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“Cutting the Master's Strings”:

Identity and Drama in the Simulated Spaces of Games.

Introduction

Systems, Units, Games, Play

Games have been called "the defining cultural form of the 21st Century", a claim that could be said to negate most, if not all, other media. Games comprise a billion dollar business and consumers are spending more and more time playing them, time-wise outpacing every other media except music, as it is almost ubiquitous today. Companies with backgrounds in other media are expanding their production into the gaming sector, showing the trust investors and producers place in the medium. As part of the entertainment segment, games are the most powerful economic force around: examples include the recent hit game *Grand Theft Auto 4* which in 24 hours grossed over 50% as much as the best selling *Harry Potter* book did in the same time. However, if we try to imagine what enormous capabilities games hold in a time where they are more commonly consumed than other media, the question of user/player identity and its formation becomes a key factor in understanding games. Many games are becoming more like simulations than rigidly ruled software for ”closed” and regulated play, harnessing the abilities of the medium to encourage replay and reflection on increasingly more representational simulation. This is not to say that all games are explicit simulations as such, but in their inherent dependence on the user responding in one way or another to the medium (which other media traditionally do not) games are powerful tools for

identity-making and identity-exploring. Choices, personalities and entire "worlds" to explore are literally at the fingertips of anyone daring to take the plunge.

As games have started to open doors into ourselves by means of the characters we play as, scholars and gamers alike have started to consider what separates these contemporary video/computer games from the ancestral sorts of card or board games and how we are supposed to deal with them and our new ones in critical ways. Early video games such as *Space Invaders* did little else than give the player conservative win/lose conditions hailing from the "traditional" game and putting him/her in the role of a spaceship defending against the alien horde in the unglorious low definition mantle of old. The narrative sub-plot was neither necessary or explicitly announced in other ways than in the game's title and as artwork on the sides of the arcade cabinet. These first video/computer games grew out of and adopted much of their terminology and ways of working internally from their classical counterparts while "needing" a basic setup that would involve the player; this is what would later be called "urgency". In the quest for urgency and necessary belief in the represented, identity and man-machine unity had to be created. Thus, the player became the spaceship, a McLuhanesque extension bringing peace to the galaxy by killing off the alien onslaught. Although the hegemony of most basic arcade games (which were the most commonly produced video games until the mid 80's, and arguably still hold much ground) was challenged by something entirely different as more "textual" or literary/narrative works showed up, the core ideas behind the first digital games have stuck with the game culture almost universally up until this day. What is now felt is more troublesome - games had been rapidly developed in an age of hyper-capitalism and had grown technologically so fast that critical reflection was lost along the way. Even as the technological restraints have been loosened, the core mechanics and ideas behind most games have shown little signs of modification in their design, staying true to their classical themes of point-gathering or just "being the best," making relatively few attempts at widening the medial possibilities. Serious research started appearing on the subject of video games in the late 90's, much

of which borrowed its thinking from the fields of literature or film studies. Janet Murray famously talked about her notion of cyberdrama which sparked the fire of modern game studies. Speculative and somewhat over-zealous, her concept of the "novel-generator" is now much less pre-dominant, although the theory still has a few followers. Games are not literature and are in turn not hypertext, and this is the main premise of the ludologist ideology, who made their formalist approach to games more or less standardized. The ludologist notion of game as action, not as reenactment stands true in the formalist sense which seems plausible for most games. However, as the medium is in dire need of new waypoints and goals to achieve, the deconstruction made through ludology, however appropriate it may have been some years back, needs to be put aside for more critical investigation. As Georgia Tech scholar Ian Bogost, writer of *Unit Operations* and *Persuasive Games*, has made clear, we should broaden our view of the role of games within the humanities:

> Instead of focusing on how games work, I suggest that we turn to what they do - how they inform, change, or otherwise participate in human activity[...] Such a comparative videogame criticism would focus principally on the expressive capacity of games and, true to its grounding in the humanities, would seek to understand what it means to be human. (Bogost 2006, 53)

In my research I will not delve into the ludologist-narratologist argument, as it holds little creative or useful value in this context. Instead I will use Bogost's notion of unit operations as my main method of disassembling a handful of games, and some in inspired mid-flight, such as Half-Life 2, Silent Hill 2 and Shadow of the Colossus. Unit operations are, in short, tiny elements in gameplay or in the "engine" running the greater system of the game structure. Ian Bogost, who founded the term, defines them as "modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems..." Bogost contends "that unit operations represent a shift away from system operations, although neither strategy is permanently detached from the other." (Bogost 2006, 3) The use of these terms make it easier to discuss and understand the effect of restrictions

and/or possibilities given in a certain game and in its spaces. These enable critical understanding of disassembled processes within the greater system of the game. It is not unlike the post-structuralist term "deconstruction," used by the ludologists, in the way that it scales "minor" details into view so they can be more closely examined and understood as asynchonous devices of meaning-making. Procedurality, or the chain of understanding linking these operations with user interaction, is a key concept. This concept is also intimately linked to chaos theory, defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "[T]he branch of mathematics that deals with complex systems whose behavior is highly sensitive to slight changes in conditions, so that small alterations can give rise to strikingly great consequences." Thus, the focus that I will maintain is one of unit operational (procedural) focus which means deconstructing the artifact and separating the patterns of interaction and rules from its representation. Rules in games, as such, are therefore extremely important. Their role is to halt discourses within the system of the game so there cannot be "wrong-doing": it is the legislative nature of the game's world, one that ultimately shackles the simulative nature and possibilities within game worlds. One cannot transcend the game's rules because they are what is "allowed": what is allowed is an extension of what defines its genre. The rules are also ways of making the burden easier for the developers of the game, since it erases the percieved unnecessities from the final product, ultimately instilling a rhetoric of order-taking and little identity-making. What is interesting about the rules of a game is that they most certainly imply a bias or subjectivity, in turn mostly masked within the game world as mere happenstance. Of course there are still rules that apply to a simulation: after all, a simulation is a set of rules, which may or may not be dynamically altered. "True" interactive drama arises from the play or curiosity the player applies through his interactions; thus the player is given more agency and power will also corrupt the contemporary notion of film-as-game and become evolved.

Simulation as has been traditionally seen in gaming has been restricted to either academic fancies of certain games, or more likely for the average player, in physics/vehicle-based games. Simulation, in

this essay, connotes the long-livedness and lasting effect of an action or event, an approach that is clear in its world-making by applying rules to objects, and less obliged to add classic narrative structures to them. As such, the paradigm of "games" needs to be looked upon once again, but in the light of an open game system: one must dispossess the magically forced "narrative" qualities forcing it to retreat to its win-lose conditionality, such as was the nature of the historical, earlier games. Identities are made from first-hand experiences and are made through choices. Choices as such are relegated to the few that gameplay as a term permit, and those that are constructed by the game makers. I propose there is an increasing divide encountered between the medium's agent and simulative nature as opposed to the feeling of games being little else than (un-)interactive fiction, more and more riddled with urgency instead of agency: although it seems one is Marcus Fenix when playing Gears of War, one is really nothing but a pre-recording of the game's rules set into a cinematic frame. The player is less player, and transforms into a mere playback device. Contemporary conceptions of multi-threaded narrative structures and such are more of mirages, half-way bricolage than future-proof solutions. The difference between agency and urgency becomes all the more clear when considering the heavy cinematic influence on games, and when taking special note of the very much linear pre-determinedness of these and many other titles. In ways, this essay is an anti-thesis presented to the normalized cinematic ideal of contemporary game design. The audience is apparently ready for this "revolution", which is not even that very new; one may think of open-ended games such as *The Sims*, *World of Warcraft* or the much deeper roleplaying experiences provided by, for example, *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*, all of which are critical and consumer success stories. The essay's name comes from this notion of having to follow narrative or game-play dictated rules in many, if not most, games. My goal is to find examples of key criteria in *Oblivion*, *Assassin's Creed* and a number of other titles, illustrating traces of what might be a richer (in experience and agency) game world simulation. I have divided the essay into the primary sections, which I call Body and Mind respectively. The Body section deals with the physical and embodied aspects, while the Mind section takes up immaterial notions, such as

choices, social context and time.

Body - Movement, Embodiment

The Postmodern Space in Assassin's Creed

Long-time game theorist Henry Jenkins has already made us aware of the importance of space in games: "...I have made the case that game consoles should be regarded as machines for generating compelling spaces [...] and that the core narratives behind many games center around the struggle to explore, map, and master contested spaces." (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan 2004, 122) While most games are bound to abstract notions of spatial representation (*Tetris* and *Pong* for example) more and more games have pursued the goal of verisimilitude and representational spaces of increasingly photorealistic qualities. In the infancy of this attempt, three-dimensional space has been used as a technical feat more than it has evolved in ways that invite heightened player agency. Especially in this era of "film-as-game" this has been obvious; games like *Gears of War* and *Army of Two*, although highly detailed in their graphics, provide very few if no options of spatial exploration to the player. One might counter-argue this by saying that these games are action games, connoting their reliance on linear progression as a means to deliver action-packed experiences in the general timing provided by the script. This might be a completely plausible reason for structuring this particular kind of game in that way, but there are reasons why both developers and consumers are desperate for change. Action games are often high priority, key titles developers want to turn into cash cows and are expensive to make, taking considerable time to develop. At the same time, the consumer feels cheated for having to play no more than a handful hours to see the end titles. Thus far the answer has been one borrowed from 70's and 80's cinema: make a sequel. The sequel is often only tweaked in its core rules, clinging to its earlier cinematic presentation for sell value and for the first time, the consumer feels happy to have spent a reasonable amount of time in the game's universe. He has still been charged full price for two games, which inevitably conjures up problems

for game developers. The action game has become the epithet of the early high definition era: visually spectacular, low agency games with a stable multiplayer component (one of the most expansive segments of game development today). In the end, the consumer has bought into the rollercoaster ride of the "film experience" less than he has been taking part of a game. While the business side of this may not the primary issue in my research, there is still a need to understand the many sides of an issue that could remake most of gaming as it stands today.

"When game designers draw story elements from existing film or literary genres," Jenkins continues, "they are most apt to tap those genres - fantasy, adventure, science fiction, horror, war - which are most invested in world-making and spatial storytelling." (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan 2004, 122) Clearly, many of the digital medium's hardships surface rapidly in spaces we normally perceive as being "free" spaces, environments where physical movement is understood as a criteria for its being at all, such as cityscapes where mobility is a necessity in its ontological dynamics. In these "short" high-budget games narrative, choices and gameplay have been balanced to the rules of the film-goers handbook: give them everything and chunk it in sizeable portions, thus neglecting the spatial and dramatic qualities of the digital world that breeds it. When these milieux are trampled and transformed to nothing more than numb traversals between pre-made experiences or "happenings" they become something completely different: a second-rate, handicapped version of a simulative possibility-space. Spatiality in games is important in the sense that it both informs us of its rule-structure but also of the ways in which these can be broken, and are therefore very potent elements unlocking the full breadth of the game.

Assassin's Creed challenges popular convention by setting up one important overarching goal: the freedom of movement according to rules of high/low profile actions. The game is set in the 1190's, in the middle of the King Richard crusades of Palestine where the player's role, as an assassin fallen in grace, is to assassinate the enemies of your Brotherhood who happen to be King Richard and some of his loyals. As the theme is obviously in the range of most other free-roaming action/stealth

games Ubi Soft has differed relatively little from the traditional discourse of the genre; the player must kill his target enemies, must take part of the linear plot and finally, must have completed all objectives to get to the ending sequences. However, where *Assassin's Creed* takes some departure from standards is in its ways of introducing procedural logics into the game. While the goals of the game as such remain anchored in linear storytelling, most of the player's time (and most of the optional gameplay content) is based around moving through the spaces of Jerusalem, Acre, Damascus and the small town of Masyaf. In moving about, the player explores, collects tokens and rides his horse from city to city as needed or desired. The idea is that one should, just like in moving through physical spaces in real life, build a mapped logic of the city's spatiality ("escape plans" one might call them in this particular game) to use that knowledge against one's enemies when something goes bad. After having successfully assassinated a target, one must lose all pursuers (enemy guards and malign throngs of bystanders, beggars and lepers) by navigating through the city and using space as a weapon: hiding in buildings, knocking near-by items over to hinder pursuers or killing some of them off if needed to continue unseen.

Emergence as a concept is not fully explored in the game as it is far more concerned with the navigation through space and the freedom of movement and sense of agency. There is no engagement in extended contacts with anyone save for a few key characters that push the narrative further. In the greater view, *Assassin's Creed* also makes use of some of the principles outlined by Structuralist and Situationist thinkers, devoiding the city of its panoptic function as the overarching layout of the streets become obstacles to hinder - not to permanently stop or cease action within them. They transform from forbidden structures to becoming real, plain; they are made possible to encounter and win over. When entering a city for the first few times, in what might be called the mapping phase, one is drifting through the cityscape; the ”derivé” of the Situationists. Writing about the flaneur, Ian Bogost notes; "As a figure in transition across an anonymous urban expanse, the flaneur's role is fundamentally a configurative one. His passage through the city constantly opens up new paths, new glances at passersby, new storefronts and sidewalks, just as it closes down others."

(Bogost 2006, 75) The flaneur is the guise of the citizen that negates the cityscape by not using the architecture of it in the way it is supposed to, being a voyeur of the city's logic and local happenings. In ways, *Assassin's Creed* remediates the chase scenes of thrillers or action movies in its foundation on killing certain people and fleeing afterwards, counting for a significant part of the game experience, also making the player need to remember the cityscape. While the game does not forbid the player to act sloppily or to just go ahead and kill targets brutally and carelessly, the rhetoric of the game definitely invites players to use surroundings and to understand the local events to prepare and execute the killing in an elegant and perfectly executed manner. While this is not a theatre piece or a movie, there is most certainly interactive drama in these high-pressure situations, much of which is born out of the AIs important role. Bystanders will not just be there waiting for the guards to arrive after a murder but instead become dynamic parts of the crowd that reacts in a multitude of ways depending on the conditions at hand. The player's relations to the city's people can be harnessed to one's advantage by killing members of the Crusade or helping people that are harrassed by mobs. If being chased, the player's new comrades can be seen blocking of streets or pushing away pursuers independently of what the player is doing at the moment, never needing to overtly command them (and turning it into a strategy game). On the other hand, clumsiness and odd behavior might make bystanders wary of you, passively spectating or even taking to violence against you in chase situations.

Another highly aware choice is how the physical controls and the usage of its buttons, corresponding to two entirely different sets of arbitrary functions, are changed by the press of a button. Except for the simple reason that it would be impossible to map all controls onto one button set, this design makes the player physically aware of the change of settings. As the masses of people surrounding the player are dynamic and interchanging obstacles the need to navigate in a fashionable manner becomes a core gameplay concept and the reflexive varying between control schemes becomes integral to the gameplay. The game's theme is based on "parkour", a sport of navigation hailing from France, and is being actively imitated in other games. Digital Illusions, the

company behind the *Battlefield* franchise, are working on *Mirror's Edge*, a game that deals with movement through contemporary city spaces in an action setting. This is also a example of the forced dramatization that companies seem to find necessary - *Assassin's Creed* makes most of its gameplay out of non-violent or passive navigation - the very act of it: the guards do of course function as guards, but the navigational gaming has relatively little to do with active encounters and dealing with enemies per se. Making the player want to visit the places in the digital world becomes something very different from wanting them to see more of a pre-constructed authorial story, but as Henry Jenkins writes:

> Spatial stories are not badly constructed stories; rather they are stories that respond to alternative aesthetic principles, privileging spatial exploration over plot development. Spatial stories are held together by broadly defined goals and conflicts and pushed forward by the character's movement across the map. (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan 2004, 124)

The drama and excitement of *Assassin's Creed* is most certainly not in the story overlaying the rules, but in its dependence on the player "living" the game. As an entertainment experience *Assassin's Creed* goes to some interesting and perhaps new lengths in how to apply more "realism" or natural difficulty for the experienced gamer while still unifying gameplay and representation. Instead of relying on simple math tables increasing enemy health or such, one may remove elements of the HUD (Heads-up-display) erasing some of the handicaps gained through game mechanics, like a radar and various indicators. This is not unfamiliar in racing games, but in *Assassin's Creed* the experience of discovery and mental cartography becomes much more direct since one cannot rely on the external help provided by the interface.

Returning to the troubles of film-as-game: The problem lies primarily in the dissonance between player and player-character; conflicting interests arise entirely naturally from that. Calling this type of interaction *steering,* Nick Montfort addresses this dissonance:

> Perhaps it is interesting to say that the interactor steers the player character [...] To think of the interactor as steering, rather than playing, suggests that the player character is a sort of vehicle from which a world can be seen and otherwise experienced, and that this character both constrains us (we have to remain in the vehicle) and also opens up possibilities (we can use this vehicle to get around and even to effect changes in the world). (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan 2007, 140)

Hideo Kojima, producer and director of the *Metal Gear Solid* games, has consistently resorted to story-telling through cut scenes. The *MGS* series is a rather good example of where many would see this problem of identityloss: playing the game, one enacts a certain scheme of procedure, working with the game mechanics to conquer the difficulties of the game (the gameplay or *ludus*). As one makes progress and starts to hit triggers within the storyline, cinematics or forced CODEC (a sort of radio) conversations start playing, directly erasing whatever own experiences or thoughts the user has forged into the game. While still being high in production values, this easily makes the game seem like two very different pieces haphazardly glued together. The need for a backstory or narrative framework to effectively apply game rules to becomes a morbid need when two extremely disparate, and in their own ways, important parts collide. This notion faces the same conflict as film did with literature: it uses the former medium's techniques to express the latter medium's story. In the case of film, this was apparent in its early dependency on intertitles. Games like *Silent Hill 2* and *Ico* have been loved and praised by critics for years, and are on the surface similar to many other linear narrative games but still make a much more powerful impact on their players; but one may consider why this is true in these cases. I believe much of the immersive characteristics rise from their protagonist's silence (no "forced" ideology as opposed to *MGS*) and the absorbing, moody environments that they have adopted as settings. There are many environmental clues that unlock our understanding of the happenings in-game, deepening the experience of personal discovery: in *Silent Hill 2* this is seen in-between plot understanding and information gained from hidden artifacts, and also in the violence constantly surrounding the game, finally putting the

player's fear and the protagonist's anxiety very close to each other. *Ico* uses gibberish language in the few cases that anything is spoken and instead depends on an escalating relationship with a girl called Yorda that the player must rescue early in the game. Few technical means are used to force the experience onto the player (not even using much music), leaning mostly on the isolated environments of the great castle (the game's setting) and an intricate relation between player and NPC. Ico and Yorda are the prey of ghosts seeping into almost every room, further tightening the bond and tension between the player and Yorda when momentary separation is key to survival, making gameplay exciting and dependant on the emotional ties for progression. The spiritual sequel to *Ico*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, uses vast terrains and long travel distances to achieve something nearing meditation: the player is subject to expectation, fear or even guilt, needing to kill sixteen gigantic creatures that roam the land only to gain a faint chance at reincarnating the character's loved one. The storyline becomes second nature: the focus is never on the narrative but in the game's centering on the brutal, epic deaths that seem barbaric in an atmosphere reeking of beauty. As opposed to *Silent Hill*, where violence becomes glorified - which indeed has consequences for both narrative and gameplay - by means of the milieux where violence is dealt (starting as vengeful, ending as illusionless), *Shadow of the Colossus* becomes a lamenting remorse for the beasts, sacrificially dying for a price that may not be equivalent to its reward. While spatial storytelling is a a subject within game critique, the analysis is still much more of a cinematic understanding (room-as-passage), and one must consider that these three games are very much the exception in the game industry. These games have made successful claims not on storytelling as such, as a way of passively representing something - ultimately being the anti-gaming storytelling: film - but in their spaces and the player's relationship to them. Time can be problematic as Jesper Juul experiences with ”dead time – when you have to perform unchallenging activities for the sake of a higher goal.” (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan 2004, 138) Using the example of two popular MMO games, Juul claims ”you must spend hours or days doing mundane tasks such as walking, waiting for monsters to respawn, or even fishing or chopping wood. It makes perfect sense within the context of the game

but it is a dull experience [...]" In fact, I would argue that (dead) time, although not very fun, is a powerful piece of spatial gameplay if used right. Of course it is of utmost importance to provide the player with a character and an environment worth discovering and playing in, but it is in the exploration much of this lies. By empowering the gamer these situations would become more important; dead time meaning the triviality of the gameplay more than the action represented. In single-player environments this is subdued by pure concentration of gameplay (lacking from MMO's that crave very large investments of time), and in the case of *Assassin's Creed*, dead time is only just that if one does not understand the game's reliance on planning and waiting.

If we would think of the general player-player character split as "steering" it might work to accept current ideas on these issues and the games on the market. The problem is that we should not be that willing to do so: Steering one's character is probably the least immersive or agent experience if you add simulative features to a game. *Half-Life 2* never makes any attempts at all to engage in simulation other than in its physics, and it is hyper-aware of its nature and becomes engaging because it is a form of meta-game in itself. Writing about not being the active I within the game, Montfort sees the problems of having a character-as-vessel within the game: "The main deficiency of seeing the player character as steerable is that it does not highlight this vehicle's nature as a character - as an anthropomorphic, meaningful actor. The simple "man" or "ship" of early arcade games is also steerable, after all." (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan 2007, 141) He goes on to discuss what the user sees/takes part of as the steered vehicle, while I emphasize the meaningfulness of the actual movement as a way of working against rule-systems and keeping the procedural possibility-space open. Simon Penny writes on Pierre Bordieu and the body copying mental subordination:

> One quality common to sports training, martial arts training and military training is anti-intellectuality. Whether an activity is introduced verbally or methodically or is instilled by discipline and repetition, it is universally acknowledged by both teacher and (successful) student that the training is

> only really effective when it becomes automatic, reflex. It becomes not conscious. (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan 2004, 74)

As one moves through the narrative game one is partaking in just the same "jedi mind trick" to use a pop culture reference. A procedural game environment is an opposite of this: a highly intellectual, although not discriminating space for gameplay. It makes the user conscious of the system as a whole, and uses the unit operations to strengthen the sense of agency and place in the world. The user becomes important as a technical manipulator, an equal and is distanced from the metaphorical "reading" and takes part, instead, in the procedural "acting" of story and content. Police action game *SWAT 4* managed to make more varied use of the gameplay by mapping out multiple spots where hostiles and hostages could be placed during missions, meaning the player had to be careful in any given play session. This method is in no way hard to implement but instead requires more time to create spaces that are engaging (so it will not seem inconsistent with character placement), something the game did receive positive criticism for. Focus is shifted from place to space: the pre-construction of the Event is eliminated, instead emphasizing the overall quality of the representative space for non-linear interactions.

With the exception of merely narrative connotations and issues raised by the filmic "revolution" in games, the very fact that they restrict motion is problematic. The spaces one moves through in most games, which Jenkins does not address, are uninteractive and uninspiring for further investigation. Point-and-click games of old were made for discovery and testing solutions, but most modern games striving for verisimilitude are million-dollar productions with years of development invested: they *should be* interactive and inspiring, but are most often not. A kind of tunnel-vision is at work, incorporating the strictly forward-moving elements of game progression into the spatial storytelling, while games like *Assassin's Creed* are starting to move towards a usage value of the assets the game makers create, ultimately enhancing replayability and pleasing more customers. Contemporary blockbuster games like *Gears of War* and *Army of Two* are good examples of conservative game-

making, taking enormous resources to create, but only a few hours to complete and giving little meaningful replay value. They will be games remembered for their few memorable constructed moments while procedural games will always be remembered for what one has done, on own terms, inside them.

Mind - Cognition, Choice

Re-Defining Simulation and Decision-Making in Oblivion

What separates life from narrative media is arguably media's reliance on choices, either moral or otherwise significant ones as compared to the numerous sometimes seemingly irrelevant choices one needs to make continuously in real life. All narrative media are basically systems for delivering a certain number of key facts or details during certain intervals. Media form and narrative system unify, make a gateway for storytelling: the form of the novel is one example, the conventions of a classical thriller is another. Unmistakably the fact that digital games can/could offer other solutions and other "readings" of any given artifact has become one deeply engraved in contemporary culture. So far, in fact, that we have been fooled by a very potent simulacra which we easily could have avoided: while "aware" of its open potentials, the standardized approach of packaging interactions within a shell of narrative enclose and bias the possibility spaces within games. Although the Aristotelian dramatic model has proven worthwhile in, for example, film, it has been applied to the medium of games quite a few times - always failing in the end. Even if the interest as a theoretical problem has been mostly dealt with within academia, the impact of film on games is significant, a medium which is representative of classical dramatic models. Game designers have in varying degrees tried to incorporate the player as a "writing device" unto the screen, instead of relegating him/her to the plain meaning-making and deciphering of preprogrammed events. While the word "game" might be indicative of many such things, it is losing value in many environments, as in *Assassin's Creed* or *World of Warcraft*. They have other functions that may or may not be apparent

at first glance, such as having issues of freedom of movement, communication and correspondence between game rules and the metagame understanding. A game such as Bejeweled might have great worth in being seen as a game (Janet Murray might have learned that after her analysis of *Tetris*) which is in line with the thinking of Eskelinen and others, but these people are in turn avoiding the spatial connotations and identity aspects of games. Open rule systems may be the best way to find a way into our identities. In a strange turn of events, the idea of identity, seen as the assemblage of numerous traits and ideals from a greater whole of unlimited choices, becomes an overly obvious picture of a normal Western person today - perhaps most truthful when seen as part of an undeniable rule-base: the game. As games make rules and operations of actions, and therefore also thoughts, they remind us of the collage of personalities and traits we must possess on a daily basis just to exist in society at all. Postmodern life is thus most apparent when seen in the frame of a screen, for it externalizes the core routines of our human actions and personality-play onto an Other. As we perceive other bodies, yet not our own, the avatar's place in space is much easier to comprehend and project upon. The life of the avatar is the meta-reality of Self.

Formally, a game is little more than a set of rules and the question of what to enable and what to disable for its players has been around since day one. Game creation through feature reduction is the minimalistic and likely most efficient way to ship a game in time according to most publishers. This has become rule in a climate where linear gameplay is law, and flexible structures demand new thinking that is currently undesirable. As such, procedural generation is a rather new "discipline" and takes significant time in programming, but may reduce much of the workload from the asset creators, all depending on what kind of generation is coded. Writing on the promises of procedural narratives Warren Spector, the master designer known from *Deus Ex* and *Thief*, has inserted the famous roleplaying archetype of the game master into this same equation:

> The simple truth is that you can't get a well-constructed plot through emergence - not yet, anyway, maybe never. Good stories are constructed, not

> found. Personally meaningful stories, sure, but good stories with universal significance? That requires an author. The virtual game master, like a real, human game master in a face-to-face roleplaying experience, can really do some good here. (Spector 2007)

By using the archetype of the universal gamemaster to strengthen his argument Spector avoids answering the question of necessarily preprogrammed events, such that would determine actions before-hand. Even the ”virtual game master” would be no more than a set of intricate rules, and the challenge would be in making this character/force/system a naturalized piece of the game. If we would think back on Jenkins' notion of spatial storytelling as "respond[ing] to alternative aesthetic principles, privileging spatial exploration over plot development" (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan, 124) we could negate the question as it stands right now, instead relying on entirely different criteria for game narratives. Letting the spaces of the game be more important than the context (the current, primary focus) might be the most suitable answer. *Dungeons and Dragons*, the primeval roleplaying game, made its way into video games in a macabre form: storytelling and rules were present but they were in perfect asymmetry. Instead of focusing on storytelling and the dramatic enactment of gameplay itself, which was judged in the background by the massive rule books, the most common parts of the rule books became the game itself. Descending from the free-form, although rule-based, setup of table-top roleplaying games it could be argued that what is mediated primarily in its computer-based equivalents is the basic dungeon-bashing style of roleplaying more than the free-form storytelling that was/is the main attraction of roleplaying. By virtue of this historical background, the free-form on-the-fly drama of true roleplaying or Boalian theater is much more open for interpretation and interaction and a more suitable candidate for future storytelling technologies. Aristotelian and contemporary "drama" of games are strictly predetermined in their narrative arc: In the modern game one is thus less actor than spectator of events unlocked. While games are not theater as such, the environments of for example *Assassin's Creed* could be said to be a metaphorical stage for events unfolding (although always within range of the game's

possibilities). Introducing new ways of thinking about theater, Gonzalo Frasca writes about Augusto Boals "theatre of the oppressed":

> Unlike traditional theater that offers just one complete, closed sequence of actions, Forum Theater sessions show multiple perspectives on a particular problem. They do not show ”what happened” but rather ”what could happen.” It is a theater that stresses the possibility of change, at both social and personal levels. (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan 2004, 89)

Here we can find traces of a replayable, non-finished setting for enacting procedural choices. In looking at simulation-spaces in this way, non-linear acting is encouraged, enhancing player agency and identity-making. Currently, paper-thin characters are obviously deemed necessary to be possible to project upon as a player, but procedural generation would be immensely better in character generation and unit operations providing clearer self-reflection would be advised from the developer side. In his *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud writes that ”by stripping down an image to its essential ”meaning”, an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't” (30) and ”the more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe.” (31) Justin Marks has made a bitter remark on the topic of "thin" characters in games:

> Ready for some heresy? As great a game as *Halo* is, and as much as it deserves to be a true benchmark for this industry's success, when you take away the awesome gameplay and reduce it to character and story, we've really seen it before. Don't start screaming on the message boards yet. Take a long, hard look, because this is true of a lot of popular games out there. On a story level, they often take place in familiar worlds and lack the character work (read: compelling enough to make a movie star want to be in the movie) that would elevate them above the level of a good genre film. (Marks 2008)

Taking on the role of a pre-made ”broad” identity has arguably been done before, and is valuable

for allowing people to believe in the actions of the character. However, this might also be best left in the sphere of narrative media, as it has little effect in a directly interactive medium such as games. In Ico, where the protagonist was almost completely silent, it was not the character's ”broadness” that was the most captivating part, but the interplay of Ico and Yorda's bond and the fact that the player was (almost) never separated from control of the game.

One of the most powerful exercises in decision-making in games today is *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, which happens to let you create your own unique character and let it grow its own talents and background, reducing the baggage of pre-made (incompatible) identity. Moving from archetypes to dynamic actors or player characters will be troublesome for contemporary narrative writers, but is entirely possible when revising the existing norms. As criteria is changed, our perception of what makes a game character may also.

In the 17th Century philosopher John Locke reintroduced the concept of Tabula Rasa or "the blank slate", connoting the new born child's total blankness, to be self-inscribed with information as it grows up and lives its life. Tabula Rasa is a core concept and gameplay mechanic in *Oblivion* enabling a diverse palette of character traits, well suited to the style of its player. *Oblivion*, and as other games such as *Call of Duty 4*, show the necessity of applying oneself to the Tabula Rasa of the polygon model; crucial in gaming, especially inside procedural environments. By constructing a framework for the game and adding content and procedural elements to the world of the game, more unexpected behavior and freedom of movement can be created for the user to participate in. But why has this not been tried on a broader scale yet? In his *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost finds a common deficiency and uses an old game by Chris Crawford as an example; "...tighter *symbolic coupling* (author's italics) between user actions and procedural representations. *Balance of the Planet* offers a terrifically sophisticated procedural model of global ecology, but its coupling of user action to the game's causal model is weak, reducing both empathic and dialectic engagement." (Bogost 2007, 42) If the developer is trying to instill sympathy or a scheme of belief (becoming "play") into the game, simple menus will not suffice. *Oblivion* uses the tried setting of a medieval-

fantasy land where the player spend most of his time venturing on missions or quests for the benefit of others, earning loot and occassional rewards for himself. As the land of Cyrodiil is vast and full of things to see and hidden tombs to discover, the map becomes the most crucial tool in the game, not only for embarking on the planned quests, but in truly experiencing the feeling of discovery and in the unplanned event-making. Here is where Aristotelian drama fails entirely: the digital drama becomes something you do and not something you are told or being shown. In fact, the word "drama" just like the word "game" may be too shallow to entirely hold all the connotations of these new games. As AI technology is still not powerful enough to simulate people in all possible ways, Bethesda have instead relied on branching dialogue and quite believable movement and use of spaces for these NPCs. The symbolic coupling becomes ever the stronger when singular elements, such as perspective (first-person), character memory and the unplanned (resultful; agent) venturing are united. Cartography and discovery is key to understanding *Oblivion*.

Oblivion does not hold on to any traditional kind of class system as abilities (except some very basic inheritances) grow as they are acted out in the game. Thus even a swordsman could be a notorious archer if one just fires a bow enough. While this may not sound intriguing, this system is not found in many RPGs. Instead class dictates almost everything, hindering all progress not steeped in the class-defined mold. Choices in *Oblivion* are of a significantly deeper kind than what is normally seen in computer RPG's. If one would be careless, a main character of the game could be killed and stay permanently dead, making all further quest progress impossible in that direction. Nothing is stopping the player from going ahead with such grave actions. Most interestingly, *Oblivion* manages to make choices seem natural or even as invisible, instead of just being poorly disguised story-triggers. *Oblivion* is somewhat procedural in its generation of story, in that the pattern of quests one accepts is defined by earlier choices and other factors. However, there are still quest lines that could be further reduced by means of consequence, so the game never goes the whole mile in its procedural story-making. The game does not operationalize all aspects of all interactions; time does not have a role in dialogues as it has in *Fahrenheit* where one only has a

certain amount of time to make dialogue choices. Its main accomplishment is in proceduralizing the enacting of missions and their undertaking in the sense of being multi-linear branches of choices and accounting for travel time as a concrete gameplay piece (you must travel between locations that might be far away, but there is an option to auto-travel which still "costs" in-game time). Auto-travel is a good choice for the impatient gamer, but is as strong a device as travelling in *Shadow of the Colossus*. Since the map is empty in the beginning, and one only can auto-travel to visited places, one must tread the land.

Rules could be said to have moral implications in some situations. As much as morals have been tried in many games, there is often a great divide between two choices, seldom integrating a flexible grey area of choice and consequence. One game that made an aftershock in moral statements was *Deus Ex*:

> *Deus Ex* mounts a procedural rhetoric of moral uncertainty. Far from simplistic relativism, the game makes a claim about the inherent complexitiy in ethical decision making. Whereas player gestures in *Knights of the Old Republic* or *Black and White* always map directly to moral values, such gestures in *Deus Ex* participate in a broader process of contemplation and reconciliation. Yet, despite its sophistication, the game still does not make a direct claim about a proper moral compass. (Bogost 2007, 286)

The game moves into a territory where it can deny choice as universal (mapped), instead making the player's thought processes take part of a choice structure that is variable. The outcomes of one's actions change from what was first expected, stripping the player of rationalist logics and reminding them of the changing values of even the simplest choices. Another common way of inserting some form of predeterminedness into the player character is in the disabling of choices (rules), or conversly, in making choices/rules very obvious. Most games "form" choices and have systematic gameplay logics determining rules and values. For example in most military games one may not kill

any own soldiers - in *Call of Duty 4* one is punished by instant failure if doing so. Two other interesting examples are *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* and *Call of Juarez*. In *Zelda* an economic rule base with both gameplay and moral implications will not allow the player to own more than 500 rupees (the game's currency). A message plainly stating "You cannot carry any more rupees. You put the rupees back" is displayed if trying to work against the rule/logic/moral. The moral is embedded in a physical issue: the player has no place to put the extra money. A moral issue is raised in the *Call of Juarez* where you play interchangably as a priest or a young man whose stories are interwoven in the setting of the Wild West. Although it is okay, even as a priest of the cloth, to brutally slaughter any and all opposing bandits and cowboys, one simply cannot take a sip of alcohol even if they are liberally dispersed on the game's levels. Likewise, it is impossible to drink with the young boy. The game simply denies the player, via a message, to drink alcohol. By erasing possibilities that are still represented (and simply not non-existant), a logic of predetermined or manufactured behavior is unravelled. If you could drink, your actions would probably be diminished by the effect of the alcohol, but in removing the option itself the developers are making a claim of non-drinking, although it may be masked in other reasons. One could be that it was developed in Catholic Poland, for example. In both *Deus Ex* and the *Metal Gear Solid* games, use of alcohol, medication and tobacco gives the player a slight edge in some specific way but gives heavy damage on vision, stamina or such, becoming a specific-use "power up" and not any general consumable. There is often a penalty for the usage, but it is nevertheless allowed. Of course these are also statements made through gameplay rules, although more liberal ones.

The greatest medial difference between film and game might be in the factor of choice where time is a central issue in negotiating gameplay and choice value. The death of one very central contemporary gameplay concept, film-as-game, was paradoxically introduced already before it began. In *Half-Life*, which famously never used any cinematics or cut scenes, (which was also true of its sequel *Half-Life 2*) the player takes part of a sci-fi story but is never separated from it: there

are no external views of the player character or moments where the player is not in control. Gordon Freeman, the protagonist of *Half-Life*, never says a word during his journeys and is indeed a seemingly perfect vessel for the game narrative. For connoisseurs of the game universe the issues of identity and Gordon's role within it have been questioned many times over the last decade, and quite truly, his role seems to be vaguely superhuman, appearing to be a man transcending time and space to always be where it matters. In the words of the G-Man, seemingly responsible for Gordon's being, "The right man in the wrong place can make all the difference in the world. So wake up Mr. Freeman, wake up, and smell the ashes." (*Half-Life 2*, introductory sequence) Seconds after this sequence the player finds himself on a train to the brutally policed City 17, a city renamed to a numeral complete with Soviet style architecture and ominous displays of the "Administrator". There is never really any explanation exactly why Gordon is summoned and people around do not recall him/the player getting aboard that particular train. Hidden already in these first seconds one can see just why *Half-Life 2* makes such a powerful argument of playable versus narrative storytelling. The game as such is completely composed of linear progression but Gordon's role, while not fully explained, becomes part of the player's identity. No cinematics cut off the playing that would threaten to ruin the paper-thin veil around the character of Gordon Freeman, and one can even throw cans at key characters while in dialogues instead of being the bystander-of-story. As the game uses extensive scripting to always make the player feel empowered or "in the right place, at the right time" it is nearing a meta-reflexive state, when these moments are unveiled to the player. Later, Gordon becomes a resistance leader, (never really taking part in the "choice" as such - he does not say anything) finally leading the city's people to some sort of temporary victory. Gordon is banished from this Moment by the G-Man in the end, his disappearance from the screen being his "un-existance", promising Gordon/the Player to return to his calling in due time. The fact that one is constantly reminded of one's importance as a metaphorical playback device and in turn, however much time one has played the game, the player's actions (if one survives, quite honestly the only way in which one can ever fail in most games) are always happening *in the right time*. Being

wrong, or out of time, is seldom a possibility in games other than the simplest arcade games or in ones where scripted sequences require that timing. In short, *Half-Life 2* becomes a meta-game criticism of what its competitors have become: experiences that invite you to participate and create a story but never manage to deliver anything other than a pre-made one, thus failing their promise.

Subtexts are perhaps the most crucial part in the social constructionism view of how games are part of, and affect, regular life. Games like *Grand Theft Auto* become strong windows into contemporary society, much thanks to its cynical remarks and reappropriations of media and real life. Strong opinion is always around and being loudly voiced about *GTA* and others, but what is forgotten is how the rules of these games make statements not only of what is undesirable behavior but also where society stands overall by creating a procedural rule system that deconstructs a larger pattern, such as society. Irony is an effective tool for encasing these rules as *Grand Theft Auto* has proved. Theoretically *Grand Theft Auto* opens up worlds of possibilities in its city representation, but as Bogost has already claimed, writing on the inherent problems of actions of non-violence in *GTA* and using an example of machinima that reappropriates the rules of the game;

> *My Trip to Liberty City* could be held up as an example of how the player can reject the game's violent themes, but this would be a mischaracterization. Even though Munroe chooses not to exact any violence by his own hand, his entire experience flows from his choices in relation to both peace and violence. Those who argue that one can "do anything" in Liberty City are mistaken: the game constantly structures freeform experience in relation to criminality. *GTA* crafts the game experience in terms of a set of relations between possible actions and their consequences; in the gap between these decisions, simulation fever reigns. This is where the player must frame his next action in relation to a web of motivations, fears, and preconceptions, both within and without the game. (Bogost 2006,

157)

What is clearly pointed out is the game's inability to simulate "narratives" or events that are not already made to actually be in the game: the rules in the game mark out the bouys that mark the limits of this particular system. They work accordingly when the player wants to be a city gangster, but fail when the player identity does something else. Although the cutting and editing of scenery and certain animations could be said to imply and build "new" events as they could have been seen, they are never actually there other than insinuated, making Munroe's experiment in the wider meaning a failure in the sense of expanding the rule scheme and the experiences the breed. Another aspect that often fails in a simulation that aims to be very broad is in the lack of deeper planning (and in turn, unexpected events when the system works flexibly) which has disappeared from *GTA.* Stores operate seemingly without clerks or store-keeps and close the exact same minute they are supposed to, failing to give the non-linear approach to operationalized systemic gameplay. *Oblivion* embodies these characters, placing them in time and space and making them individuals; they are simulated actors in a world of consequences. A system which is rigid and improbable to behave flexibly or variably will in its depth still always be ruled by the linear film-as-game ideology so deeply engraved in Western culture. *Assassin's Creed* used dynamic animation to create seemless meshing of multiple animations into one, but we are still trying to find a similar solution for storytelling and a future game-worthy system of choice structures.

Conclusion

"Move the Mouse to Look Around"

In combining the humanities cultural and social perspective of games with the technical understanding of game development we have come some way in moving toward a less dogmatic principle of game theory (and in extension, development). The central point of interest has been the concept of rules, it in reference to graphical representations or narrative plots. Games are designed

to adhere to one/some rule(s) more than others; time taking precedence of split-second decisions in *Diplomacy* for example. Rules are inherent in games, because otherwise there would be no game. However, these rules do not have to conform strictly to the conventions that are now solidly grounded in contemporary games on this basis alone, being hidden or rigid structures withholding player identity. Choices and open doors to more open-ended gameplay have been tried in many ways already, as has been shown, and also through solutions around the games themselves. In *Halo 3*, developers Bungie listened to the fans and made more options available in the game types and settings (evolving from a few game types to a broad range of them) and introducing TV-like viewing capabilities of on-going games. *World of Warcraft* houses a number of "meta-games", or games-in-game, that mount the framework of *WoW* unto new ones further opening up the game's possibilities. Private servers for games like *World of Warcraft* open up strictly regulated spheres to other people than the game's server technicians, yet enhancing custom rule-making. Postmodern acting is overtaking the former hegemony of Modernist being: the player is taking more part in the forming of the experience. As there are numerous examples one could take to apply the Bogostian unit operations and arguments upon, and that some games are really trying to break the mold openly, I believe there is enough reason to start campaigning for games that are more conscious of how they represent choice and how they deal with spaces. While looking through a rather extensive choice of game design books, much is said about how to follow popular (and working, I might add) conventions and how to think of graphical representation and other factors of productive focus. These topics are indeed of importance to anyone making games, but they are profoundly unaware of the greater impact these conventions bring with them. As games begin to become more simulation-like and aware of their system/unit operations, the merely game-like games might have even more of a market, becoming accessible entertainment products while the million dollar projects are showing their false promises and lose to open-ended variants. "Toy games" like *The Sims* are perhaps the most useful example of where obvious rules have been used and well-received: *The Sims* is a great example of how to easily blow life into digital characters. It should be remembered

that the core of the game is 8 years old and upcoming titles like *Spore* will most likely push the current boundaries of procedurality, whose implications on the technical, as well as the rule-based and "humanities" side of gaming is revolutionary. *Shenmue* (1999), a monstrous undertaking supposed to contain three parts but left in economic limbo after the second title, did also make some interesting attempts at integrating movement, choice and time into the same game with emphasis on multiple gameplay elements. Simulating the hassles of "real life" and the hardships of a young man losing his father to gang crime, the narrative becomes less important than the many varieties of action that are operationalized (from forklift driving, shopping, collecting, to the extreme amount of characters one can meet). In a cynical way, *Shenmue* is thus as much a comment on life as something "mechanical" if played/lived in a repetitive pattern as it was a signal for renewal of gameplay ideologies.

There is, of course, significant overlap of game and real life. Games are time-consuming and may or may not have a large part of social life involved in them. First-person shooters as well as free market economies within MMO worlds have spawned a new generation of rich, with gameplaying becoming a sport or possibly even a job. A trend that is very interesting to see evolve is socio-gaming. In “games that are not quite games" such as the PlayStation Eye camera games or music games such as *Guitar Hero* or *Rock Band* the "extensions of man" come into play, optimally combined with the tangible physical space where people join the game and become integral parts of it. That is why a game like *Guitar Hero* effectively remediates the guitar hero figure as a singular deity-like entity while *Rock Band* conjures a setup which is suited better for cooperative teamwork; lesser parts, greater whole through social interactions. They are games in the traditional, although reborn, sense: there are specific guide lines for victory/failure conditions, but they are almost transparent - it is all about the "feeling" which in turn is multiplied effectively by the use of unique technical tools, such as guitars, or the Wiimote. In the spirit of McLuhan, the same goes for the PlayStation Eye camera games, that are much more about the interaction/performance itself - not so

far from the Wii experience that is more about technological possibilities than about the gameplay as such.

The question begging to be asked is, "Is the embodied character identity the same as the player's physical identity?" I believe the answer to be relatively simple. It is, obviously, not. It is however very much dependent on it, but is ultimately determined by what choices one is offered, in what context and how these integrate into the player's identity. One's real life gives countless choices every second, but we are castrated from many of its possibilities by means of society, religion, morals and numerous other factors. Games, however, have only managed to give few of these choices thus far and not always in situations where these choices really matter. *Assassin's Creed*, *Oblivion* and *Ico* all have their small gifts to the future of gaming, and I have already named many others that have contributed to a deeper understanding of the intricate technical, artistic and playful nature of games. Modifying and tweaking games has long since been a favorite activity of many wannabe game designers, itself a very procedural undertaking, and the democratized ability to make entirely own games is enticing many now that there has been some liberalization of means of production. As the indie scene is once again steaming hot, this time with corporate backup and reasonable prices for hardware and software, these new auteurs are apt to open up for possibilities that are shut for the larger corporate entities. Introversions games have been universally praised and computer students are making hit games like *Portal* and *Flow*, which all make great statements on how gaming is redefining itself by re-thinking old values and ideologies.

The postmodern notion of life and social integration as roleplay is easily seen in games; they make its players see a pre-made world with pre-made eyes. When the possibility-space is opened to other choices than those inherently configured within the pre-configured model of choice, the space for personality is opened up fully. Thus, the ultimate simulation would be a space where one does not know what kind of game one is participating in. In turn, the player does not know how to relate to

co-players because the rules are so masked as to be almost transparent, irrelevant. In the dynamic rule-systems of simulation, as understood in the context of being configurable systems for identity-play, ”play” becomes the central concept: daring to test, wanting to try – not for the story or for any challenge. My claim has not been that there is no need for games as they are now - indeed there are numerous entertaining or otherwise "great" titles available – however I contend that the next true step in gaming did not happen with high-definition gaming as much as it has started to begin with new guide lines and understandings of games as possibility spaces. There are numerous aspects I have not, or only slightly, touched upon, involving the economical, social and personal side of gaming: all of which have a great impact on what games can and will do in the future. While the economy of games might work excellently as procedural generation is standardized and more established than today, I believe the largest trouble of open-ended gaming might be not the games and their possibilities as such, but rather society itself. When games move from the point-gathering and violence-making of most contemporary titles, players will have to face a few moments of discovery: the game might make them better understand the artificiality of surrounding structures. Instead of seeing games as primarily social conduits or challenge spheres, they might begin to unravel the construction of life and society, in a sense moving players back to the curious mind of the child once again. Also, players might be terrified when they learn of their disruptive power to challenge systems of rules. Reasonably these games would meet a resistance far stronger than the forces counter-acting *Grand Theft Auto* and *Postal*. Games become as important as the Lacanian mirror stage, but being far more accessible in theory: games are democratic, participatory devices that draw from one's cultural understanding of technologies around most people. They put us in space, time and place and proceduralize systems/units that encourage interaction, a far stance from the linear soldiering and order-taking of film-as-game perspectives. While we have seen evidence of "new" game development, we are still mid-flight to what today may seem like a day dream, but is really not so far away - and we did not even truly lift off more than a decade or so ago. Sometime in the near decade the next important question will be "When do we succumb to sim-sickness?" We

will have to wait for answer in the future.

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