue to promise a better, more fulfilling life. Bolter and Grusin discuss our obsession with the new and explain how this fixation cultivates the desire for perfect translation. Their theory of “remediation” pronounces that media have always involved the process of remediating or reworking older forms for their own purposes. We are fascinated,

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<sup>88</sup> According to Wikipedia, the online user-created encyclopedia, “Black box is a technical term for a device or system or object when it is viewed primarily in terms of its input and output characteristics. Almost anything might occasionally be referred to as a black box: a transistor, an algorithm, humans, the Internet.” Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_box](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_box), last modified 25 March 2008, accessed 30 March 2008. I have intentionally retrieved this definition from Wikipedia because, with its alterability, it seems to function as a “white box” where the inner workings are exposed. Whether this is true or simply gives the reader the illusion of foregrounding is up for debate.

then, with a “new” that is not new at all. “For many virtual reality enthusiasts, the computer so far surpasses other technologies in its power to make the world present that the history of earlier media has little relevance...virtual reality (or digital technology in general) completes and overcomes the history of media.”<sup>89</sup> When newness is fetishized in this manner, it seems to become immediate and transparent, leaving little room for critical comprehension.

The authors argue that this struggle over immersion is the central issue at stake in the creation of media objects. They claim that, since the beginning of media production, there has been a dynamic relationship between the search for immediacy and what they call “hypermediacy,” or the acknowledgement and exploitation of creative practices. In a picture aiming directly for immediacy, the artist wishes to erase all trace of his own hand and make the image into a convincing and direct representation of the world. In a hypermediated image, the viewer is meant to recognize that it is indeed an *image* and that it has been created using certain techniques and constraints. In Bolter and Grusin’s subtle logic, both of these lead to a form of immediacy. The first, for it attempts to create a picture without interface with which we can have a direct relationship; the second, for the object *itself* is the real. It no longer refers to anything, but is complete unto itself. By accepting its existence as an entity in the world instead of denying it, it becomes that much more authentic.

For Bolter and Grusin, the fact that immediacy is desirable means that artists are perpetually compelled to refer back to previous media in their own

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<sup>89</sup> Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 24.

work. While one should not appropriate this genealogy as a “nothing new under the sun” dogma, it is helpful to bear it in mind when imagining the historical lineage of interactive media such as games. Though there are distinctly new objects and new techniques for apprehension present in our digital world, they often borrow or steal from older media. This has the effect of making the new seem more familiar, by appealing to fluencies that we mastered long ago. Following this pattern, the cinematic techniques used in games appear in the earliest cinematic products, such as those of the nickelodeon.<sup>90</sup> Such images become structuring devices for reading moving images.

Fluency need not, however, always lead to immediacy. Older imaging techniques (such as cinematography) may be appropriated and force us to engage with the material at hand. This may happen in extremely subtle or sly ways, as in a wink or inside joke, but this moment may be also harnessed for multifaceted engagement with the game. Provoking estrangement through cinema is hardly a new concept. What is innovative is how it pairs with recent developments in interface design to create novel ways of looking and interacting with digital media.

The interface is an integral part of how we work with games. Recognizing the techniques used in game construction and not simply being subject to immersive techniques or the ruse of transparency can propel players towards a

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<sup>90</sup> The nickelodeon was a small movie theater that cost a nickel to enter. It typically engaged a piano or organ to create dramatic music. See J. Yellowlees Douglas and Andrew Hargadon “The Pleasures of Immersion and Interaction,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 202 and Bolter and Gruisin, *Remediation*, 98.

more critical apprehension of their own playing. Identifying the issues that the interface raises is a vital step and will allow the subject to think about both her physical actions (exemplified by controllers and other hardware) and how she relates to the game's visuals more generally (exemplified by screen interface.) Without this step, she may react by reflex and muscle memory and accept the game's ideologies as her own without even realizing it.

On the game designer's side, references to older media may help prevent players' total immersion and uncritical apprehension by breaking up the game's temporal flow, thereby its mediatedness more apparent. Fracturing time disturbs the neat event-to-play time register so prized by Jesper Juul. That Juul desires temporal immersion is evident in his hatred for cinema-style "cut-scenes" often embedded within games, wherein the computer takes over and displays event time that the player cannot direct or challenge. Play time is ruptured by the cinematic interloper and the game suddenly becomes non-gamelike. Juul says that these portions of the game can typically be passed over with little or no consequence since the player is not able to do anything during them anyway. However, most games that employ cut-scenes do so in order to include plot exposition that would otherwise be clunky or impossible to articulate. If the player skips them, it is at her own risk.

Instead of relying on what he sees as outdated cinematic conventions, Juul argues that learning about the past should take place during event time. This may be accomplished by finding artifacts or clues to the history of the world. In this way, the time remains seamless and unscarred by extramedial influences.

Even when loading new screens or levels, there should be no break in the event time that does not correspond to one in play time unless it is framed as a pause or otherwise labeled. A screen that says “loading” thus provides an alibi for a break in play time that does not correspond to one in event time. He views cut-scenes that come between levels of a game as superfluous to both registers. Saving a game and thus breaking event time into more manageable portions is not viewed as a bad thing per se, but does bring with it the problems of decreasing dramatic tension and difficulty of play as well as disrupting immersion.

If one takes basic enjoyment to be the goal of game playing, then succumbing to the illusion of game time is sufficient, and comparable to the desire for an encompassing narrative structure. However, if one desires a deeper understanding of the function of time in games, then it is necessary to have momentary breaks or ruptures wherein one can begin to think about the supposed wholeness of a game and why we desire it. If one only plays games where every moment is “accounted for” by framing or other techniques of continuity, there is little chance of an aperture through which to glimpse the metagame. These cracks exist in all games, though some have perfected the illusion of totality more than others.

It is difficult, for example, to sense them in the complete and convincing world of the MMORPG. In these games, there is no way to save one’s progress and reload at a previous point if something goes wrong. So doing would disrupt the natural flow of time and breach the hull of the game. In the world of a

Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game, many participants share the same consensual hallucination and seem to inhabit, act, and interact within the same space. Because of the social nature of the game and the persistence of the world, everyone is subject to the same schedule and rules. No one save one of the game designers can step outside of those rules.<sup>91</sup> Everyone is subject to the time of the realm and a clock attached to the player's map will remind her of the server's time. There are different servers in different time zones and so the player's realm may not be in her own time. A confusing proposition, to be sure. The overarching rule is to abide by Server Time and thus to agree to live in the time designated by the computer. The time varies between realms, but is always internally consistent.

The artificial consistency of times is a large part of what governs how gameplay proceeds. The speed of combat is one of the most visible sites of time-management. Programmers decide how combat will proceed by changing the speed of various abilities. For example, the speed of shooting an arrow has nothing to do with how fast anyone in the physical world can shoot. It has everything to do with the interconnectedness of combat abilities across classes and the time assigned to each. There is a tactical difference between immediate actions and those that are delayed. Some spells, (whether harming or healing) do not gain their full potency immediately, but transpire over a period of time (damage over time or dots). Others are instantaneous. Many actions in the

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<sup>91</sup> Developers have their own servers and realms on which they test new code and on which they can do as they please. Machinima videos of the wonders of these realms inspire awe in players on the normal servers, though they would not seem substantially different to a non-player.



game have a “cool down” period, meaning that the player must wait a designated amount of time before she can utilize this power again.

This process is supposed to produce a well-matched set of combatants who may have diverse skills, but are restricted by various limitations in order to keep battles interesting and “fair.” All of the possible actions are charted against one another to prevent one class from being “overpowered”, or having an unwarranted advantage. Trying to ascertain what strategic combinations can deliver this advantage is a major pastime of forum participants across the globe. The time it takes to perform a feat is constantly reevaluated by Blizzard (the company that produced *World of Warcraft*) and changed accordingly to maintain the balance of power among classes. They have the final say and decide on what counts as game time.

Players must choose their actions carefully and consider the many temporal roadblocks that have been put in their way. From resurrection sickness (a time of reduced ability after one resurrects) to respawn (how fast slain enemies reappear), time is not on the player’s side. There are many other instances of being “under the clock” such as timed quests and enforced speed of travel.<sup>92</sup> Additionally, there exist special quest areas for groups that are called “instances” where the game shifts from a massively multiplayer game to a multiplayer game. Groups of up to five players are allowed in these areas, but as

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<sup>92</sup> The reward for dedicated play is often seen in the form of a mount. These start relatively slowly and then progress to “epic” speed. A flying mount is also attainable, but the increased functionality is offset by a slightly slower speed. The epic flying mount is in a class by itself.

many groups can enter at a time as they wish. Each will be cordoned off in their own version of the game separated from the rest of the world. Even though they have become physically cloistered, they still function under the overarching server time. The space may seem to be temporarily unique to them, but time is always Blizzard's. All of these point to the fact that the player has punched her timecard and is now working for the game.<sup>93</sup>

Just how much Blizzard controls the clock is evident in the pursuits known as grinding and farming. Grinding (mentioned in chapter two) is the somewhat mindless task of killing beasts (mobs) for the express purpose of gaining experience points. The amount of experience for each creature is determined by the player's current level and can be charted in terms of xp/hour by a commonly installed meter. This process is considered to be tedious and almost a waiting period before one gets back to the "real" game. A delay is built into the system that prevents players from ascending the ranks too quickly (though there are many speed-levelers who do it very quickly and even manuals for purchase that explain their methods.)

Farming is similar in nature. Certain tasks require a large number of an object; playing solely to obtain these items is called farming. A player farms for items such as soul shards or metal ore and is typically performed to obtain items for crafting. Though it is an "illegal" practice, players can purchase gold (using

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<sup>93</sup> Perhaps the apogee of instrumentalization, the Blizzard website will even calculate how long it will take for you to acquire certain gear rewards according to your current progress. In the same vein, add-on meters inside the game will estimate the time until your next level or when your team will win (or lose) on a battleground.

their real life, though equally mediated, credit cards) from various firms on the internet. Accomplished gamers scoff at this lucrative practice. Though few people enjoy the processes of grinding and farming, not spending the amount of time that the company requires is viewed as a sign of low competence. Players work entirely within the preordained system and judge one's merits according to Blizzard's strictures.

Gold farming is a contentious point in *World of Warcraft*, for it signifies that the internal system has somehow "broken down" and players are no longer working with their own capacities and spending their own time. Farming gold is often a process undertaken by what are known as "Chinese gold farmers," a racist, pejorative term used to denigrate the players and their function. The process was said to begin in China, where dormitories of players take turns gaining gold, but now transpires many other places where such labor is cheap. To say that a player has bought gold implies that he is of low "worth" and little skill because he has not proven himself through the required hours of toil. Calling someone a "Chinese gold farmer" is an insult that implies that he is unable to communicate, can only perform menial tasks, that he is exploiting the game for "impure" reasons, and that he is "breaking" the game by allowing people who buy gold to advance unwarrantedly, effectively, to cheat.<sup>94</sup>

Similarly, whole characters may be purchased on auction sites such as eBay. This is considered "illegal" by Blizzard and any accounts found to have

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<sup>94</sup> At a Blizzard conference in 2007, an announcement was made of further measures that would be put in place to stop "Chinese gold farmers;" a cheer went up in the audience at this proclamation.

been involved in such transactions will be deleted. One seller stipulated in his auction description that he was not, indeed, selling his *character*, which would be illegal, but was negotiating a fee for the *time* his labor took to build the character thus skirting the issue and allegedly bartering fairly. Blizzard did not believe that such a view was substantial enough to free him from the end-user agreement.<sup>95</sup>

Labor, time, and money have long been fungible under capitalism. In this instance, however, the company works to crack down on the exploitation of labor power, if only because it takes the control of time out of their hands. By making each player responsible for his own playing time, they maintain the systemic control of time that has been built into the very architecture of the game.

Because the system is so complete, it is very easy to lose track of one's time and play for hours without thought of even eating or sleeping. The game has become immersive in that the player substitutes game time for his own and considers his actions in terms of battle, travel, quest, and respawn instead of categories from the outside world (like breakfast, lunch, and dinner).

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<sup>95</sup> One example of selling characters online can be found at <http://www.news.com.au/entertainment/story/0,23663,22105871-7486,00.html>, last modified 1 July 2007, last accessed 30 March 2008. An ebay store specializing in selling Adenas, the in-game currency for the game *Lineage*, states: "I thought you sell Adenas' - No, we don't, we sell time and labor. Adenas have no value in the real world, it is a copyrighted word owned by NCSOFT. Adena only has value in the game, because it can be used to buy or create in-game things. But Adena takes a lot of time and labor to amass, which have definite value in the real world. Therefore, what we sell is the time and labor expended in performing our service." Their store can be found at <http://stores.ebay.com/SwagVault-Gaming-Services>, last accessed 15 January 2008.

## **The Spell of Stasis**

There are few instances that break the spell of stasis cast by corporate gaming, yet it is possible to find moments of breakdown that can be utilized as resistance against totalization and mesmerization. I will appeal to the concept of “dead time” as a device for engendering thoughtful engagement with the game. It is possible to maintain an enjoyable play experience without being completely subsumed by the hegemonic manipulation the game portends. Dead time refers to the pauses that occur during game play, either on behalf of the game or the player. Loading screens, moments of boredom, and breaks in temporal continuity create a distraction from the main event. These ruptures remind players that they are playing a game and give a sense of distance from it. During this period, the purpose and fullness of the game recedes, leaving space for reflection. But the game itself only allows for playing; time spent during the game while not actually playing, is dead.

Time, in the games I have mentioned already, is a medium for productivity. Time is what allows the player to kill the thugs, to collect the gems that she requires to progress. Few moments are left for meandering or other activities that have no substantial goal state. Time is full of activity that structures the player’s life and thoughts. Moments that seem to have no purpose or reward are generally avoided. Time that could be spent in contemplation or unremunerated exploration is, instead, filled with mind-numbing grinding. The hierarchical nature of the game dominates the player’s environment, though the world is constructed with the player in mind. Every beast respawns to be slain

again; every lode of ore reappears to be mined. The game landscape is a site of goal-oriented action, a workspace where one's every moment is controlled and overflowing with activity, however tedious. Time is full, but players are left empty.

The relative "fullness" of time can be evaluated in terms of "flow." Flow is a concept introduced by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi that assesses the fluctuating interest a player has in an activity. Flow is a measure of the malleability of the player's sense of time in the game.<sup>96</sup> Time compresses and seems to fly during a flow state; otherwise, time drags. When the player concentrates so intently on her playing, she loses her sense of "normal" time, which expands and contracts according to her ability to complete the tasks at hand.

Juul characterizes flow as a rather simple shift between boredom and interest. Having a captivating, enduring activity and goal state aids in the player's immersion in the game and decreases the amount of "dead" or "empty" time. Grinding and farming are almost second nature after one has become accustomed to the controls, and yet they are usually trivial and repetitive tasks. One can grind for hours, but those hours often drag. It is not uncommon for a player to say that she is "just grinding" which means that her activity is not particularly important and she is free to pursue other tasks or quests in the game.

Juul comments that the pleasure gained from such mechanistic actions contradicts the idea of flow, for repetitive motions do not always lead to boredom, but instead can induce captivation. For Juul, activities like grinding can *produce* a flow state instead of impeding it, so that time is no longer dead. It is true that

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<sup>96</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

serial activities like grinding do not *a/ways* induce boredom, but typically they are bemoaned and are characteristically low on the hierarchy of desirable occupations<sup>97</sup>. These “time sinks” gobble up hours without the need for much conscious thought. Dead time is recognized and lamented by players almost universally; often resulting in the cry for more effective immersion. By being a disruptive force in immersive environments, dead time could function as a place to utilize playing (or, perhaps more precisely, moments of *not* playing) in order to contemplate human-technology relations. Grinding’s maddening tendency to disrupt inclusive game experiences gives the player a sense of frustration and a desire to return to the narrative or goal at hand. Recognizing this desire and thinking about why it occurs is one way to promote progressive ludic thought. Though it is a small step, it is a step nonetheless.

Juul also argues that frustration can be a positive aspect of games. With this sentiment I agree, but for almost diametrically opposed reasons. He believes that frustration can motivate players to hone their skills in order to avoid further irritation, thus making them better players. Frustration is fruitful in this instance, but only in so far as it impels us towards the game’s goal state. A little aggravation leads to better problem solvers and better workers. Juul’s formulation thus works entirely within the game’s structure and supports the same charge of productivity and efficiency. I argue that, contrary to Juul’s efficiency training, these moments of flow interruption can be harnessed for engaged playing. By giving us a contrast between event states, they provide a

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<sup>97</sup> Jesper Juul, “Game Time,” 139.

means for looking at the game from outside, appreciating its composition, seeing our place within it, and contemplating other methods of structuration.

Douglas and Haragadon discuss the phenomena of immersion and engagement and propose a modified flow state as a possible alternative that incorporates elements of both. They characterize immersion as the identification of (and with) a set narrative schema and choosing actions that are appropriate to it. Engagement, on the other hand, violates conventional schemas by utilizing more than one, or none at all. Readers and players are unable to “unthinkingly apply ready-made scripts”<sup>98</sup> and cannot lose themselves in a predictable continuity. They must constantly reevaluate the structural formation of a game/text and their relationship to it in order to make the work comprehensible, or, on the other hand, to recognize its incomprehensibility. Instead of playing from the inside out, engagement requires that one look from the outside in, reading not only the text at hand, but also the process of writing the text. Engaging texts confront the player and force her to reconsider normative configurations of story, reward, aesthetics, perspective and other schemas.

Following Sherri Turkle’s innovative work on games in the 1980s, the authors propose that a flow state is possible that contains a commitment to narrative, script, and immersion as well as to engagement and an examination of the game’s framework. Turkle witnessed gamers enter a state of flow where they were completely involved with the game and yet were able to simultaneously

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<sup>98</sup> Douglas and Hargadon, “The Pleasures of Immersion and Interaction,” 201.



maneuver outside of it and maintain a larger view of the practice of gaming.<sup>99</sup>

This dual mindset was used primarily to improve the player's ability and score in the game.

There already exist sites where players can hold both of these states in mind simultaneously. Game forums, such as those hosted by Blizzard, allow for an admixture of role-playing and statistics-counting. Players can hold discussions of the stories behind the quests at the same time that they find mechanical hints for completing them. Many players see the frame of the game while they work inside it. However, simply realizing that one is playing a game is not enough. To be critically engaged requires that players contemplate why a game is formed in such a way instead of just how. Using their view of structure to manipulate it for the most points is not sufficient. The combined state of immersion/engagement does not have enough critical distance to allow for a profound contemplation of games as technologies and practices. The forums may interweave mechanical and narrative aspects, but they have led to a more efficient practice of play and not a more thoughtful one.

I prefer to think of the ruptures in the delicate flow state as the most productive sites for thought. They create a vacillation between the states that leads to a dialectical appreciation of both form and content. They lead to an engagement that goes beyond efficiency training to break down normative schemas. Turkle also believed that computer games have the potential to be catalysts for critical thought:

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<sup>99</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

This [critical simulation] would take the cultural pervasiveness of simulation as a challenge to develop a more sophisticated social criticism. This new criticism would not lump all simulations together, but would discriminate among them. It would take as its goal the development of simulations that actually help players challenge the model's built in assumptions. This new criticism would try to use simulation as a means of consciousness raising.<sup>100</sup>

Engagement with both the form and the content of a text allows a reader to decipher not just the "story" being told, but also the metanarrative of which she is a constituent component. Since players are so intimately and actively involved in games, it is fitting that they use this active position as a quasi-narrator in order to critique the structures at hand.

Using time as an entry point, a player can delineate the many registers used in game construction. Event time, real time, play time, loading time, cooldown, lunchtime: a game's chronology is at once imbricated with players' schedules and at the same time is radically separated from them. By imagining herself and her actions across these registers, the player can begin to hypothesize about the structures that create time in its various forms and are created by it. Witnessing this dialectical process draws the player into an analytically engaged position vis-à-vis the game, the gamer, and the material world that created/is created by both.

The most fruitful readings come from engaged playing, but this does not mean that players must (or even can) be completely engaged at all moments. The gaps and dissimilarities are the most evident when contrasted with a prior state of immersion or captivation. Interrupted flow may reveal why and how the

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 71.

player has lost herself in playing. To be sure, sites of rupture may simply be explained as loading screens, glitches, etc. Accordingly, it is easier to witness this breakdown and postulate ways of harnessing it through games that are built on a less absolute model.

### **The Black Bargain**

One such game is *Shadow of the Colossus* (figure 2.1,) an adventure game wherein the player must destroy a number of living stone colossi in order to bring his love back from the dead. The story begins as the character rides through a deserted, melancholic landscape and meets a mysterious being in a ruined temple. He offers to revive the character's lost love, provided that the character completes the trials he assigns. It seems to be a typical hero-quest narrative, but as we will see, in the end the narrative becomes radically inverted. Fractures within the game will become sites from which a player may interpret it beyond the frame.

Adorno, in *Minima Moralia*, speaks of how textual gaps provoke meaningful interpretation. Rather than prescribing everything that a reader (or in my case, player) should extract from a text, there need to be moments of insolubility wherein the reader must halt: "[T]he value of a thought is measured by its distance from the continuity of the familiar."<sup>101</sup> If one were to dictate to a player everything that she needs to know, in a world that is utterly predictable and totalized, there would be no room for learning or even the pretext of agency.

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<sup>101</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 80.

By including impenetrable objects, actions, and environments, players are forced to reflect on their circumstances.

These ruptures function to estrange the player from her own playing. Players are not immersed in verisimilitude or saturated by convincing simulation or submerged in activities akin to daily life. Instead, they are confronted by an uncanny, empty landscape and a world that does not care about them or their existence. The environment of *Shadow* is eerie and unpopulated, save by a few small snakes and birds and a handful of foes. The character rides on his faithful horse on steep slopes and vast plains (figure 2.2.) There are no other people with whom to interact; this is not a world built to human scale. Its emptiness is intense and the player is forced to wonder why there are no other individuals to be found. This place could simply be long forgotten or a realm like the underworld. Either way, the character's presence in it is completely incidental. He can climb rocks or scale ruins and explore, but the only means of interaction available are found in killing the colossi and the occasional (decidedly non-monstrous) snake or bird.

In her meanderings, the player sees the ruins of ancient structures (figure 2.3.) These function as an index of loss, for they are utterly inert, without even a hint as to the civilization that created them. In *World of Warcraft* there are ruins as well. I have already spoken, in chapter one, about how they seem to metaphorically lament a lost history. The ruins in *Shadow* do this as well and, due to the fact that there is absolutely no trace of habitation, go further to speak of their ultimate inexplicability. The ancient civilization did not make *Shadow's*

crumbling temples and bridges in order for us to interpret them, for players have no code by which to do so. In *World of Warcraft*, there are quests, characters, and documents to help players piece together an admittedly spotty account. In *Shadow of the Colossus*, the ruins remain mute; they are about the utter absence of history.

*Shadow's* game world is, in a way, comparable to ours to the extent that the possibility of historical investigation and exploration seems evident and even invited. Yet, ultimately, it is a world that the player is barred from completely understanding. The realm is uncanny; it is both eerily similar to our own and yet remains alien and alienating. The environment never solidifies into an intelligible whole. The tension between the familiar and the unknowable creates an epistemic distance. This lends the game its critical potential for appraising our quantification of time. The game plunges us from a realm of knowledge into one of uncertainty, and value lies in the distance we fall from one to the next.<sup>102</sup>

The character traverses great distances on this enigmatic voyage -- much of the game consists of wandering about on horseback, trying to unearth the next colossus. There is no set time limit and one could wander indefinitely, exploring the depopulated landscape. The player receives a hint as to the direction of the beast, but is under no obligation to proceed there directly and may meander as

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<sup>102</sup> As Heidegger noted, it is *unheimlichkeit* that keeps humans from feeling at home and thus forces them to search for meaning and understanding. The uncanny is useful for philosophical exploration, for the unsettledness that the thinker senses propels him towards Being. Heidegger says, "In the clear night of the nothing of anxiety the original openness of beings as such arises: that they are beings – and not nothing." Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 103.

he chooses for as long as he likes. There is nothing compelling him towards only one point and nothing in the environment, such as creatures to kill for experience, to while away the time. The absence of the multitudinous tasks present in many games, adventure and otherwise, makes the time spent traveling seem hauntingly empty.

All dialogue in *Shadow* takes place in a puzzling, alien language,<sup>103</sup> which has the effect of estranging all players, regardless of nationality, from the text of the game. The voices are quavering and mysterious, sounds bordering on intelligibility, but never resolving into comprehensible words or phrases. There are cinematic subtitles given in translation, forcing the player to recognize the separation between the game world and the “real” world. Though creating a new language may be a ploy used to increase sales in several different demographic markets, it also creates a provocative pause in comprehension. The developers certainly had the option of hiring voice actors or simply leaving the player to read dialogue as text on the screen. Instead, they chose to make language into another gap that must be bridged, and not an immediate, unmediated experience. The player, confronted by this aporia, must first recognize how her attempts at normal understanding fail before interpreting the dialogue in the context of the story and larger game. The need to shift between linguistic

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<sup>103</sup> The game designer says that the gibberish language is a “Romanization of Japanese.” He has morphed Japanese into a nonsense language by adding sounds from the romance languages. There were still voice actors for the lines spoken; it was not completely fabricated by a computer, though the voice of Dormin, the villain, is a composite of male and female voices. See Shane Bettenhausen, “Afterthoughts: Shadow of the Colossus,” <http://www.1up.com/do/feature?cid=3145476>, last modified 11 August 2005, last accessed 30 March 2008.

registers offers a moment of delay in which she can contemplate the texts at hand. The player is prevented from becoming completely immersed in the game by this impediment.

From there, she can engage with the form of the work. Perhaps she will realize that the programmer is the bridge between the game world and our own. The hand of the programmer, not normally noticed by players, becomes visible as the only way that the nonsense language could be translated. The programmer writes both the narrative and the code; by imagining him as the fulcrum between the world of the game and the world of technology, players can perceive the oscillation that makes this game so unique and challenging. The pauses that are necessitated are fruitful, for they refocus our vision on the parallels that the game has with our own interaction with technology.<sup>104</sup>

When one finally finds a colossus to kill (figure 2.4,) the temporal register of the game shifts dramatically. From vast and dead, time suddenly becomes shockingly full. When one's character approaches, the scene zooms in upon the colossus that must be slain. What constitutes the visual field is out of the

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<sup>104</sup> The game is obviously set in an unearthly environment. There must be some entity or group that translates these inhuman words into a language that we can understand. The game developers have, of course, created the language and are not merely interpreting it for us. The programmer is made to seem like a medium, in the spiritualist sense, a conduit for specters from beyond. This is true in a sense, for though she is the supreme creator of the gibberish language spoken in the game, she is just a conduit for the programming language that brings it to life. In a way, this nonsense language is the language of technology. In order for us to comprehend it, an outside agent must interpret it. The programmers have the unique position of spanning both realms, of translating both the gibberish of the other realm and the machine code that renders it audible.

player's control as she is directed towards this task. Urgent, anticipatory music begins. The player must now ascertain where the vulnerable spots are on each beast. When she finds these glowing sigils (or glyphs), she must stab them and drain the colossus of its power. There is no time limit to this task, only a diminishing health bar that is lessened each time the character falls, is stomped, etc. Time remains endless, but now the player is forced into an agonistic struggle of *timing*.

Timing, or the calculated management of the assigned temporal register, is the only weapon she has against certain doom. By effectively scaling and traversing the colossus, she proves her ability to learn from various stimuli and to shape her actions accordingly. For example, a colossus may begin to shake its head, signaling a series of motions during which a player must wait and hold on. Afterwards, in a moment of calm, she may rush to the neck where she stabs the beast vigorously. The colossus will retaliate and attempt to dislodge the character from his body, but the player has witnessed this behavior before and is prepared to deal with it. She maintains her grip on a tuft of grass growing on the statue's back and prepares for the cycle to begin anew.

The player must wait for the opportune moment to strike; her actions depend wholly on those of the much larger and mightier colossus. She will remain small and powerless in this world unless she exploits her aptitude with timing. During these tense, transitory moments, she can effect change in the environment around her. She achieves a measure of agency in this barren world. Time marches on, but during battle, she can maneuver within it. Timing



her motions against the world's uncaring clock is of utmost importance if she is to survive in this realm for long. She can temporarily gain a reprieve from the emptiness of the world by choosing the best moments to strike.

I say that this reprieve is temporary, for before long the strength of the world reasserts itself and she is forced once again into impotence. After each colossus is destroyed, its energy jolts into the character's body (figure 2.5.) During this quickening of energy, the player is unable to assert any control over her character. We see an image of the character's body being assailed by the energy before he is transported back to the original temple. The entity directing the player speaks a few words and she is on her way again. The player has no choice in the words his character will speak during the cinematic sequences that occur between the slaying of each colossus. Likewise, at the end of the game, she is powerless against the fate she has begotten. It seems, for a moment, that she can move and perhaps alter the course of game, but this is an illusion. The game designer has stated that this moment of potential was inserted in order to make the player believe that she had agency, only to have it taken away in the end.<sup>105</sup> The main character's dead lover is eventually revived, but only after the entity reveals itself to be an imprisoned demon who has tricked the player into freeing it. Its essence was divided among the colossi and when they were slain, the various fragments of his soul were rejoined in the character's body.

The player can only watch as her character is transformed into a demon (figure 2.6.) The most she can do is perhaps slay a few of the people who have

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<sup>105</sup> Bettenhausen, "Afterthoughts."

ridden in from the normal world to prevent the demon's release. Regardless, the outcome has already been determined: the main character is either killed or incarcerated again in the temple under piles of collapsing stone. Every colossus that the player successfully slays is another step closer to the inevitable. The demon has tricked the main character and the game has tricked the player. Instead of a fulfilling outcome where quests are completed and satisfaction is gained, the end point is loss and an unavoidable death. The promise of success that always accompanies such games is filled with defeat. Even when the player wins, she inevitably loses.

The world of *Shadow* is one of deceit and disappointment. It is a deterministic space where everything has been prophesied and preordained. Only within the narrow confines of timing can the player hope to gain agency, just to have it torn away from her again at the end of the game, when she loses her character completely to the dark forces she has been serving unknowingly. This world of trickery is analogous to the program itself. The story mirrors the deterministic processes of the game, exposing *Shadow's* world to be a simulation of our own. The attuned player can use the disjunctions and impenetrabilities in the game to find a parallel to her own playing and to understand how technology has created a false sense of continuity in contemporary life.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Jerry Holkins (a.k.a. Tycho), author of the webcomic *Penny Arcade*, has the following to say about the game:

The dread starts at the very beginning, simmering in your gut, and it never gets better ever - hour upon hour. You know immediately that you are engaged in something like evil, if not evil itself, but our appetites as players demand that we seek objectives and conquer them - and the

Endgame<sup>107</sup> can be disheartening and discouraging, but all is not doom and gloom. At the very end of the story, the character's lover awakens to find the broken and struggling horse returning to her side. She wanders about the ruins and comes upon a grassy knoll that has the first signs of new life. Small creatures hop about cautiously and greenery grows anew. This rebirth is not just a pandering happy ending, since the gamer does not herself overcome all obstacles. Instead, it can be read as a new vista of potential opening up before the gamer as she replays. This may not seem like a game with much replay potential, but perhaps it is only on the second or third time through that the player can appreciate her unique perspective on games, structures, and time. Much like James Joyce's *Ulysses* that cannot be read, but only reread, *Shadow's* promise lies in how it shapes the gamer's outlook for all future playing.<sup>108</sup> Instead of offering a simplistic fairytale narrative that can be completed and filed away with other conquered schemas, *Shadow* alters one's perception of virtual objects and their meaning. The player has gained valuable insight into the workings of digital technologies and the structures that support them that can be

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game scourges us for this dereliction of conscience. The technology at work often obscured the game itself, but the emotional wavelength has resounded years after the fact. At this late hour, I can recall no camera foibles or performance valleys. All I can recall now is the black bargain, and concentric waves of anguish.

<http://www.penny-arcade.com/2009/6/8/>, last accessed 7 August 2009.

<sup>107</sup> This is the term used by gamers to describe the content at the end of a game.

<sup>108</sup> Douglas and Hargadon, "The Pleasures of Immersion and Interaction," 201.

refined and augmented on each future voyage, in this game and in others.

The game functions as a catalyst for thought and not a substitute for it. Were it to be specifically didactic, the player would lose the space for contemplation that she can explore inside the game and be forced into an unambiguous reading of it. The game is not congruous with any definite reality, but instead propels the player towards an unknown outcome. Whether she decides that roaming unburdened about the landscape is the most interesting facet of the game or is more interested thinking about how history is visualized, she has many different variables to explore. If the game were to be “informative” and “edifying” it would no longer possess the capacity to engender free thought and would instead communicate a singular message. That message, however radical it may claim to be, delimits the possibilities for creative and critical thought and narrows the game’s focus to one predetermined meaning. If a game’s import is grasped and its potential exhausted in one sitting, it has not functioned as a mechanism for inducing thought, but rather as a propagandistic icon.

### **Enigma and Dialectic**

It will seem that I have diverged completely from Adorno by proposing something so mundane as a videogame be a vehicle for reflection. Perhaps if one takes a monolithic view of Adorno’s position on cultural objects, as one might on a first reading of the Culture Industry chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, this would be so. However, although Adorno was certainly a proponent of autonomous art, it could never be *utterly* autonomous and divorced from the

world. Artworks were, as he said, windowless monads. The universal (of the world) and the particular (of the object) exist in perpetual tension with one another:

Explanation amounts to the reduction to what is already known, whose synthesis with what is to be explained inescapably involves a universal. But the reversal of the particular into the universal is no less determined by the individual object...The reciprocal relation of the universal and the particular, which takes place unconsciously in artworks and which aesthetics must bring to consciousness, is what truly necessitates a dialectical approach.<sup>109</sup>

By utilizing a dialectical method of interpretation that takes both sides of this problem into account, viewers can glean art's truth content. Similarly, games enact this struggle between the universal and the particular. Between the two poles lies a force field, a measure of the tension inherent in the struggle, in which the agon continues perpetually. This charged gap is a space for players to contemplate the world and the object, the universal and particular. In the case of *Shadow*, this gap provides an opportunity for the player to think about the discontinuities and aporias between its uncanny world and her own. The distance from the known is what propels the player towards insight.

What is crucial for Adorno's concept of aesthetic appreciation is that the object has a sense of the "enigmatic," discussed in more detail in chapter one:

If a work opens itself completely, it reveals itself as a question and demands reflection; then the work vanishes into the distance, only to return to those who thought they understood it, overwhelming them for a

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<sup>109</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 180-81. "The impossibility of a univocal construction of the history of art and the fatality of all disquisitions on its progress – which exists and then again does not exist – originate in art's double character as being socially determined in its autonomy and at the same time social" (ibid., 210).

second time with the question “What is it?”<sup>110</sup>

By this definition, artworks are always more than they contain. A certain excess of possibility surrounds the work and keeps it from ever being a strictly mimetic object in the world. Artworks are puzzles; one can comprehend the puzzle-like quality in art but can never completely encapsulate it within rational thought. There will always remain some quality that keeps us from fully understanding, and thus filing away and forgetting, art objects.

Adorno’s theories are applicable to videogames, but not because games are puzzles that one attempts to solve. Games can be understood as puzzles on two levels. The most obvious, the finite goal of the game, is not analogous to Adorno’s description of the enigma. However, the gaps involved in the game as a cultural object have the same form as those found in artworks. In *Shadow*, this manifests as a series of aporias that may cause the player to cast her gaze in all directions, but never to reach a gratifying result or closure. The game has enigmatic qualities that can instigate the player’s search for the “What is it?” though she may never find it.

I propose that aesthetic contemplation is a type of play wherein the viewer/player must negotiate representations of the world in order to comprehend her surroundings. In other words, the kind of videogaming that I am calling for is modeled on aesthetic deliberation and tied to an active process of playing. Such a practice requires that the player continuously reevaluate her position vis-à-vis the game object and the real world in order to account for the dialectical tension

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 121.

between them. Aesthetic contemplation is an active process wherein the work is constantly considered and reconsidered.

Games, too, are defined by their active nature. One of the foremost scholars on gaming and digital culture, Alexander Galloway, has said that action is the primary characteristic that distinguishes games from prior media such as film and television.<sup>111</sup> The player is intimately involved with her cognition of the game world and must remain vigilant in case of unexpected happenings. Some might argue that players are engaged with games in primarily physical ways, but I argue that the corporeal aspect of games is coupled with mental processes, for the movement on screen is only analogous to movement in the real world. It is the player who must make the mental connection between the two (or see where that connection falls short.) Since her work as a player is a mixture of the physical and the mental, it is similar to the artwork's reliance on a physical substrate that is cognized through philosophical inquiry. In this way, both aesthetics and games are object-oriented, to borrow a term from computer programming, and relate to the manifestation of various images. The material component is important, even if it is ephemeral.

Art and games are both inside and outside the world and must utilize a philosophical program that employs the techniques of a broadly based hermeneutics encompassing fundamental questions: conceiving history, society, ideology, politics, economics, and the like. On this score, Galloway's claims about "realist games" and "countergaming" are troubling. He splits the game

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<sup>111</sup> Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

world into two distinct categories. First, he calls for “realist” games that attempt to recreate social situations in order to display inequalities and injustices that will arouse players to action both inside and outside the game. Second, he says that there should exist an avant garde of gaming that he refers to as “countergaming,” which disturbs normative gaming practice by utilizing decentering practices such as narrative intransitivity, estrangement, and aperture to destabilize the player.<sup>112</sup>

The first indication of trouble is that Galloway has taken these methods directly from filmic literature and practice, as if film discourse is coterminous with that of games. Ironically, Galloway argues that games should be critically understood as distinct objects that manifest distinctly different traits than film or television.<sup>113</sup> He goes on to say that games ought to emulate certain tendencies in film, namely “realist” and “avant garde” practices. Doing so dilutes his argument for the seriousness and necessity of game studies. If his prescription for future games is that they be more like film, the games we see will never live up to their potential and neither will we.

Galloway’s theory is further problematic to the extent that he reaffirms the unnecessary split between “popular” and “art” games, making them incommensurable. Reiterating these stale categories plays into the hands of both cynical laypeople and art connoisseurs by making popular games into easily digestible slogans, on the one hand, and art games inaccessible by mere mortals, on the other. While I sympathize with some of the strategies he has

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.



outlined for “art” games, his classifications will prevent both sets of games from ever being experienced by anyone outside their respective markets. By foregrounding the process of contemplation, I argue that ludic contemplation can be much more widespread and thus more effective at promoting profound experiences with art and games alike.

Galloway supports a strategy of realism for popular games, with reference to realist (neo-realist) film as espoused by Andre Bazin. Bazin’s realism utilizes various methods to recreate, as Galloway says, “the phenomenological qualities of the real world.”<sup>114</sup> Realist film used non-actors, minimal editing, location filming, and an emphasis on everyday life to create films that more accurately reflected contemporary life and critiqued the social order than typical, classical films had done. Galloway is careful to say that game realism does not simply refer to the ever-increasing fidelity of images, sounds, or environments in games (escalating polygon counts), but rather to the political program that utilized the quotidian to address larger political issues.

For Galloway, an ideal popular game would emulate a Brechtian play with a comprehensible message to be taken into everyday life. He states, “[R]ealism in gaming is fundamentally a process of revisiting the material substrate of the medium and establishing correspondences with specific activities existent in the social reality of the gamer.”<sup>115</sup> Galloway claims that games such as *State of Emergency* (by Rockstar Games, wherein the player instigates urban violence)

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 84.

and *Under Ash* (a first-person shooter made in Damascus from the point of view of a Palestinian fighting against occupation) approach his concept of “social realism” because individuals from marginalized communities can relate to them on a personal level. However, players never merely see their lives reflected in a game; they construct their identity *through* games. Even supposing that these games provide a Brechtian situation, Adorno’s criticism of Brecht stands strong: players are given a message that they may consume unthinkingly. If the player does not need to think, then she may easily be manipulated into reproducing repressive social schemas.

It is strange that Galloway, as intent as he is on proving that games are an innovative and intriguing medium unto themselves, channels Bazin’s filmic realism as a program for progressive gaming. He does emphasize that games are active and based on a relationship between the player and the game, two points with which I wholeheartedly agree. However, choosing filmic realism (and later countercinema) as the principle guidelines for the future of gaming, is less than productive. Galloway claims that literature and images utilize a form of realism that is characteristically immobile while games are centered on movement. Games should be faithful to individual’s circumstances in order to promote action inside and outside of play. Galloway claims to be interested in games “as games,” but the realist program he describes is, following film, a definitively narratological one. The player may bomb a corporate headquarters and thus release some of his suppressed rage in a virtual environment, but he is following a script much more than he is an active creator of his own adventure.

Galloway's insistence on realism raises a number of questions. For whom should games be realistic? Are these the only individuals that should play them? Who controls (or ought to control) the principles being acted, performed within them? While I think that it is important to consider the subject of the games in one's analysis, promoting "realism" as a generic program is problematic to the extent that it assumes a one-way relationship between the game and the gamer, whereas the two are fully intertwined. The gamer does not simply identify the "reality" of a game: the game also creates her reality. If games are created to depict/enact "realism," they ignore the fact that they are also constituting it. For this reason "edifying" games with which the gamer can uncomplicatedly identify are misleading.

I follow Adorno's argument that artworks should not be propagandistic. By applying these principles to games, players can have a more robust understanding of the potential of game objects. The meaning of a work is not the same as its message, just as the meaning of the game is not synonymous with its storyline. It is not beneficial to a populace to have their beliefs spoon-fed to them, no matter how politically progressive these beliefs may seem. Adorno says, again in *Aesthetic Theory*,

The dialectical relation of art to praxis is that of its social effect. That artworks intervene politically is doubtful; when it does happen, most often it is peripheral to the work; if they strive for it, they usually succumb to their own terms. Their true social effect is an extremely indirect participation in spirit that by way of subterranean processes contributes to social transformation and is concentrated in artworks; they only achieve such participation with their objectivation.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 242.

If games strive for direct social intervention, if their meanings are doled out ready-made, they simply reinforce the doctrines that keep the masses from thinking in the first place. If individuals play games with which they can easily and unproblematically identify, they do not need to think about their own situation but instead can accept its “truth” readily. Making the artwork synonymous with life takes away the critical space within which one may philosophize. Works should not be readily consumable versions of reality, identical to and inseparable from the world, but rather exist at a distance from the real, from the known. These gaps, such as those in *Shadow*, are what makes it possible for a viewer/player to imagine life otherwise than it currently is.

The second program for which Galloway calls is that of “countergaming,” a term that denotes games produced in order to reveal the flaws of mainstream games. He describes contemporary avant garde game production in terms of Peter Wollen’s assessment of Jean-Luc Godard’s filmic practice.<sup>117</sup> He remains dissatisfied with the current state of avant garde gaming, for it tends to emphasize a completely autonomous aesthetics that allow very little interaction on the part of the player. Galloway does not believe that current practice lives up to the potential of the medium, for it strays away from the ludic into the filmic by disallowing player intervention in favor of a predetermined agenda. He correctly

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<sup>117</sup> Peter Wollen, “Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent D’Est*,” *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia Press, 1986), 120-29. Wollen argues that filmmakers ought to utilize practices that defy mainstream, narrative cinema in order to be artistically and politically progressive. The principles Wollen delineates are: narrative transitivity versus intransitivity, identification versus estrangement, transparency versus foregrounding, single versus multiple diegesis, closure versus aperture, pleasure versus unpleasure, and fiction versus reality.

believes that one cannot fully subsume videogames inside filmic registers. Yet, his prescriptions for the future of games are bound, seemingly inextricably to film's trajectory.

According to Galloway, games should strive for the same principles that Godard's films achieve. By assimilating (and not merely sampling) these principles first found in New Wave cinema, games can become a progressive force. He believes that true countergaming does not yet exist because those currently working in avant garde game production have little sense of interaction, agency, and the complex relationship and active partnership that players have with these technologies. For Galloway, when avant garde creators finally realize the importance of the player, a truly political upheaval may begin. He says, "[T]here will appear a whole language of play, radical and new, that will transform the countergaming movement, just as Godard did to the cinema, or Deleuze did to philosophy, or Duchamp did to the art object." Countergames, according to Galloway, will instigate progressive political change. Such a claim is patent nonsense. Games will not miraculously transform the world by aesthetic alone.

However, Galloway's project is not completely bankrupt. He says that when countergaming exists, it will do so "as gaming" and not as non-interactive art. I agree that the action of the subject is vital to any movement in gaming that proposes to change the viewer/player's attitudes or behaviors. Any consideration of the progressive possibilities for the medium should contain an assessment of the relationship between the game and the player and not rely solely on the game's advanced aesthetic program. It is important not only to theorize how the

games should look, but how we, the players, will and should react to them.

Claiming that new games ought to follow a specific and total program is misguided, for often it is the shock of the unexpected in the midst of the quotidian that is the most successful at provoking thought.

It is problematic to show undue favor to programmatic avant garde creative practices in gaming, but perhaps when he states that countergaming will exist “as gaming,” he and I are in fact speaking of the same phenomenon. What I want to emphasize, however, is that the games need not be separated by forced categorizations. By creating a gulf between avant garde games and the rest, we undervalue the crucial component of the games that makes them so different from film and thus so unpredictable: the players. Making revolutionary games is not enough. Players bear the most important burden: thinking about their own actions in both the game world and the real world. While revolutionary games may be constructed to further thought instead of stifling it, it is not the games that must ultimately contain innovative notions about agency etc., but the players and their own philosophizing about their play. This is why Adorno’s aesthetic theory is so compelling, for it recognizes the necessity and potential of both the object and the viewer and realizes that the important work happens in the dynamic space between them.

As with any form of non-instrumental reflection, this raises the crucial question: why would players wish to engage the thorny issues I have discussed? We can choose to approach our technologies mindlessly and contribute to our own oppression, or we can assume a critical stance and hope to effect social

change. The playing of games is typically couched in terms of freedom; although I posit that most contemporary games promote technological serfdom, we can still harness the power of play for liberatory ends. The tricky step comes in convincing players that the path of least resistance, nonreflective playing, is not the most beneficial. Revealing the detrimental parallels between games and oppressive social situations is one way to spur players into thought. For instance, in the previous chapter I discuss how *World of Warcraft* directly mirrors work that many, in their “real lives” find tedious or repressive. In discussing *World of Warcraft* with other players, simply explaining the parallel initiates a moment of critical thought about the technology and the social situation that surrounds it.

In the end, refusing to play along amounts to critical engagement with games. Gaps and aporias in games help to develop dialectical readings and permit vital philosophical action. Critical playing, in these circumstances, represents a cycle of understanding and estrangement, the process of losing one’s bearings and finding them again. Time, as a subjective measure, is useful as a touchstone for thinking about the role the player has in enabling the game’s structure. Critical reflection on games, however, is not limited to temporal registers and can be applied to any circumstance in which the player toils within an alien system of representation and finds lucidity in the moment of rupture.

In order to get beyond mere description of games, we must begin to think about how the player can fruitfully interact with them. By modeling aesthetic appreciation on play itself, we can imagine a rich process of imagination and

discovery that does not require a “serious game” but may find meaning anywhere the player’s concept of the ordinary is fissured by the unexpected. Instead of suffocating thought with predetermined ideological programs (progressive or not), games can function as catalysts for contemplation by intruding on our lives in a vivid and provocative way, by rousing us from a media-induced coma and reminding us of what might be. In games it is, perhaps, not the things that we see but the ones we fail to see that may teach us the most about technology, play, and our lives. As Adorno writes, “Thought waits to be woken one day by the memory of what has been missed, and to be transformed into teaching.”<sup>118</sup> Through the vibrant and interactive medium of the videogame, we can find ways productively to (dis)orient ourselves and to transform our play experience into a dynamic and inspired site for philosophical (social, aesthetic) exploration.

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<sup>118</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 81.



## Chapter Three

### Rubbing on a Wound: Landscape and Synthetic Worlds

#### Virtual Landscape is Landscape

Virtual worlds are often stunning examples of landscape construction. Sometimes they are very strange looking, but game landscapes represent themselves as landscapes nonetheless. Games utilize methods of landscape image-building that are specific to digital media, though they often borrow techniques from more conventional artistic practices, such as painting, to create convincing and compelling realms. Thus, virtual worlds are connected to both other visual media and to the physical reality that they are intended to represent. Often these worlds strive for verisimilitude even when creating a realm of specifically *unearthly* beauty. The penchant for visual recognizable mimesis is a trend that deserves more careful observation, especially with regard to how images of natural beauty function inside and outside the synthetic sphere.<sup>119</sup>

Much of contemporary game design is fixated on creating “immersive” environments.<sup>120</sup> There are a number of different “types” of immersion, including

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<sup>119</sup> As a player of the immensely popular and influential massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft*, I have sometimes marveled at the radiant beauty of an object such as an in-game waterfall and taken a “screenshot” to capture it. The practice mimics the picture postcard or photographic snapshot and celebrates both the digital artist and the natural landscape. Such commemoration reveals how intricately technology and natural beauty are intertwined; homage is paid to nature through technology itself. The question remains, however, whether this homage constitutes a contemplative relationship or simply a recognition of novelty.

<sup>120</sup> Allen Varney, a writer for the online gaming magazine *The Escapist*, considers immersion to be a universal characteristic of game design.

tactical, strategic, narrative, sensory, and psychological; different media enact immersion using different means.<sup>121</sup> Immersion generally refers to the sensation of existing within a virtual environment and is accompanied by “intense focus, loss of self, distorted time sense, effortless action.”<sup>122</sup>

Landscape is an important means of constructing immersive states. Bob Bates, author of the textbook *Game Design*, makes it clear that the goal of good design is to create a fully convincing and naturalized environment. He states,

Immersion is what happens when you make the moment-to-moment experience so compelling that the player is drawn completely into the game and the real world disappears... You bathe the player in a constant stream of images and pull him into your world, and you avoid the gaffes that jar him out of his reverie... A successful game entices the player into the gameworld and never lets him go.<sup>123</sup>

The successful game, by this definition, is seamless and the appearance of the landscape is accepted as a natural part of the experience. Bates' paradigm creates a credulous, disempowered player who is unable to recognize the constructedness of the environment, thus foreclosing the option of reflexivity.

To be sure, some immersive projects make a nod towards reflexivity or critical apprehension, such as Jeffrey Shaw's 1998 installation *Legible City*, in which the viewer pedals a stationary bicycle around a projected city made up entirely of words. However, my focus is on the overwhelming majority of

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<sup>121</sup> If an individual dons a virtual reality (VR) headset to experience a digital environment, she will not have the same experience as when she enters a Cave Automatic Virtual Environment (CAVE) installation, where a digital environment is projected onto the walls of the room.

<sup>122</sup> Allen Varney, “Immersion Unexplained,” *The Escapist* (08 August 2006).

<sup>123</sup> Bob Bates, *Game Design*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Course Technology PTR, 2004), 21-22.

contemporary games that strive for behaviors consistent with immersion and captivation. A more progressive textbook on game design, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman admits that though most commercial game designers consider an “addictive” game a success, meaningful play ceases when free movement and choice are taken away.<sup>124</sup> As Adorno notes in “Prologue to Television,” “Addiction is immediately regression.”<sup>125</sup> A player may interact with an immersive game and even be in awe of it; however, if she is addicted, she may be unable to make informed thoughts about the state of game play and her role as an actor. In order to maintain a progressive and fruitful dialogue with the game, players must learn to interact reflexively with landscape, even when the game does not promote such interaction.

This chapter examines how virtual landscapes both determine and display a contemporary image of a self that has been divested of power. I will explore what role natural beauty plays in our conception of synthetic worlds, particularly that of *World of Warcraft*. I will use Adorno’s theoretical constructs vis-à-vis natural beauty and art beauty in order to suggest how dialectical contemplation can restore some of the agency that players lost along with their ability to modify their surroundings.

However, before I move to specific representations of landscape, I must examine

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<sup>124</sup> Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 356.

<sup>125</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Prologue to Television,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 53.

what landscape is. Is it a view of a place, or perhaps a representation of a view of a place? After considering these questions I will discuss what landscape has to do with progressive gaming. I agree with a growing number of landscape theorists who hold that landscape should be thought of as an active site for contemplation and participation, in a way that the standard conception of landscape does not allow. I suggest that the modern, scopic (sight-privileging) definition of landscape is insufficient for critical gaming and that in order to appreciate the formative aspects of landscape, we must go beyond merely looking.

Landscape is often called “picturesque,” a term introduced by William Gilpin in his 1768 *Essay on Prints*. The use of this term is somewhat odd, for it reverses the typical order of representation. One would expect that a picture is constructed to resemble a landscape, but not the other way around. Fitting the aesthetic ideals for art of the time, a properly picturesque scene was varied in both texture and composition and reflected Romantic idealizations.<sup>126</sup> Paintings became models for landscapes and vice versa. From this period on, viewers have tended to treat landscape as if it were a painting or a photograph: as an object to behold. The ubiquitous vacation snapshot, for example, embodies the picturesque landscape. It is a means by which people delineate the boundaries

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<sup>126</sup> Gilpin was an advocate of artists and designers “helping” nature on its course and recommended, for example, improving Tintern Abbey by way of a carefully swung mallet. Designers have long been involved in the careful scripting of nature.

of the site, and situate themselves within it, by arresting the landscape's movement. Art historian Michael Newman says, "The tourist makes a decision about framing. Their snapshots are framed for them and by them, and also in accord with memories of images, so that their pictures are also pre-framed."<sup>128</sup> Taking a tourist snapshot, a phenomenon I will discuss in some detail later, is a way to immobilize the landscape by way of one's personal (though heavily mediated) relationship with nature. Viewers decide what counts as landscape by framing it, turning it into an image. Nearly every vacation photographer hopes that his images will be "picturesque" in the colloquial sense, even though they are already pictures.

The digital era complicates the matter further since now synthetic worlds are based on an image of an image of the picturesque. Virtual worlds are often called "hyperreal," though not because they are fantastical or outlandish in their imaginative reach. Extraordinary images are not new. What is different now is that the natural world has become for us a picture, landscape images pictures of pictures, and digital worlds/images pictures of pictures of pictures. The layers of mediation that encircle virtual worlds and their habitation are dense and recursive in a way that no Renaissance Madonna could possibly have been.

Many virtual worlds are designed, however, as if they were paintings (i.e., primarily visual and noninteractive) instead of dynamic and alterable. Such worlds are just as flat as paintings: literally, for they are reproduced as two-

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<sup>128</sup> Rachel DeLue and James Elkins, eds., *Landscape Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 138.

dimensional images,<sup>129</sup> and figuratively, for they brook no interference.<sup>130</sup> *World of Warcraft* is constructed in this way.<sup>131</sup> The vistas of the world may be vast, but the player can only see a single, cropped field of view at one time. Scenes are truncated to a human scale though they may be of majestic cliffs or islands floating in the sky. An entire world is turned into a framed picture that can be captured at will. Nature becomes a representation: first to we who see it, then to the programmers who create its digital form, and then again to the player as she takes a snapshot of herself in an exotic locale.

A site where such exoticism is visible, found early in the game, is that of Stranglethorn Vale, a jungle environment filled with murderous pirates, menacing

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<sup>129</sup> In December of 2006, Nintendo launched the Wii, a gaming console that allows for full-body integration in videogaming. One feature of this new system is that each player can create a personalized avatar, called a Mii, as a personal representation in games such as boxing and bowling. The visualization choices are quite limited, but they may nonetheless bear striking resemblance to the player. Individuals grew so attached to their avatars that they wanted a physical manifestation that would stay with them even when the computer was off. In January 2007, several different sculptors, none of whom was affiliated with the Nintendo Corporation, offered custom 3-dimensional Miis for sale. [http://www.paulpapedesigns.com/Store\\_CI.html](http://www.paulpapedesigns.com/Store_CI.html), last accessed 25 July 2008, and <http://www.miisculptures.com/>, last accessed 25 July 2008.

<sup>130</sup> The internet in general is often lauded for its interactivity and user participation and in examples such as MetaFilter, a community blog, inventive communication occurs. The spread of information becomes productively decentered and ingenious linkages between disparate topics are quite common. I do not, however, wish to fetishize interaction. Interaction can also be harnessed for regressive or repressive purposes. Games such as *Second Life* do allow interaction, but almost completely in the service of capital. For example, buying and selling real estate and clothing in order to earn more Linden Dollars is, as I delineate in chapter 1, foreign to the spirit of play. It mechanizes innovation and creativity and promotes the accrual of more products for their own sake.

<sup>131</sup> See figure 3.1 for an image of Gethse, a dwarven player character in *World of Warcraft*, admiring a landscape painting inside an inn.

tigers, and mysterious ruins. The verdant foliage is wild and yet perfectly manicured. Different areas for different quests are perfectly spaced and always designed with the player's movement and activities in mind. This is what jungles would look like if they were Disney rides: perfectly ordered, yet tousled. Living in the "untamed wilderness" is an ideal way to be a part of nature while dominating it utterly. The player exercises control by conquering beasts, completing quests in the area, and by the very way she takes in landscape.

Everything about the game discourages players from reflecting on the mutually constitutive relationship between nature and technology. Accordingly, images of virtual worlds may simply be taken for granted. The player may momentarily be in awe at a beautiful scene, but the instrumental context of the images largely determines their meaning. More often than not, the distraction that such vistas afford is simply a temporary reprieve from the ugliness of the actual surroundings. Synthetic worlds may also function as an exercise in hyperreal overindulgence, showcasing extravagant virtual panoramas simply because they are possible.

In the synthetic worlds that comprise *World of Warcraft*, it appears as though the player is integrated with the entire environment and connected to it in a profound way. By participating in tasks such as picking herbs or skinning animals, players seem to become intimately involved with the land. But since the virtual land will always return to its original state, players' interaction with his or her environment is transient, if not illusory, because it is based solely on commodification and collection (of herbs, pelts, etc.) What this indicates is that

players are not actually interested in a participatory relationship with their environment, but rather the image of such a relationship, freed from toil and hardship. The digital landscape is thus a vision of pseudo-utopia, a perfect place where ecology works for people without requiring any consideration in return.

Such a pseudo-utopia is ripe for critique, aesthetic and ideological. Games can perform the role of art objects, revealing much about the contemporary subject and her relation to both nature and technology. In this way, aesthetic consideration of games comprises the basis for an ideological analysis. I contend, following Adorno, that through careful examination of aesthetic objects (in this case, games) and the application of philosophy to them, we might be able to change our consciousness and subsequently to help change our world.

The meaning of an artwork does not readily reveal itself. Artworks can only be deciphered by the precise application of rational thought, by contemplation. Art does not work directly on the stuff of the world, but rather through us, by challenging normative boundaries and structures and moving the viewer into a confrontational relationship with the problems at hand. Similarly, games should not be taken at face value, but rather should be treated as objects worthy of contemplation. To see what this entails, I look to Adorno's aesthetic philosophy. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* visits and revisits the problems of visual culture in order to reveal what he refers to as "truth content." Truth content is not merely the "meaning" of the work or what it is supposed to "tell us," but instead resides in the insights into society immanent to the object itself. That said,



artworks are not simply neat packages that contain meaning. What is significant about a work may be quite oblique, related to its form or our manner of consuming it.

In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno suggests ways that we can utilize manufactured objects in conjunction with philosophical practice in order to reveal deeper truths about the conditions of production and society as a whole. He states, “Art is nevertheless the truth of society insofar as in its most authentic products the irrationality of the rational world order is expressed”<sup>132</sup>. Adorno’s words here reveal both his commitment to the power of rationality and his recognition that rationality can be corrupted. By utilizing this understanding on game worlds, pinnacles of digital construction, we may surmise much about the irrationality of the allegedly rational world they manifest.<sup>133</sup>

Though they tell us much about the contemporary subject, games are typically considered to be activities that curb thought entirely and create a state of zombie-like enthrallment. Instead of passively consuming these landscapes and being unaware of the spell they cast, we can unlock the contemplative and philosophical potential of games by actively considering their deeper implications. What games often reveal, I argue, is absence or loss. The worlds attempt to recuperate or recreate utopia, yet the degree to which they fail is as telling as

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<sup>132</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 84.

<sup>133</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

how they succeed. We can use the image of synthetic realms as an object lesson, a way to contemplate our own unreconciled world. Adorno states that, “It is not for art, through particularization, to disguise the ruling universality of the administered world.”<sup>134</sup> That is, however, precisely what game worlds often do. Thus, we must dissect them in order to ascertain their truth-value: what they can tell us about living in an administered, hyperrationalized world, which may in fact be defined by the nature of their lie.<sup>135</sup>

What are game worlds, if not perfect, self-contained, and fully complete? Certainly players may experience displeasure within them, but the image of the world is one of rational perfection where every outcome is comprehensible and can be understood as a part of a coherent whole. Consistency is often attained through the valorization of the quantitative: experience points, health points, gold pieces, and stat bonuses. They are hyperrationalized environments in which the random is always augmented by the predictable and strategies are conceived with an eye towards collection, achievement and the promise of progress (see chapter 2.) Yet within the programmed order there remains a glimpse or a wish that the world could be otherwise.

Such a utopian world is, of course, illusory, since it fails to promote integration or reconciliation between society and the natural world. Instead it provides an alternate site of reconciliation, a decoy that allows for satisfaction of

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<sup>134</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 84.

<sup>135</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Free Time,” and “Progress,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

the utopian drive without affecting real lived conditions. Yet images of hyperrationalized worlds are valuable to the extent they reveal, however inadequately, our need for reconciliation, the first step towards achieving the insight on the basis of which something like utopia might fittingly be imagined. Adorno notes that, "With human means art wants to realize the language of what is not human."<sup>136</sup> Synthetic worlds do not create equality or integration, either with nature or within social units. They are not perfect realms of frictionless communication and their truth-value lies in what they reveal negatively. Games are tricky to decipher and often have subtle ideological motivations. Game landscapes are no exception.

### **Landscape is Ideological**

How landscapes (and the discourse surrounding them) are framed tells us much about how we articulate our sense of self. Denis E. Cosgrove, in his path-breaking *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, suggests that landscape is a way of seeing, "a way in which some Europeans have represented to themselves and to others the world about them ... and through which they have commented on social relations."<sup>137</sup> In the same vein, landscape and architectural historian Diane Harris notes that landscapes are often used to naturalize certain

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<sup>136</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 78.

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in DeLue and Elkins, *Landscape Theory*, 20. Cosgrove's thesis can also be applied to non-Western landscape traditions as well, though the pervasiveness of Western perspective has dictated most of the conventions of contemporary game landscapes with which I am concerned.

political agendas.<sup>138</sup> Simply by including or excluding various elements, designers can create environments that give voice to their ideological assumptions. If landscapes are “pure,” then these developments can be portrayed as if they were eternal and should be accepted without question. She recommends that landscape viewers examine “how difference is constructed, who is left in, who is left out, and look carefully at what’s visible, but also at what is erased or consciously rendered invisible and for what purposes.”<sup>139</sup> She claims that landscape studies, and I would argue games studies, “must also involve analyzing that which cannot be seen,” -- in essence, the present absence.<sup>140</sup> Many things are elided or omitted from landscape construction, a phenomenon even more visible in painting, wherein time is arrested and the flow and change of the landscape is brought to a standstill. Games, by contrast, are constantly in motion, yet they partake in this ideology of permanence.

Games typically depict nature and environments as sublime, unchanging, and beyond the reach of mere mortals. The environment of the game is often just a backdrop and not an integral part of the game itself. Players may pick certain herbs or search for quest items in mounds of dirt, but since most games will return to an original state, the games are more about viewing than actually interacting with the land. Unlike some virtual realms, such as *Second Life*, players can produce no lasting trace of their “presence” on the world of *World of*

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<sup>138</sup> Diane Harris, “Self and Landscape,” in *Landscape Theory*, Rachel DeLue and James Elkins, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 189.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

*Warcraft*. Footprints in snow recede, water ripples dissipate, bones fade away. Most non-player characters are static, merely standing in place waiting for player input. Others wander repeatedly in the same small loop. Even with the continual input of players, everything will return to the initial game state. The realm's imperviousness to character's actions perpetuates the erroneous notion that landscapes are bastions of timelessness and purity, a problematic doctrine that necessarily separates humans from their surroundings. *WoW*'s landscape was made to be looked at. Rich and varied, it is based primarily on a scopic model of interaction that does not allow for a more profound or enduring relation between player and environment.

Such visual dominance is problematic, for it releases viewers from any responsibility for their environment.<sup>141</sup> If individuals view themselves as separate from landscape, it becomes merely a "beautiful" or "inspirational" stage setting. "Nature" becomes a transcendent phenomenon and the adversary of "culture," represented by people. Mythologizing nature in such a way implies that humans can have no impact on it. The real effect that humans have on landscape is ignored in favor of a phony "timelessness." Following this tendency, the design of *World of Warcraft* is such that players cannot make a lasting impression on their surroundings and are thus cut off from interaction with the world in which they play.

Players cannot change their virtual environment, but it can change them. Diane Harris states, "As we [or the game designers, in this case] create our

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<sup>141</sup> DeLue and Elkins, *Landscape Theory*, 87-150.

surroundings, we simultaneously inhabit, move, even perform within them, and the surroundings reproduce us just as we produce them.”<sup>142</sup> She cites examples such as citizenship, nostalgia, and patriotism as ways that our landscapes have a determining influence on our subjecthood. A problem arises, then, in the asymmetrical relationship of player to game, since it renders players unable to contribute to their own subject formation.

Urban Studies/Planning professor Anne Whiston Spirn also displays an interest in “active” landscape, claiming that landscape involves an ongoing dialogue between, so to speak, figure and ground. The language of landscape can be spoken by anyone; landscape designers are merely more fluent in its many dialects. She says,

Designers are storytellers. Design is a way of imagining and telling new stories and reviving old ones, a process of spinning out the shape of a possible future...We extend these meanings further through processes of construction and cultivation, use and neglect, as we dwell in what began as dreams.”<sup>144</sup>

By recognizing the many factors that influence the creation and utilization of landscape, human participants can become more cognizant of the stories/ideologies inside which they live, and thus more able to shape them.

Unfortunately, in contemporary commercial gaming, the dialogue is rather one-sided. In *World of Warcraft*, players can influence the landscape only in very minor ways, such as mining a vein of ore that will soon replenish itself. By

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<sup>142</sup> Harris, “Self and Landscape,” 194.

<sup>144</sup> Anne Whiston Spirn, “‘One With Nature’: Landscape, Language, Empathy, and Imagination,” in *Landscape Theory*, Rachel DeLue and James Elkins, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 64.

manipulating game mechanics, some players are able to modify their surroundings in more provocative ways, though these, too, only last temporarily and are often for the purposes of advertisement.<sup>145</sup> The gamescape of *Second Life* is indeed alterable; much of its in-world production is primarily for profit. For example, in 2007, real estate firm Coldwell Banker purchased a large parcel on the mainland of *Second Life*.<sup>146</sup> The firm has staffed offices (in the Ranchero area of SL) that sell SL land and answer questions about real world properties. The company is not aiming to earn money selling the land, but they are participating in the formation of virtual citizens and shaping their subsequent outlook on non-virtual holdings. *Second Life* residents utilize their preexisting

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<sup>145</sup> One example of this occurred in the Dwarven capital city of Ironforge. Dead bodies were strewn across the stone floor; dozens of identical gnomes lay on the ground. Residents and visitors did not seem much bothered by the carnage. One or two priests glanced at the scene for a moment and then moved on towards their meeting at the Auction House. The placement of the uncannily similar gnomes did not seem completely random, yet for the passersby on the street, there was no discernable order. I tilted my camera, looking down from a bird's-eye view and saw their clandestine message, "WOWGOLD.COMCHEEP SAFE." The intriguing manipulator was just another spammer, hawking his wares. When the players "release" their dead gnomes and allow them to resurrect at a graveyard, the bodies disappear and are replaced by tiny piles of bones. Eventually, these too will vanish and Ironforge will return to its original state.

Some players will have seen the ad while it lasted, but most will see it on guild sites or forums in the form of a still or moving image. The images are so quickly disseminated that their presence in the game's landscape is not particularly important. It does not really matter *where* in the realm the advertisement takes place. The same sensations of recognition and nostalgia connect players and advertisers if it is in the Ghostlands or at Thunder Bluff. The ad will be identifiable to any *World of Warcraft* player and thus do its work without the landscape ever becoming more than the pretext for economic exchange.

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[http://money.cnn.com/2007/03/22/technology/fastforward\\_secondlife.fortune/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2007/03/22/technology/fastforward_secondlife.fortune/index.htm), last accessed 25 July 2008.

knowledge of houses, buildings, and scenery<sup>147</sup> to determine the value of land in their virtual world. Instead of creating environments for themselves, citizens purchase premade homes and islands. As such, the practice of living in *Second Life* becomes less and less active and more about possession and accretion. Not coincidentally, houses bought from Coldwell Banker (for approximately 20 USD) cannot be altered.<sup>148</sup>

I do not suggest that there should be no economic exchange in games, far from it. However, in order for the game environment to function as a catalyst for the critical playing that I have been advocating, players must not allow landscape to be reduced the status of a computer wallpaper, in spite of game developers' efforts. As it stands, environments are often merely momentary diversions of color and line, essentially decorative and ornamental. Landscape, and the social, cultural, and ideological assumptions that it imbeds, should be a significant part of the game experience. By first recognizing the primacy given to scopic mathematics, players can come to appreciate the plight of game landscape and of landscape more generally (of both the living and representational kinds.)

By "scopic mathematics," I refer to the idea that games are, first, meant primarily to be seen (instead of interacted with or manipulated), and second,

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<sup>147</sup> Spirn, "One with Nature," 45, notes that cities are landscape, too.

<sup>148</sup> While there are some interesting projects being undertaken in *Second Life*, such as Keystone Bouchard's *Gallery of Reflexive Architecture*, the primary focus of most endeavors is replicating normal behaviors. This applies to a wide gamut of activities, from purchasing a house to participating in Budweiser's Lingerie Model search.



premade and calculable. They are almost exclusively deterministic and rely on a specific understanding of perspective (a view on already created and finalized space) in order to function. While games are hardly instantiations of one-point perspective, they in landscapes nonetheless appear as the natural outcome of the scientized world.<sup>149</sup> The mathematical nature of space in synthetic worlds is hardly a new phenomenon; it began with the rational ordering inherent in linear perspective in the early Renaissance.

In *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Erwin Panofsky discusses how the creation of three-dimensional space within a two-dimensional picture plane is a radically different way of seeing than any that had come before. One-point perspective, the definitive representation of space in the West since the Renaissance, mathematically calculates and renders distance according to geometrical principles. The central point from which all calculation begins is the eye of the viewer. It systematizes space according to a regular decreasing of size and uniform progression to a vanishing point in the distance (see figure 3.2.) The world is rendered mathematical and predictable and is ready for the artist to apprehend and inscribe it. Space becomes organized and efficient and, perhaps most importantly, methodical, the results readily evident in Alberti's *De Pictura* (1435.)

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<sup>149</sup> Some games, most notably first person shooters, deploy more traditional perspectival images, such as using clearly delineated orthogonals to define corridors receding in the distance. In *World of Warcraft*, distance is rendered in a more complicated manner, with certain areas utilizing blurring and other atmospheric renderings to create the illusion of depth. Perspectival representation is further confused by the mobility of the "camera" or player's view, a topic on which I will touch in the following chapter.

Prior to the advent of linear perspective, for example in the pictorial system of the Greeks, space was understood to be, and represented as, discontinuous and irregular. Image building did not depend on geometrical idealization, for the eye is not linear, but curved; it is not static, but constantly moving. These properties were utilized to define how the painted image should appear. Thus, pictures represented space that was aggregate and dynamic instead of orderly, consistent, and straight. Space did not have a single central point of view; objects shifted and overlapped unsystematically. Objects were not placed into a single logical order with a man's eye in the central station of power, but instead were subjected to an eye that roved.

Panofsky notes that in this organization of space, "...bodies are not absorbed into a homogenous and infinite system of dimensional relationships."<sup>150</sup> Instead, they are various and placed in a space that is discontinuous. He comments that it would have been unthinkable for artists and philosophers of this era to create the systematic space of linear perspective, for that requires a modern view of the world that has very different philosophical underpinnings. Specifically, linear perspective requires a view that rationalizes all space into a logical arrangement of coordinates within a universal and mathematical representation of the world.

Emphasizing the mathematical is significant, for as Heidegger notes, this concept underlies our modern conception of science, research, and our picture of

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<sup>150</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (Cambridge, Mass: Zone Books, 2002), 44.

the world at large. We normally think of math as being about numbers, but this is merely the most obvious manifestation of the mathematical. Heidegger claims that the sciences as we know them exist due to a specific way of viewing the world. An already-formed picture of the world is projected into the future and science judges and compares findings to this picture to ascertain their correctness. Heidegger:

... it [modern physics] can proceed mathematically in this way only because, in a deeper sense, it is already itself mathematical. *Ta mathemata* means for the Greeks that which man knows in advance in his observation of whatever is and in his intercourse with things: the corporeality of bodies, the vegetable character of plants, the animality of animals, the humanness of man. Alongside these, belonging also to that which is already-known, i.e., to the mathematical, are numbers.<sup>151</sup>

The “already-known” character of numbers illustrates how modern man apprehends objects and sets them before himself as if merely finding their pre-ordained location in a coordinate system or, perhaps more commonly, a painting.

Heidegger’s description of mathematics elucidates his claim that in the modern age man has turned the world into a picture. Man perceives the world as if it were an already formed, already unified whole that he must simply perceive and reason out. Objects fit into the rationalized space of the world as into a landscape that recedes in an orderly fashion to its vanishing point. Such a view is a thoroughly modern conception of the world, one that is reasonable and demands a rational and logical ordering of the universe. Accordingly, for Heidegger it would be meaningless to speak of a “medieval worldview”: since the

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<sup>151</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 118.

metaphysical grounding that supports an encompassing picture of the world did not yet exist, it would be incorrect to say that medievals had a “worldview”.

Similarly, Panofsky says, “Antique perspective is thus the expression of a specific and fundamentally unmodern view of space...Antique perspective is furthermore the expression of an equally specific and equally unmodern conception of the world.”<sup>152</sup> The discontinuity of ancient vision corresponds to an impression of the world that is not a single “picture” of it, as with linear perspective. It is more akin to an aggregate of ways of seeing than to a unified, modern perspective. He chides earlier art historians for failing to see that the ancient conception of space neither demanded nor allowed for the creation of linear perspective as we know it.

Panofsky begins his text with a quotation from Dürer, that great crafter of linear perspective (figure 3.3), which translates to, “Perspectiva is a Latin world which means ‘seeing through’.”<sup>153</sup> Panofsky clarifies that by “perspectival” space, he means not just any form of foreshortening or the use of distance, but rather a unified view that transforms paintings into windows. The ancients may have had techniques for dealing with spatial depth, but they did not have this sense of “seeing through” that so succinctly expresses the modern conception of the world as a picture.

By accepting this paradigm, viewers accept that landscape is already a sort of image or picture from which they are necessarily separate. It may

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<sup>152</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective*, 43.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

currently be impossible to extricate ourselves from the mathematical paradigm as a whole. However, recognizing the ideological baggage that accompanies such a view may help to prevent the thoughtless habitation (or worse, worship) of hyperrationalized space.

One may object to this analysis, claiming that there are instances of uniqueness and creativity in games such as *World of Warcraft*, suggesting, for example, that screen shots (snapshots taken by players inside the game) capture an individual's particular interactions with the landscape. Though a player may take a screen shot of her character in the game, doing so merely perpetuates a false, auratic image of gameplay disguising the reigning ideology, as I shall argue in the following section

### **Battling Loss, a Losing Battle**

Walter Benjamin argued that the only place that the aura lingers in reproducible images is the human face.<sup>154</sup> The aura, or the sense of uniqueness about a situation in time and place, is negated when images can be reproduced anywhere and under any conditions. Pictures become valuable because they can transmit information and have what Benjamin calls "exhibition value."<sup>155</sup> Photographs of people, on the other hand, hearken back to the cult of

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<sup>154</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 27.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

remembrance of the dead. They capture individuals as they once were, preserved and untouched by the ravages of time. Preservation makes them into objects of veneration akin to relics. The images retain a mystical quality that seems to transcend the mortal world of mere empirical facts.

Photographs of people contain “melancholy, incomparable beauty”<sup>156</sup> because of the absence that is implied in such commemoration. No matter what the mood of the picture itself may be, the format of the photograph implies an attempt to capture a fleeting moment and the recognition of our inability to stop time successfully. The photos produce melancholy for they are a reminder of how we ultimately lose the faces and the moments that we cherish. The desire for preservation is what compels us to take snapshots, sit for portraits, and gaze lovingly over family albums.

Though the image may be cropped badly, or have poor lighting, vacation photos have a certain awkward charm. Author Rebecca Solnit suggests that, “[T]hey (tourists) aren’t interested in making good pictures. Their project is an indexical reference to the fact of having been there.”<sup>157</sup> One is immersed in an exotic locale, out of place. A tourist takes the photo to verify her existence, to remember an event.

People take such commemorative photos in virtual realms as well as in the real world. Players take snapshots, or more accurately “screenshots,” to record portraits and assorted activities such as battles -- something akin to

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> DeLue and Elkins, *Landscape Theory*, 135.

vacation photos. Though the world is synthetic and its products mediated very differently than in the physical world, the impulse that causes players to persist in this image-making is the same, they are attempting to capture a moment for themselves before it is lost forever.

Players take screenshots in order to make their virtual actions tangible and real. By commemorating a moment of a game, the player attempts to capture and make static an essentially motive practice. In order to prove that her avatar exists and that it is as real and important as any other form of identity or persona creation, a player screen captures it. The images can then be uploaded, printed, added to blogs, attached to emails, namely anything that can be done to a “normal” photo. The process of capture and dissemination reinforces the “realness” of virtual practice and displays how much we want our virtual selves to mimic the tangible world. One’s avatar is never unique in time and space. There are dozens of characters who look just like mine, speak with my virtual voice, wear my virtual clothes, and possess my skills. Techniques such as snapshots work to convince players that they have both a unique relationship to their surroundings and a unique subjectivity.

The game landscape provides players sufficient information to allow them to project their own desires onto it. The game's imagery continually references nature, but remains oddly abstracted from it. The screen colors are vibrant and the textures varied, but they are much more like sketches of a real world than an equivalent to it. A waterfall in the game looks like a time-lapsed photo of running water, catching the hint of movement without requiring the details. So too are the

surfaces of the vines, trees and ground: patterns that appear three dimensional when a player is running past, but reveal themselves as flat when examined closely. Thus, those who live their virtual lives in *World of Warcraft* are given sufficient detail to allow them to identify with their surroundings and project onto them a connection to nature that, to a non-player, will seem alien and perhaps even absurd. Anyone who plays the game, however, can identify with the process of situating one's character in the landscape that one is bonded to and memorializing the moment in a screenshot. The memorial creates a sort of temporary or illusory aura for the image.

Such memorializing can be seen in figure 3.4, an image that could almost pass for someone's Hawaiian vacation photo if not for the strange armor the subjects wear. It is a typical screenshot of two characters in Stranglethorn Vale. The presence of the characters in the photo, as in any vacation snapshot, signifies the characters' presence in the environment, stating that they were there, that they experienced this vista. To be sure, they were experiencing a representation and now the photo commemorating it is a representation of a representation. Many layers of instrumentalized mediation stand between actual nature and the players. Perhaps the distance makes the reference and the yearning more poignant. The style of the photo itself is familiar, but the stylized vision of nature may be foreign and alienating to those who do not play the game.

For those players who take screenshots, the images are highly personal. Screenshots can carry as much sentimental value or weight as normal photos.



An outsider may find the captions silly or the images cartoonish, but for those who identify with the game, the images strike a chord. Like photographic images, they have power over viewers and resonate with personal experience and memory. Harris says (of normal snapshots), "One can be cynical about them, but the intimacy they generate is truly amazing."<sup>158</sup> Seeing another couple's screenshots from Stranglethorn Vale causes me to look back with nostalgia to a moment of gameplay that is gone forever.

Michael Newman broaches the topic of indexicality and the digital from the opposite end of the spectrum.

I think digital, simulated landscape has gone beyond that stage of landscape-as-representation-of-consciousness, creating almost inhuman landscape spaces. That is something we haven't really discussed at all: the idea of an entirely artificial, digitally constructed landscape, which is what most high-budget Hollywood films these days provide. Some art practices, especially indexical practices, are in a sense an attempt to resist the total substitution of real landscapes by digital landscapes."<sup>159</sup>

He sees some artistic practices (and, one can imagine, the indexicality of tourist snapshots) as ways that people fight back against the uncertain ontology of digital worlds. I contend that the uncertainty of digital landscapes is not rooted in their being somehow alien. The reason these landscapes cause so much uncertainty and insecurity is because they are uncannily close to what we consider to be the real world.

Games landscapes may introduce a measure of existential uncertainty into players' lives. In order to cope with the anxiety that digital spaces produce,

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 146.

players attempt to acquire an aura for their avatars. The aura expresses the overall distinctiveness of an object. Activities such as taking vacation snapshots in a game demonstrate how players try to assure the uniqueness of their avatar. They will inevitably fail because digital realms are unable to support such inimitability. However, the need for fixity in time and place remains.

Desiring an aura, and the metaphysical commitments that go along with it, comes with many hazards, not the least of which is the fact that achieving the aura's promise of uniqueness is virtually impossible. We, as critical practitioners of gaming, must keep this impossibility in mind when studying and creating these images. The question remains: why do we want to make our virtual lives real? Despite claims that we are firmly entrenched in the digital age, in reality we have not yet fully embraced the virtual paradigm. Screenshots, then, reference the natural world in order to create a space that invokes enough of the real world to be believable but remains sufficiently abstract enough to allow us to project our desires upon it.

Virtual landscapes are programmed to fulfill (and, of course, to create) our desire as realms of plenitude, even in the midst of strife and battle. Creatures that have been slain will respawn in moments, plants that have been picked will regrow, and veins of ore will reappear. Shortage can occur, but abundance is soon restored. The cycle of want and satisfaction is enacted perpetually; the world promises to be a better and more rewarding place than the player has ever experienced. Such imagined simplistic, false plenitude is another reason that the pseudo-medieval setting is so popular. Looking back to a legendary past

disguises the grip of instrumentalized actuality. Adorno states,

So long as progress, deformed by utilitarianism, does violence to the surface of the earth, it will be impossible – in spite of all proof to the contrary – completely to counter the perception that what antedates the trend is in its backwardness better and more humane.<sup>160</sup>

In the end, the game world owes its very existence to the processes and devices that wound the natural one.

Games use multiple layers of mythologizing to conceal the conflict between the natural and the technological that inheres in them. The player journeys in the gameworld and experiences its wonder and mystery; their avatars witness undiscovered countries and the ruins of lost civilizations that are more mysterious and intriguing than the mundane towns and villages where daily activities such as shopping and crafting transpire. Compare a small coastal settlement such as Southshore (figure 3.5) with the Sunken Temple of Atal'Hakkar (figure 3.6.) The village is rustic and quaint when seen in relation to the latter fallen civilization. Characters are continually met with older, more dramatic sites that push the boundaries ever backwards toward an unreachable, mana-filled original moment.

Similar to the function of the Romantic's gothic folly, game world landscapes act as an apology for the destruction of natural beauty, and as a surrogate for it. A folly is a building constructed to resemble a medieval ruin; it displays a longing for the historical even though its connection to actual medieval buildings is spurious. Adorno: "If today the aesthetic relation to the past is poisoned by a reactionary tendency with which this relation is in league, an

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<sup>160</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 64.

ahistorical aesthetic consciousness that sweeps aside the dimension of the past as rubbish is no better.”<sup>161</sup> It is necessary to see how history functions in artworks and not merely endlessly to refer to a nonexistent past in search of a fictitious and mystical beginning. Unfortunately, most videogames are structured in a way that promotes impotent mythologizing.

### **Landscape as Mana, Player as Consumer**

The player is torn between her modern conception of knowledge and space and the illusion of mana, the immaterial, spiritual force that pervades all beings. Mana represents an utterly unknowable, magical power that allows incomprehensible deeds to be achieved. Mana is the essence of otherworldly potential, the “I want to believe” of the mystic world. It is no accident that characters (in many games, not just *World of Warcraft*) use “mana points” to cast spells, part and parcel of a concern to replicate the wonder and mystery of an imagined primordial world. Adorno describes the primordial relation to the world in terms of a “shudder,” in relation to magical or otherwise inexplicable events that provoke fear of powerlessness in the human subject.

Players channel the power of mana in order to assert their agency in the game world. However, that they are complicit with the system of mana shows the paradoxical and problematic nature the enterprise. Contradiction can be seen in the term “mana points” itself, which quantifies something that by definition is unquantifiable. The desire for mana displays a longing for a world

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 65.

that has not been “finished” or completely accounted for by science.<sup>162</sup> That the hyperrational points system remains demonstrates how unfeasible such completion actually is. The impossibility of mana increases the desire to attain power over the world.

For Adorno, the concepts of natural beauty and art beauty are inextricably intertwined: each invokes the other in a dialectical relationship that attempts to come to terms with humanity's unreconciled state. To see something in nature as beautiful means that one is necessarily separated from it; the harmony between man and nature has been lost. Art beauty partially resolves this disunity by mediating between the natural world that is damaged and the world of reason that has done this damage. The artwork resides within the dialectic and it is the philosopher's (and, I suggest, the player's) job to reveal the tensions that are hidden and begin to work through them.

### **Taking Back Landscape/Out of the Mana Trap**

In order more fully to appreciate the intricacies of landscape, viewers must find ways to reconnect with the concepts of “shaping” and “responsibility” that inhere in early definitions. Though landscape is typically defined as a special view of natural formations (promontories, rocks, cliffs, valleys, etc.) this definition is insufficient for contemporary reflective practice. It confuses the suffix “scape” with that of “scope,” a mistake that disenfranchises individuals and debases their relationship with the environment. The term landscape was originally not only

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<sup>162</sup> The wholesale reclaiming of mana is part of the reason why so many popular games rely on swords-and-sorcery style realms.

about seeing, but also about interacting with and shaping the land. Spirn notes,

If you look at the roots of the word landscape in Nordic and Germanic language, for example, Danish landskab, German Landschaft, or Old English landscipe, you see a combination of meanings that associate a place and the people who dwell there, past and present... Skabe and schaffen mean "to shape," and the suffixes –skab and –schaft, as in the English –ship also mean association, partnership. There is a notion, embedded in the original word, of a mutually shaping of people and place: people shape the land, and the land shapes people.<sup>163</sup>

The older sense of the word is valuable, for it urges us to establish a more thoughtful, conscientious connection to our environment. In most contemporary gaming, by contrast, the ability to change one's surroundings meaningfully is all but absent.

Considering the social import of an image through what it provokes aesthetically is merely the first step towards a contemplative practice of playing. Reflective playing will not transform games, especially not immediately, but it will allow us the intellectual space to use game worlds as object lessons about how we truly wish the world to be transformed. It is clear that synthetic beauty (and, I extrapolate, synthetic worlds more generally) is connected to natural beauty. Gamescapes are always seen in some relation to "real" landscapes. It is fruitful, then, to study gamescapes with some of the same techniques that enhance our understanding of landscapes proper.

When games are developed with an eye towards their sociological or psychological effects, they often serve controlling, hegemonic structures. The company Bungie, during the development of *Halo 3* (a first-person shooter on the theme of alien invasion), hired experimental psychologist Randy Pagulayan to

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<sup>163</sup> DeLue and Elkins, *Landscape Theory*, 92.

monitor individuals at play and to suggest strategies for improving the game experience, i.e., making it more addictive or immersive. In an interview with the popular magazine *Wired*, Pagulayan states his research questions, "Is the game fun? Do they [players] get a sense of speed and purpose?"<sup>164</sup> One of the cardinal rules of interactivity is that the player must feel as though she is making a difference in the virtual world. Whether she is actually making a difference is nearly irrelevant. The final result is a game based on the illusion that the player is having a unique experience, when in actuality she is having an average and repeatable one.

Pagulayan recorded about 600 gamers' responses to various scenarios in *Halo 3*, assessing each for things like ease of maneuverability, accessibility of resources, and how long the player can survive. Using this information in a feedback loop, the developers went on to modify the game, making sure that the challenge level was neither too high nor too low. Clive Thompson notes, "They're trying to divine the golden mean of fun."<sup>165</sup> The assumption is that "fun" is determinable through behavioristic modeling and can be created by instituting structures of punishment (e.g., character death) and reward (e.g., finding ammo or accumulating points) in games.

Early in the company's history, Bungie instituted "thirty seconds of fun," as their catch phrase. This means that during gameplay, there would be a constant

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<sup>164</sup> Clive Thompson, "Halo 3: How Microsoft Labs Invented a New Science of Play," *Wired*, 21 August 2007, [http://www.wired.com/gaming/virtualworlds/magazine/15-09/ff\\_halo?currentPage=all](http://www.wired.com/gaming/virtualworlds/magazine/15-09/ff_halo?currentPage=all), last accessed 20 November 2008.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

stream of activity (in this case, battle) followed by an interlude during which the player would get a brief break. The player learns to react automatically during these thirty seconds of chaos, choosing weapons and attack styles as if second nature. Afterwards, she is granted a respite from the intense struggle. In *Halo's* gameplay, the cycle of work and recuperation that defines the capitalist system of labor is reproduced in miniature. *Halo 3* is by no means the only game that works against critical consciousness. Bungie (now a separate company, but formerly owned by Microsoft) merely has the most technologically advanced laboratory for ensuring the propagation of “fun.”

Because so much time is devoted to studying how to prevent critical playing, the player must integrate reflection into her own playing and thus to begin to find pathways towards social change. Scrutinizing games, some will argue, takes all the fun out of them. But if this fun promotes sexism, classism, or the promulgation of other unjust social systems, “fun” in the context I'm describing is just another word for brainwashing. Critical consciousness does not have to be tedious. Players can still enjoy the vistas of *Outlands* or the sight of a town from the back of a gryphon. Such images can function as catalysts for intellectual engagement with aesthetic and social issues.

Adorno's conception of artworks as channels for the transformation of critical consciousness is especially pertinent to the discussion of virtual technologies. It gives us a process for the consideration of aesthetic objects as well as a model for understanding the connection between the technological and the natural world. Natural beauty rubs on the wounds we have inflicted on the



world that surrounds us, and in our era of games and synthetic environments it is through critical play that we can save them.

To that end, a purely scopic schema neglects what is so intriguing about both landscape and games: the performative interaction that they engender. If landscape and games maintain the fixity of their borders, they doom themselves to a restricted, predetermined (mathematical in the sense of “already known”) existence that inhibits their potential for stimulating thought and change. James Carse speaks of this phenomenon when he describes what he terms Master Players. They are

so perfectly skilled in their play that nothing can surprise them, so perfectly trained that every move is foreseen at the beginning. A true Master Player plays as though the game is already in the past, according to a script whose every detail is known prior to the play itself.<sup>166</sup>

When a person utilizes such a predetermined schema for any action, from viewing a landscape to creating a digital avatar, she is succumbing to the myth of the Master Player and the aura that it exudes.

As an alternative, individuals can begin to contemplate the fluidity of schemas and the mutually constitutive nature of objects. To view a landscape is to help create it; the same goes for playing games. Creation (including that of the self) is a profound responsibility and often it is easier to leave the schemas to others, to Master Players. Doing so seems to fix objects and concepts in time and space, making them simpler to conquer. Ludic thought, however, is not particularly concerned with conquering or domination. Instead, it flourishes

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<sup>166</sup> James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* (New York: Random House, 1986), 21.

where opportunities are left open. Striving for open-endedness does not mean that objects can never be acted upon or cultivated, merely that these cultivations are not the ultimate conclusion.

Carse illustrates the conflict between fixed and open futures as the distinction between “finite” and “infinite” games and players. He says, “Finite players play within boundaries; infinite players play with boundaries.”<sup>167</sup> Finite games are those with precise beginnings and endings, where the goal, players, and rules remain clear and the premises of the game unchanged throughout play. When the game is over, a winner is declared and play officially closed. Infinite games, however, shift during play. The rules are never completely static and the goal of the game may change ad infinitum.

In infinite games, the identities of the players and their roles are fluid; the only constant is what I have previously referred to as a joyful state of otherness, wherein the player cultivates strangeness and change in order to provoke unforeseen conclusions. Espousing a similar claim, Carse states,

We are playful when we engage each other at the level of choice, when there is no telling in advance where our relationship with them will come out – when, in fact, no one has an outcome to be imposed on the relationship, apart from the decision to continue it... To be playful is to allow for possibility whatever the cost to oneself.<sup>168</sup>

While finite games insist on obedience, the only thing that infinite games insist on is possibility. Infinite games allow for personas and rules, but never at the expense of any player. She may decide to change the game or the rules at any

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<sup>167</sup> Carse, *Infinte Games*, 12.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

point, so long as her changes keep the players in the game, in other words, keep them thinking. I have made the connection before between aesthetic contemplation and play; here it resurfaces as the free play of cognition.

By critically engaging with the rules of the game, a player may transcend finite play. The study of games and the development of infinite play give us a new angle from which to approach videogames as well as the “real” world. It is a fortuitous coincidence that current discussions in landscape theory emphasize similar tactics. The cultivation of a profound and personal connection to one’s environment can apply to any “scape” in which one finds oneself.

Shortsightedly, some may object that a large number of games are not set in typical outdoor landscapes. As Anne Whiston Spirn reminds us, cities are landscape, too.<sup>169</sup> They are places that have been altered, plotted, and planned as much (or less!) than many of the spaces we consider to be “natural.” When examining what is traditionally considered a landscape, viewers must keep the creative impulse in mind. If individuals do not settle for being mere viewers and insist on being Ludic Thinkers (or players), they will begin to develop a more profound bond with their surroundings. The lessons of “scape” can be seen in settings apart from the great outdoors (what most people think of as the real landscape.)<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Spirn, “One with Nature,” 43.

<sup>170</sup> To close a section of the landscape conference to which I referred earlier, the moderator made ironic mention that during the break participants are going to go experience “the real landscape out there.” In the rest of the seminar, participants continually returned to this phrase, obviously uncomfortable with the implication that there is no “real” landscape. The majority of participants were

The game *Portal* (figure 3.7), for instance, gives us an intriguing view towards “scaping” one’s environment, though it is set with nary a tree in sight.<sup>171</sup> Visually, the game is very “unlandscape-like.” The main character wakes up in a sterile white space, apparently a testing room of some sort. An eerie computerized voice informs her that she will be participating in an Aperture Laboratories Enrichment Center test. She comes upon a room wherein depressing a platform dispenses a block. She uses that block to hold down the platform, opening a door. In this imagined future, such rat-in-maze testing is (apparently) quite ordinary; it appears to be a conventional problem-solving test for her and a conventional puzzle game for us.

Each floor is marked with various icons (figure 3.8). These inform the player of how close she is to completing the puzzles and warns her of the hazards on that level (falling blocks, murky water that instantly kills, creepy targeting androids.) Her main tool is a special gun that can lift objects and create portals in certain walls (figure 3.9.) The portals allow the player to travel about the level and to avoid deadly traps. She can shoot one wall and make a sort of wormhole to an unconnected area. She alters her environment, sometimes in unexpected ways and with unexpected results. There are puzzles to complete, but there is also plenty of time for merely traveling about and observing the

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interested in the phenomenology of this “real landscape” and troubled by the predominance of theory in the field, which they felt was “ungrounded” so to speak.

<sup>171</sup> This game, along with others such as *Unfinished Swan* (by Ian Dallas), *Echochrome* (by Sony Entertainment), and *Crayon Physics* (by Petri Purho), provides tools for meaningful engagement with the environment.

different effects that the character can instigate.

Instead of merely jumping on platforms or moving a block to reach a higher level, she manipulates the landscape in a meaningful way. The game is innovative in that it allows the player literally to open new possibilities for movement and interaction. The player changes how the space is delineated and defined by creating portals. She can see her character moving in multiple areas at once or repeated infinitely, thanks to the distorted physics of the game (figure 3.10.) At the same time, she opens a paradoxical space in which to participate in the infinite play of contemplation. Allowing her to create and to examine the possibilities of paradox is an intriguing proposition for games, which are normally internally consistent.

The game, while it does have a distinct outcome, is critical of deterministic progress. In fact, the nineteen levels through which the player progresses are something of a ruse. The Artificial Intelligence that controls the testing has gone mad and tries to murder the main character when she completes the final puzzle. She escapes certain incineration and struggles towards freedom by traversing the underside of the facility. Instead of pristine white, this area is rusty and crumbling, though the puzzles are no less challenging (figure 3.11.) Eventually, the main character destroys the AI using the same techniques that she was taught for crossing the maze. The skill set that she acquires can thus be used to rupture the sovereignty of contemporary instrumental society. Both sections of the game have a definite outcome, i.e., finishing the puzzles and subsequently escaping to freedom.

She learns certain proficiencies to complete her assigned tasks, but can also use these to beat the system. Beating the system, in this sense, is not completing the game, but rather exploring the possibilities that such technologies bring about. It is not finishing the story that necessarily provides insight or liberation, but rather being able to use technologies for one's own benefit (exploring inside the game) instead of merely the benefit of others (completing puzzles, escaping.)

It is fitting, then, that completing the game is part of the paradoxical space that the player has opened. The game centers on the theme of escape, but by finishing it, she has followed the intended, predetermined story to its completion. How the player explores the possibilities of the portals, how she revels in the unexpected and reflects on new potential worlds, is much more intriguing than simply completing the game. The game rewards such experimentation and the achievement of strange feats, such as finding a way to fall for 30,000 feet. The player uses almost the same procedure to freefall indefinitely as she does to catapult herself towards a goal state.

Landscaping, then, is a means for the player to manipulate her surroundings. No longer a passive viewer, she can actually effect change, be it in the natural world or synthetic. I refer to a person in the "normal" landscape as a player, for sustaining a ludic relationship to the environment allows one to see the myriad possibilities that inhere in it instead of simply accepting one perspective as genuine. By learning different techniques to alter her environment, she may expand her capacity to reflect on her surroundings and

her place in them. The player may still complete assigned tasks; videogames are, as they are programmed, finite. However, by maintaining a curious and creative outlook, she can use the tools provided by technology in order to play her own infinite game: exploration and reflection.

My interest in infinite games may seem to be at odds with the stance I took at the beginning of the dissertation, that the “real” and “play” worlds should be kept separate. As I hope was clear, play as such need not be abandoned, but rather the implication that life is simply a series of finite games with clear winners and losers. My proposal of the Ludic Thinker is designed to surpass an uncomplicated split between the game world and the real world by suggesting that reflection can be accomplished in the spirit of play, but without the deception (veiling and self-veiling, as Carse calls it) that accompanies corporate gaming.

## Chapter Four

### A Slave Obeys: Agency and Digital Gaming

In the introduction to this dissertation, I claimed the digital gamer represents the struggles of the contemporary subject. She seems to have agency, but is constrained by instrumental culture. She is free to choose, but her choices come from a menu. She has a goal, but does not determine it herself. It is difficult to ascertain the degree of agency subjects retain in our highly structured society, so restricted are they by consumerist programming, the bifurcation between labor and leisure, etc. Indoctrinated early into the cult of the individual and processed through systems of punishment and reward (e.g., the education system, work, and/or prisons), it is no wonder that subjects have an ambivalent relationship to choice, never mind that we are taught from the cradle to ignore such restraints and to “reach for our dreams,” as the platitude goes.

Even though games are instrumental objects, they may invite ludic behaviors such as exploration, contest, and persona construction and often involve a point of view that is unique to each game and to each player. For example, in the exemplary game *Bioshock*, which I will discuss in this chapter, individuals are free to play, explore, and experiment. In spite of this freedom, players are also constrained by factors interior to the game. Its mechanics and story, as well as outside conditions such as the player's own culture and upbringing and the intricacies of digital technologies more generally, all serve as constraints on the player's freedom. *Bioshock* may appear to be just another first person shooter where the goal is to find the best way to blow things up. In fact,



the main dilemma the game presents is the struggle between pre-determination and self-determination. Ultimately, though, *Bioshock* does not provide an answer to the dilemma. The player must determine for herself just how much agency she has (and wants to have) in the game (and, to extrapolate, outside of it.) It does, however, give players compelling reasons actively to seek self-determination and their own agential power.

Using the work of contemporary philosophers such as Daniel Dennett and J. David Velleman on the construction of the self, I will explore how videogames model our ideas of selfhood and thought. These authors propose a model in which the self is not a singular, solid entity, but is rather a center of gravity around which individuals may weave any number of fictions. Through the construction of personae and personal narratives, selves are instituted. These selves may be purely fictional, as Dennett maintains, in which case they have no causal influence upon a person's actions and behavior. Alternatively, these selves may be real, as Velleman contends, in spite of being comprised of fictional components. What is common to the narrative self, whether it is regarded as purely fictive or in some sense real, is the creative process that surrounds its construction. In this chapter, I will analyze various games with an eye to how games provide an active approach to self-determination and self construction. Further, I will discuss this phenomenon in relation to the philosophical accounts of self developed by Dennett and Velleman.

Neither of these philosophers specifically mentions videogames in his writings. Their models are, on the one hand, novels and, on the other, ordinary

conversations. In an era of ubiquitous computing, where individuals constantly use avatars and screen personas for interpersonal communication, I will argue that new, technologically savvy models of the self more accurately represent how selves are created. In this chapter, I will contrast novels with non-linear media such as games, and conversations with more complex negotiations of the self, such as the creation and maintenance of digital avatars in order to show that games can further our understanding of selfhood.

### **Narratives and Micronarratives**

Videogames have become a medium of choice for vast numbers of people. Many such games (and, perhaps, even the process of play itself) require the creation of temporary, but nonetheless revelatory, narratives, parallel to the stories that people use to develop their self-identities. By considering the process of identity formation from the standpoint of gaming and the ludic more broadly, we may begin more effectively to represent the way that subjects interact with contemporary technologies.

Dennett and Velleman agree that humans use narrative to construct selves. Instead of claiming that the self is a unified, rational core at the heart of human action and thought, Dennett contends that the self is a fiction, an imaginary center of gravity. Dennett is quick to clarify that this claim is not a denunciation of the concept of a self. The self is a useful, constructive fiction that allows humans to go about their daily business with some sense of continuity and connection. Fiction, in this context does not mean that the subject is “faking”.

Instead, fictions are the subtle chains of action that humans create in order to process the world without becoming overwhelmed by it.

Dennett's view of the self is tied to the concept of narrative cohesion. The brain does not have a central control panel, nor do our thoughts arise in a neatly orderable progression. What matters most is that the individual have a strong sense of how he or she came to be as he or she is. Such a sense is derived, for Dennett, from the causal chain that we consider to be our biography. The self, in this model, is the fictional character that we employ to make sense of our own narrative. To Dennett, the self remains an abstraction, a theoretical center of gravity instead of a concrete object in the world. Dennett denies that the self is singular and locatable, but nevertheless maintains that what gives us a *sense* of such a self is its continuing presence in a narrative. For example, I am the main character in a story that I have been writing since about 1980 or so and this sense of continuity is what allows me to understand my thoughts and actions as coming from a self.

The metaphor that Dennett uses to describe the self and self-creation is that of a novel-writing computer. Gilbert, the computer, is able to respond to statements, to perform actions (like continually locking himself in a storage closet), and to write his own autobiography. Gilbert is stipulated not to be a conscious machine. Dennett compares him to the organ of the brain, which may act and write, but does not know what it is writing. Gilbert goes on to write a novel that starts with the phrase, "Call me Gilbert." All the actions that Gilbert takes show up in the story. Gilbert finds himself, once again, in the storage

closet and yells, "Help me!" If we free Gilbert from, he send us a thank you note.

At this point Dennett asks, "But who is Gilbert? Is Gilbert the robot, or merely the fictional self created by the robot?" He suggests that the robot Gilbert is not a self, but the character Gilbert about which the biography is being written *is* a self. The fictional entity is a self, but the object (or organism) housing it is not. In this reading, the brain is not a self, for it functions disjointedly and is not purposively integrated. The brain has "lots of subsystems doing their own thing without any central supervision."<sup>173</sup> The self exists only as a theoretical component, the empty eye of the storm about which fictions circulate.

One difficulty with Dennett's assessment is that many individuals, including J. David Velleman and Galen Strawson, do not consider their lives as one long story. Not only can most people not remember every event in their biography, most do not consider the self they were at age two to be equivalent to the self they are at age thirty. At best, then, the story is fragmented and mosaic. In response to this perceived difficulty, Velleman contends that what is significant is not the continuance of the main character as a participant in a narrative, but rather the sense that the individual possesses agential unity, the feeling that one is an autonomous unit able to act in the world. He suggests that instead of a story that makes us feel consistent, what matters is the sense that, at a given moment, we are able to make decisions and to act upon them.

In addition to disagreeing with the idea that a single narrative best

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<sup>173</sup> Daniel Dennett, "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity," in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. F. Kessel, P. Cole, and D. Johnson (Hilldale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1992), 6.

represents individuals, Velleman also takes issue with Dennett's insistence that the self is not real. He agrees that the self is largely constituted through the elaboration of narrative fictions, but denies that this fiction is untrue. The main issue is that such fictions functionally create an autonomous subject. Velleman states:

My current claim is that the self-narrating robot really is endowed with a self in this sense and can therefore live up to the portrait of the protagonist in his autobiography. He is endowed with a self because his inner narrator is a locus of control that unifies him as an agent by making decisions on the basis of reasons.<sup>174</sup>

For Velleman, Gilbert is not merely acting like the self about which the story takes place; he *is* that self. Consequently, as a creature that can make decisions and act upon them, Gilbert can be held accountable for his actions.

Dennett's project is important, for it frees the subject to explore multiple selves and personas. If selves are fictions, and one may have multiple selves, then the potential for exploring other roles and other choices is immense. However, if these fictions, as Dennett contends, seem “robust and real” without *being* robust and real, then their importance in our actual, material lives is trivial. To Dennett, the fictions are fundamental only because inescapable. Without these narratives, there is no self.

Velleman argues, and I agree, that the fictions are fundamental because they not only bring about our sense of self, but may also determine our future actions. Even though the narratives at work are fictitious and constructed, that

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<sup>174</sup> J. David Velleman, “The Self as Narrator,” in *Autonomy and Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays*, ed. John Philip Christman, John Christman, and Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 20.

does not mean that they are merely figurative and have no material effects. An autobiographer does not merely write his or her story. That story subsequently influences his or her behavior. If the representation (the story) really does have an effect on the choices that the individual makes, then it is no longer just an abstraction, it is a real thing that has material consequences and can be used to interpret behavior.

What is common to these two viewpoints is that selves are created through processes of narrativization. Velleman's model is not consistent through time, but instead insists on agential unity, that is, the ability to make choices in the present. He denies that there is a single narrative that must characterize an individual's sense of self. Velleman appeals to the number of micronarratives that occur during a person's daily life, stories that would include the process of making coffee or of checking one's email.<sup>175</sup> While Dennett concludes that selves are partial and fragmented on account of the physiological processes of the brain, Velleman suggests that selves are fragmented because individuals simply do not conceive of their lives as one grand narrative, but rather an accretion of many smaller ones.

Micronarratives are similar to what Daniel MacKay, in his study of fantasy roleplaying games, refers to as "fictive blocks."<sup>176</sup> Fictive blocks (a concept adapted from Deleuze) are units of significant action that may be unhinged from

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>176</sup> Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001).

a larger narrative anchor. Individuals can then rearrange these units and create a multitude of new stories and behaviors. Similarly, selves are created through the recombination of tiny bits of action.

Performance theorist Richard Schechner's concept of "strips of behavior" or activity (borrowed from Irving Goffman) also describes the process of micronarrative accretion.

...strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original "truth" or "source" of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted—even while this truth or source is apparently being honored and observed. How the strip of behavior was made, found, or developed may be unknown or concealed; elaborated; distorted by myth and tradition. Originating as a process, used in the process of rehearsal to make a new process, a performance, the strips of behavior are not themselves process but things, items, "material." Restored behavior can be of long duration as in some dramas and rituals or of short duration as in some gestures, dances, and mantras.<sup>177</sup>

Schechner is concerned with how improvisation and performance more generally is constructed through the reenacting and juxtaposing of various behaviors. For example, improvisation, in his view, is not the spontaneous generation of completely unforeseen material, but rather the selection and connection of information that is accessible to the subject. The units of information can be small, as in a gesture, or large, as in a drama.

While self-narrativization is currently one of the more popular theories of self, Galen Strawson proposes that philosophers who suggest that we create our personas through narrative merely project the way that they see the world onto

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<sup>177</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 1.

the rest of society.<sup>178</sup> Indeed, he claims not to think using narrative schemas at all. Strawson characterizes his approach to selfhood as Episodic and non-Narrative, as opposed to Diachronic and Narrative.

In the Episodic, “one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the further past and will be there in the further future.”<sup>179</sup> The opposite holds for the Diachronic. Strawson says that while Episodic may be aligned with non-Narrativity and Diachronic with Narrativity, the two are not equivalent. Strawson is careful to say that neither worldview is superior to the other. However, they are remarkably close and for our purposes they constitute a viable heuristic.

Though Strawson seems to privilege neither, Narrativists tend to imply that individuals who do not think of themselves in narrative terms are dysfunctional. The hardline Narrativist camp includes writers like Marya Schechtman who insist that people must have a “full and explicit narrative [of their lives] to develop fully as a person.”<sup>180</sup> Schechtman's claim demands a great deal from the individual, both in terms of memory and memory integration. Narrativism, for Strawson, provides insufficient agency for change or growth. Narrativism, he argues, “seems to me to express an ideal of control and self-awareness in human life that is mistaken and potentially pernicious. The aspiration to explicit Narrative self-articulation is natural for some – for some, perhaps, it may even be helpful – but

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<sup>178</sup> Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” *Ratio* XVII (December 2004).

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 430.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.



in others it is highly unnatural and ruinous.”<sup>181</sup> Leaving aside questions of “naturalness,” Strawson reasonably assumes that strong Narrativism applies schemas of control and linearity to lives that might otherwise be free and able to engage in more playful and malleable storytelling and subsequent self understanding.

However, Strawson goes so far as to deny that narrative influences his thoughts in the least, in protest against strong Narrativists such as Schechtman. Strawson views narrative as overpowering and dominating. What he misses, as a result, is the wealth of possibilities that come with storytelling. By claiming that the small narratives that Velleman contends make up our selves are trivial, he not only misconstrues the nature of narrative self-building but also threatens the concept of causality more generally:

[T]he psychological Narrativity thesis is ... false in any non-trivial version. What do I mean by non-trivial? Well, if someone says, as some do, that making coffee is a narrative that involves Narrativity, because you have to think ahead, do things in the right order, and so on, and that everyday life involves many such narratives, then I take it the claim is trivial.<sup>182</sup>

Narrative (capital N), in this reading, is a unified and coherent story that a self constructs out of its life events and without which, Narrativists claim, the self is incomprehensible. Narrative (small n) is just a story.

In large part, Strawson is arguing against writers like Charles Taylor who claims that life is only comprehensible if viewed as a coherent Narrative and that

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 447.

<sup>182</sup> Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” 438-9.

ethical choices can only be made in light of such a continuum.<sup>183</sup> Strawson believes that one can be perfectly ethical in one's life (responsible, a good friend, etc.) without seeing life as one long story. With this I agree. Taylor and Schechtman's view of narrative is not only highly normative, it is also attempting to ground a normative theory, after all, as dogma. Strawson throws out narrative with ethically prescriptive Narrativity. Such an aversion is understandable. However, the question of why narratives writ small are trivial remains a puzzle, since such narratives are conducive to the "in the moment" character of Episodicity.

Since I, too, am abandoning capital N Narrative, Strawson's objection to small stories loses much of its pique. Strawson characterizes Episodics as lacking a strong link to past lived events. His portrayal suggests that these individuals' sense of self comes from whatever thoughts, emotions, and sensations occur to them at the present moment. It is a rather Zen notion that dispenses with unnecessary cathexes and longings. Focusing on the here-and-now is, in many respects, an admirable ability. Most individuals are too busy worrying about their past mistakes or hoping fruitlessly for a better tomorrow to do anything about their real material conditions. Without some kind of structure, however, an individual would merely be a bundle of sensations. I suggest that it is a sense of agential unity, created through the aggregation of events into series, which an individual must feel in order to act.

Without said unity, individuals would be pathological and schizophrenic,

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<sup>183</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

unable to process linear structures such as languages, directions, or history. But Episodics *are* able to process all of these and more. This ability, and the sense of agential unity, emerges from the multitude of micronarratives that Strawson is so quick to dismiss. Strawson believes that Episodicity and Diachronicity are fundamentally opposed. I posit that they are different in magnitude, but not necessarily in kind. Following Velleman's conception of the self as an agential unit formed by the accretion of narratives (large and small), I suggest that Episodicity does in fact use stories to situate itself. The Episodic is simply more malleable or mobile within his or her stories.

However, as Velleman suggests, stories are what allow us to project our selves into future situations, i.e., "What would I do if space dragons attacked the Earth tomorrow?" and to examine our reasons for past action, i.e., "What did I do last week when space dragons attacked the Earth?" Strawson makes a distinction between recent and further (past/future) events. However, exactly when that cut off occurs is, ultimately, arbitrary. Strawson does not attempt to delimit just how much past makes up an episode or how much future there needs to be for a narrative projection. The answer to this question is, arguably, up to the individual. What is not controversial is that any modicum of agential unity requires small causal chains in order to define actions and behaviors. Episodicity is narrative, after all, though unlike the stringent and overbearing ethical Narrativity of Taylor and Schechtman. It is narrative in the smallest possible way, allowing stories and selves to revise themselves, to redefine their parameters (both temporally and physically) and to combine and recombine in

innovative ways.

To recapitulate: the self, as I imagine it, is created primarily through micronarratives that the subject uses to build agential unity. Micronarratives are the basis for our perception of causality as such and a requirement for spatio-temporal coherence and attribution of action. It may be true that, as Strawson says, philosophers never grasped what a self “is,” but merely on how they, themselves, conceptualize *their* selves. However, I define the self minimally, thus accounting for a very wide range of personalities, including the Episodic, the Narrativist, the psychotic, and most anything in between. A self is a center of agential unity surrounded by the actions it chooses. It is not a continuous entity that must be the same throughout time. A self is amorphous and can shift and change depending on what reasons and stories are circulating about it.

The Narrativist may fit this model because he or she simply connects the micronarratives into longer strings of meaningful action. There is no necessity that requires one's self image to be spatio-temporally united and perhaps, if Strawson is to be believed, there are a number of good reasons to see it otherwise. However, if an individual takes comfort from the idea that he or she is the protagonist of a larger, more important story than she or he sees in the here-and-now, so be it.

The Episodic views his or her life as it exists in the present moment, supposedly unfettered by the weight of history. However, even arch-Episodic Strawson admits that “[t]he way I am now is profoundly shaped by my past, but it is only the present shaping consequences of the past that matter, not the past as

such.”<sup>184</sup> One's agential unity is produced through the choices that one makes and the rationale that one uses. Being shaped by one's past is tantamount to admitting that the micronarratives (or small stories) of one's life are decidedly nontrivial. Additionally, just as stories have shaped one's current sense of things, they also give direction to one's future projections, thereby creating a functioning agent.

What separates a neurotypical, an average person with a normal amount of self knowledge, from someone with Dissociative Identity Disorder or Schizophrenia, is the ability to integrate narratives (small or large) into his or her self picture. Whereas a neurotypical might be able to see how his or her rationale for actions changes in different situations, the psychotic's self picture does not necessarily have any connection or continuity with past stories. With multiple personalities, for example, radically different selves with what may be completely contradictory histories exist within one individual. What this amounts to is an inability for the individual to unify his or her narratives coherently. While normal selves may incorporate contradicting stories (in other words, deceive themselves) they are still able form an agential unit.

The degree to which neurotypicals are informationally integrated may vary greatly. However, what is common among them is that they are able to act effectively in the world. Healthy individuals are constantly shifting their opinions, changing their views, and amending their stories, proving that an agent need not be static in order to be a locus of selfhood, though in each of these cases the

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<sup>184</sup> Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” 438.

shifts are incorporated into a final whole. Thought is neither flat nor perfectly linear. It is a multilayer mosaic wherein certain events or moments are emphasized and subsequently revised or erased.<sup>185</sup> Selves are much the same, changing depending on circumstances. Stretching the boundaries of one's sense of self can be a profound reflective activity. The figure of the ludic thinker, which I have invoked throughout the text, tries on different personas and examines the world from different perspectives, challenging his or her normal sense of self awareness.

Finally, according to Strawson, it is “unclear that the examined life ... is

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<sup>185</sup> Dennett, “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,” 7, cites an experiment conducted by neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga with patients who had the corpus callosum, the structure that connects the two hemispheres of the brain, severed. Gazzaniga asked the patients to reach into a bag with their left hands and verbally to identify the object in it. The nerves in the left hand connect to the right hemisphere of the brain; the speech center is located in the left hemisphere. The patients were unable to identify the object in the bag by touch because the right hemisphere received the sensory information from the left hand and was unable to transmit it to the language center in the left. As Dennett says, “...the ‘part which can speak’ is kept in the dark, while the ‘part which knows’ cannot make public its knowledge.”

Patients were able to find a way around the predicament, proving that the brain is a crafty organ indeed. Since pain signals are sent to both the hemispheres, if the subject, for example, pricked his hand with a pencil inside the bag, he was able to “jumpstart” the process of identification. The pain was a sufficient clue to start other centers guessing what the object was. Eventually, the subject could identify the contents of the bag and the semblance of a unitary individual was reinstated.

Dennett surmises, as does Gazzaniga, that the experiment reveals a process in which even normal humans participate. The brain constantly performs actions such as the pain “jumpstart.” Dennet notes that we “find ourselves engaged in all sorts of behavior, more or less unified, but sometimes disunified, and we always put the best ‘faces’ on it we can. We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography.” Ibid., 8.

always a good thing.”<sup>186</sup> I take issue with this statement. Indeed, the very concept of the ludic thinker depends on a commitment to conscious examination and reflection on life that is undertaken with principles of playful engagement in mind. I am in agreement with Horkheimer and Adorno when they lament that “thought has lost the element of reflection on itself,” leading to the harming of the individual and the betrayal of enlightenment.<sup>187</sup>

I have argued throughout this dissertation that philosophical thought can prevent individuals from being exploited by the social system and can help them to overcome oppressive conditions. Horkheimer and Adorno:

But a true praxis capable of overturning the status quo depends on theory's refusal to yield to the oblivion in which society allows thought to ossify ... The fault lies in a social context which induces blindness ... Knowledge ... can now devote itself to dissolving that power. But in face of this possibility enlightenment, in the service of the present, is turning itself into an outright deception of the masses.<sup>188</sup>

Theory can help people to examine their lives and their place in society, to the benefit of both. Thought must not only be promoted insofar as it aids the powers regnant.

One problem with digital technologies is that their theoretical import is typically outweighed by their novelty; such disposable culture often disinclines the populace from intense or extended thought. To this end, knowledge in

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<sup>186</sup> Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” 448.

<sup>187</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 30.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

instrumental society often consists in merely knowing the steps in a process. For example, an individual might know how to program her iPhone, but not understand the deeper social implications of her mobile communication. Games can provide instructions for rote behavior, transforming players into automata. In this vein, Horkheimer and Adorno warn that, “[t]hought is reified as an autonomous, automatic process, aping the machine it has itself produced, so that it can finally be replaced by the machine.”<sup>189</sup> However, creating instrumental subjects is not a necessary result of technology. Technologies such as games can also be used as objects through which to think about topics such as the significance of persona construction in the digital age. By examining the roles and behaviors that one performs in games, individuals can begin to reflect on their own agential unity and sense of self.

### **Would You Kindly?**

Before addressing how games and avatar construction can lead to fruitful reflection, I will examine how agential unity is represented and enacted in some of the games I have described throughout this dissertation. *Bioshock* is perhaps the clearest case. The game tells the story of how technologies can shape the self and, in turn, be shaped by them. The game begins with a cinematic cut-scene in an airplane.<sup>190</sup> The scene is shot in the first person, the perspectival form of the game. Instead of a view from outside, the player begins by seeing the

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>190</sup> A cut-scene is a short cinematic interlude that provides exposition in a game. See page 92 for more.



space that she will, but does not yet, inhabit: her character's point of view. These moments not only provide the tone and setting, but also foreground the difference between having power and not having it. The player can only watch the cut-scene; she cannot yet participate in the story. Many games begin in such a manner. However, very few of those games then go on to show the disparity between cut scene and game, between filmic and ludic, between actions that are mandated and those that are freely chosen.

In the plane, the character holds a wrapped gift. There is an old family photo and a note, of which all that is legible is the phrase, "Would you kindly?" This phrase will become central to the story for, as it turns out, the main character has been conditioned to perform only actions that begin with those words. Currently, while flying above the ocean, the plane crashes. (Only at the end of the game does the player discover that it was her character who crashed it, an act apparently triggered by the ominous phrase already mentioned. The package contains a gun and instructions, though the player does not know this fact at the time.) Subsequently, we see the character floundering in the water. At this point, the player assumes control of the character. Swimming around the partially submerged wreckage quickly reveals that the only place the player can come ashore is a tiny, man-made island. Inside a lighthouse on the island are posters advertising a city named Rapture and idolizing its founder, Andrew Ryan. One telling banner proclaims, "No gods, no king, only man."<sup>191</sup> The main

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<sup>191</sup> A PA announcement from Bioshock: "I am Andrew Ryan and I am here to ask you a question: Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? No, says the man in Washington; it belongs to the poor. No, says the man in the Vatican; it

character then travels to the city by means of a small, automated submarine.

The city and its founder are references to the work of Ayn Rand. Her philosophy of Objectivism holds that rational man ought to strive for his own happiness, free of the constraints of law or altruism, both of which result from flawed ways of thinking. Government involvement in commerce should be nonexistent and society can effectively regulate itself. Human beings must be allowed to strive for their greatest creative power and happiness without fear of retaliation by the state or other individuals. Man, in this model, is completely self-determining and must be allowed the freedom to express his complete potential. Just how well such an approach to society works is speculated through the underwater city of Rapture.

In Rapture, there is only one law: no citizen may leave. It is alleged to be the only place where man can reach his ultimate potential and the only place where he is truly free. However, the laissez-faire model that results is corrupt, unstable, and ultimately crumbles due to the influence and unfair distribution of gene-splicing drugs known as Plasmids. The player must use the Plasmids in order to negotiate the architecture of the game and to compete with the extraordinarily powerful, junkie-like residents of Rapture. Plasmids are regulated by one's level of "Adam" and "Eve" two mysterious substances that allow individuals to have strange and god-like powers such as the ability to throw fireballs.

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belongs to God. No, says the man in Moscow; it belongs to everyone. I rejected those answers. Instead, I chose something different. I chose the impossible. I chose...Rapture."

After witnessing a horrific fight between two junkies, also known as Splicers, the first character that the player meets is named, drolly, Atlas. He seems to be a compassionate Irishman who needs the player's help to rescue his family from Splicers. Communicating through a radio, he gives the player clues and recommendations for how to proceed through the city. It is not obvious that Atlas is manipulating the player. He merely seems polite when he prefaces all of his suggestions with the ominous conditioning phrase. For example, "Now, would you kindly pick up that wrench?" sounds like a mere affectation of speech, when it is, still unbeknownst to the main character and the player, something more sinister. Whether or not the player is actually free to choose her own actions is the main point of contention in the game. If the player wants to play the game, she must heed Atlas' suggestions. She can do so without thinking because such guidance is a common convention in gaming. Thus the player and the character are both implicated in the struggle for choice.

It is worth noting that the game was marketed as a veritable (and rather unproblematic) festival of free choice. The box emphasizes the number of possible ways that a player might dispatch the iconic foe of the game, a Big Daddy (see figure 4.1.) She has many options for shaping her character's abilities and powers and for finding new and exciting ways to kill enemies. The player may specialize in throwing fireballs, or electrocution, or even reprogramming gun turrets to shoot enemies for her, among other options.

Another choice that one makes in the game is whether or not to kill a type of character known as a Little Sister (figure 4.2). Little Sisters are protected by

the Big Daddies and are under the distant, but watchful gaze of their creator, Doctor Bridgette Tennenbaum. The player discovers that the girls were orphans who underwent horrific experiments in order to increase the amount of Adam that they produce and that can subsequently be harvested, at the cost of the child's life. The player may choose to gather the Adam for herself or to cure the Little Sister and free her. This choice, it so happens, is the only one that actually makes any difference in how the game ends (though even that difference, as we shall see, is marginal at best.) Everything else that the player seems to choose (e.g., where to explore, how to kill enemies, how to build her character) is called into question, as we discover in a later cinematic.

The player makes her way through Rapture only to discover that the shadowy smuggler Frank Fontaine (a reference to Rand's *The Fountainhead*) has killed Atlas's family. Atlas wants revenge and, ostensibly, the player wants to understand the mystery of the destroyed city and to escape it. Thus, she trudges on, discovering along the way proof of Fontaine's corrupt business practices and political struggles against Andrew Ryan. He has also supported illicit Plasmid experiments including, it turns out, the main character's creation.

Instead of the a fully formed, normal adult, the player might have assumed, the main character was birthed nine years ago and subjected to accelerated aging and behavioristic conditioning. An audiotape reveals an episode from his history: a doctor forces a young child to break a puppy's neck by activating him with the phrase, "Would you kindly?" The child is helpless against the conditioning and kills it, sobbing. During this process of

conditioning, all of the main character's memories were implanted and he was tasked with only one thing: to kill Andrew Ryan. Fontaine's bid to control Rapture is a long con; he has waited patiently in the ruined city for the player to complete his scheme for him.

Eventually, the player discovers that there is no Atlas, only Fontaine. He is a master of disguise and has posed as many different people during the operation. Fontaine has been stringing the main character (and the player, too) along from the very beginning. The main character's whole life has been, as it were, programmed. When the player confronts Andrew Ryan, he makes a dramatic speech in an attempt to dissuade the player from killing him, finally proclaiming, "A man chooses, a slave obeys!" Since Fontaine has activated the main character with the conditioning phrase, however, the player can only watch helplessly as her avatar kills Ryan. No amount of wishing or struggling can, at this point, undo the damage wrought by the brainwashing.

Neither the protagonist nor the player is given the freedom to act at this crucial juncture. The player identifies with the protagonist and can feel (figuratively) the pull of the chains that the main character has tattooed (literally) on his wrists. The protagonist is the creation of a culture of self-serving brutality, instrumental society at its extreme. The player is the product of a similar, if milder, situation. She follows Atlas's instructions because it seems like what she is "supposed to do" in such a game. Typically, in videogames, there is one "true" narrative and various hints and clues will tell the player where she ought to go. In a way, the player is just along for the ride, chained to one path or storyline. As

games become more and more complex, this tendency may evolve into a more free system. At the moment, there are rarely vastly different story arcs that the player may pursue.<sup>192</sup>

Following this trend, killing Fontaine seems to be the only way to stop the conditioning phrase from being used to destroy what is left of the main character's identity, such as it is. She seeks him out of necessity, not volition, though she is attempting to establish some sort of agency for the main character. As the player searches for him, Fontaine activates more subconscious programming that gradually weakens the main character by removing his Plasmid powers and physically debilitating him. The repentant Doctor Tennenbaum, however, comes to the player's aid. She helps the player to find various recordings that neutralize the negative effects of Fontaine's conditioning. Though the main character is programmed, the player may learn to fight against it. The situation is not ideal, nor does it claim that, like Andrew Ryan believed, the individual can overcome all. Instead, the game offers the more modest proposal that, though constrained by various kinds of conditioning, mental and physical, individuals have some say in the outcome of their lives.

At the end of the game, there is a final showdown between the main character and Fontaine. Only by enlisting the help of the Little Sisters is the player able to defeat him. There are three possible endings to the game, all of which involve killing Fontaine. The epilogue is dependent on how the player has chosen to act throughout the game. If she has saved the Little Sisters, she is

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<sup>192</sup> This is not a hard and fast rule, however. *Morrowind*, *Oblivion*, and *Fallout 3*, games by Bethesda Software, are exceptions.

rewarded with a vision of them growing up and supporting the main character in his old age. If she has harvested any, the end is much bleaker. The Little Sisters are slain and the main character leads the Plasmid junkies of Rapture into the “real” world. The Splicers slay a number of surface-dwellers and gain control of a nuclear device. If she has harvested all of them, the same occurs, except with a bleaker tone of voice.

Only one of the endings is significantly different from the others. In personal correspondence, several players have described the ending as a source of disappointment. To them, it is the playing itself that is enjoyable and ought to be emphasized. I concur with this sentiment, for the process of ludic exploration in the game, while limited, still provides a means for the player to inhabit a different role than her everyday life. Because the game constantly invokes the problem of free will and choice, she is forced to reflect on why she chooses one action over another and, thus, on how much agency she actually has.

The main character's sense of self came from implanted memories. An individual with such a fragmented consciousness might not be able to complete tasks in the world since she cannot maintain continuity with past, present, and future actions. Fontaine assures that the main character has a modicum of unity by assigning him very specific tasks which are, effectively, the narratives that will determine what kind of a self the main character has. He needs to collect Adam; does he kill the Little Sisters or save them? He needs to escape a Big Daddy; does he electrocute it or use a frost bolt? Just as the main character's memory

comes back in flashes, the micronarrative quest structure helps to congeal character's identity and agency around a locus of action.

The main twist of the game, however, is that his memories are all false. He does not have a family like the one pictured in the opening cinematic. He is not a newcomer to the ruined city. He is not even more than nine years old. The climactic moment, when the main character kills Andrew Ryan, reveals that the self the main character believed to be true (and that the player has been in charge of throughout the game) is a fabrication. The main character has been formed and manipulated by the trickster Fontaine.

At this point in our reading of the game, individual agency seems unreliable at best. If people can be manipulated so completely and are constantly under the control of those in power, a person might not even know if he or she possessed self-knowledge in the first place. However, the game does divide true memories from false, suggesting that if one has an accurate picture of the stories that comprise one's life, one may have reliable knowledge about oneself. After the catastrophic turning point with Ryan, the false memories begin to break down. The player discovers audio tapes strewn about the city on which are recorded events in the main character's life. The tapes reveal the conditioning to which he was subjected. The player is shown flashes of what "really" happened to the protagonist and from these snatches begins to construct a new sense of who the main character is.

Fontaine subsequently debilitates the protagonist with the subliminal cues mentioned earlier. He strips the character of his abilities one by one and the



protagonist's identity crumbles. The player aids the main character in creating a new, autonomous existence, free of subliminal messages, irresistible commands, and involuntary quests. The main objective in the remainder of the game is self-determination. After realizing that his life was a lie, every task that the protagonist undertakes and every area that he explores are charged with new significance. Instead of just instrumentally trudging to a goal, the character is rebuilding his entire identity through exploration and experimentation and by reflecting on his situation.

It could be argued that there is no change; the player is still trudging towards a goal. However, the circumstances under which she acts have undergone a complete reversal. She has learned about the main character's false history and chosen to create him anew. Her playing redefines the roles and abilities that the protagonist inhabits and uses throughout the rest of the game. One of the things that is so powerful about identity construction in *Bioshock* is that the player not only witnesses the dissolution and restoration of the main character's ability to act in the world, she herself undergoes the process while playing. When the main character's powers are taken away one by one, the player must learn to compensate in order to stay alive in the destroyed city. Her tactics for engaging or avoiding enemies as well as her reasons for doing so are changed irrevocably by the destruction and reconstitution of the main character.

The player is constrained in various ways, but not all constraints are negative. Some restrictions, such as being forced into manual labor or scorned for breaching gender boundaries, are repressive. However, all games have

constrictions of some kind. They are systems of limits within which trial and error may uncover new possibilities for reflection on existence and new perspectives from which to see one's life.

I have argued against instrumental games such as *World of Warcraft* for their promotion of unthinking, repetitive action. My opinion on this point stands. On the other hand, not all technological products turn players into zombies. People can use the technology available to produce thoughtful, engaging, interactive games that bring to the fore important topics like identity, agency, and cultural indoctrination. If a game allows for sufficient freedom within which to explore, as do games such as *Shadow of the Colossus*, *Portal*, and *Bioshock*, their form and mechanics can enhance the game and the player's power to look, think and act instead of debilitating him or her.

At the end of *Bioshock*, the player is aware of how her choices have been constrained by the conditions of the game. She can choose to continue or not. What is significant is that she sees the role she inhabits as a role and not as an indisputable norm. James Carse takes up this idea when discussing how individuals adopt and perform roles. He says that individuals must assume a role, be it Ophelia on the stage or a mother at home, freely and knowingly:

Only freely can one step into the role of mother. Persons who assume this role, however, must suspend their freedom with a proper seriousness in order to act as the role requires... The issue is whether we are ever willing to drop the veil and openly acknowledge, if only to ourselves, that we have freely chosen to accept the world through a mask.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> James Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* (New York: Random House, 1986), 16.

If a player is fully committed to the scripts a game offers, then she has not acknowledged her complicity with the game structure. One might worry that the problem is that the agent cedes her agency completely to the game. The real problem is that she does it without recognizing it. Similarly, Huizinga says that play is an activity that must be chosen freely, it cannot be forced. If the activity or role is forced, it is no longer playful.

When players abandon themselves to the whim of game scripts, they lose the freedom to choose their roles. One place that such a loss of freedom is most obvious is in *World of Warcraft*, a game about achievement and accomplishment. The heroic deeds and fantastical quests in the game require a great deal of boring preparation and training. Players spend an inordinate amount of time “grinding” in order to make enough gold for new armor or to gain enough experience for the next level.<sup>194</sup> For a game allegedly about magic and heroism, much of the player's time is spent doing activities that are neither fun nor challenging. The game is, in a word, work. While grinding is almost universally disdained, that does not stop every single player from engaging in it.

Not only does one take up a dubious role in *WoW*, but also often it is to the exclusion of roles that we might take to be more fundamental, such as the

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<sup>194</sup> Players also spend an inordinate amount of money on *World of Warcraft*, leaving aside the issue of buying gold. As of this writing, there are three pieces of software that make up the game, each of which cost from \$20 to \$30. While only the first is required for basic play, the new areas and character classes offered by the expansion software are enticing to many players. The monthly cost is \$15. If a family wants to have multiple accounts, each individual must purchase all the software as well as his own account. Additionally, many players opt to purchase multiple accounts, sometimes as many as 5 at one time, bringing the monthly outlay to \$75.

role of spouse. One man, posting to the forum Gamer Widow, shared the following story:

My wife started playing WOW [World of Warcraft] in about December of 2007. Two weeks before our 38th wedding anniversary she came to my room and told me she was leaving me. She wanted to find "something different." That something different turns out to be WOW. She plays 12-18 hours a day and ignores all other life. She refuses to answer the phone. She refuse[s] to return emails. She is effectively gone into the game. She lives with my adult son and he tells me she rarely leaves the house and then only to buy food. She is supposed to find a job to support herself but after 2 months she still has not applied for a single job. I am destroyed by a video game and have no idea how to proceed.<sup>195</sup>

This story is not uncommon, by any means, nor is it limited to *World of Warcraft*.

The internet abounds with sites proclaiming the iniquity of games and those designed to help recovering game addicts.<sup>196</sup>

Such addiction is supported not only the game mechanics, but also the way that social interaction is built into the game. Josh, a 16 year old high school student, relates the following:

*WoW* isn't just addicting for the never ending repetitive system, more so for the social environment. When you get so close, and you see them making commitment to "spend time" it feels like a freaking relationship, but you enjoy it, and its blinding (as some relationships are.) There really isn't a easy balance when you're hardcore. Between farming consumables, making sure your arena team is 2200+, and being a raid leader? Where does real life come in?<sup>197</sup>

Individuals in this situation recast themselves in the game's terms. Identification

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<sup>195</sup> <http://gamerwidow.com/widows-corner/new-widower/>, last accessed 2 March 2009.

<sup>196</sup> <http://www.gamingsucks.com/>, <http://www.wowdetox.com/>, <http://www.wikihow.com/Break-a-World-of-Warcraft-Addiction>, last accessed 2 March 2009.

<sup>197</sup> <http://www.askapadwe.com/81/are-a-lot-of-people-really-addicted-to-world-of-warcraft/>, last accessed 2 March 2009.

with one's game character is not necessarily a bad thing. "Real life" is not somehow magically less confining. Roles in real life can be just as debilitating. What is problematic is that an addicted individual's obsession with the game disallows any playful realignment of priorities, interests, or roles. The game becomes the benchmark for all interactions and the player can no longer take on new roles freely, only when they are demanded by the game.

In *Shadow of the Colossus* the revelation that game roles can be misleading does not come until the very end of the game. The player has spent the entire time following the whim of a supernatural entity, only to discover that it has tricked her into freeing it. The story upon which the player based all of her actions is, much as in *Bioshock*, a lie. The player's agency has been misrepresented throughout the game and she must, at the end, reevaluate how she understands her actions and her self. Each quest to slay a stone colossus functions as a small story that helps to create the character's identity. When the truth of the situation is revealed, the player must stop and reexamine her memory of the experience based on a reevaluation of her role.

The constructedness of narrative is revealed too late for the player to benefit during the game; her insight can only aid in future play. When a player replays *Shadow of the Colossus*, she is cognizant of the fact that her character is being manipulated. She gains a new perspective on how and why she acts as she does. In a replay situation, the player knows what she is getting into and can thus evaluate the game elements in a new light. When one replays *Bioshock*, a similar phenomenon occurs. The player is aware of the structures of power

behind the game's mechanics and plot and can thus consider the protagonist's plight differently than when she first played.

By contrast, playing *World of Warcraft* is a static experience. The same hierarchy of progress and accumulation shapes interaction no matter how many times one accesses the game. Additionally, every new session of game play is essentially like the last. One might fight new monsters or collect new items, but the process is identical. Even special dungeon runs have a predictable pattern of bosses and loot. Since *World of Warcraft* is a persistent environment, remaining “on” even when a player is not present, it must maintain some sense of continuity or players who are absent for extended periods would be unable to play. It is true that new features are added periodically, but, without fail, they fit into the larger picture. Nothing the player can do will have an appreciable effect on the future of the world or game.

Alternatively, the landscape in *Portal* is always shifting and changing due to the player's input. *Portal* allows the player a more active role in self development by giving her the tools to modify her surroundings and to move freely within them. The sterile testing rooms in *Portal* may seem, at first, to be devoid of motion -- all it takes is the player and her portal gun to invest the space with movement and life.

Though *Portal* is a computer game, and thus a screen technology interfaced through various peripheral devices (keyboard, control pad, etc.), it introduces the theme of embodiment. Some consider videogames to be the nadir of physical involvement. However, because the player of *Portal* has a specific,

meaningful relationship with her avatar's physical disposition, unlike in, say, *Tetris*, the lessons she learns in the game can often be brought back to the normal world. The player does not need to move in an analogous way to her game avatar, such as with the Nintendo Wii, in order to form a profound relationship between bodies and space.<sup>198</sup> Artificial Intelligence researcher Henry Hexmoor defines embodiment thus: “the notion that the representation and extension of concepts is in part determined by the physiology (the bodily functions) and in part by the interaction of an agent with its environment.”<sup>199</sup> Embodiment, in the case of games, is a relationship that an agent forms between physical and mental processes. In the case of *Portal*, players can form a connection between the surroundings that they manipulate and their own sense of existing in space.

All games, and indeed any computer use, require a certain form of communion with the interface. Learning exactly how to manipulate one's computer or controller is an art unto itself. However, in very few games does the imaginative connection between mental and physical properties carry over into the real world. With *Portal*, it is common for players to have creative fantasies that involve the transposition of game physics to their embodied circumstances. For example, in figure 4.3, from the webcomic Penny Arcade, the character

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<sup>198</sup> The Nintendo Wii uses a motion-sensitive controller; in games such as *Wii Sports*, the participant stands and moves as if she were boxing, bowling, playing tennis, etc.

<sup>199</sup> Henry Hexmoor, Johan Lammens, and Stuart Shapiro, “Embodiment in GLAIR: A Grounded Layered Architecture with Integrated Reasoning for Autonomous Agents,” paper presented at the Florida AI Research Symposium, Fort Lauderdale, FL, February 1993.

Gabe creates an endless slide using *Portal* technology. Though such an example may seem frivolous, I believe that it is evidence for a significant relationship between stimulating digital technologies and actual bodies in space. The relationship is important because it displays how individuals can adopt micronarratives from game environments and apply them to their sense of self more broadly. Because *Portal* involves the player in innovative and empowering activity, it is exemplary for conceiving ways that digital games may be used for self creation and increased self-knowledge.

Indeed, games provide a model for self creation that is unparalleled by older technologies. Because they involve the active participation of an agent, they are much more akin to the actual process of self building than other, static or nonparticipatory media such as novels. Daniel Dennett chooses the novel to represent his concept of the self. As we have already seen with Gilbert the novel-writing robot, Dennett conceives of the self as a fictional character. Gilbert is able to narrate its own story and though the robot does not count as a self, the fictional character about which its novel revolves *is* one.

Dennett's version of the self can conceptualize its actions in persistent narrative terms. Though individuals are not all unified thinkers, the autobiography that they produce paints them as coherent agents. The self remains a useful but fictive invention. The novel that Dennett holds up for comparison is *Moby Dick*. Clocking in at about 800 pages, *Moby Dick* is much closer to a meganarrative than to a micronarrative. Given that Dennett is committed to a disunified entity projecting the illusion of a greater unity, it makes



some sense that he refers to such a monolithic tome.

However, Dennett acknowledges that there are significant differences between novels and selves. Since novels and other similar narratives are completed by the time we read them, they are no longer working the magic that is self-creation. Novel characters always come pre-scripted. According to Dennett, selves are fictional beings around which a narrative coheres. By extension, once that story is no longer being written, there is no longer an active self. Videogames, on the contrary, offer a continually mobile environment in which players can form and reform their self concepts by assuming various micronarratives provided by the game space. This process differs from the model of the novel because the agent does not try to use a single coherent narrative to conceptualize her self. Instead, she is free to use any number of smaller actions or stories to define her behavior, affect, and mental state.

Dennett proposes that thought is basically an internal conversation. Stripped to its bare essentials, this is perhaps true. However, it seems that in contemporary society, where multitasking is the rule, there are more accurate ways of describing the demands of communication and thought. The modern day individual must split her attention among numerous different media objects. Whether this is balancing a spreadsheet, email, her Blackberry, iPod, and voicemail, or chatting in different windows while playing a game and monitoring her Facebook account, it requires the deft manipulation of technological products and the ability to divide one's gaze and mind into radically different activities.

One example of such a complicated communication system arises in

*World of Warcraft*, which is, for better or worse, far more complex than a group of people speaking. There are different “channels” for different topics and woe betide the player who posts a statement or request in the wrong one. There are protocols for speaking out of character and different messaging systems for whispering to an individual, addressing one's party, conversing with guildmates, and calling for the help of a Game Master. One must simultaneously attend to the mechanics of the game, being sure to shoot off that round of fireballs while remaining alert for the group leader's commands.

Splitting one's attention is not a new concept. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century such capabilities were especially important.<sup>200</sup> Today, the multiplicitous individual is best represented by the gamer: always alert but seldom thinking particularly deeply about any one task. The image of thought manifested through digital technologies is well suited to Dennett and Gazzaniga's system of mosaic thought. Different parts of the player's consciousness are assigned different tasks and process information in parallel, with brain modules all working at the same time to solve a complex problem, instead of serially, one task after another. The level of complexity in thought and communication is important to consider because it results not just in a net increase in information processed, but in a qualitative difference in the psyche of the contemporary subject.

The player is in a unique position because she is enacting the stories and not merely watching them go by, as in a film, reading about them as faits

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<sup>200</sup> For more on the history of attention and distraction vis a vis media technologies, see Vanessa Schwartz, ed., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

accomplis, as in a book, or channeling her attention directly, as in a normal conversation. Games are useful models for self creation because they specifically invoke purposive activity and narrative, thus appealing to the process of micronarrative accretion that I (and others) claim is representative of self formation. Some of the narratives involved in games are unwieldy and overbearing, some are smaller and more useful, some are small and useless. Each individual must judge for herself the utility of the stories available for incorporation into her self picture. In this way, persons may sustain a practice of deliberative and playful self performance that acknowledges the function of roles in human interaction.

### **A History of Violence**

So far, the discussion of selfhood and games may seem rather theoretical and abstract. However, current scientific research on videogames confirms that games and self-modeling are interlinked. In the following, I will briefly describe the state of empirical psychological research on games and gaming, with an eye to its implications for how selves are constructed and maintained. I argue that individuals can use the active, performative nature of game playing in their processes of self-determination. However, empirical research in the field tends to paint the player as a passive vessel for harmful scripts and affects.<sup>201</sup>

The focus of many videogame studies has been to determine how games

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<sup>201</sup> I want to emphasize that I am not endorsing the experimental methods used in the following examples. Rather, I am interested in showing the efficacy of the model of selfhood I presented earlier in interpreting experimental results.

create violent subjects. The assumption among a number of researchers (who accept the verdict of earlier experiments with movies and television) is that games containing violence uncontroversially promote violent thoughts and behaviors. The most prevalent model for describing the mechanisms through which this occurs is Craig Anderson's General Aggression Model (GAM – see figure 4.) In the GAM, violent media exposure reinforces aggressive beliefs and attitudes, aggressive perceptual schema, aggressive expectation schemata, aggressive behavior scripts, and aggressive desensitization. What this means is that individuals are programmed to behave, think, and feel more aggressively after playing violent games and are much less likely to participate in prosocial (helping) behavior.

Violent play did not originate with videogames, nor are all behavioral schemas aggressive. Violence is simply the focus of much of the scholarly research on the effects of videogame playing. Because violent behavior is often extreme and more visible than other attitudes or affects, researchers consider it to be a more readily discernible marker of how games may affect development. Additionally, public fervor against violent games gives psychological research in this area high visibility in grant competition.

Many studies in videogame psychology are correlational and consist in self-evaluative surveys. Researchers ask individuals questions about their thoughts, feelings, and behavior and subsequently draw conclusions about how such states came to be.<sup>202</sup> An example of this method is a study done by Jeanne

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<sup>202</sup> See, for example, Ricardo Tejeiro Salguero and Rosa Bersabe Moran,

Funk, et al., published in the *Journal of Adolescence* in 2004.<sup>203</sup> In order to ascertain how real life violence and videogame violence effect the desensitization of children toward violence more generally, School questionnaires were given to 150 elementary school students: 1. KID-SAVE (Screen for Adolescent Violence Exposure) consisting of 34 questions about the child's exposure to real world violence; 2. Children's Empathy Questionnaire (CEQ) with 15 questions designed to assess the child's level of empathy; and 3. the Attitudes Towards Violence Scale (ATVS), a 16 item self-report measure of attitudes towards violence.

The children responded using various number scales to statements such as, "People with guns or knives are cool," and "Parents should tell their kids to fight if they have to." The researchers correlated the data from these questionnaires with information about the child's media habits, thus allotting each child a "Violent Media Preference" score. The researchers claim that a penchant for violent videogames is a predictive measure of strong proviolence attitudes and weak empathy with others.

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"Measuring Problem Video Game Playing in Adolescents," *Addiction* 97 (2002): 1601-06; Brian Ng and Peter Wiemer-Hastings, "Addiction to the Internet and Online Gaming," *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 8 no. 2 (2005): 110-113; Thomas Robinson, Marta Wilde, Lisa Navacruz, K. Farish Haydel, and Ann Varaday, "Effects of Reducing Children's Television and Videogame Use on Aggressive Behavior," *Arch Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, 155 (2001): 17-23; Douglas Gentile, Paul Lynch, Jennifer Linder, and David Walsh, "The Effects of Violent Video Game Habits on Adolescent Hostility, Aggressive Behaviors, and School Performance," *Journal of Adolescence* 27 (2004): 5-22.

<sup>203</sup> Jeanne Funk, Heidi Bechtoldt Baldacci, Tracie Pasold, and Jennifer Baumgardner, "Violence and Exposure in Real-Life, Video Games, Television, Movies, and the Internet: Is There Desensitization?," *Journal of Adolescence* 27 (2004): 23-29.

Games were more strongly correlated with aggressiveness than either movies or real-life violence. The researchers are careful to say that the study did not investigate causal relationships; however, they imply that the active, intense, and immersive nature of games promotes stronger identification with violent models. Such modelling is problematic to the researchers because, “[i]n violent videogames empathy is not adaptive, moral evaluation is often non-existent, but proviolence attitudes and behaviors are repeatedly rewarded.” Games, on such a view, contain antisocial schemas that contribute to moral turpitude by reinforcing negative patterns of behavior.

There are different modes of receptivity to games and the study notes that differences among individual children may affect their formative vulnerability to representations of violence. Since this is a correlational study and cannot report on causality, it may be that individuals with higher trait aggressiveness (people who would tend toward violent behavior even without the input of violent media) are simply drawn to more violent games.<sup>204</sup> “Difficult” children, as the study terms them, have lower empathy generally and often engage in violent play.

Children without behavioral problems also participate in violent play, sometimes directly modeled directly on videogame scenarios.<sup>205</sup> A concern lying behind many of the accusations that game violence is harmful is that children

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<sup>204</sup> To this criticism the researchers counter that the violent games will not improve empathetic response. Assigning a direction to the correlation between games and proviolence characteristics is risky at best.

<sup>205</sup> Funk, et al., “Violence and Exposure,” 34.

lose sight of reality and, because of this, perform actions that are inappropriate. However, it is almost never the case that the children actually believe themselves to be inside of a game. Children certainly have the ability to tell fantasy play from real life. The real concern with videogames, and indeed any medium, is that the schemas of proviolence behavior are incorporated into the range of thoughts and actions that are readily accessible to them. The schemas and actions that the child encounters in the game can be broken into micronarratives, which are then replayed by the child within play and without.

The combination of micronarratives (or fictive blocks, or strips of action) in games results in game play scripts, stories that help players to understand the situation at hand and to decide future behavior. Craig Lindley and Charlotte Sennersten, researchers in game design and cognition at Gotland University College in Sweden, have noted some examples of game play scripts: scripts for interacting with a trader, including evaluating items; a script for negotiating quests, e.g., exploring background information, considering alignment (moral character of the quest); a script for exploring a labyrinth, e.g. following the left wall until the character arrives back at the entrance; a script for the combative engagement of an enemy, including tactics for approaching and engaging the enemy and selecting a formation and/or angle of attack and launching the attack.<sup>206</sup> Players' reactions to scripted circumstances may be internalized, as

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<sup>206</sup> Craig A. Lindley and Charlotte C. Sennersten, "A Cognitive Framework for the Analysis of Game Play: Tasks, Schemas, and Attention Theory," paper presented at the Workshop of the Cognitive Science of Games and Game Play, Vancouver, Canada 26-29 July, 2006.

with grinding, for example.<sup>207</sup> In this way, they can act without thinking about their behavior at every turn.

Script formation is a process by which an agent reacts to information about herself and the world. Individuals may acquire scripts and schemas from almost anywhere: books, television, people, games, or any number of other sources. There is an important sense in which the agent cedes her agency when following such a script. Her actions are caused by the rules of the script, rather than directly by her choice. Individuals take on some scripts voluntarily, and others they do not. It would be impossible, even for the most dedicated episodic, to avoid scripts completely. A ludic thinker strives to recognize the scripts in which she participates and to evaluate her involvement in them.

The mechanism through which players identify with the characters they play is known as displacement.<sup>208</sup> As delineated by new media researchers Jussi Holopainen and Stephan Meyers, the phenomenon of displacement can be split into two different types: somatic and temporal. Temporal displacement is the ability for individuals to imagine hypothetical situations forward or backward in time.<sup>209</sup> One can also imagine the behavior of another by considering them as an agent and extrapolating from prior information. More pertinent to my

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<sup>207</sup> Social interaction within games can also be broken down into scripts, e.g., how to behave in a fantasy roleplaying guild, or how to have an in-game romance.

<sup>208</sup> Lindley and Sennersten, "A Cognitive Framework," 9.

<sup>209</sup> Such a feat would require, as I noted earlier in reference to the work of J. David Velleman, the presence of an agential unit who uses past behavior and affect to predict future behavior and affect.



discussion is somatic displacement, which also involves agential unity, but, instead of imagining future events, deals with current identification pairings between the self and objects. Holopainen and Meyers:

Somatic displacement refers to the ability of a person to project the mental model of his or her own identity into another physical form, which represents the player in an alternate environment. There are some examples of somatic displacement in other human activities, such as driving a car - successful automotive navigation requires the driver to project their body image to the physical limits of a car. When one is involved in a car accident, one typically says "he hit me!" rather than "his car hit my car!" Many games play upon this form of displacement of the self. For example, computer games set in the third person require a user to project their self-image into the character on the screen. First person games require the user to project their entire body image into a virtual environment, a phenomenon referred to commonly as immersion.<sup>210</sup>

Immersion, in the standard definition proposed by Janet Murray, involves the sensation of being completely surrounded by another, believable world and learning to maneuver within it.<sup>211</sup> During an immersive experience, according to Murray, the normal world is obliterated. The player can find pleasure from learning to navigate a strange environment.

In chapter two, I contrasted immersion of this sort with engagement, in which the participant is thoughtfully involved with world and also with her role qua

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<sup>210</sup> Jussi Holopainen and S. Meyer, "Neuropsychology and Game Design," paper presented at Consciousness Reframed III Newport, Walse, UK, 2000.

<sup>211</sup> Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 98-99. There are a number of different types of immersive experiences (imaginative immersion, challenge-based immersion, and sensory immersion are three). See Laura Ermi and Frans Mayra, "Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion," paper presented at Changing Views: World in Play, Digital Games Research Association 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference, Vancouver, June 2005.

role.<sup>212</sup> Carse suggests that a player or ritualist must always have in mind the fact that she is playing; such a mindset is not possible with a completely immersed player. When a player is immersed, she is more susceptible to the unconscious influence of schemas. Researchers worry that though game scripts are defined in a virtual space, the principles at hand may be carried over into real world behavior. Funk says, "Intense engagement is another potential reason for concern about violence in videogames because such engagement may increase the probability that game behaviors will generalize outside the game situation."<sup>213</sup> Though Funk calls the games "engaging," her description of games aligns more closely with my definition of "immersion." Engagement, or conscious interaction with the game and meta-analysis of the game situation, is diametrically opposed to the phenomenon about which she expresses concern.

Funk's concern is not unfounded; there is a strong connection between immersion and addiction, as is made clear by a focus group participant in one of her studies: "... sometimes you get so into it you don't want to stop."<sup>214</sup> The mechanics, story, and audiovisual experience of games are typically intended to

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<sup>212</sup> Others, such as Emily Brown and Paul Cairns, suggest different classification schemes. For example, coding immersion into three levels: engagement, engrossment, and total immersion. In this model, player involvement in the game changes during the course of play. However, all three are on a similar scale. See Emily Browns and Paul Cairns, "A Grounded Investigation of Game Immersion," in *CHI'04 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors and Computing Systems* (Vienna, April 2004): 1297-1300. I find it more fruitful to follow Douglas and Hargadon's definition (see chapter two, pp. 102-105), which opposes engagement and immersion on a very basic level.

<sup>213</sup> Funk, et al., "Violence and Exposure," 34.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

be as complete and all-encompassing as possible. Since the player is actively moving through the game, he or she must choose to be enveloped; he or she loosens her grip on her old life and embraces a new one created within the dictates of the game.

When players are addicted to games, they lose sight of the self that is choosing to play and instead rely on the structure and content of the game for their worldview. The agential unity of the self is relinquished in favor of a positive stimulus response (or reward) from the game. It is no wonder that excessive videogaming, in one study, was found to resemble chemical dependence as classified by the DSM-IV, the standard text used to classify psychiatric disorders.<sup>215</sup> If a game is able completely to dictate the scripts and schemas that individuals use to construct their sense of self, then it may induce a pathological condition.

One Dutch experimental study, entitled “I Wish I Were a Warrior: The Role of Wishful Identification in the Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggression in Adolescent Boys,” examines how boys use videogame characters as models for behavioral scripts. The hypothesis was that violent videogames were more likely to induce hostile behaviors when players identified with the characters they were playing. One hundred and twelve boys between age twelve and seventeen with lower academic ability were tested by assigning each a game with either realistic

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<sup>215</sup> Ricardo Tejeiro Salguero and Rosa Bersabe Moran, “Measuring Problem Video Game Playing in Adolescents,” *Addiction* 97 (2002): 1601-06. 1601-06.

violence, fantasy violence, realistic nonviolence, or fantasy nonviolence.<sup>216</sup>

After playing the game, each test subject participated in the Taylor Competitive Reaction Time task (TCRT). In the TCRT, the participant is told that he or she is competing against a partner to test reaction times. Whichever partner is faster may deliver a blast of noise to the other, some of which are so loud that they would damage hearing in longer intervals. In reality, each subject performs alone; the test is rigged so that each participant “wins” about half of the time. The loudness of the blast is considered by experimental psychologists to be an accurate indicator of aggressiveness.<sup>217</sup>

The authors distinguish between “similarity identification” and “wishful identification.” In similarity identification, individuals identify with characters because they share various features. In wishful identification, individuals desire to emulate the character, regardless of actual relatedness. All types of identification play roles in self creation. Wishful identification, which, in this study, was measured by questionnaires that followed gameplay, is particularly important for it can be used accurately to predict future behavior.<sup>218</sup>

Regression analysis reveals that subjects who played a violent game displayed more hostility than those who played a nonviolent game. Additionally,

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<sup>216</sup> The games used were *America's Army*, *Killzone*, *Max Payne*, *Doom 3*, *Quake*, *Metroid Prime*, *Pro Evolution Soccer*, *Tony Hawk's Underground*, *Mario Kart*, *Mario Sunshine*, and *Final Fantasy*.

<sup>217</sup> Elly Konijn, Marije Nije Bijvank, and Brad Bushman, “I Wish I Were a Warrior: The Role of Wishful Identification in the Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggression in Adolescent Boys,” *Developmental Psychology* 43 no. 4 (2007): 1040.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

wishful identification with the main character was positively correlated with aggression. Wishful identification with the protagonist of a nonviolent game was not found to have a bearing on aggressive behavior. The authors state, "Although realism and immersion did not influence aggressive behavior, they did influence wishful identification. If the game was realistic, and if players felt immersed in the game, they identified more with game characters." An immersive experience created an environment more conducive to character displacement than did an unbelievable or fantastic experience. The immersive nature of some games lends itself to the acceptance of various scripts and schemas. In this experiment, the authors concluded that such identification was only problematic if the game was violent. What it reveals more generally is that immersion lends itself to the reflexive (as opposed to reflective) assumption of game schemas.

One conclusion that might be drawn from these findings is that since immersive games create an environment in which players are vulnerable to manipulation, such games should be avoided or outlawed. However, the conclusion is false. It depends on a flawed understanding of the phenomenon of immersion. Immersion is a relation between player and object; studies of this relation must take into account not only the game, but also the player's active role. If the player under consideration is ludic in the sense I have described throughout this dissertation, then the effects of scripts and schemas will be radically different.

Cognitive maps such as Anderson's GAM seem to assume that subjects

will always regurgitate whatever they are shown. Such models fail to account for the affect and mental processes of the subject. To say that players will necessarily be corrupted by exposure to violent games is to deny the active nature of self formation in favor of a passive model of programming. Earlier, I asserted that games can have negative effects on players. In this chapter, I might seem to say that games cannot have negative effects because of the active nature of self- construction, though in fact I claim no such thing. What I claim is that it is possible for agents to circumvent negative effects by virtue of taking a more active role in playing. There is little point in talking about games as objects of cognition if the agent doing the thinking has no role to play. I contend that the promotion of reflective thought in players would do far more to end negative script modeling than would banning or condemning games.

Obviously there are some exceptions. I am not, for instance, a proponent of the game *Battle Rape*<sup>219</sup> or of allowing very young children to participate in bloody massacres. However, one should not underestimate the power of philosophy to mitigate the negative effects of violent media and, more generally, instrumental society's hegemonic control over thought and behavior. As

Horkheimer and Adorno state:

Unlike its custodians, philosophy refers, among other things, to thinking that refuses to capitulate to the prevailing division of labor and does not accept prescribed tasks. The existing order coerces people not merely by physical force and material interest but by overwhelming suggestion. Philosophy is not a synthesis, a basic science, or an overarching science, but an effort to resist suggestion, a determination to protect intellectual

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<sup>219</sup> This is an actual game. Released in Japan in 2002, it is a hentai (anime with explicit sex) fighting game.

and actual freedom ... Philosophy detects the lie which domination inescapably brings with it. Refusing to be hypnotized by the preponderant power, it pursues it into all its hiding-places in the social machinery, which by its nature cannot be taken by storm, or placed under different control, but must be understood in freedom from the spell it casts.<sup>220</sup>

In order to resist the persuasive scripts of games, players can examine the motives and methods of the structures in which they participate (games, in this case.) In order to be an active agent, one must be aware of the various ideologies that form one's self concept. Distancing oneself from the process and examining the situation in a playful, reflective manner can avert much of the harm done by dominating or coercive schemas. The key to such a proposition is thinking which refuses to capitulate and individuals who refuse to just play along.

Some will continue to claim that games are for relaxation and easy amusement. There will be no convincing those people that philosophy has a role in their daily routine. However, life can be more than thoughtless entertainment. Since games actively model the process of self formation and self discovery, it is important to enter them with an open, active, discerning mind. Especially in immersive environments, the player must remain vigilant against hegemonic forces that would control her. Because games already require extensive player input, they are well suited for further participatory action. Horkheimer and Adorno display remarkable prescience when they claim:

... [I]t is in the nature of truth that one is involved in it as an active subject. People may hear propositions which in themselves are true; but they experience their truth only by thinking as they hear and continuing to think.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 202.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

The player can responsibly affirm her behavior, affect, and mental state only when she thinks as she plays, and continues to think.



## Conclusion

### The Trouble With Play

The purpose of the foregoing text may seem, on first blush, somewhat oblique. It is certainly not a manifesto for game development, though how games look and feel has been my primary object. Neither is this dissertation concerned with the application of orthodox Marxist critique of capital, though the means of game production and consumption play a significant role in game history. Nor have I engaged in purely postmodern critique, or a demographic account of game communities.<sup>222</sup> I have not undertaken a feminist critique of game content, as have others.<sup>223</sup> Nor have I succumbed to either a narratological or ludological reading of game stories (narratology) or structures (ludology.)<sup>224</sup> This text is not a review or defense of games, though games are my objects of study. It is fruitless to speak of “games in general” (or “what digital technologies do”), for they are all so varied in how they work and why. That being said, merely to

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<sup>222</sup> See Nick Yee’s Daedalus Project, a survey of players of Massively Multiplayer Online Games: <http://www.nickjee.com/daedalus/>, last accessed 21 June 2009.

<sup>223</sup> Anne-Marie Schleiner, “Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygons? Gender and Gender-Role Subversion in Computer Adventure Games,” *Leonardo* 34 no. 3 (June 2001): 221-226; Helen W. Kennedy, “Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis,” *Games Studies* 2 no. 2 (December 2002); Michel Marriott, “Fighting Women Enter the Arena, No Holds Barred,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2003.

<sup>224</sup> A prime example of narratology is Michael Mateas “A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 19-33. For ludology, see Espen Aarseth, “Genre Trouble, Narrativism and the Art of Simulation,” *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 45-55.

reduce games to anecdotal mementos does a disservice to their philosophical potential and social implications.<sup>225</sup>

Instead, I have attempted an exegesis of various games in order to expose their compatibility (or decided incompatibility) with critical philosophy. If I have done so in a less than systematic way, it is because I use as my cicerone Theodor Adorno, a thinker who was as deeply suspicious of master narratives and closed philosophical systems as he was critical of hegemonic social systems that control and disfigure life. Instrumental society does not promote critical reflection and, in fact, actively dissuades its subjects from questioning the status quo. In this text, I have suggested that ludic or playful thought is compatible with critical philosophy as espoused by Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* and elsewhere. I contend that playful thought can be a means to improve one's real conditions of life, a sentiment in line with Adorno's project of social amelioration. His goal is to work against a "world which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings," where individuals are forced to serve structures of power that ultimately destroy their ability to think freely.<sup>226</sup>

In light of the omnipresence and mesmerizing power of games, Adorno's comment has new urgency. Contemporary digital games are pivotal in the battle against instrumental rationality, for they hold the pistol, so to speak, in a number

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<sup>225</sup> Most games studies falls under this heading. See Tanya Krzywinksa "Blood Scythes, Festivals, Quests, and Backstories: World Creation and the Rhetorics of Myth in World of Warcraft," *Games and Culture* 1 no. 4 (October 2006), 395.

<sup>226</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 80.

of ways. The most obvious of these ways is the violent character of many games, though the impact of game violence on players remains uncertain. I am more concerned with the thoughtlessness with which most games are played. This is a kind of “violence” with which Adorno is concerned as well. When players hold the pistol to their own heads, and with cheerful abandon no less, what is to be done? I suggest that the only thing that can in good conscience be done is for the players themselves to learn strategies by which they may subject such objects to reflection. Scholarship that only seeks to inform players of the “true meaning” of a game is actively pernicious; it does little more than steady the pistoleer's aim.

The spirit of my project is effectively summarized by musicologist Kofi Agawu in his essay, “What Adorno Makes Possible for Music Analysis.”<sup>227</sup> In this text, Agawu asks how and why Adorno's writings on music are important for music scholarship today, even though Adorno's favored artistic movement, high modernism, has long since declined. At length:

In order to begin to make good on Adorno's legacy, music analysis must be willing to take nothing for granted, must not delude itself into imagining definitive analyses or final states, must glorify present engagement instead of deferring to the supposed authority of past criticism as transmitted by historians of thought, and must be willing to stage ongoing enactments and reenactments of the musical work (or parts thereof) not only in actuality but, more potently, in imagination and in a manner consistent with music's performative essence. It is the certainty of provisionality and the provisionality of certainty, the conviction that what has been said may be false, incomplete, or inadequate, and that there is always more to say and especially to ask – this is what Adorno makes possible for the dedicated music analyst. Whether this constellation of stances – which has no corporate currency, and whose peculiar shapes

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<sup>227</sup> Kofi Agawu, “What Adorno Makes Possible for Music Analysis,” *19<sup>th</sup> Century Music* 29 no. 1 (2005): 55.

prove too unruly for domestication for mass teaching – can be generalized and institutionalized as "theory" is debatable. In any case, it presupposes an ethical stance that is not framed by the cowardly dictates of political correctness and critical opportunism, but by an embrace – which we might as well call "strategic" – of a simple yet powerful belief that it is possible – indeed desirable – for one musician-writer to write something that other musicians find edifying.<sup>228</sup>

Agawu suggests that Adorno's work still has the power to promote creative thought about music and subsequently to invigorate scholarly work. If music analysis remains engaged with its object and does not atrophy under the weight of received views, it can have real aesthetic and social import.

Agawu seizes on the fact that Adorno's work cannot be easily co-opted for institutional use. Adorno's techniques for engaging with art objects are not easily taught; instead of a list of commands, he proposes a much more amorphous kind of philosophical reflection. To dictate the direction or form that reflection must necessarily take would be to capitulate to the authoritarian impulses that haunt rational thought. Instead, individuals must toil alongside the art object, striving for a complex, dialectical relationship with the work that cannot easily be categorized or predicted. Spontaneity of this sort is one of Adorno's touchstones. The intense connection that one has to an artwork may not be fully accounted for. It arises from mutual preparedness (i.e., the art ought to be provocative and the viewer ought to be ready to think about it) and it gives rise to previously undiscovered connections and imaginative observations. Agawu, in a similar fashion, argues that thinkers must be cognizant and respectful of the processual nature of scholarship and music.

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

Adapting Agawu's pronouncement for the future of music analysis to game studies will help to avoid the pratfalls of contemporary games scholarship and inject much needed critical perspective into gaming. In Adorno's work, as Agawu notes, there is an implicit ethical position about society and politics. Adorno's aesthetics works to reveal the truth content of objects through the philosophical examination of sensuous apperception. Aesthetics does not only reference the subjective appraisal of taste, but rather describes the desperate struggle to create and to nourish visions of a reconciled, free society. Though games are hardly the avant-garde works to which Adorno gave so much attention, they nonetheless contain truths about life in contemporary society, even when their truth is their lie.

Keeping with the spirit of Adorno's reflective philosophy, I have proposed that an attitude of ludic thought may allow players to engage with games in an open-ended way. Adornian aesthetics prevents analysis from becoming only conjecture, for it requires that the analyst recognize how structure and form are important to works. It is not, however, beholden to a structurally-focused approach as is ludology. Games need to have rules, but that does not mean that the philosophical end point of their analysis is determined before one even begins to play. Ludic engagement requires an imaginative player who may sometimes play according to the rules, but also attempts to bend the rules for the sake of exploration, as difficult as it may be. Simply to abandon oneself to the rules of the game is hardly reflective. Neither is its opposite, the proposition that play is a free-for-all.

Adorno argued against inflexible rule structures by critiquing instrumental culture in texts such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where he and Horkheimer examine how hierarchical social structures (systems of rules) have at once helped to create and to deform society. Individuals, they argue, must not abdicate their freedom of thought to the machinations of the culture industry. Instead, they must reflect on how reason has gone awry. Adorno criticizes the notion that play is a free-for-all in *Aesthetic Theory*. In a passage from the *Paralipomena*, Adorno repudiates the Schillerian idea that free, untethered play represents the full measure of man's imaginative power. Schiller: “[N]o error will ever be incurred if we seek the ideal of beauty on the same road on which we satisfy our play-impulse... For, to speak out once for all, man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays.”<sup>229</sup>

By itself Schiller's claim might support my call for ludic thought, for I too make the connection between aesthetic education and play. I suggest, as Schiller seems to, that imaginative exploration is a playful process by which one may come to understand truths about the world. However, Schiller and I part ways early on; he wishes play to be a completely autonomous mode and I believe that it can both reflect and change the real conditions of life.

Schiller believes that it is the absence of hindrance that creates an atmosphere

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<sup>229</sup> Friedrich Schiller, “*Letters on the Aesthetical Education of Man*,” Letter CV, in *Literary and Philosophical Essays: French, German and Italian*, ed. Charles W. Eliot, Harvard Classics 32 (New York: Collier, 1910). Available online at: <http://www.bartleby.com/32>, last accessed 03 July 2009.

of play. I contend the very opposite. Again, Schiller:

The imagination, like the bodily organs, has in man its free movement and its material play, a play in which, without any reference to form, it simply takes pleasure in its arbitrary power and in the absence of all hindrance. These plays of fancy, inasmuch as form is not mixed up with them, and because a free succession of images makes all their charm, though confined to man, belong exclusively to animal life, and only proves one thing - that he is delivered from all external sensuous constraint.<sup>230</sup>

Schiller views the injection of aesthetics into life as a way to restore the balance that rationality destroys. He views play as a pure expression of freedom. To him, aesthetic education and the search for the beautiful are the highest manifestations of freedom, whereas freedom is debased by the twin tyrannies of hyperrationality and compulsive feeling.<sup>231</sup>

Schiller has a rather limited account of what play actually is. For example, aesthetic experimentation culminating in a poem or symphony counts, but something like boxing matches or other rough play would not.<sup>232</sup> Indeed, most activities that we consider to be play or playful would not be considered so under his rubric. He deems play to be the absence of hindrance, taking it out of the

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., letter XXVII.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., letter XXI: "But as soon as we remember that freedom is taken from man by the one-sided compulsion of nature in feeling, and by the exclusive legislation of the reason in thinking, we must consider the capacity restored to him by the aesthetical disposition, as the highest of all gifts, as the gift of humanity. I admit that he possesses this capacity for humanity, before every definite determination in which he may be placed. But as a matter of fact, he loses it with every determined condition, into which he may come, and if he is to pass over to an opposite condition, humanity must be in every case restored to him by the aesthetic life."

<sup>232</sup> Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 131.

realm of life and installing it firmly in the Ideal.

Play is not, as Schiller would have it, inherently good or unproblematic. It can be cruel, bloody, or otherwise unsavory. Nor does it merely designate activity without hindrance. Instead, play deals with the crafty navigation of hindrances. It is the act of functioning within sets of arbitrary rules, which are, of course, a kind of hindrance. The ludic spirit may be used for any number of reasons and to any number of ends; it can equally be harnessed for repression as for productive purposes, e.g., reflective philosophy.

In this dissertation, I have attempted to focus on the latter. Ludic thought has untapped potential, though it remains to be seen whether playful contemplation is a more socially productive technique than other forms of philosophical exploration. No less than a scalpel or other instrument, philosophical tools must be continually tested for their utility and potential. If play is valorized uncritically and its methods applied undialectically, then it will likely prove not only sterile, but also repressive.

The detrimental aspects of play are as important to study as the productive ones. Adorno goes so far as to correlate play with repetition compulsion and archaic impulses. Such a move might seem out of line with his appreciation for playfulness as a means to resist domination. Always wary of a panacea, however, Adorno states that the concept of play has been misinterpreted and misused by theorists. He suggests that concept of play-as-freedom is misleading, if not downright dishonest. If art, for example, is denuded of all praxis and purpose, and individuals claim that it is free of the constraints of



history or utility, then it is participating in bourgeois self-delusion. He claims that the connection between praxis and play is far more complicated than Schiller's simplistic formula allows.

Play, he says, casts a spell on art that forces it into stale imitation and complicity with fate. If art claims to be generated completely through play, it denies its connection to the world of labor and unfreedom: "The putative play drive has ever been fused with the primacy of blind collectivity."<sup>233</sup> In other words, when art divests itself of the concept of praxis, it loses the dialectical energy necessary for real expression and surrenders the ability to express truths about life and society. Such a view is in direct contrast to Schiller's concept of play as pure expression.

That said, however, art cannot exist without play. The problem arises when playfulness is fetishized and dialectical thought is abandoned. For play and playfulness to promote thoughtful engagement, they must not surrender to the totalizing impulses that surround them. Adorno says that the way to prevent such capitulation is to be mindful of the pain that accompanies play. From the *Paralipomena*:

Only when play becomes aware of its own terror, as in Beckett, does it in any way share in art's power of reconciliation. Art that is totally without play is no more thinkable than if it were totally without repetition...<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 317.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

What Adorno calls “terror” is one way to prevent art from falling victim to a false sense of ideal harmony. Terror, in such a case, is comprised of the dissonance, gaps, and contradictions that keep an artwork from becoming a fully comprehensible (and thus easily assimilable) whole. Art contains elements of play, but must not be subordinate to those elements. Whenever art *is* subsidiary to play, it becomes not only complacent but also regressive. In order to be progressive or philosophically beneficial, art must acknowledge its debt to compulsive, imitative, archaizing, and repetitive impulses, but must maintain a dialectically charged presence.

The dialectical character of play stems from its existence both as “an act apart,”<sup>235</sup> as in Huizinga’s formulation, and also as a mimetic counterpart to real world events. In this way, play is true and untrue at the same time, always part of the world and yet categorically separated from it. By never giving in to one side or the other, play may maintain the internal tension that animates it. In this vein, Adorno observes that, “[w]hat is predicated here of play holds true for all art as well.”<sup>236</sup> I have attempted to take advantage of the dialectical qualities of play and to apply Adorno’s concepts in re art to reflective ludic activity.

If one denies the dialectical features of art or play then my analysis will remain unconvincing. For example, if one believes that games are wholly for entertainment or release and have no power to shape thought or the real

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<sup>235</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 10.

<sup>236</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 318.

conditions of the world, then one has no reason to concede that play is philosophically valuable. Similarly, if one contends that art exists in a completely autonomous realm of free aesthetic expression, it may not influence life at all.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that games and playful activity have a dialectical nature and have power to shape thought and the real conditions of the world. Games can benefit from the same techniques Adorno recommends for the study of art. I have called such activity ludic thought. Just as art should be viewed thoughtfully, with reflection on such themes as representation and identity, so too must games if they are to be more than factories producing complacent, somnolent subjects.

The first three chapters of the text deal primarily with how games might promote such reflection, to the benefit of the individual player and to society as a whole. Further work in this direction will involve the analysis of more games and the exploration of a wider range of thematics. Such an inquiry would provide much-needed rigor to the often flaccid and anecdotal discipline of Games Studies and also help to integrate philosophical deliberation into player's lives.

In the final chapter I considered how gaming subjects are formed, claiming that agency is created through the amalgamation of many small stories (micronarratives.) Such a theory of agential unity is applicable outside of gaming contexts, but is particularly illuminating when applied to psychological experiments in attention and distraction in play situations.

Future research in the field would help to reverse the simple causal models so prevalent in game discourse today (e.g., “playing games makes people violent.”). It would also reveal additional ways to utilize games for positive outcomes.

The potential of games far outstrips their meager application as tools for corporate training or social scapegoats, but this potential can only be realized if players choose to realize it. By reclaiming the power of ludic engagement from manipulative hegemonic forces, individuals may develop an aptitude for philosophical thought, conscious self-formation, and subsequently, social change. In order to accomplish such a goal, theorists and experimental researchers should encourage the creative aspects of play and forgo the temptation to “improve” games uncritically. Neither should players be blindly counseled against games as a whole. Refusing to play along, after all, is not a refusal to play, but is rather a refusal to play on the terms of those in power.

## Figures



Figure 1.1: Episteme the Night Elf, character creation in *World of Warcraft*.

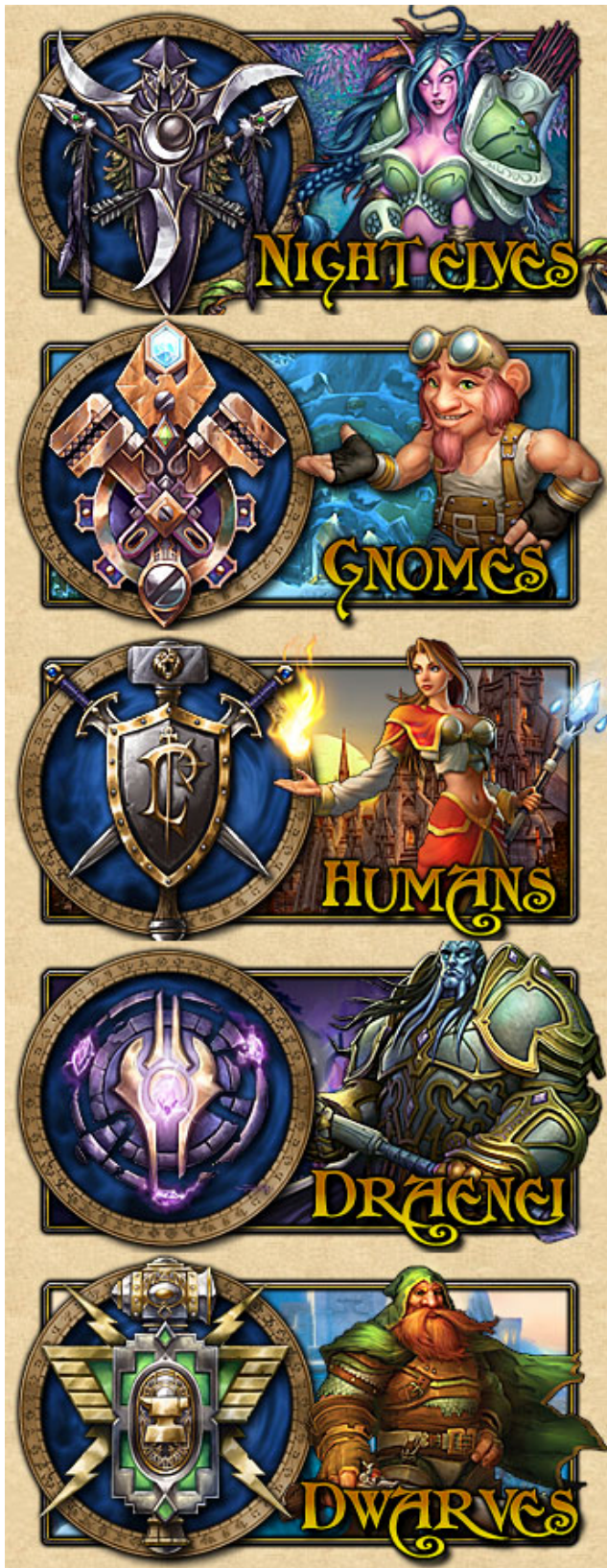


Figure 1.2: The Alliance Races in *World of Warcraft*.





Figure 1.3: The Horde races in *World of Warcraft*.



Figure 1.4: Experience (XP), quest-giver, and questing scroll in *World of Warcraft*.





Figure 1.5: Animal-human hybrid office worker from Natalie Bookchin's *Metapet*.



Figure 1.6: Leatherworking in *World of Warcraft*.



Figure 1.7: Leatherworking supply vendor in *World of Warcraft*.





Figure 1.8: Druid trainer in *World of Warcraft*.



Figure 1.9: Combat and monsters in *World of Warcraft*.





Figure 1.10: Druid talents in *World of Warcraft*.

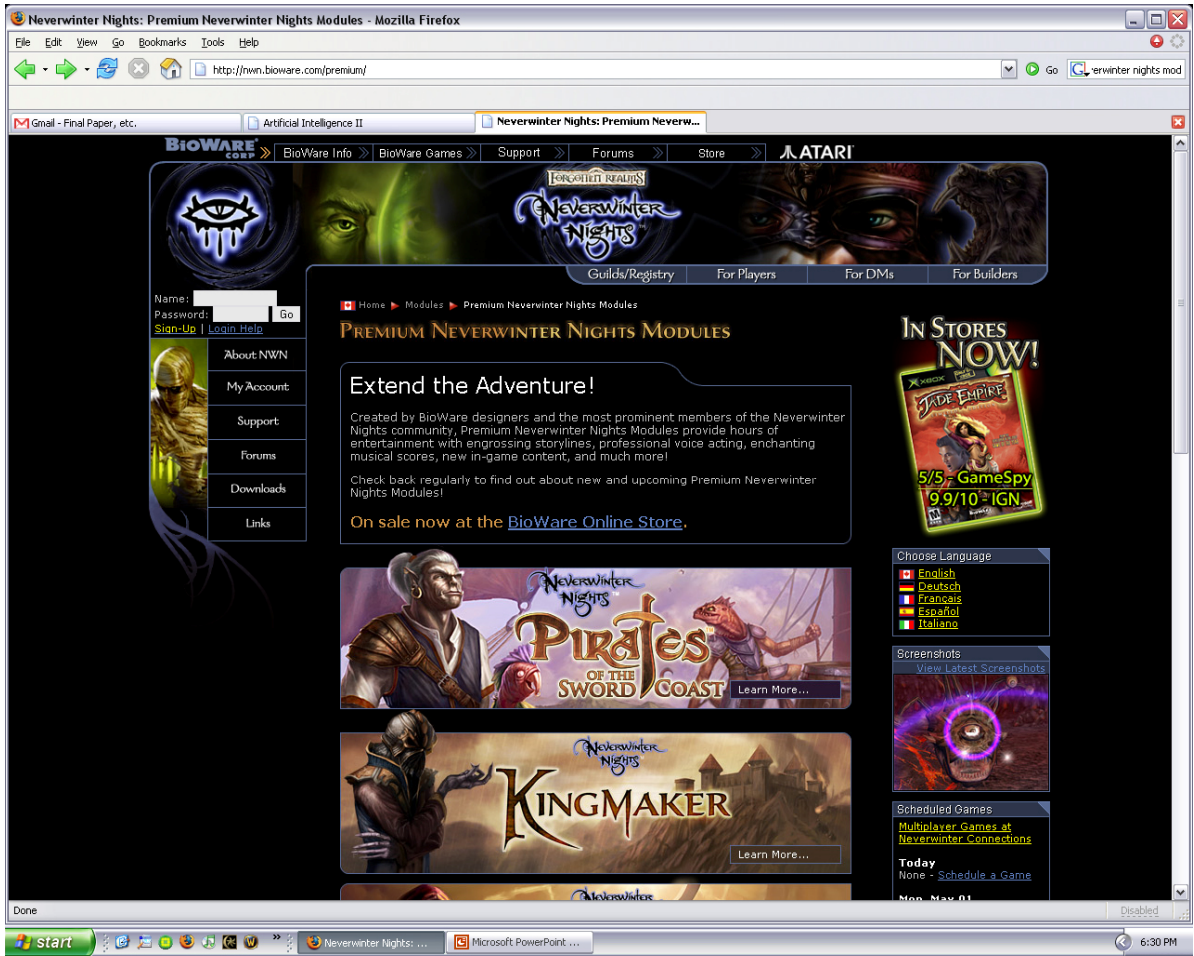


Figure 1.11: Additional content modules from the game *Neverwinter Nights*.

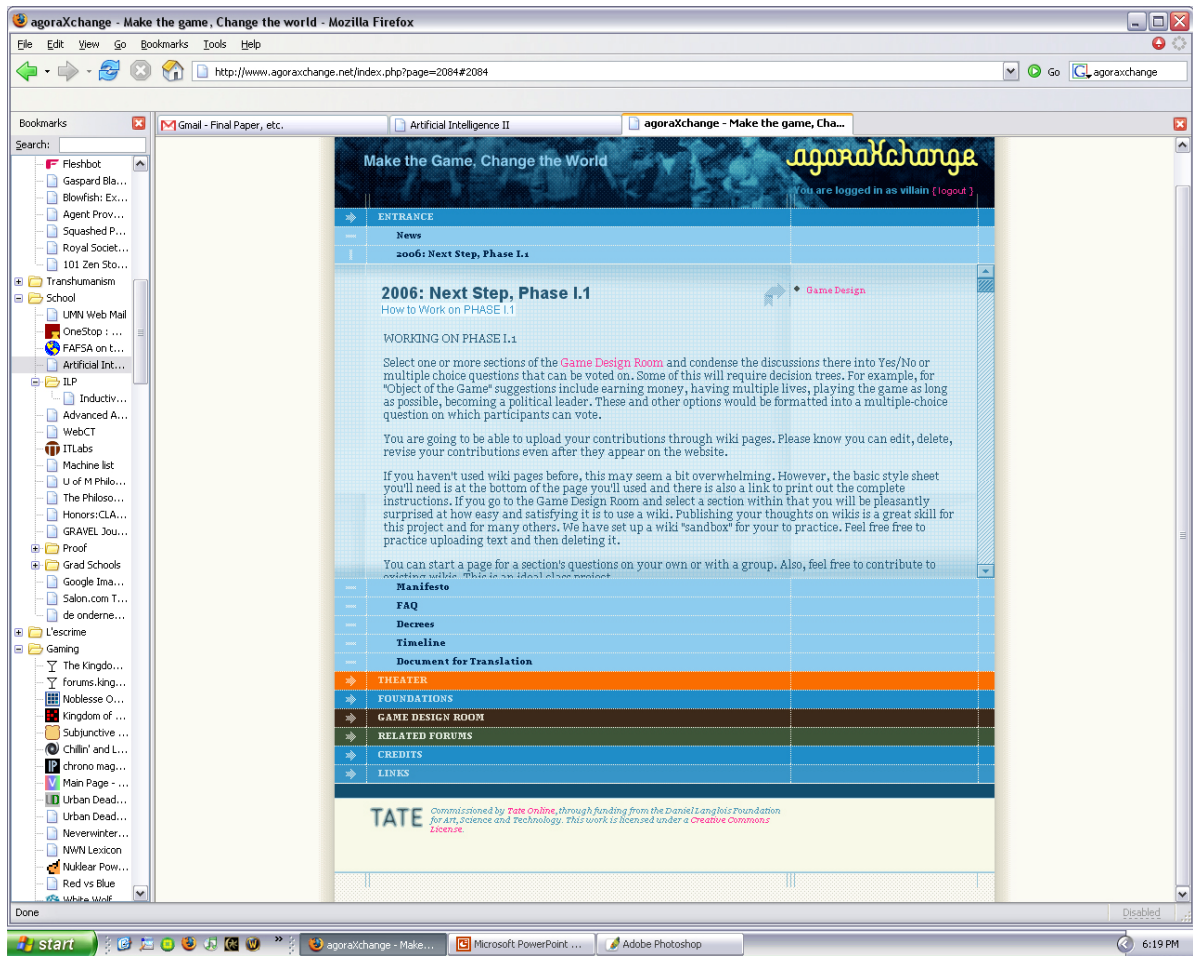


Figure 1.12: Natalie Bookchin's *agoraXchange*.



Figure 1.13: Logo for the game *Progress Quest*.



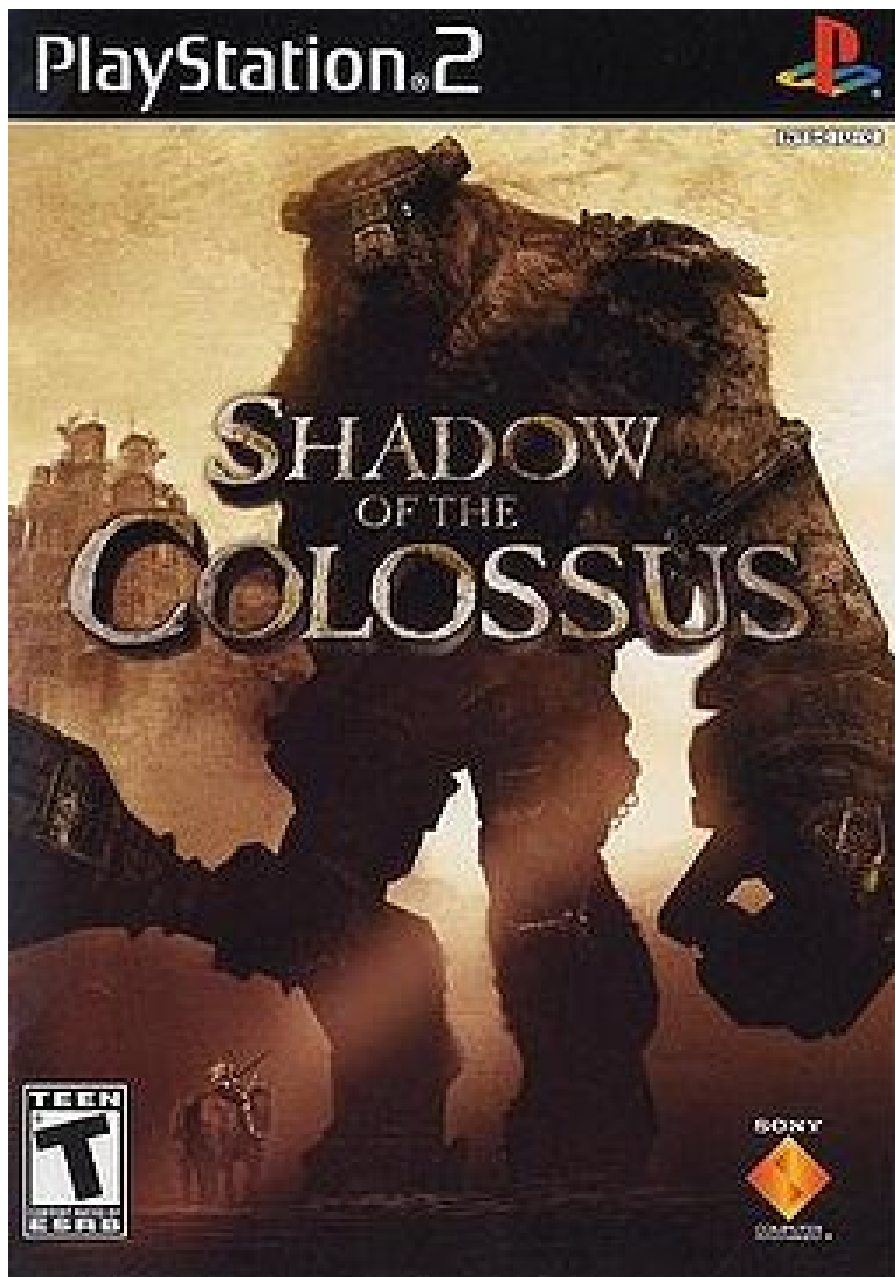


Figure 2.1: Cover art for the game *Shadow of the Colossus*.



Figure 2.2: A boy and his horse, plus a flying stone dragon, from *Shadow of the Colossus*.



Figure 2.3: Temple ruins in *Shadow of the Colossus*.



Figure 2.4: A colossus whose weak spot has just been stabbed, from *Shadow of the Colossus*.



Figure 2.5: Jolts of energy the character receives after killing each colossus in *Shadow of the Colossus*.



Figure 2.6: The player misled, *Shadow of the Colossus*.





Figure 3.1: Gethse the dwarf admiring a landscape painting at an inn in *World of Warcraft*, 2008.

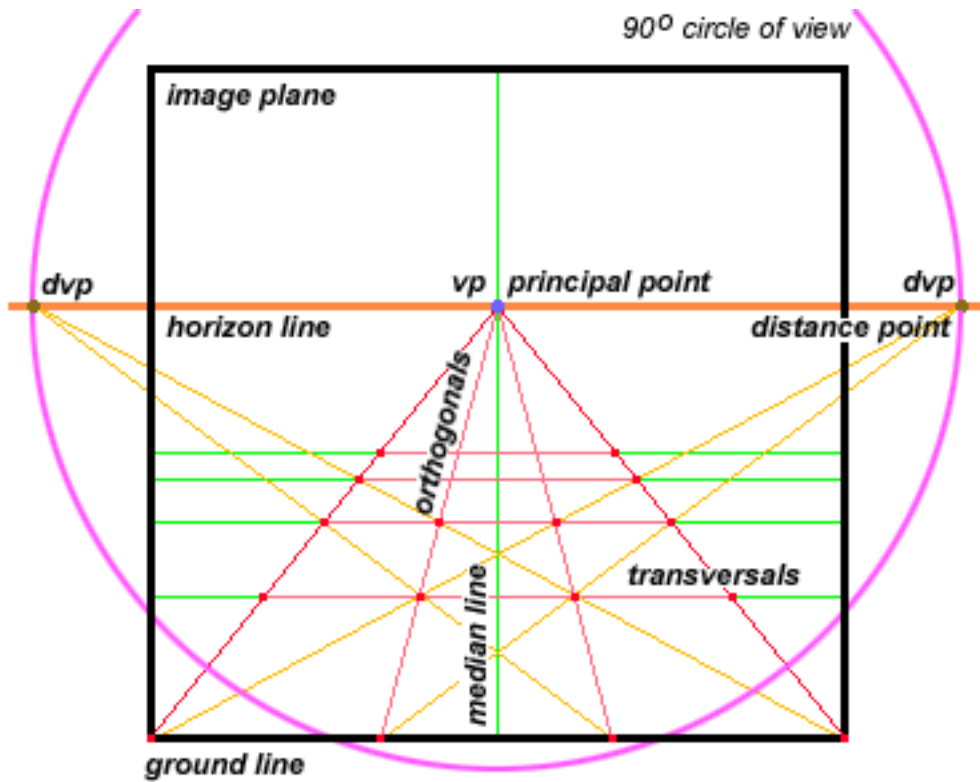


Figure 3.2: Illustration of linear perspective

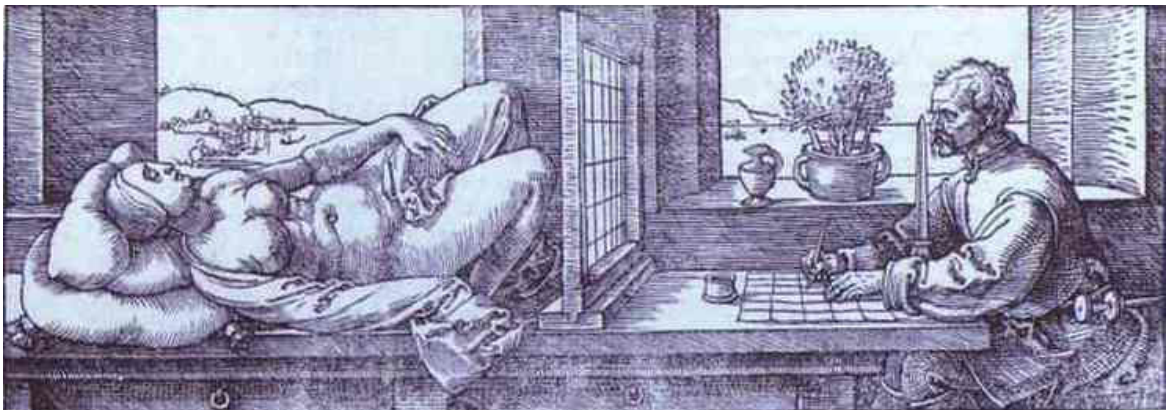


Figure 3.3: Albrecht Dürer, etching depicting the grid method for reproducing perspective, 1527.



Figure 3.4: Orryx and Girard in Stranglethorn Vale in *World of Warcraft*, 2007.





Figure 3.5: The village of Southshore, in *World of Warcraft*, during The Festival of Halloween's End.



Figure 3.6: The Sunken Temple of Atal'Hakkar in *World of Warcraft*.

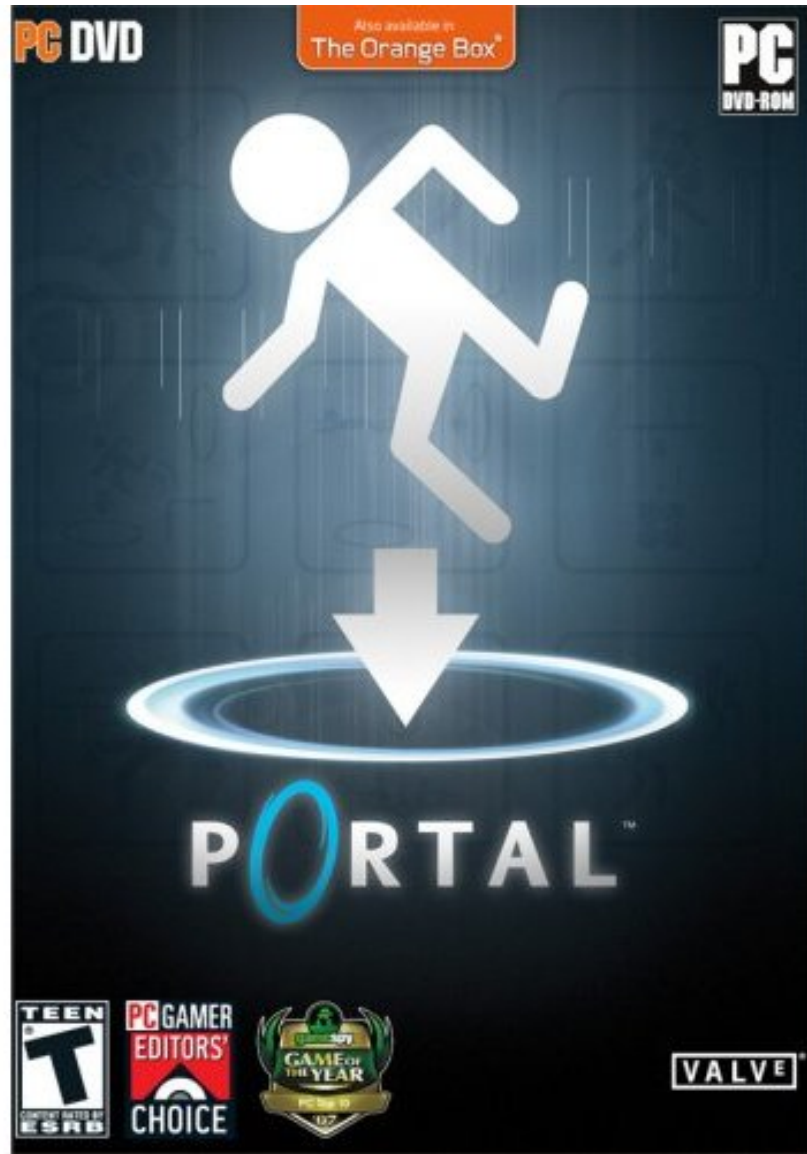


Figure 3.7: *Portal*, cover art.



3.8: *Portal*, introduction to level 13, displaying iconography.



Figure 3.9: *Portal*, orange and blue portals with portal gun.





Figure 3.10: *Portal*, portals in infinite regress.



Figure 3:11: *Portal*, the dirty underbelly of Aperture Science.



Figure 4.1: The cover art from *Bioshock*, depicting a Big Daddy and Little Sister.





Figure 4.2: A Little Sister from *Bioshock* brandishing her ADAM syringe.

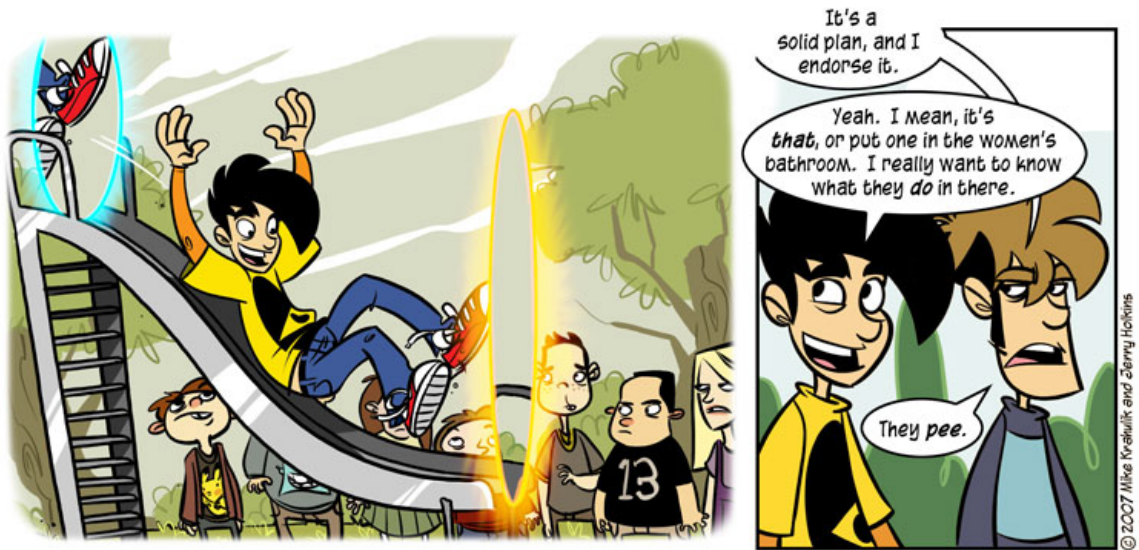


Figure 4.3: Penny Arcade comic, "Think of the Possibilities," October 2007.

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