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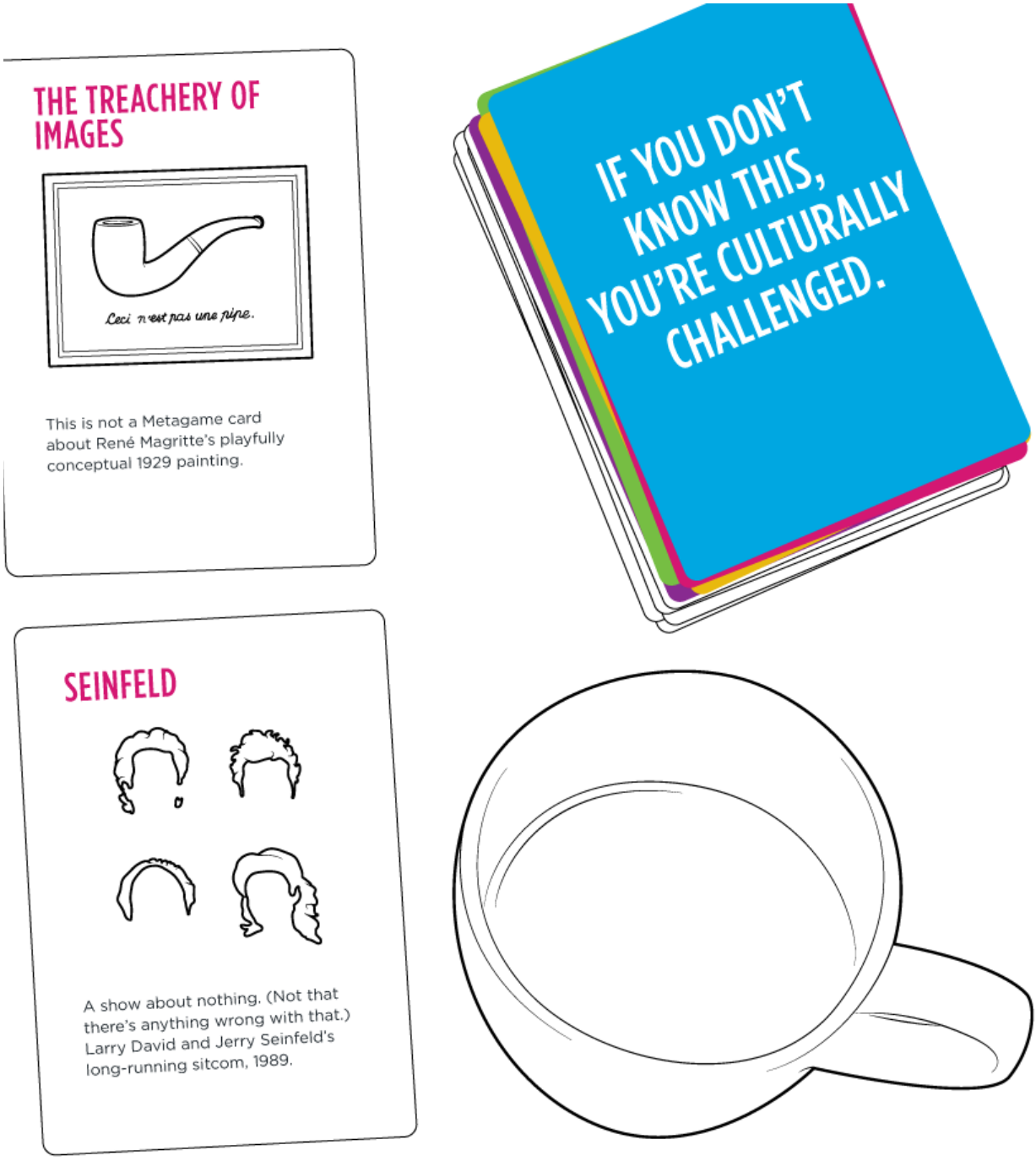
# GAMES ON GAMES

## Game Design as Critical Reflexive Practice

Edited by Giovanni Caruso, Riccardo Fassone, Gabriele Ferri, Stefano Gualeni, Mauro Salvador



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# GAMES ON GAMES

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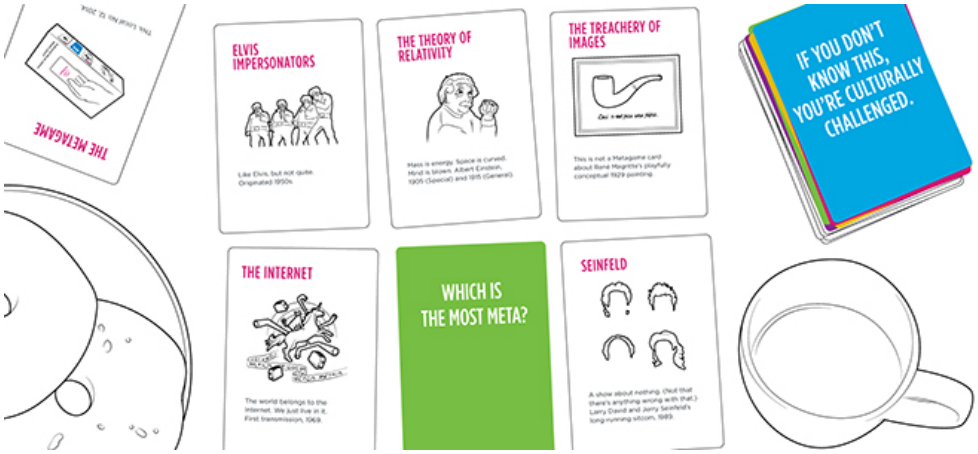
# Games on Games

## Game Design as Critical Reflexive Practice

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In September 2013, the editors of this issue of "GAME The Italian Journal of Game Studies" hosted a panel at the DiGRA conference in Atlanta, to explore video game design as a cultural praxis, as a mediator that allows specific forms of criticims and epistemological inquiry to emerge. The panel, titled *G|A|M|E on games. The meta-panel*, aimed at constituting "a step towards a playable theory of game studies – a meta-level in which playing, designing and critiquing overlap" (Caruso, Fassone, Ferri, Gualeni & Salvador, 2013), and addressed topics such as the history and theory of self-reflexive games, their presence in the mainstream market, and the implications of designing a game of this sort. In other words, the panel was a first attempt at imagining different forms of game research that would complement or, in some instances, even substitute the written word as the preferred tool for scientific dissemination in game studies as well as certain other context of philosophical inquiry where the experiential qualities of the medium and its interactive affordances constitute definite advantages over – and possibility to complement – text (think of the materialization of ethical scenarios, thought experiments, of the possibilities to access experience of alternative phenomenologies, etc.).

In the last three years, the panelists produced a number of contributions on the subject of self-reflexive video games and playable theory (Fassone, 2015, Gualeni, 2015), tackling topics such as the meta-communicative potential of video games, medium-specific forms and modes of self-reflection, and video games as tools for theory, speculation, and philosophical thinking. This issue of "GAME The Italian Journal of Game Studies" is a provisional conclusion and a partial formalization of this wider – inherently open and rather informal – network of research interests.

In the years following the Atlanta panel, the number of video games that could be legitimately characterized as self-reflexive has grown exponentially, which led to an increased attention from the game studies community on the subject, with papers (Ensslin, 2013), panels (Backe, Fassone, Karhulati & Švelch, 2016), and – maybe most significantly – games being published and presented at major conferences. The interest in self-reflexive critical game design has progressed significantly. In 2013, we presented a series of independent games that showed a disposition towards self-reflexivity, and a game designed as a proof of concept of playable theory – Stefano Gualeni's *Necessary Evil*. Just three years later, the number and complexity of examples has grown beyond our expectations. On one hand, theoretically-inclined practitioners have designed and released games-on-games that confront, discuss, and critique different aspects of video game design, development, distribution and culture. On the other one, maybe more surprisingly, also mainstream games seem to consistently adopt meta-referential discursive strategies as a common component of their design lexicon. In the last decade, games like *Portal* (Valve, 2007) or *Eat Lead: The Return of Matt Hazard* (Vicious Cycle, 2009) represented the odd emergence of self-referentiality in a medium that seemed to prefer an often crude form of literality. However, more recent AAA games such as *Saints Row IV* (Volition, 2013) or *Grand Theft Auto V*(Rockstar North, 2013) have contributed to a popularization of self-reflexivity as a legitimate, and to an extent even desirable, mode of expression with their encased narratives, and their conscious effort to reveal some of the tropes and affectations of contemporary game design. Self-reflexivity, or the more prosaic use of self-aware humour, may have transpired in mainstream games through the mediation of successful experiments such as *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013), in a process that seems to resonate in other media contexts (Quigley, 2010).

Nevertheless, most of the main questions posed by the 2013 panel remained open. Can video game design be compared to more formalized practices of scientific research or speculation within game studies? And, by virtue of an intellectual leap that in itself calls for discussion, can video games be considered as an efficient vehicle for the presentation of certain kinds of knowledge, in the same way in which papers, conference presentations, and books are? What Ratto defines as "critical making" (2011), the practice of producing artifacts of different sorts in order to "supplement and extend critical reflection", may apply to

video games as well. Forms of "research through design" (Zimmerman, Forlizzi & Evenson, 2007), of "carpentry" (Bogost, 2012), and "speculative design" (Dunne & Raby, 2013) have been analyzed, discussed, and maybe most importantly, put into practice in different fields of cultural and scientific production. To address this gap and to map the current (and future) state of self-reflexive games, we asked both researchers and designers to imagine an application of these concepts to video games. Paraphrasing Zimmerman, Forlizzi and Evenson, what does research through game design might mean? What epistemological insights can we derive from the act of designing, making and playing video games?

This issue offers a variety of approaches to these very questions, explored by scholars/designers whose theoretical work significantly intertwines with the practice of game design. Moreover, this issue is in itself inevitably self-reflexive in at least two ways. First, with Games on Games. Game design as critical reflexive practice we consciously attempted at stretching the boundaries of the format of the scientific journal. For this reason, potential contributors were asked to submit not only papers, but also video games that complement theoretical and speculative thinking, prove a specific point, or offer means of playable critique. As we believe that games may in fact offer a viable lexicon for scientific production and that game studies as a field may benefit from some playful research, this issue is a first experiment with producing and disseminating knowledge stemming from research through game design. This inevitably led to a series of questions regarding the integration of text and games. Is a game design document supposed to integrate the meaning of a game on games? Or should the playable artifact stand on its own as a legitimate piece of scholarly work? In this issue we adopted a hybrid policy, with contributions ranging from the purely textual to more complex examples integrating gameplay and traditional written commentary.

Second, this issue adopts a self-reflexive perspective by publishing extracts from the peer-review process. When discussing the implications of publishing a wide and diverse range of materials (papers, games, design documents, etc.), we concluded that exposing parts of the process of peer-review of this multitude of objects may in fact reveal some of the dialogic nature of scientific publication. While, in most cases, scientific papers are published as relatively stable texts, existing for the audience only in their final format, the objects – both readable and playable – published in this issue are presented along with some of the reviewer's comments that were critical in shaping their final version. Revealing parts of the mechanism on which scientific journals are built – namely the submission-review-resubmission cycle – is our own contribution to the process of research through practice. This denouement frames the larger question of whether a playable critique may be assessed by means of traditional peer-review, and aims at revealing the kinds of insights authors derived from this inevitably asymmetrical dialogue. Furthermore, it is probably only fair that a journal that asks authors to produce self-reflexive artifacts, detailing and critiquing their own craft, takes a step itself towards the exposition of its inner workings.

Stefano Gualeni's contributions to this issue gravitates around the game *Necessary Evil*, which was already mentioned as the first experiment that was explicitly and didactically designed and developed with the intention to start a discussion on self-reflexive games that spanned practice and theory. His paper inaugurates our discussion on the possibilities for video games to be mediators that facilitate critical reflections on conventions and traditions in video game design and development. In other words, it introduces self-reflexive video games as video games designed to materialize critical and/or satirical perspectives on the ways in which video games themselves are designed, played, sold, manipulated, experienced, and understood as social objects. The textual academic work accompanying *Necessary Evil*comprises two interdependent sections: a reflection on the game (as well as the design decisions that participated to its realization), and a wider discussion on the virtual worlds of computer games and digital simulations as critical, epistemological tools, or – more in general – as the philosophical contexts where a new way of pursuing humanism is already arising.

Pippin Barr is present in this issue with two games and a paper detailing the design decisions that informed their production. Jostle Bastard and Jostle Parent are playable critiques of *Hotline Miami*(Dennaton Games, 2012) and *Octodad: Deadliest Catch* (Young Horses, 2014), two games that claim to present a critique of video game violence and a humorous take on parenting respectively. Through the use of a design practice described by DiSalvo as "reconfiguring the remainder" (2012, p. 63), Barr points at what is left out of these games, ultimately stating that both fail in their rhetorical intent. As noted by Barr in the commentary provided with the games, *Hotline Miami*'s critique of video game violence is contradicted by its very mechanics, that prescribe violence as the only possible player interaction with the environment. In *Octodad: Deadliest Catch*, on the other hand, the lack of permanent consequences prevents the development of a meaningful narrative in favor of a shallower sequence of comedic skits derived from the player's incompetence. Barr's games substitute or reframe a core mechanic of *Hotline Miami* and *Octodad: Deadliest Catch*, thus addressing what the author considers to be fallacies in their design, and offering a glimpse at alternative, speculative versions of the two games.

With *Nostalgia Videogames as Playable Game Criticism* Robin J.S. Sloan posits that not only games designed with precise critical intents may be dubbed as games-on-games, but rather that a critical intent towards other games or game culture in general may be found in most video games. Drawing from a series of theoretical traditions dealing with the concept of nostalgia and its manifestations in cultural production Sloan proposes three close readings. *Braid* (Hothead Games, 2008) is analyzed as a critique of canonical games such as *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985), that operates on preexisting player literacy regarding the mechanics and narrative implications of platforming games. *Homesickened*(Snapman, 2015) engages with discourses on gaming technologies by refashioning specific hardware-dependent aesthetic configurations

– for example the CGA colour palette – in the context of contemporary game production. Finally *Velocity 2X* (Futurlab, 2014) is presented as an example of pastiche, exploring the boundaries and intersections of different video game genres.

Brian Schrank's analog game *Bust A Cup* pits two players one against the other in what the author describes as "the LARP of a brawl". The players wield ad-hoc tools – a wooden structure, a hammer, a chain, and the eponymous cup – in the attempt to smash each other's cup. In his companion piece to the game, Schrank offers a theory of play within the frame of real-life risk, analyzing the social and ludic consequences of playing a game of *Bust A Cup*. Schrank claims that the controlled but unavoidable amount of risk implied by *Bust A Cup* – one can be hit by the hammer, or cut by the shards of an exploding cup – instead of promoting aggressive behaviors invites players to question their sense of the self, and rethink their attitude towards safety, control, and security. Schrank's piece, coupled with the videos of games of *Bust A Cup*, argues for a reconsideration of sanitized, allegedly risk-free play.

Daniel Cox and Matthew Beale's game *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* tackles the ethics of first-person shooters, by casting the player in the role of an NPC, a low-level grunt at the mercy of the overpowered protagonist. The game asks the player to fill a number of forms and overcome rather repetitive tests in order to assess her ability to sustain the amount of physical and psychological abuse required for the job. By trivializing violence in the context of a first-person shooter, *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* engages with the morality of violent play and the ethical inflexibility of algorithms. Moreover, the stark, aseptic look of the game operates as a reflection on the form of digital bureaucracy found in video games, "on how algorithms both operate from and perpetuate states of boredom".

Josef Florian Micallef's *Illusion Master* is a short game that tackles some significant issues in game studies, such as immersion, flow and self-reflexivity. Through the game and the accompanying piece, Micallef proposes to rediscuss the notion of immersion in favour of a more nuanced reading of the practice of gameplay as pecuarly ambiguous. In Micallef's game the player is forced to enact a form of double embodiment, playing both as the avatar and, in the final stretch of *Illusion Master* as a self-conscious player reflecting on what Micallef describes as "objective self-presence". The text accompanying the game acts both as a theoretical reflection on phenomenological issues in game studies and as a design document detailing the conceptual and pragmatic implications of producing a philosophically informed game.

Evan Torner confronts the topic of self-reflexivity in tabletop role-playing games, thus providing an argument for the inclusion of analog play in the discussion on games-on-games. Torner analyzes three experimental role-playing games that present different but arguably convergent forms of self-reflexivity and self-referentiality. Epidiah Ravachol's *What Is a Role-Playing Game?* is a nano-sized role-playing games that abstracts the fundamental components of the genre into a minimalist set of rules and ask players to reflect on the nature of

role-playing. Meguey Baker's *1,001 Nights* is a playable critique of the encased narratives found in *Arabian Nights*; Nathan D. Paoletta's *World Wide Wrestling* is a role-playing take on the milieu of professional wrestling that asks players to conflate performance, storytelling, and kayfabe. Through the analysis of these examples, Torner claims that the free-form narrative structure and the fluid nature of social interaction found in tabletop role-playing may be conductive to self-reflective practices and forms of critical game design and play.

Finally, the cover image for this issue of GAME, found at the top of this page, was provided by Local No. 12, the designers of the card game *The Metagame*. Since *The Metagame* was inevitably referenced in every meeting the editors had when working on this issue, it seemed fitting to have it up there. We are grateful to John Sharp and Erik Zimmerman for their contribution.

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# Self-reflexive videogames

## Observations and corollaries on virtual worlds as philosophical artifacts

**ABSTRACT**
Self-reflexive videogames are videogames designed to materialize critical and/or satirical perspectives on the ways in which videogames themselves are designed, played, sold, manipulated, experienced, and understood as social objects. This essay focuses on the use of virtual worlds as mediators, and in particular on the use of videogames to guide and encourage reflections on technical, interactive, and thematic conventions in videogame design and development. Structurally, it is composed of two interconnected parts:

In the first part of this essay, I will discuss *NECESSARY EVIL* (Gualeni et al., 2013), an experimental videogame that I designed as a self-reflexive virtual artifact. With the objective of clarifying the philosophical aspirations of self-reflexive videogames – and in order to understand how those aspirations can be practically pursued – I will dissect and examine the design decisions that contributed to the qualities of *NECESSARY EVIL* as an example of "playable philosophy".

Taking off from the perspectives on self-reflexive videogames offered in the first part of the essay, the second half will focus on virtual worlds as viable mediators of philosophical thought more in general. In this section, I will argue that, both through the practice of game design and through the interactive experiences of virtual worlds, twenty-first century philosophers have the possibility to challenge the often-unquestioned understanding of written discourse as the only context in which philosophical thought can emerge and be developed.

**KEYWORDS:** *video game, critical design, philosophy, virtual worlds, self-reflexivity*

The videogame discussed in this essay is freely available at http://evil.gua-le-ni.com/.

### AN INTRODUCTION TO SELF-REFLEXIVE (VIDEO)GAMES

Self-reflexive videogames are videogames that are deliberately designed to materialize, through their gameplay and their aesthetic qualities, critical and/or

satirical perspectives on the ways in which videogames themselves are designed, played, sold, manipulated, experienced, and understood as social objects. The subversion of representational and/or interactive canons, and the often jeering meta-representation of (video)ludic objects are design strategies that are frequently employed in the realization of such videogames.

Self-reflexive video games typically question their own (generic) technical, interactive, and thematic conventions by intentionally provoking a sense of unease and unfamiliarity in their players and spectators. From this perspective, they can be recognized as aspiring to produce experiential effects that are conceptually comparable to those pursued by some of the currents of the philosophical and artistic movement customarily labeled modernism. The bizarre and unfamiliar aesthetics embraced by several modernist currents explicitly attempted to unsettle the observer, the reader, the spectator, the player, and to elicit in them a state of detached, suspicious inquiry. This state of mind was recognized and sought-after by the Dadaists, the surrealists, and the situationists among others as the necessary pre-condition for demystifying representational as well as cultural conventions, and ultimately for reforming society (Laxton, 2003; Flanagan, 2009, pp. 88-94; Gualeni, 2015a, pp. 63–67; Van Roessel, 2008, pp. 44-45). A few, particularly noteworthy examples are in this sense Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, Alexander M. Rodchenko's works of photomontage and photography, Lev Tolstoy's literary production, and the practice of Surrealist play.

In a similar way, the aesthetic and interactive experiences of self-reflexive videogames are designed with the overt intention of establishing – through astonishment and unfamiliarity – a degree of analytical distance between players and videogames, turning the latter (embraced together with their established conventions and tropes) into objects of critical analysis. As Brecht phrased it, the spectators (or, in this case, the players of self-reflexive videogames) "need to develop that detached eye with which the great Galileo observed a swinging chandelier" (Brecht, 1964, p. 192).

With those objectives in mind, these kinds of unsettling videogames typically disclose experiences that are not inherently enjoyable or rewarding. In analogy with Brecht's epic theatre, their gameplay tends to be uncouth and drily instrumental to their experiential and critical goals. Self-reflexive videogames do not generally employ interactive and aesthetic techniques that try to make their players identify with the playing characters, unless with the intention of pulling that empathetic rug from under the players' feet later in the gameplay. In this sense, they are not typically designed to elicit a sense of *catharsis* in the Aristotelian sense – that is to say to trigger "the purging of the emotions through empathy with the stirring fate of the hero" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 147).

Subverting conventions and making grotesque mockeries out of traditional tropes, self-reflexive videogames prompt us to become aware of the ways in which we currently play, design, develop, sell, modify, criticize, and attribute social values to videogames and videogame elements. This seditious approach

to game design is pursued by self-reflexive videogames to the extent that, if we were to try to identify their "gameness" in terms of formal properties, many would barely be recognizable as games at all. It is not infrequent for them to be roughly executed, short-lived, unwinnable, and deliberately annoying[1].

In the pursuit of subversion and *defamiliarization*, the gameplay of self-reflexive titles often includes the overt exhibition of the "constructedness" of videogames as artifacts (for example displaying debug information or background geometry, deliberately triggering aesthetic glitches, and making elements of how a game engine triggers scripted actions visible). Instead of excluding the artificiality and the technical setup of videogames from their gameplay (removing them, or keeping them only accessible to the game developers), those aspects are frequently and purposefully exposed. Particularly evident examples of this design strategy for unsettling the players are encountered in the recent videogames releases *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd., 2015) and *The Magic Circle* (Question, 2015) , in which design decisions and technical solutions are aesthetically revealed during gameplay and are openly discussed by in-game characters (including the narrator) as a key feature of their gameplay. In the sense explained above, *The Beginner's Guide*, *The Magic Circle*, and *NECESSARY EVIL* (discussed and analyzed in the upcoming sections of this essay) be considered examples of games with evident self-reflexive traits and objectives.

## *NECESSARY EVIL:* A SELF-REFLEXIVE VIDEOGAME

*NECESSARY EVIL* is a small, single-player, experimental videogame that was developed by Dino Dini, Marcello Gómez Maureira, Jimena Sánchez Sarquiz, Allister Brimble and myself during the summer of 2013. *NECESSARY EVIL* was designed with the intention of revealing to its players – through its aesthetics and gameplay – that the ways in which we conceptualize, design, and develop videogames all rely on an implicit player-centric ideology. According to this ideological framework, the virtual worlds of videogames and digital simulations are typically produced and presented in ways that allow for a specific way of revealing: a way of disclosing an experience that is exclusively limited to the perspective of the player(s).

In current practical terms, when we approach virtual worlds as (experiential and technical) products of this ideology, the experience horizon that they afford can be understood as being explicitly generated around the players' perceptual and interactive possibilities. As a case in point, elements of an interactive, digital world that are too far from the players to be perceived, virtual objects whose sight is occluded by other virtual objects and characters that are momentarily irrelevant for gameplay or for a certain world-simulation are not actually materialized by the software, and only exist as potentiality[2].

Technically speaking, every virtual world tacitly materializes what could be identified as an idealistic perspective. According to a radical version of idealism – for example in the case of George Berkeley's subjective idealism – the quali-

**1.** The intentionally frustrating and raw aesthetic qualities of gameplay in self-reflexive videogames can be exemplified by Failnaut's videogame *Grindstar* (2012). *Grindstar* can be freely accessed online at http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/605910.

**2.** Interestingly, from an etymological perspective, the adjective virtual was originally coined in modern Latin to encapsulate the idea of potentiality. *Virtualis* is a late-medieval neologism the existence of which became necessary when Aristotle's concept of δύναμις (***dynamis***: potentiality, power, quadrate) had to be translated into Latin (Van Binsbergen, 1997, p. 9). The concept of potentiality at the etymological foundation of the adjective virtual provides the background for understanding why, at least in one of its interpretations, it is used to indicate the latency of certain possibilities inherent in a specific artifact, combination of artifacts, or state of things. In this understanding, the adjective virtual works in counterpoint with the adjective actual, where the latter does not indicate a potential state of affairs, but the current, presently existing one. A more common connotation of the adjective virtual was presented by Pierre Lévy not in opposition to actual in the sense discussed above, but to actual in the specific meaning of "pertinent to the world humans are native to" (Lévy, 1998, p. 14).

ties that we can experientially encounter in objects (regardless of whether they are part of the actual world or of a virtual one) are not objective properties of those objects. From an idealistic standpoint, it is our experience of those objects that is responsible for bringing them and their properties into existence as mental contents (Gualeni, 2015a, p. 88).

This idealistic foundations of the ways in which we technically materialize virtual worlds has, first and foremost, the functional scope of limiting the amount of calculations that are needed to sustain that virtual world. It is a convenient – if not necessary – evil.

## A SELF-REFLEXIVE DESIGN ANALYSIS OF *NECESSARY EVIL*

*NECESSARY EVIL* was designed and developed with the intention of playfully problematizing the unquestioned idealistic structuring of virtual worlds that was outlined in the previous section of this essay. In doing so, it also inevitably ridicules the player-centrism of videogame worlds, thus functioning as a self-reflexive videogame.

From a game design perspective, and similarly to most games that are understood as having self-reflexive qualities, *NECESSARY EVIL* heavily relies on interaction norms, narrative tropes, and aesthetic conventions that are firmly established in the tradition of a particular game genre (in this specific case, the fantasy action role-play-videogame genre). The repetition of time-honored traditions in videogame aesthetic, videogame narrative, and videogame interaction appears to be consistently preferred to the pursuit of formal and/or technical innovation when developing self-reflexive videogames. This design strategy must be recognized the dual advantage of not requiring the players to learn (or to learn from scratch) how to operate within the virtual world which the self-reflexive videogame discloses for its players. This advantage includes not having to familiarize with the ways in which abstract and extra-diegetic information are encoded and represented. In this way, the designers can focus on the alteration and repurposing of specific areas or elements of the game that they intend to subvert and trigger critical thought upon, and making the destabilized (and destabilizing) aspects of the game emerge with particular evidence by way of contrast; that is to say by making in-game elements and behaviors stand out as unexpected and uncanny against the backdrop of the bulk of notions and conventions that the players are considered to be already largely accustomed to.

In order to function as a critical artifact, as already explained, the game relies on its players' familiarity with the ludo-narrative structures that the game mockingly discloses[3]. Consequently, a large portion of the gameplay of *NECESSARY EVIL* aligns to traditional canons and functions accordingly. On the backdrop of that conventional background, and in order to demystify the player-centric approach outlined above, the game crucially subverts a specific interaction trope: it gives the player control over a contributory character. In *NECESSARY EVIL*, the player takes the role of a disposable minion of

**3.** Similarly, in Brechtian epic theatre the intended spectators should already be familiar with what is being represented. This trait contributed to shifting the focus of the experience away from its narrative contents of a certain work, and to prevent the public from being emotionally involved in the events taking place on the stage (or in the virtual world in question). In these contexts and with those *estranging* objectives, according to Van Roessel, "telling an old story is a benefit rather than a drawback" (Van Roessel, 2008, p. 44).

evil instead of the customary part of the valiant hero, a paragon of valor. In line with the aesthetic canons of action role-playing videogames, the players are supposed to recognize the minion of evil that they control as a generic, minor figure: a secondary character that plays a subaltern role in the progress of the main character – the hero. In *NECESSARY EVIL*, the hero is a computer-controlled *non-player character*(NPC).

In our self-reflexive videogame, the horned minion controlled by the players is confined in a dimly-lit room from which it cannot escape. The monster has, in fact, no constructive options for interacting with the room: the door does not open for its little red paws, the chest contains nothing, and the objects that are already in the room respond to the players' actions as if they were cheap theatrical props. These design decisions were meant to elicit a sense of marginality in the players, and to experientially reveal to them what a virtual world feels like when that world is designed around someone else's perceptions, needs, and narrative progress. In other words, the players' possibility for interaction with the world of *NECESSARY EVIL*, as well as the duration and the quality of their experience, are deliberately designed to be deficient and unsatisfactory (Gualeni, 2015b).

As a consequence of what was just discussed, the virtual world of *NECESSARY EVIL* is likely to be understood by the players as existing only to be experienced by the NPC-hero, and not to be enjoyed or explored by the horned monster. The little monster merely poses a challenge among many others: it is something for the hero to overcome in order to continue on his intrepid quest. Eventually, the computer-controlled hero accidentally enters the room where the monster is trapped. As expected in these videoludic situations, a fight ensues between good and evil. After the fight, when the horned monster is finally slain, the computer-controlled hero collects a key from the chest, opens the door, and leaves the room[4]. At that point, the room itself, its elements, and the player-creature are swiftly removed from the computer's memory, which consists – from the point of view of the monster – in witnessing the "de-rezzing" and disappearance of the game-world. This concluding act is symmetrical to the loading process that the players experienced at the beginning of the game. Both the beginning and the end of *NECESSARY EVIL* try to metaphorically communicate the players the constructedness of the game as a technical artifact: the de-allocation of elements and characters is needed to save memory and computation resources in order to efficiently materialize the rooms that are (implicitly) going to be visited next by the hero.

## ON VIDEOGAMES AS CRITICAL TOOLS

Through the defamiliarization of aesthetic and interactive conventions – and thus by encouraging players to see the videogames "anew" and recognize them as possible objects of analysis and/or satire[5] – self-reflexive videogames perform specific critical functions in our culture. As cultural artifacts and as media-

**4.** If the players are particularly proficient with their control of the little monster, it is also possible for them to defeat the NPC-hero. Once the hero is defeated, however, the game promptly triggers a "game over" state. This behavior might be unexpected (and hopefully even unpleasant) for the players, as their gameplay experience is interrupted by the "game over" screen (a customary way of giving negative feedback to the players) after having successfully accomplished a difficult task. This design decision is, however, logical. It aligns with the intention of experientially revealing to the player that it is the experiential path of the hero and his situation that are relevant to the game state, while the skill level and the aspirations of a subsidiary character are.

**5.** Poignant theoretical and critical references that I consider worth mentioning in support of this argument are Viktor Shklovsky's notion of *ostranenie* (estrangement, defamiliarization) and Ezra Pound's dictum "make it new". In several essays of the American poet, "make it new" encapsulated what he understood the defining feature of modernist aesthetic: a change of perspective that allows the recipients of the work of art to rediscover their familiar world and to reshape their sensitivity and perspectives (Shklowsky, 1917; Pound, 1934).

tors of thought, they disclose perspectives and notions that are often tacitly and unwittingly excluded from practices and theories concerning virtual worlds and videogames. Similarly, as discussed and exemplified in the first part of this essay, the social agenda of several modernist currents relied precisely on the conviction that the self-reflexivity of expressive media forms (or, more generally artistic techniques and design strategies meant to make mediated content feel astonishing and unfamiliar) could foster a state of suspicious inquiry imbued with critical potential. The modernists deemed this state to be to be capable of insinuating alternative possibilities of being and promoting change at the broader socio-cultural level.

The question I am tackling in this section of my essay, however, is not whether the self-reflexivity of mediated content can effectively be understood as a factor of socio-cultural change. In the specific context of game studies, in fact, the notion that virtual worlds could be embraced as interactive arguments, as academic output, and as critical artifacts has been firmly established since at least a decade ago (depending on the origin myth one decides to embrace in that respect) (Bogost, 2007; Bogost, 2011; Grace, 2014). Contemporary culture already recognizes virtual worlds of videogames and digital simulations as viable and often desirable alternatives to traditional media forms. This is particularly evident in contexts such as education, persuasion, and training. The question I am asking in this second part of my essay is whether those worlds, both in their self-reflexive qualities and inherently as worlds, can be understood as philosophical artifacts.

I believe this question can be fruitfully asked – and perhaps even answered – from the standpoint according to which the central *modus operandi* of philosophy consists in guiding thought to rigorously reflect on the correctness and the possibilities of thought itself. In pursuing this task, the philosophers of language dedicate their academic efforts assessing the validity and correctness of linguistic propositions. Their perspectives rely on the idea that language holds a privileged – if not throughout exclusive – relationship with thinking. In academic fields like philosophy of language and psychology, the two are often conflated (Petocz, 1999, pp. 186-188). To be sure, approaches and models that are founded in some form of identification between thought and language are not only common to philosophy of language or psychology: in contemporary philosophy of mind, for example, the understanding of mental states (such as beliefs, desires, etc.) as propositional attitudes is often accompanied by the belief that such states are thereby linguistic (Petocz, 1999, p. 186).

Since Plato, for reasons that are rooted in socio-technological context of fifth-century Greece, the history of philosophy has been specifically identified with the history of a particular declination of a linguistic approach to philosophy: *written* philosophy. Interestingly, these reasons also started to be explicitly discussed in some of Plato's own texts, for example in the *The Seventh Letter* or in the Socratic dialogue *Phaedrus*. One of the first twentieth century philosophers

to advocate for a critical attitude towards the exclusive and often unquestioned association between thinking and writing was Ludwig Wittgenstein. However, apart from a few remarkable exceptions (among which Wittgenstein's own 1929 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and Jacques Derrida's 1974 *Glas*), philosophical texts have rarely supported and complemented their perspectives and arguments by means of their physical design and/or editorial structure. Hardly ever has philosophy materially expressed reflections on its very materiality[6].

The enduring and exclusive focus on linguistic ways (and, in particular, on written ways) of mediating thought can be understood from this perspective as having numbed the sensitivity of Western philosophy towards the specificities and the limitations through which that specific form of mediation frames and sequences arguments and ideas. I believe that it can also be accused of having made philosophers poorly capable of entertaining the possibility of alternative methods for mediating philosophical thought. This almost complete eclipse of philosophy's critical attitude towards the medium-exclusivity and the viability of alternative ways of mediating thought (and thinking) is what the second part of this essay tries to challenge in the age of digital media.

Motivated by similar concerns as mine, philosopher and game designer Ian Bogost recently went as far as accusing the focus on the practice of writing of being a detrimental habit for the humanities in general. In his 2012 book, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, he noted that "[t]he long-standing assumption that we relate to the world only through language is a particularly fetid, if still bafflingly popular, opinion" (Bogost, 2012, p. 90). Bogost and, before him, philosopher Davis Baird proposed a remedy for this alleged cultural malaise that consisted in the embracing of "building" (understood as the academic *praxis* of *doing*, of constructing things as a heuristic practice) as a possible, fruitful alternative to the logo-centrism of the humanities. The practice of constructing artefacts as a philosophical practice offers, according to the outlined perspectives, an opportunity

> to correct the discursive and linguistic bias of the humanities. According to this view, we should be open to communicating scholarship through artifacts, whether digital or not. It implies that print is, indeed, ill equipped [sic] to deal with entire classes of knowledge that are presumably germane to humanistic inquiry. (Ramsay and Rockwell in Gold, 2012, p. 78)

Having recognized the inherent limitations and effects of linguistic ways of framing and communicating thought, it would be illogical to propose to embrace building as the ultimate philosophical medium. The use of virtual media[7] or other forms of practical involvement as ways to pursue philosophical thought through doing can intuitively be understood as overcoming some of the inadequacies and limitations that are inherent to an exclusively linguistic – or more specifically textual – mediation of thought. It is, however, a form of

**6.** A similar argument was raised by German philosopher Friedrich Kittler in his 2011 article *Towards an Ontology of Media*. In his text, Kittler addresses the systematic exclusion of physical and technical mediation from the practice and the objectives of philosophical thinking, arguing that it was only thanks to the work of Martin Heidegger that a philosophical consciousness for technical mediation finally arose (Kittler, 2011).

**7.** With *virtual media* I indicate ways of mediating notions and perspectives that do not rely on semiotic encoding and representation, but rather on the interactive experiential engagement with a certain virtual artifact. In this sense, both the design of- and the interaction with- a certain virtual artifact, or group of virtual artifacts, or system of virtual artifacts could be considered to be potentially viable academic practices. It is important to observe, for the sake of completeness, that – despite their difference and specificities – both media forms (representational and virtual) allow the possibility to engage the mediated contents hermeneutically at several levels.

overcoming that inevitably brings about new philosophical problems, limitations, and discontents. The embedding of videogames and computer simulations in social practices (philosophy being one of them) might, thus, best be pursued on the basis of the understanding that, as with any other forms of mediation, their virtual worlds disclose reality in specific ways, and that such ways are always inherently both revealing and concealing (Gualeni, 2015a, p. 94). New ways of establishing relationships with reality through media necessarily entail a balance between the increase in acuity of certain cognitive functions and the desensitization of others (McLuhan, 1994).

In this essay, and in the larger context of my philosophical work, I do not argue that the design and experience of virtual worlds should be understood as exceptional – or even as particularly desirable forms of "doing" philosophy. What I am proposing is, instead, that more scholarly efforts are devoted to developing both critical attitudes and sustained curiosity towards the possibilities and limitations offered by our larger technological environment to philosophy. To put it more practically, I am advocating for a more flexible and inclusive approach to the mediation of philosophical thought. From this standpoint, various and heterogeneous technical and expressive forms could be employed and combined to achieve the desired representational, persuasive, experiential, communicative, reflexive, and critical effects. Their synergic use could, I argue, potentially limit the emergence of biases relative to specific media forms and could complement and counterbalance the specific disadvantages inherent to each form.

Going back to the specific point I am trying to make, I believe it is important to observe that interactive virtual worlds might not be particularly suitable for presenting abstract philosophical concepts in their full intricacy and subtlety. Similarly, traditional written discourse can be recognized as limited and partial in its unsuitability to grant the recipient of a philosophical notion or argument direct experiential engagement with the notions and points of view that it mediates or the possibility to negotiate its premises and outcomes. These last possibilities are typically offered, instead, by virtual media. In this sense, there are several philosophical practices and arguments that could benefit by the hybridization with media forms that, for example, rely on simulation instead or representation as the dominant mode of the organization of cultural objects.

We could, for instance, utilize virtual worlds in combination with textual explanations in philosophical contexts when detailed representations of spatial contexts are particularly salient to the point being made, or when the materialization of a specific situation is called for (for example in the case of thought experiments or the simulation of speculative ethical scenarios). Virtual media could be phenomenologically and rhetorically advantageous when the recipients of a certain philosophical notion or perspective are expected to objectively test and evaluate different possible courses of action, or are confronted with interrogatives concerning non-actual or non-human phenomenologies, etc. For a more detailed and thorough discussion on the philosophical relevance of em-

bracing the design and the experiences of virtual worlds, please refer to chapters 4, 5, and 6 of my 2015 book *Virtual Worlds and Philosophical Tools*.

In *NECESSARY EVIL*, as a case in point, the philosophical arguments of the game are not only offered to the player in the form of an interactive experience, but is also summarized textually in the pages of a (simulated) book that can be encountered in the game world.

Not unlike videogames and virtual experiences that are designed with social purposes such as education and training, our self-reflexive videogame pursues its socio-cultural objectives via a number of communication modalities: linguistically (via text and speech), aesthetically (through visual, aural, and tactile rhetorical means of persuasion), and interactively (asking the players to evaluate their agency and their options in certain contexts, reinforcing and rewarding specific courses of action over others, *et cetera*).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Following a reflection on self-reflexivity in videogames, this essay advocated for a less intransigent approach to the articulation, the manipulation and the diffusion of philosophical ideas, notions, and hypotheses. In the preceding pages I proposed a more compromissory approach to thinking, an approach that is open to embrace – where contextually desirable – the hybridization (or even the substitution) of traditional media forms with activities that involve doing and/or experiencing something (within as well as without digital mediation).

In developing my arguments, I did not only present a linguistic speculation on philosophical mediation, but combined philosophical text with philosophical gameplay within a virtual world.

I would like to conclude with the observation that the framing, communicating, and problematizing of philosophical thought through virtual worlds will constitute, for twenty-first century philosophers, a challenge that goes beyond problematizing the exclusive use of written discourse. Philosophizing with (and through) virtual worlds will not simply consist in reframing and reformulating classical philosophical questions and perspectives, but already led to the inevitable emerging of new ways of thinking as well as new philosophical interrogatives. Such questions are often only possible to be articulated as – and/or within – virtual worlds and often reflect on their very digital mediation. I am referring, for example, to philosophical approaches to personal identities in cyberspace, to embodiment and mental dissociation in virtual worlds, to the ontological status of the virtual, to self-reflexivity in simulated worlds, to the our moral horizon in relation with artificial intelligences and virtual beings, to the relationships between actual-world policies and the ones that are enforced in virtual worlds, *et cetera*.

It is in from this standpoint that I argue that virtual worlds need to be understood, studied, and used as the contexts in which a new humanism has already begun to arise. *Wanna play?*

## REVIEW EXCERPTS

Following page

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# Review excerpts for Self-reflexive Videogames

## Observations and corollaries on virtual worlds as philosophical artifacts

"The videogame that is part of the article sucks. It is not fun to play, it is not exciting to explore, and its aesthetics are off-putting. In other words, it succeeds in its job perfectly. It provides a functioning role model for academic software: a quickly testable appendix that the reader can consult in case they wish to deepen their comprehension of the verbal argument. As scholars, we do not want to spend our working hours on processes that we already know more than well.

I would, however, like to play the devil's advocate for one more moment, and point out a potential issue related to the following description of the videogame: "The monster has, in fact, no functionally useful options for interacting with the room: the door does not open for its little red paws, the chest contains nothing, and the objects that are already in the room respond to the players' actions as if they were cheap theatrical props." While playing the videogame indeed confirms the description, it also reveals the paradox of play (most prominently addressed by David Myers' long-lasting position): some players might actually find the unrewarding structure of the videogame rewarding since it enables a unique anti-environment for play. By enabling exploration and potential epiphany via winning (despite the semantically charged "game over" screen), it already succumbs to the standards of genre, mechanics, and theme. Probably, the only way to avoid the paradox would be to not provide the reader the possibility to play at all would be leaving the videogame unpublished cohere with the argument better, reframing it rather a potential, conceptual work of academic software?"

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# Critical Jostling

**ABSTRACT**
Games can serve a critical function in many different ways, from serious games about real world subjects to self-reflexive commentaries on the nature of games themselves. In this essay we discuss critical possibilities stemming from the area of critical design, and more specifically Carl DiSalvo's adversarial design and its concept of reconfiguring the remainder. To illustrate such an approach, we present the design and outcomes of two games, Jostle Bastard and Jostle Parent. We show how the games specifically engage with two previous games, Hotline Miami and Octodad: Dadliest Catch, reconfiguring elements of those games to create interactive critical experiences and extensions of the source material. Through the presentation of specific design concerns and decisions, we provide a grounded illustration of a particular critical function of videogames and hope to highlight this form as another valuable approach in the larger area of videogame criticism.

**KEYWORDS:** *Critical design, adversarial design, reconfiguration, videogame violence, emotion*

The videogames discussed in this essay are freely available at http://www.unwinnable.com/2013/11/19/playable-jostle-bastard/ and http://www.unwinnable.com/2015/04/09/jostle-parent/.

## INTRODUCTION

Videogames, like any medium, can be not just a target of critical engagement but a form of it themselves. *Jostle Bastard* (Barr, 2013) and *Jostle Parent* (Barr, 2015) are two videogames devised as direct critiques of two popular earlier videogames, *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games, 2012) and *Octodad: Dadliest Catch*(Panic Button Games, 2014). These games reify and thus make playable critical interactions with their source material, extending specific ideas that were introduced but not fully developed. As will be discussed, in both source games, reductive settings and narratives led to oversimplifications or missed opportunities for deeper engagement with their subject matter, ultimately prior-

itizing entertainment over meaning. *Hotline Miami*, while often championed as critical of videogame violence, largely contradicts the goals it sets in the actual experience it offers players, falling more on the side of celebrating violence than condemning it, while *Octodad* sacrifices the potential emotional weight associated with parenting to comic stereotypes and slapstick play. Both *Jostle Bastard* and *Jostle Parent* reconfigure central ideas from their source games in order to make alternate strategies of design and corresponding player experiences available. Importantly, these critical games are also able to operate independently of their source games even as they use them as a starting point for reconfigurations of design and narrative.

In this brief essay, the central idea of critical videogame design via reconfiguration will be explored through an examination of the design decisions made in creating *Jostle Bastard* and *Jostle Parent*. First, we will see how the notion of critical game design is developing alongside substantial contributions in other fields such as object design and interaction design, focusing more specifically on adversarial design. We will then review the critical functions of both *Jostle Bastard* and *Jostle Parent* with specific reference to the games they were created in response to, before summarizing the demonstrated potential of critique in videogame design and analysis.

## CRITICAL DESIGN

The practice of design as a form of critique is well expressed in Anthony Dunne's *Hertzian Tales* (Dunne, 1999). Here Dunne outlines a project (later expanded with Fiona Raby) to develop a design practice focused on a critique of what they label "affirmative design". In a more recent discussion of the related area of speculative design, Dunne and Raby (2014) characterize affirmative design as "design that reinforces the status quo", an approach that focuses on solving problems, innovation, and eventual consumption. Critical design, by way of contrast, offers oppositional concepts such as "post-optimal objects" and "user-unfriendliness" (Dunne, 1999) that seek to question and provoke, to *find*-problems and lead us toward critical thought. In this practice, Dunne and Raby produce objects that function as reified critiques of design and technology. One of their best-known design objects is the *Faraday Chair.* It presents the audience with a small, enclosed space in which it is proposed we could shelter from the electromagnetic radiation that invisibly surrounds and penetrates our bodies. By explicitly stating its purpose, the artifact brings the audience's attention to an unsensed aspect of our lives. It provokes us to question, for example, why we are not "protected" from this radiation and what harm it could do to us. In short, Dunne and Raby suggest that such objects can serve a critical function by provoking questions and reflection in an audience through experience and interpretation.

Naturally, matters are more complex than a binary of critical versus affirmative design. As discussed at length by Bardzell and Bardzell (2013), the question of what is and is not critical design may be quite a subjective matter, including

the distinction with art proposed by Dunne and Raby. Bardzell and Bardzell suggest a constellation of properties of critical design by drawing on the traditions of critical theory and metacriticism: the ability to shift the perspective of the audience, a speculative or subjective nature, a dialogic methodology, encouragement of skepticism and sensitivity in interpretation, and reflexive awareness of limitations. Unsurprisingly, the Bardzells point out that many of these qualities are shared with art, blurring the any line we may attempt to draw between art and critical design.

Critical design has already been extended into the world of videogames both in terms of theory and practice by researchers such as Mary Flanagan (2009), Lindsay Grace (2011), and Rilla Khaled (2014). This has included perspectives such as Flanagan's "critical play", a design methodology focused on critical games, and Grace's "critical gameplay", a project of game creation with an emphasis on the self-reflexive critique of existing videogame tropes. These designer-scholars suggest and show how videogames can be imbued with a critical perspective on a great variety of subjects, from social issues to the physical nature of play to commenting on videogames themselves. What is especially interesting about introducing critical design to videogames is the potential for an *interactive* critique that players engage with actively and directly. Thus, while Dunne and Raby's *Faraday Chair* functions as a pointer toward ideas, it is not itself a working object. Indeed, much critical design is of such a speculative nature, functioning more as a thought-experiment or exemplar. James Auger and Jimmy Loizeau's (2001) *Audio Tooth Implant*, for instance, created an imaginary tooth implant for communication that never existed beyond a mockup, and instead drew its critical force from media attention allowing the public to confront this idea "in the wild". In contrast, critical videogames can leverage their very real mechanics and gameplay to communicate their critical perspective through play itself. Videogames are real, functional objects in this world that players can not only think about, but directly interactive with and experience.

## ADVERSARIAL DESIGN

A direct point of connection between the more speculative world of critical (object) design and the functional world of critical videogames can be found in Carl DiSalvo's (2012) discussion of adversarial design. This is a form of critical design focused specifically on interactive technologies which "evokes and engages political issues" but does so "through the conceptualization and making of products and services and our experiences with them" (p. 2). This active creation of experience through working products is central to the adversarial project. Especially relevant in the tactics of adversarial design offered by DiSalvo is the notion of "reconfiguring the remainder" in which:

> [t]he activity of reconfiguration leverages an understanding of the standards of configuration, both technically and socially. It works by manipulating those

> standards and addressing what is left out of common configurations, which can be referred to as "the remainder". (p. 63)

Reconfiguring the remainder involves the idea of taking standard design and technical practices and shifting them in relation to one another in order to highlight elements that may otherwise not be seen. DiSalvo illustrates this with the example of Kelly Dobson's (2007) *Blendie*, an artwork consisting of a blender that responds to human sound only if the human performs the strenuous task of mimicking the sound of a blender. Here critical design ideas surrounding transparent voice-based interaction with technology alongside the drive for humans to adapt themselves to technology are brought to the foreground through an uncommon and disturbing form of interaction that reconfigures conventional and expected product use.

Critical videogame design very often uses this reconfiguration of conventional videogame design tropes. The "remainder" in such cases is the possibilities dormant or excluded in conventional or "affirmative" approaches to design while the reconfigurations are of design decisions and implementation details often taken for granted. We can thus see videogames critiquing videogames as a form of critical reconfiguration to explore latent possibilities of specific design frames. Crucially, as already noted, reconfigured videogames still continue to function as videogames. Their critical power comes from their ability not just to be seen or heard, but to be played.

For the remainder of this article, we will explore two specific examples of this approach of reconfiguring the remainder in critical game design. While sharing some similarities particularly with Lindsay Grace's "critical gameplay" project, here the point is the explicit reconfiguration of pre-existing videogames into new forms that comment on and extend their predecessors.

## *JOSTLE BASTARD:* "I'M HERE TO TEACH YOU HOW TO JOSTLE"

The highly successful arcade-style beat-em-up game *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games, 2012) is set in a dark and seedy world. The player is sent out by mysterious answer phone messages to kill waves of gangland tough guys. The player spends most of their time plotting paths through spaces in order to kill everyone and then escape past their inert bodies and pools of blood. The game was explicitly created with a critique of videogame violence in mind, its creators stating that they "wanted to show how ugly it is when you kill people" (Smith, 2013). This was reflected in the game's presentation of visual and mechanical violent excess through a self-reflexive lens. Throughout, the designers are intent on emptying meaning from the violence as a critical take on players' general acceptance of violent acts during play: the game is repetitive and solely focused on violence and alienation in the form of extended action sequences in which the only resolution is to kill everybody and more "social" scenes that depict the player's character as completely dissociated from everyday life. Indeed,

at the end of the game, a scene breaks the fourth wall with two janitor characters effectively to accuse the player explicitly as someone entranced by violence who needs to examine their motives and goals with dialog such as "we haven't killed anyone, you have…" and "you've done far worse things than we have, haven't you?" (Dennaton Games, 2012).

Despite its interesting intent and design moves, *Hotline Miami* is an awkward fit for a critique of videogame violence. A central difficulty is that when violence and murder constitute the core form of interaction and are inescapable in order to progress through the game's narrative structure, there is no decision with consequences to be made by the player, and thus no ethical quandary. The horror of the piles of bodies at the end of each level is undercut both by the necessity of their death (mechanically speaking) and by the game's explicit validation of the player's actions through an elaborate scoring system. While it might be that, as in *War Games* (1983), "the only winning move is not to play", this is hardly satisfactory in the context of a medium whose only purpose *is* to be played.

*Jostle Bastard* is a reconfiguration of elements of *Hotline Miami* in an attempt to provide a critical response to questions of videogame violence by leveraging DiSalvo's concept of reconfiguring the remainder. Here the remainder is the omission of the consequences of violence beyond the player's immediate visceral response. Centrally, *Jostle Bastard* replaces the central action of "killing" in *Hotline Miami* with the far less drastic verb of "jostling". Through a simple physics implementation, the player's core interaction becomes that of repeatedly bumping into objects and people. By moderating the violent act to one of non-fatal aggression, players are pushed to confront the social ramifications of injuring, intimidating or inconveniencing another person physically. When jostled, other characters in the world may fall down, flee in fear, or even jostle back, giving the violence an evolving social context. Ironically, by dialing back the extremity of physical harm possible, the game makes that violence more actively present in the experience of the player.

Developing this idea of violence taking place in a social context, there are major consequences in the game for the simple act of jostling or being jostled. Scenes largely take place in public places such as cafés, movie theatres, and parks, so if the player creates too great a public disturbance someone will call the police. If the player remains, the police will arrive, arrest her, and take her to jail. The more often the player is arrested, the longer she must spend in a cell before being released. Similarly, the player works as a teacher at the start of the game but, of course, can lose this job if she is violent in the classroom. If she persists in violent behaviour, in fact, the player may end up unemployed and evicted from her apartment, sleeping in public parks and wandering from scene to scene. This disintegration of the player's life and social relations as a consequence of violent behaviour reconfigures *Hotline Miami*'s extremes into a more nuanced and realistic representation of the impact of violence on day-to-day life.

As in *Hotline Miami*, *Jostle Bastard* would still offer a problematic representation of violence if the player had no other options, so the game also includes the possibility of pursuing an "ordinary" life. The player can teach a class of children, buy a coffee at the café, watch a movie peacefully, and so on. These forms of interaction may be far less exciting than creating mayhem, of course, but they do serve as a contrast, problematizing any violence as not strictly "necessary" to the narrative of the world. This enables players to think critically about the idea of violence as "fun" without the excuse of it being mandatory.

As a dynamic system, *Jostle Bastard* also revealed possibilities for emotional distress that were not explicitly designed for. This was exemplified in one tester's experience with the "revenge" element of the game: if you are violent in *Jostle Bastard* there is a chance that your victims may return later with reinforcements to get payback, jostling you mercilessly. In this instance, the tester had followed the predictable path of jostling people, being jailed repeatedly, and losing his teaching job. This creates a stressful situation in the game, of course, but this player then decided to "go straight" and behave like a decent person. He performed his new job quietly, went to the movies, and sat in the park. Despite his peacefulness, a group seeking revenge for being jostled earlier burst onto the scene to retaliate. He did not fight back, but the police were summoned and he was jailed again as the underlying code of the game does not distinguish who is jostling whom. The tester thus found himself at the mercy of both an unjust legal system and his history of violence; even "going straight" was no longer an option.

### *JOSTLE PARENT*: THREE LIVES

*Jostle Parent* was created to serve as a critique of design decisions made in the popular physics-engine-comedy game *Octodad: Dadliest Catch*. In *Octodad* the player must awkwardly manipulate the limbs of an octopus pretending to be a human to solve seemingly simple challenges such as pouring a glass of chocolate milk or mowing the lawn. The physics-based interface is very literal, leading to slapstick comedy as the player flails incompetently.

The most interesting feature of *Octodad* for our purposes is that it introduces an emotional dimension. By framing the protagonist as fearful of being discovered as an octopus and thus losing his family, there is a significant focus on his valiant attempts to be a good parent to the children he loves while under duress of the constant threat of exposure. This emotional core is, however, undermined by the game's linear narrative: failing (notably, being detected as an octopus) leads only to restarting a "level" of play. There is ultimately only one narrative, the one in which *Octodad* is successful. Any sense of emotional consequence experienced in moment-to-moment play is quickly eroded as the player realises there are no narrative or other ongoing social consequences of their failures. This, along with the explicitly comic approach to the subject matter, means *Octodad* offers very limited emotional tones.

*Jostle Parent* escalates the potential emotional drama and risks of parenting by reconfiguring the elements of *Octodad*'s scenario into a more "realistic" simulation of possible consequences. In fact, in the process of reconfiguration the source game itself takes a back seat: unlike *Jostle Bastard*, *Jostle Parent*does not rely on explicitly referencing *Octodad* to bring forward its critical point. Taking its cue from *Jostle Bastard*, the protagonist of *Jostle Parent* is only able to "jostle" as his primary interaction with the world. Using this action, the player is asked to take care of the protagonist's three children over the course of a day, waking them up in the morning, feeding them breakfast, taking them to the park and beach, and so on. During this day the player must focus on bodily pushing the children around the environments as well as colliding with certain objects in order to interact with them (jostling food out of the refrigerator, for instance). This task is already difficult enough, and mirrors *Octodad*'s struggles to perform banal daily tasks, but *Jostle Parent* includes the very real possibility that the children might die. The hazards include faulty electrical sockets, deep water, and busy roads, all of which the player must skillfully navigate the children around. Without the comfort of a linear narrative and a happy ending, the anxiety and emotion of the game are centered not on the idea of being temporarily unmasked as a fraud (an octopus) before resetting, but of being revealed once and for all to be the worst kind of parent, one who lets their children die.

Many of the design decisions in *Jostle Parent* were aimed at building a sense of responsibility and emotional investment in the lives of the children. The children have their own names, for instance, (shown through surtitles) and these names are announced if they die, removing any idea of a "generic" child. Throughout the game the children also act like children, clinging to the protagonist, playing happily with toys or watching television, while also constantly wandering around their environment. All these features help to make the children sympathetic, independent agents with their own inner worlds in order to emphasize their individual value to the protagonist. The simple activities in the game, such as playing with a ball or swimming, are intended to give a sense of everyday realism through their very lack of drama.

*Jostle Parent* thus takes *Octodad*'s nod to the stresses and consequences of parenting to an extreme in order to show how an intense emotional commitment could be achieved. Most centrally, consequences in *Jostle Parent* are permanent: if a child dies in the game the protagonist visits the grave with the remaining children and the day restarts. While this seems like a standard videogame "reset" after a lost life, the deceased child's bed is empty and they are instead represented as a gravestone in the graveyard from this point on. In many games, players have three "lives" to help get them through the various levels; here the three children are a literal version of those "three lives", representing a judgment of the player's performance of parenting. Somewhat ironically, the gameplay itself becomes easier with each child's death as there is less multitasking required.

Ultimately, the remainder revealed by *Jostle Parent's* reconfiguration of the tropes and mechanics of *Octodad* is the potential for emotional engagement and tragedy by embracing permanent consequences in design. The player of *Jostle Parent* feels a similar stress to the player of *Octodad* in the sense of the difficulties of micromanaging a physical simulation, but only the player of *Jostle Parent* knows that if they fail, the child in their charge will die and, perhaps worse, they will have to play on without them rather than restart. There are thus multiple narratives the game might follow, acknowledging that a central element of evoking deep emotion is knowing things could have been otherwise. In fact, the protagonist himself can also die in certain circumstances and become a ghost. They are able to watch any remaining children asleep in bed but are no longer able to care for them – perhaps the ultimate tragedy for a parent.

## SUMMARY

Games can be critical in a great variety of ways, from serious games about real world subjects to more inward-gazing self-reflexive commentaries on the nature of games themselves. In this essay we have discussed two games, *Jostle Bastard* and *Jostle Parent*, in terms of DiSalvo's concept of reconfiguring the remainder. When we reconfigure the remainder in videogames, we shift the structures of more conventional designs in such a way as to make apparent assumptions or absent possibilities. Both *Jostle Bastard* and *Jostle Parent* reconfigure their source games to bring out and highlight an omitted or missed "remainder" centered around the often neglected ideas of consequence and tragedy in mainstream design.

*Jostle Bastard* reconfigures *Hotline Miami*'s frictionless violence by shifting it to a social environment where violence matters beyond its visceral and visual horror. By *reducing* the actual violence performed, the game makes that violence harder to avoid as a consequential act. *Jostle Parent* reconfigures the emotional play gestured toward in *Octodad* by introducing real consequences in a non-deterministic world in which such emotion can be registered and experienced – a mechanically "unsafe space" in which to fully engage with tragedy. Both games thus reconfigure their sources in ways that both critique existing design strategies but also productively suggest alternative possibilities that are valuable in their own right. The design and development process required by reconfiguration is a specific critical outcome in itself, but most importantly allows real players both to contemplate design norms and tropes they are familiar and to suggest new ideas and experiences that might be possible through alternate design practices.

## REVIEW EXCERPTS

Following page

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ANONYMOUS reviewer 1
June 2016

# Review excerpts for Critical Jostling

"[referring to Dunne & Raby] A key part of D&R's perspective is the critique of "affirmative design" (e.g. the keeping of the status quo, affirming consumeristic neoliberal attitudes). Another key component, better articulated years later in Speculative Everything, is the idea of producing artifacts that are sitting in our world, yet coming from another, slightly more disturbing one. I also have some issues with characterizing their work as a critique of design and technology: in Hertzian Tales, in Design Noir and in Speculative Everything, they insist on the relationship between society, expectation and design – with the objective of acting on design to reveal how it shapes up society.

There's a wealth of literature on the (often quite controversial) relationship between D&R and (interaction) design. A key text here is Bardzell, J., Bardzell, S.: What is "Critical" About Critical Design? In: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems. pp. 3297–3306. ACM, New York, NY, USA (2013)."

"[when the 1st draft mentioned a straightforward division between Critical Design being "not working objects" and games having "very real mechanics"] There are examples of critical designs that are completely speculative (e.g. the Teddy Bear Blood Bag Radio by D&R), some others that are at an halfway point (e.g. the Pigeor D'Or ), some others that were perfectly realized and functional. An important text on the functionality of critical designs is Pierce, J., Paulos, E.: Counterfunctional Things: Exploring Possibilities in Designing Digital Limitations. In: Proceedings of the 2014 Conference on Designing Interactive Systems. pp. 375–384. ACM, New York, NY, USA (2014). I would frame it as "some designs are 'speculative', whereas games are real objects in this world" "

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# Nostalgia Videogames as Playable Game Criticism

**ABSTRACT**
The aim of this paper is to consider the emergence of nostalgia videogames in the context of playable game criticism. Mirroring the development of the nostalgia film in cinema, an increasing number of developers are creating videogames that are evocative of past gaming forms, designs, and styles. The primary focus of this paper is to explore the extent to which these nostalgia videogames could be considered games-on-games: games that offer a critical view on game design and development, framed by the nostalgia and cultural memory of both gamers and game developers. Theories of pastiche and parody as applied to literature, film, and art are used to form a basis for the examination of recent nostalgia videogames, all of which demonstrate a degree of reflection on the videogame medium.

**KEYWORDS:** *Game design, nostalgia, parody, pastiche, retro games*

## THE NOSTALGIA VIDEOGAME

The focus of this essay is the nostalgia videogame, which I define as any contemporary game that explicitly incorporates past aesthetics, design philosophies, or emulated technical limitations. My specific aim is to address two questions: to what extent can we consider contemporary nostalgia videogames to be a form of pastiche or parody that provides a critical engagement with the past? And subsequently, can we identify these nostalgia videogames as part of the wider discourse on games-on-games?

The maturation of videogames and, by extension, the gaming audience, has logically led to a period of introspective original games that demonstrate a fascination with the history of the medium. While publishers and consumers have long been invested in the repackaging, resale, and collecting of videogames (see for instance Swalwell, 2007), in recent years there has been a distinctive shift toward the development of new games that demonstrate nostalgia for past gaming. Videogames that purposefully signalled retro styles were initially discussed as a potential fad in game development (Ramachandran, 2008). Almost

a decade later, the expanded production and consumption of retro-styled games demonstrates the broader social, economic, and cultural value of the nostalgia videogame, and suggests that game developers are increasingly engaging with the design philosophies and aesthetics of past gaming eras to inform contemporary game development projects.

We might initially dismiss these nostalgia games as overly sentimental, as an obsession with gaming relics. Many critics have indeed dismissed the potential for nostalgia to offer any form of critical engagement with the past. This is perhaps most obvious in critique of the nostalgia film, famously identified as a depthless product of postmodern cultural production by Jameson (1991, pp. 279-296). It has been argued, however, that the nostalgia film offers new ways of interpreting and understanding social and media history (Sprengler, 2009, pp. 84-90). More broadly, the emotional, intellectual, and critical value of nostalgia has been discussed in relation to cultural and media memory (e.g. Boym 2001; Errl, 2011; Sperb, 2016). One of the key arguments in support of critical nostalgia centres on the idea that nostalgia can reveal as much about the present (and our aspirations for the future) as it can the past (Lowenthal, 1985, p.8). While not as rigorous as historical methods – which ultimately aim for an objective evaluation of the past – nostalgic imitations can be regarded as a form of critical engagement with the past framed by personal and collective memory. This in turn reveals more about our current situation: the contemporary social, economic, and cultural issues that we face, and how this directs us to remember the past in particular ways.

With specific regards to nostalgia videogames, Garda (2013) offers one of the most useful discussions of nostalgic tendencies in game design. In her analysis, Garda defines retro game design utilising a continuum of restorative to reflective nostalgia, an approach that is generally appropriate to understanding the relationship between nostalgia, memory, and technology (Van der Heijden, 2015). Restorative nostalgia can be aligned with the re-emergence and deployment of classic games on modern hardware, predominantly through online stores. Of more pressing interest to the current essay, reflective nostalgia can be considered the design of neo-retro games: new games that reflect a revival of past styles or designs (as in retro 8-bit, retro 16-bit etc.) The manner in which games reference the past is raised by Garda, which has implications for the type of consumer nostalgia that may be appealed to. Gaming nostalgia may be personal (in that some players have direct memories of the referenced works), or collective and detached (in that some players will not have direct appreciation of the referenced works, but understand the references).

In this essay, I aim to build on this existing work by proposing that the nostalgia videogame could be considered a form of playable game criticism. I explore the notion that these nostalgia videogames are in fact games-on-games: games that have been developed by designers who are critically engaged with both the history of their medium and their own emotional and intellectual connection to gaming. In an age in which games can be quickly sourced and

downloaded on to consoles, PCs, and mobile devices, it is easier than ever for gamers to connect with gaming history by playing classic games. But is simply playing a classic game a sufficient means of understanding the aspirations and ideals of past designers and gamers? I explore whether contemporary critical imitation (in the form of pastiche and parody) can help us to understand gaming history, and whether the act of playing these nostalgia videogames can offer unique insights into game making and culture.

This essay is structured in two parts. In the first part I develop a foundation for the analysis of nostalgia videogames by linking the literature on pastiche and parody (which typically focuses on literature, film, and art) to game design. The intention here is to identify useful definitions of pastiche and parody, and in turn consider how these definitions could inform research that is specifically grounded within game design. In the second part of the essay, I select and discuss a series of nostalgia videogames that make reference to period game design and culture.

## CRITICAL IMITATION

Todorov (1984) states that, "intentionally or not, all discourse is in dialogue with prior discourses on the same subject" (p. x ). Expanding on this statement, Todorov suggests that this applies not only to literature, but also to all cultural works, which draw upon the repository of knowledge retained within the collective memory. When it comes to examples of contemporary mimicry – such as the nostalgia videogame – it is therefore pertinent that we question how the imitation relates to the wider discourse on past (and future) game design.

There are many approaches to creating an imitation, as well as a variety of artistic reasons for engaging with mimicry. Hoesterey (2001, pp. 10-15) and Dyer (2007, pp. 11-16) identify a range of imitative modes, including the fake, the homage, and the emulation. Of note here are two particular modes that are well discussed in the literature: the pastiche and the parody. These are closely related imitative modes, so much so that neatly categorising works as belonging to one mode or the other is not necessarily straightforward. Dyer argues that both pastiche and parody are unconcealed imitations (i.e. they do not hide their imitation of an original work, as a forgery does) that signal their source texts. For Dyer, the difference between a pastiche and a parody concerns the evaluative approach: the pastiche invites an open evaluation of its imitation, whereas the parody incorporates a predetermined evaluation of the material being imitated. More generally, the distinction can be summarised as one of similarity and difference: where a pastiche is a work that focuses more on its similarities with an original work (or a series of works, or genre, or the style of an artist), the parody incorporates both similarity and difference to create an ironic effect (Hutcheon, 1985).

If we look first at definitions of pastiche, we can identify that this is an imitative mode that often requires the reader (player) to work to understand and make sense of its references. As Hoesterey (2001) states, "unless one can decipher the intertexts, many postmodern works will offer only a banal aesthetic experience"

(p. 27). Hoesterey also stresses the intricacy of a true pastiche. In relation to cinema, she states that contemporary pastiche structuration "goes beyond mere quotation to comprise a complex medley and layering of different styles and motifs" (p. 46). From this perspective, we can suggest two criteria for a videogame pastiche: 1) that a videogame pastiche should incorporate a broad range of gaming references, and 2) that a videogame pastiche should challenge players to exercise their knowledge of gaming history to fully appreciate these references.

Dyer (2007) provides further definitions of pastiche that can aid in the analysis of nostalgia videogames, including the concept that the "pastiche imitates its idea of that which it imitates" (p. 55). In other words, the pastiche offers some insight into how a game designer (or game culture more generally) interprets these original games: it is an imitation that is shaped by contemporary perceptions of the past. Dyer also identifies that the pastiche is constructed via a process of deformation (the selection of traits) and discrepancy (the exaggeration of traits) (pp. 56-58). This process implies a degree of critical engagement on the part of the game designer, and in turn the need for the game player to become a critical player.

In terms of parody, Hutcheon argues that "postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representation" (1989, p. 94). Hutcheon regards parody as a legitimate, intellectual, and critical form of engagement with the past: an imitative mode that "signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (p. 93). Echoing this definition, Harries stresses that:

> As a textual system, parody simultaneously says one thing while saying another, always acting as an ironic tease. Thus, it is probably productive to think of parody as a term connoting both closeness and distance as well as the oscillating process that binds both discursive directions. (Harries, 2000, p. 5)

It is this emphasis on establishing ironic difference that we might consider important to analysis of nostalgia videogames. Where game designers have implemented a stark difference with the source of imitation, we could consider what this says about both the original work and our contemporary orientation towards past gaming. For Harries, cinematic parody can be seen to emerge when similarity and difference are contrasted within the film lexicon (the core elements of the film, e.g. the characters, costumes, settings, and props), syntax (the narrative structure), and style (how the film is shot, edited, and presented). Harries also defines six methods for establishing ironic difference that could be useful to our analysis of nostalgia videogames: Reiteration, Inversion, Misdirection, Literalisation, Extraneous Inclusion, and Exaggeration.

While the above definitions allow us to distinguish pastiche and parody, for the purposes of this essay I do not deem it necessary to clearly and definitively

separate pastiche from parody, nor to move to classify nostalgia games as falling neatly into one mode or the other. In order to establish a foundation for discussion, I choose to work with the broad definition that these are related modes of unconcealed imitation that are concerned with a variable degree of similarity and difference with original sources, where pastiche tends to emphasise similarity across a range of sources and parody tends to contrast similarity and difference for ironic effect.

What is arguably of most importance to the current discussion is how we relate existing theories of critical imitation to the videogame medium, which comes with its own set of aesthetic and structural qualities. Fundamentally, it is vital that we recognise the distinct properties of the videogame as a structured and symbolic media form. While much has been written about the videogame form, for simplicity I have chosen here to work with the Mäyrä's core and shell model (Mäyrä, 2008). This model offers an opportunity to translate definitions of pastiche and parody derived from studies of literature, film, and art into the lexicon of videogames. In essence, we could approach analysis of nostalgia videogames by considering how critical imitation has been applied within the videogame shell (the symbolic representation, e.g. the narrative, the audio-visual design) and the videogame core (game rules, systems, and mechanics). For example, we might observe that the ironic difference of parody is established through close similarity within the gameplay design, but inversion and misdirection within the audio-visual representation of settings and characters.

## NOSTALGIA VIDEOGAMES AS PLAYABLE GAME CRITICISM

In order to address the core research questions of the paper, I have opted to focus on a sample of three videogames that demonstrate different approaches to imitation. These games are Braid (Number None Inc., 2008), Homesickened (Snapman, 2015), and Velocity 2X (Futurlab, 2014). The following analysis draws upon the definitions of pastiche and parody discussed above as a means of interpreting how critical imitation has been deployed. The goal of this analysis is not to try to categorise a nostalgia videogame as definitively parody or pastiche, but to instead discuss how imitation is presented within the game core and shell, and in turn to discuss what this critical imitation can tell us about the place of nostalgia videogames within the wider discourse of games-on-games.

Taking *Braid* as a first example, we instantly recognise the imitation of *Super Mario Bros* within both the game shell and core. This includes: adversaries that appear to be piranha plants and goombas, the pursuit of a princess and the message at the end of each level that the "princess is in another castle", castles and flags at the end of levels, and even a section of gameplay that imitates the level layout of *Donkey Kong*. However, we also identify parodic elements within *Braid* that help to establish critical distance from its source game. Inversion and misdirection, for example, are frequently used to create a clear contrast with *Super Mario Bros*. The use of parody in *Braid* allows us to treat it as a game

about a game: as a critique not only of *Super Mario Bros.*, but also of our memory of *Super Mario Bros.*as an icon of the early years of home console gaming.

If we unpack this, we can draw some observations about how *Braid* operates as a form of playable criticism. Considering firstly the game shell, *Braid's* use of transformed visual and narrative elements purposefully draws attention to the childlike innocence of *Super Mario Bros.* (and the gamer as child), setting up *Braid* as a kind of re-visitation to childhood (by the gamer as adult). Visually, the impressionistic style of *Braid* transforms the innocent cartoon world of *Super Mario Bros.* into a world that appears more refined and mature. Given that *Braid* was released at a time when the Indie game was moving into the mainstream, we might interpret from this the emerging desire to treat games as an art form, rather than as the consumer electronic toy that they were cast as in the 1980s. In *Braid*, the pixelated graphics and familiar shapes, forms, and characters of *Super Mario Bros.* are reimagined in a manner that suggests a distorted memory of the original game: a game from childhood now viewed again through the eyes of adulthood.

*Braid's* critical imitation of the narrative of *Super Mario Bros.* is particularly interesting. On the one hand, *Braid* utilises a degree of similarity (recognisable characters, the quest to save the princess etc.) On the other hand, *Braid* uses irony to transform and critique the narrative of *Super Mario Bros.* This use of misdirection changes not only how we interpret the story and themes of both games, but also how we perceive the player-characters (Mario and Tim) as protagonist-heroes. For instance, one of the most striking examples of irony in *Braid* is the applied use of misdirection in the game's final section. At this point, the reversal of time within gameplay reveals that the princess has not been awaiting rescue from Tim, but has actually been trying to escape from the misguided player-character all along. Here we see the protagonist archetype flipped from ideal-hero to anti-hero: Tim is not the knight in shining armour, but a complicated and oftentimes dark individual who appears to be a social outcast. In this critical imitation, Tim is Mario viewed through the eyes of the now cynical adult gamer/game designer, but he could also be interpreted as a reflection of an adult gamer stereotype: that of the loner caught up in a fantasy of heroism, but neglectful of reality.

Within the game core, we can also observe closeness to and distance from *Super Mario Bros*. The jump mechanic, while important, serves as another form of misdirection. The fundamental mechanic in *Braid*is actually the ability to reverse time, to both solve problems and undo mistakes. And a consequence of this is a much more difficult and challenging game. Functionally, *Braid* is a jump-based platformer like *Super Mario Bros.*, but the additional time-reversal mechanic transforms the experience of play. While the gameplay of *Super Mario Bros*. focuses on skill and timing (attributes that we can associate with the younger gamer), *Braid* focuses on problem solving and fiendishly perplexing puzzles that seem to purposely facilitate player frustration.

*Braid* is a nostalgia videogame, but this nostalgia is not merely sentimental. *Braid's* nostalgia is necessary to the game's thematic exploration of time, relationships, loss, and the conflicted nature of game design itself. We could play *Braid* as a game about games culture (it points to a pivotal point in our collective gaming 'childhood', whilst reminding us through both narrative and a time-based mechanic that we can never go back and fully undo the past). We could also play *Braid* as a game about both game designers and gamers: individuals who have grown up playing games like *Super Mario Bros.*, who had aspirations for the future, but who now have adult lives and adult relationships that may not live up to those past aspirations. Mario always saves the day and wins the adoration of the princess, but Tim is a social outcast whose heroics and adoration exist only in fantasy. From this perspective, the nostalgic imitation of *Super Mario Bros.* is important to *Braid* if it is to be understood as a game-on-games. *Super Mario Bros*. is arguably one of the most widely recognised icons of game design, readily associated with both the emergence of home gaming and the establishment of one of the most important and pervasive game genres: the platformer. *Super Mario Bros*. can be remembered nostalgically as a game that opened up new future possibilities in gaming. By imitating this game, *Braid* echoes past aspirations for gaming, while offering new ideas about the current practice and future possibilities of game design.

While *Braid's* critical imitation targets the design of a particular game, imitation of historic hardware limitations is one of the common ways in which nostalgia videogames seek to engage with and comment on the past. Of these games, *Homesickened* (Figure 2) is an excellent example: a nostalgia videogame that strives for an authentic period audiovisual presentation and gameplay design, while simultaneously creating critical distance by problematizing nostalgia itself. By using the aesthetics of period computer hardware to create a strong sense of discomfort, *Homesickened* turns nostalgia on its head. Homesickness has historically been linked to nostalgia and, at first glance, *Homesickened* presents an opportunity to return to the warm, familiar landscape of 1980s computing. But the clue is in the title: this is not the remembered cyber space of 80s gaming, but a glaringly unfamiliar and jarring space that is more uncanny than nostalgic.

The visual design of *Homesickened* closely imitates the output capabilities of a Color Graphics Adapter (CGA) in 320×200 4-colour mode, where the selected palette comprises black, white, magenta, and cyan. Although other games (such as *Downwell* or *Shovel Knight*) imitate the limited colour graphics and low resolutions of early home computers and consoles, few games allow their technological imitation to overwhelm the player experience to the extent that *Homesickened* does. This is a game that imitates the sluggishness of primitive graphics cards. The slow screen refresh rate as the player moves clumsily through the environment is distinctly uncomfortable for today's gamers, who are accustomed to precision and accuracy even when retro graphics are deployed. *Homesickened* makes use of a 3D game engine, allowing for free movement around a 3D

world: something that certainly wasn't possible in the early 1980s. But the use of graphical downgrading results in a drop in response time that seems almost stationary by today's expectations. On top of this, *Homesickened* emulates the churning, mechanical sounds of primitive computer hardware, creating an eerie soundtrack. The overall effect is a shattering of nostalgic selectiveness. *Homesickened* inverts the syntax of techno-nostalgia itself: it draws our attention to the gritty reality of 80s computer hardware, instead of providing a rose-tinted vision of the past that is augmented and improved for contemporary tastes.

In terms of game shell and game core, we can observe how *Homesickened* specifically targets us – the gamers – and critiques our own tendency to venerate the game technologies of the past. It is a game on games, yes, but more specifically it is a game about gamers and their relationship with their own gaming heritage. As noted above, the thorough downgrading of visual presentation makes it difficult for us to pick out elements in the game world, as they transition between various states of visual clarity as we move towards them. Not only does this serve to accurately emulate the reality of early computer graphics, but it also works as a metaphor for the problem of nostalgia itself, symbolising the fuzzy perception we have of the games we revere. In terms of gameplay design, perhaps one of the most interesting choices is the implementation of unnecessarily awkward controls, imitating the often counterintuitive keyboard controls of 1980s computer games. Most videogames today make use of elaborate control schemes, but these controls tend to feel intuitive to the point that players perform complex actions without paying much attention to the physical pressing of buttons. Navigation and interaction in *Homesickened* should be intuitive, but interactions (with the space bar) typically require the player to be close to and correctly orientated towards a target (resulting in dissatisfying beeps when the space bar is pressed to no avail), while player navigation is limited to either moving forward/backward or turning on the spot. In terms of both the shell and core, then, *Homesickened* presents an imitation of the past the critiques not only the historical development of games technology and interfaces, but also (and perhaps more importantly) our rose-tinted orientation towards a gaming past that is more rudimentary and unsatisfying than we often acknowledge.

The referencing to gaming's past in the above examples is plain to see: *Braid* makes clear reference to a well-known game franchise, and *Homesickened* is predicated upon the emulation of period technical limitations. However, we can also identify nostalgia videogames that require players to exercise a deeper knowledge of games history in order to recognise and interpret their multiple layers of references: a quality we can clearly link to the concept of the pastiche.

One particularly good example of a videogame that is perhaps not immediately identifiable as nostalgic is FuturLab's *Velocity 2X* (see Figure 3). This is a technically sophisticated game that makes the most of current games technologies: it showcases elegant HD graphics, includes layered techno music and SFX, and provides extremely sensitive and satisfying gameplay, with limited load-

ing times between levels. Even transitions between two very different types of gameplay – space-based shooting and platforming – occur seamlessly. There can be no mistaking, then, that this is an original game franchise made for a contemporary audience. At the same time, however, *Velocity 2X* is clearly not an original. Both stylistically and mechanically it borrows heavily from past gaming and associated games culture.

Fundamentally, *Velocity 2X* is an example of an X meets Y: a product that can be defined by the mashing together of two well-understood concepts. In this case, the X and Y are the vertical-scrolling space shoot-em-up and the sci-fi platformer. These game genres are perhaps best equated to the game series *Xenon*and *Metroid* respectively. We can compare *Velocity 2X* to both of these series and identify significant references. On the one hand, the similarities with *Xenon* include the upgradeable player-starship, the waves of enemies, and end- and mid-level bosses. On the other hand, the similarities with *Metroid*include the alien setting, the dichotomy of puzzle and action gameplay, and 2D scrolling levels. Additionally, player-character Kai Tana bears a resemblance to *Metroid* player-character Samus Aran from later games in the series, particularly the Zero Suit version of Samus from *Metroid: Other M*. More broadly there are embedded references to games such as *WipEout*, which clearly influenced not only the speed-orientated gameplay of *Velocity 2X* but also the mid-90s techno aesthetic.

*Velocity 2X* is an especially interesting example of a nostalgic videogame pastiche because its final presentation appears strikingly contemporary. The nostalgia of *Velocity 2X* resides within FuturLab's reconnection with past game design philosophies and ideals: fast-paced gameplay, incremental introduction of mechanics that gradually build complexity, and an emphasis on many, short levels that increasingly challenge player skill and that encourage replay for higher scores. This kind of broad pastiche of past game design is apparent in other nostalgia videogames that are more evidently retro in their styling: *Super Meat Boy, Shovel Knight,* or *Towerfall Ascension*, for example. While parodic nostalgia videogames tend to make more explicit evaluations through the use of similarity and difference, nostalgia videogames such as *Velocity 2X* are more evaluatively open. It isn't really important whether or not players understand the references: the game is enjoyable in its own right. But if the player can recognise and understand the references, they will be able to appreciate the game on a deeper level, and even understand the game as a form of playable game criticism. The process of deformation inherent within pastiche – the selection, exaggeration, and concentration of traits from past games – provides us with an insight into what the game designer felt was most valuable about those games.

With a nostalgia videogame such as *Velocity 2X*, where the critical imitation operates closer to what we may understand as pastiche, we are provided with a game experience that has been carefully (and, most likely, lovingly) curated by a game designer who possesses a deep knowledge of and passion for games. A game such as *Velocity 2X* borrows particular visual, audio, and ludic refer-

ences from past games, and then remixes and updates these references for a contemporary audience. It seeks to demonstrate to players what the qualities of these games were (or often, why our collective memories of these games are so resilient). *Velocity 2X*, then, can be considered a game-on-games that requires players to look back on a range of gaming sources and consider not only what was good about these games in the past, but also how the targeted selection and mixing of these references can make for gaming experiences today that feel simultaneously original yet familiar.

## CONCLUSION

Nostalgia in videogaming can be (and frequently is) dismissed as a sentimental pandering to consumer-creator longing for a lost past. In this context, I believe that it is important that we avoid dismissing a game due to its apparent nostalgic aspirations, and even hold back from using the word nostalgic as a negative term when describing a neo-retro game. It is certainly true that many nostalgia videogames offer only a romanticised view of the past, with limited or no evidence of critical engagement or evaluation. However, this essay has shown that examples of nostalgia videogames, when framed by theories of critical imitation, can be understood as playable explorations of the past. On the one hand, this can include nostalgic pastiches that, through selective referencing and layering, provide us with an insight into the thinking of today's game designers. In particular, pastiches can help us to understand the game designer's appreciation of past game design philosophies and play styles. With videogames that incorporate the qualities of the pastiche, players are challenged to become critical players who must work to interpret the references and make an evaluation of the intentions of the designer. On the other hand, videogames that take a more parodic approach can point to the ideas of the past and contrast these with contemporary issues in game design, development, and culture. In these instances, designers are empowered to provide direct commentary on their interpretation of past game design philosophies, styles, and technologies.

Within the wider discourse of games-on-games, I would suggest that the nostalgia videogame offers researchers and designers a means of engaging with the history of the medium. The parallel with the nostalgia film provides us with a start point for both the further study of nostalgia videogames, and the creative exploration of the medium's past through critical videogame design.

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## PHOTO CREDITS:

Cover image: Artwork created by the author

Figure 1: Screenshot from the Xbox 360 version of Braid (2008)

Figure 2: Screenshot from the Mac OS X version of Homesickened (2015)

Figure 3: Screenshot from the PS4 version of Velocity 2x (2014)

All sources screen captured from the games as listed in the References.

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# Bust A Cup

## Reclaiming Risk in Play

**ABSTRACT**
Our overly fearful risk society has eliminated much of the beneficial risk that should exist in contemporary games. Games that incorporate actual risk by design can help us overcome delimiting and harmful fears, habits, and laws. Riskier games expose our self-imposed limitations, creating opportunities for us to grow past them. *Bust A Cup* is a risky game that serves as exemplar in this paper but other games such as *Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally Okay Now*, *Pac-Manhattan*, and *BorderXing Guide* will also provide perspective. These games are risky by design, empowering players to engage in varying degrees of danger that may be legal, physical, and in some cases merely perceived. They reward recklessness with gameplay advantages and are as safe as players collectively decide to make them.

**KEYWORDS:** *Play, risk, risky games, game design, physical games, broken games, risk society*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at some of the negative effects from how we conceptualize and mitigate risk in society. Then it examines how games that afford varying degrees and types of risk can help counteract those negative effects. Risky games offer opportunities for players to face, feel, and redefine self-imposed limitations that protect us from danger or injury. The primary game examined is *Bust A Cup*, although other risky games are studied to provide perspective and contrast. The paper will also advise how to afford risk by design while avoiding the popular, unfortunate aesthetic of human destruction. The paper closes with the argument that risky games can serve a vital function to society by embracing a form of political protest akin to certain forces within the historical avant-garde.

### RISK SOCIETY

Risk is the exposure to danger, injury, or loss. Amy Fusselman (2015) explores how we have stripped childhood of risk-taking without actually mak-

ing it any safer in *Savage Park: A Meditation on Play, Space, and Risk for Americans Who Are Nervous, Distracted, and Afraid to Die*. Fusselman promotes "adventure playgrounds", curated junkyards for kids who are only minimally supervised. Adventure playgrounds are stocked with building tools such as saws, hammers, box cutters, nails, rope, and assorted trash such as rusting boats, mounds of old tires, and deteriorating piles of wood, enabling children to navigate risk of minor injury according to their own emergent play interests such as constructing whimsical or ramshackle play structures. Adventure playgrounds are not popular in the United States due to their perceived risk and exposure to litigation.

Adults have become increasingly averse to their own risk as well over the past few decades. Mainstream news media have become more alarmist, contributing to an overwhelming sense that we suffer from a growing litany of calamitous risks from terror attacks, to new infectious diseases, climate change, and so on. German sociologist Ulrich Beck coined the term "risk society" to define how society organizes in response to risk. Our risks are no longer limited to regions, territories, or countries. They have become spatially unbounded, each with myriad contributing factors—many unknown or uncharted. Agencies charged with risk management seem decreasingly able to assess and mitigate short and long-term dangers. According to Beck "the hidden critical issue in world risk society is *how to feign control over the uncontrollable*—in politics, law, science, technology, economy, and everyday life" (Raley, 2009, p. 35). We realize that we cannot effectively control our growing systemic risks so the best we can do is pretend to minimize them, for example with security theater in U.S. airports. The more we minimize risk the more we close off ways of being, thinking, and socializing that are integral to questioning and adapting our place and purpose in the world.

## THE COUNTERINTUITIVE RESULT OF GETTING BEATEN UP

As a writer, educator, and designer I strive to diversify why and how games are made as well as what games can do and mean. One of the ways I help realize these goals is by allowing game design practice to inform life experience and vice versa. My games are inspired by things that happen in my everyday life, and, conversely, I try to allow a ludic mindset to inform aspects of my behavior and life choices. For example, I bring a playful open-mindedness to where I choose to visit in Chicago or while traveling in Cambodia, Mexico, Colombia, the Philippines, etc., and whom I choose to interact with. This brings me into neighborhoods and into contact with people whom my social circle or better judgment may deem dangerous, uninteresting, and so on.

The impetus for developing the game *Bust A Cup* and ultimately this paper was getting beaten up. In the fall of 2014, I suffered an unprovoked attack by three strangers on the street in Chicago. I was not given a chance to give up my property before the attack, which happened suddenly out of nowhere. It is unclear if the assailants wanted to rob, assault me, or both. Without warning, an

assailant choked me while another beat my head and ribs with a socket wrench and a third punched my stomach. The attackers pinned me to the ground as they beat me but I did not pass out or give up. I got up several times as they kept beating me down. They kept screaming, "Stay down!" but I did not. Although I did not fight back effectively, I was able to work my way free eventually due to adrenaline, terror, and resolve.

The event was traumatic leaving me injured and shocked. However unfortunate, it taught me that my body is much tougher than I thought and my mind resolute when suffering a beating. Before the event, I did not know how I would react to an assault but now I do. My self-image changed after the beating, counter-intuitively causing me to feel stronger and more resilient once I worked through the initial shock and returned from the hospital. After I recovered from the trauma, I wanted to bring positive aspects of that experience to a game I would develop so players could realize their own resolve and resilience in the face of fear of injury. I wanted to let people play an artfully softened attack, as well as interpret and perform it each in their own way.

### *BUST A CUP*

*Bust A Cup* (2014) is a physical two-player puppet brawler developed by the author and Brian Gabor Jr. Coffee cups are placed upside down on top of "attack puppets", crude wooden crosses armed with hammers, chains, and locks. The player who breaks her opponent's cup wins. Maneuvering around in combat a player's coffee cup wobbles and tinkles against the wood. As cups are not glued or attached to the cross in any way, but simply placed upside down on the vertical beam, if a player moves too fast or wields their attack puppet at an unusual angle the cup will fall off, break on the ground and that player will lose. This design prevents players from moving too recklessly. A foot-and-a-half metal chain is attached to the right end of the crossbeam. At the end of the dangling chain swings a metal Master Lock. The chain and lock serve as a range or distance weapon. On the left end of the crossbeam, a hammer hangs attached by a swivel that rotates completely around. The hammer serves as a melee or close-range weapon. Dexterous players can get the hammer propelling around by gyrating their cross in a circular pattern to build momentum. Staring at your opponent's hammer whirling around during an orchestrated lunge is as mesmerizing as it is intimidating.

*Bust A Cup* enables players to put themselves at varying degrees of actual risk that has been lost in contemporary games. It is a DIY throwback to the traditional duel, in which opponents settle disputes in a serious game of combat using swords or pistols. In *Bust A Cup*, swinging chains and spinning hammers whiz by tottering cups that shatter at your feet. New players grapple with learning how fast they can move without losing their cup. How aggressive are they supposed to play? How do they control this flailing puppet? What kind of attacks and parries can you invent with it? How silly or threatening do they look?

The effect of playing *Bust A Cup* is a sense of lively embodiment navigating a clunky, cracked open experience.

*Bust A Cup* exerts a sociopolitical force through its spectacle of play. Ceramic cups smash on the asphalt when we play it in the alley outside DePaul University in downtown Chicago. The debris piles up crunching beneath the players' feet. Players occasionally get nervous about the accumulating debris, noise, and attention passers-by give during gameplay. *Bust A Cup* reclaims public space for ostensibly reckless, performative play. It interrupts the lunch routine of passers-by who must reconcile the odd scene with the usual midday sidewalk flow. It is not a street brawl, but not quite the usual, safe urban game either. It is a LARP of a brawl. However, instead of roleplaying dramatic places, events, and people fantastic or historic, this is a LARP of a simple brutal act of street violence, a personal reinterpretation of a personal event. This is evident when discussing the game with players. Some have described it as the closest they have ever gotten to getting in a street fight, albeit a much safer, purely voluntary (and therefore less scary) street fight. It is a way to play through a scenario they fear and avoid, rendering it less foreign and enigmatic.

Audiences, players, and the game community must address new kinds of challenges when they are faced with novel, physically risky games such as *Bust A Cup*. Nobody knows how to effectively use the equipment and it is unclear how dangerous the game really is for players or even onlookers as cups and debris fly surprisingly far. For example, the organizers of *Itty Bitty Bash*, an indie game festival held February 25th 2015 in Chicago, wanted *Bust A Cup* to be played at the event. However, the game was ultimately rejected due to fear of litigation. Hopefully, risky games that afford underrepresented, psychophysically beneficial experiences such as *Bust A Cup* will be included in more festivals in the future in spite of such fears.

## DESIGN GOALS OF *BUST A CUP*

I created the game *Bust A Cup* with two development goals in mind. The first design goal was to create an experience that gives players an opportunity to experiment a loss of their usual sense of safety. I wanted it to feel a somewhat reckless and intimidating. It is supposed to foster an unstable frame of mind with regard to personal safety and aggressive performance. Liminal experiences such as this are rare in our usual flow of managed and mediated experiences crafted by mainstream designers complicit with contemporary risk society. In this way, *Bust A Cup* reclaims a sense of risk that our fearful contemporary culture wishes to close off from experience.

The second design goal of *Bust A Cup* is to deliver a more refined version of what I psychophysically experienced in my Chicago beating. That unfortunate, random attack taught me that I was hardier than I had thought. I wanted players to gain a sense that they could handle the threat of minor physical injury with playful enthusiasm, testing and impressing themselves—not to be self-

destructive but the contrary—to be life-affirming beyond restrictive notions of the self, e.g. that they are not tough enough. Just as adventure playgrounds provide opportunities for children to actualize themselves through their chosen levels of risky play, *Bust A Cup* provides an analogous opportunity for adults. Combatants continually negotiate through body language and banter how aggressively to play. Some matches are borderline polite, as players gingerly feel out the game mechanics and chuckle at the spectacle, while other matches spring into action wildly with cups shattering into brick walls.

## BROKEN GAMES

When we play *Bust A Cup* outside DePaul University in downtown Chicago, the spirit of gameplay is festive. The subversive charm of LARP brawls in an alley is liberating and joyful. At the same time, students tend to show concern, picking up the debris to minimize potential trouble. Players swing hammers and chains with care not to hit each other's bodies, although occasional glances are inevitable. People tend to play in a civil, friendly manner due to the social context and setting.

When we hosted a *Bust A Cup* tournament outside a bar in Joliet, Illinois the mood was quite different. The crowd was more diverse and less familiar with each other. Inebriation led players to perform belligerently, sluggishly, or comically. Players accepted more risk in potentially hurting opponents as well as themselves. People did not care about the accumulating debris or trouble the ruckus could cause.

Doug Wilson noticed a similar divergent trend in player behavior with his 2011 game developed by the Copenhagen Game Collective, *Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally Okay Now* (*B.U.T.T.O.N*). People played more or less aggressively depending on the venue and social context. *B.U.T.T.O.N* is an unconventional party game for 2-8 players. To begin each round all the players set their controllers down near the screen and take a few steps back. When instructed, players race to grab their controllers and press a button while preventing opponents from doing the same. Different instructions around this theme add variety to gameplay.

Wilson (2011) argues that "that intentionally 'broken' or otherwise incomplete game systems can help nurture a distinctly self-motivated and collaborative form of play" because players have an unusual amount of agency to decide how brutal or sweet they may be. Depending on the overall mood, levels of inebriation, and familiarity, a player may decide to tackle opponents, turn off the screen, dangerously leap over people to win, and so on. Wilson reports that when drunk strangers played *B.U.T.T.O.N.* against one of the quiet, lanky developers, he experienced uncomfortable levels of hostility. Wilson analyzes the potential of "broken" games like *B.U.T.T.O.N.*:

> In the company of friends or like-minded strangers, the punk rock, design-it-yourself spirit of the game can be liberating. But played carelessly – however we

> even define that – the game can quickly turn sour. Such are the opportunities and pitfalls of so physical and open-ended a game system, so obviously contingent on the particular players and the particular setting. Yet it is precisely because the game can go so wrong that it is so rewarding when the players manage to keep it going "right". Its contingent nature might well be the main attraction. (Wilson, 2011)

Wilson proposes a design strategy for "broken" games:

> My argument is that intentionally "broken" or otherwise incomplete game systems can help support a distinctly self-motivated and collaborative form of play. From a design perspective, the key to making these kinds of broken games work is to frame them in the right way. In this view, the practice of game design becomes less about crafting systems, and more about mood setting and instilling into the players the appropriate "spirit" (Wilson, 2011).

Whereas Wilson defines broken games as "working" when the spirit remains festive, positive, and fun, I propose that broken games can also work, albeit in a different way, when things break further, become unfair, or go awry. For example, during the *Bust A Cup* tournament outside the Joliet bar, a tall, hulking player dominated the latter half of the evening. He would invariably and almost immediately break any challenger's cup. It was a sight to behold. His emergent strategy was to lunge forward and directly smash his cup against his opponent's cup, often shattering spectacularly. I had never seen this strategy before. At the end of the night I discovered I had accidentally bought a stoneware cup that was harder than the ceramic cups I had purchased for the tournament at a secondhand shop earlier that day. Toeing up against an undefeatable champion was scary because of his precise, swift, violent attacks. Knowing he will win not only brutally but instantly made it much worse. The second time I challenged him he fiercely smashed his cup against mine in the initial moment of gameplay just as he had the first time. My cup's debris sprayed across my face, grazing my chin and hand drawing blood. The superficial cuts contributed to the debauch vibe of the bar scene. A few reticent volunteers chose to challenge the champion only at that point, riding the frothing energy of a drunken crowd. Everyone cheered whoever would face such a formidable threat.

This "broken" event with an insurmountable champion was illuminating and valuable because it allowed players to face certain risk in play. It allowed people to face and process justifiable fear in a productive way. Psychologist and proponent of play Stuart Brown (2010) argues that play prepares us to better deal with risk. Brown's oft-cited example is a scientific study involving two sets of rats. One set was allowed to play when they were juveniles while another set was not allowed to play. Later in their lives, both sets of rats were exposed to cat urine. The rats not allowed play as juveniles would not come out of hiding and died while the rats that were allowed to play as juveniles eventually came

out and survived. Through play they had learned to be resilient to perceived threats. Similarly, during that particular evening of *Bust A Cup* people could face intimidating and certain defeat in an open and playful way. Even if only briefly, players had a chance to confront an unfairly matched Goliath aggressor, a sort of pseudo-bully—which was as empowering as it was frightening. Due to the actual bit of danger tamed by the seductive power of play volunteers could readily tap into their own and their friends' perceptions of themselves as brave or cowardly and proceed to challenge those perceptions.

## RISKY PLAY CAN RESTRUCTURE OUR SUBJECTIVE REALITY

By being open to things going wrong, broken games allow players to unearth and examine nuances of risk perception that may have sat unchallenged and undisturbed for years in their psyche. Risky games allow us to confront and diffuse fears in ways that are liberating, provocative, and productive to personal development. Some of us in game studies have long misunderstood the power of play, especially with regard to disruption and risk. Dutch anthropologist and landmark theorist of play, Johan Huizinga saw play as subordinate to the power of the real world. He argued that the former is always at the mercy of the latter. Huizinga (1970, p. 11) claimed, "the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. He reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world. He robs play of its illusion". It is easy to see where Huizinga's formulation is indeed true: if you are broke and worried about paying rent or, more immediately, if you have to go to the bathroom, you may not feel like playing cards just now. But, more importantly, for Huizinga play is weak because it is based in fantasy, in our minds; and the ordinary world is formidable because it is the real physical universe. Yes, play can operate in a subordinate nature to reality. In many cases, play may be limited by the things we accept and know to be real. However, play may also be transformative of reality as we perceive, project, and construct it.

Brian Sutton-Smith, another key theorist of play, sees play's purpose as questioning our usual way of acting and being in the world. This is in opposition to Huizinga's formulation, which sees play as subordinate to reality. For Sutton-Smith play's purpose is to restructure reality. To be specific, play reinforces variability from rigid, successful adaptations. Play enables organisms to push past hard-won patterns that have become fixed having ensured past survival. The established way of doing things may work, but some new experimental way of doing things—although riskier because unproven—seems like it could work and might even be fun. Literary critic James S. Hans has picked up and extended this thread. Hans laments play in our risk society has become so safe and manageable that it has lost its vitality and purpose. Contemporary culture has done its best to minimize and manage risk in play rendering it frivolous and antithetical to its purpose. A player wholly engaged in play does not only place himself at risk; he places his world at risk by giving himself up to play's dynamic and unpredictable flow. A fully realized player:

> places everything at risk, and not in the naive sense that he must consider the consequences of his action on other people as well as himself… One risks the world precisely by giving oneself up to it… we have done our best to eliminate the risk in play, to make it 'safe' for society. We almost need to relearn from the beginning that play is always only play if something is really at stake, or if everything is at stake. (Hans, 1981, p. 182-183)

A value of play is that it allows players to question the patterns in which we think and interact in the world. Play can accomplish this by incorporating actual, variable kinds of risk, dissolving limitations that conform our actions in everyday life. It can publically challenge the conventional wisdom of risk society. Players of *Bust A Cup* can, for example, play their way to a stronger self-image. Playing it in urban environments can open up livelier physical actions in shared public spaces.

At any stage of our lives we may playfully open alternate ways to be and perform in an unstable world full of dangers and potential, although traditionally, the younger we are the more we perceive and play with reality in that way. In terms of childhood development, to willfully hallucinate with "an intermediate reality between phantasy and actuality is the purpose of play", according to developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (2000, p. 104). The more often we can revisit that mindset of that developmental stage, the more we may face, feel, and transform ourselves and our world throughout our lives at any age. By embracing risker kinds of games, games that put into question chosen aspects of our identities and reality that the designers select, the more purpose play may have over our world and our lives. Designers of so-called "serious games" who wish to transform the world would do well to open their gameplay experiences to such risk in order to achieve the broader and more fundamental sociopolitical change that they aspire to foment.

## BEYOND THE AESTHETICS OF HUMAN DESTRUCTION

I would like to distinguish the kind of play I am advocating from the "aesthetics of human destruction" that cultural theorist Paul Virilio describes in his book *Art and Fear.* According to Virilio modern artists of the 20th century celebrated the destruction of humanity and the human world in their art, evidenced through grotesque deformations of the human body in abstract expressionism, the breakdown of human vision in cubism, and so on:

> [I]t was through the carnage of the First and Second World Wars that modern art, from German Expressionism and Dada to Italian Futurism, French Surrealism and American Abstract Expressionism, had developed first a reaction to alienation and second a taste for anti-human cruelty. (Virilio, 2006, p. 2)

Via broken games, we should not advance cruelty or risk danger, arrest, or humiliation for a masochistic thrill at the prospect of destruction. Nor should we advance these games to revel in the injury and misfortunes of others. Like effective avant-garde art, games that offer risky play should not advance fear or shock for their own sake. The purpose of risky play is to affirm life and diminish alienation. It should help us face and feel ourselves and our world in new ways, not further separate us. It is to enrich our being, to cultivate a stronger sense of presence in the world as well as a greater plasticity of self. It is to diversify our experience beyond the happenstance of our personal histories; to feel more alive in rich connection with this mysterious, surprising, and continually unfolding world.

*Jackass: The Movie* (2002) can alter the viewer's sense of how much, or more precisely how little, at risk the human body is of injury in motley, stupid reckless situations. The film is a series of comically idiotic, dangerous stunts performed by regular actors rather than professionally trained stuntmen. For example, in one scene Steve-O, donning only underwear stuffed with raw chicken, attempts to walk across a tightrope over a pool of alligators. In another scene, the performers crash golf carts through a miniature golf course. Yet another depicts Steve-O alternating back-and-forth between snorting wasabi and vomiting. The aesthetics of human destruction has been popularized and made visceral in YouTube communities, who celebrate backyard wrestling mishaps, testicular abuse, and a litany of horrors comprising a mosaic of human suffering that might delight Hieronymus Bosch. Most videos of injury or humiliation in this genre lack the context and continuity of the *Jackass* franchise. *Jackass* features reoccurring performers, such as Johnny Knoxville and Steve-O facing certain danger after danger. The most shocking aspect is how they never or barely get hurt. They demonstrate that after an endless stream of abuses the human body keeps going if armored with a sense of abandon and bottomless humor. *Jackass Number Two* (2006) was a Critic's Pick with Nathan Lee describing it in *The New York Times* as*:*

> [d]ebased, infantile and reckless in the extreme, this compendium of body bravado and malfunction makes for some of the most fearless, liberated and cathartic comedy in modern movies… At the root of the 'Jackass' project is an impulse to deny the superego and approach the universe… as an enormous, undifferentiated playpen. (Lee, 2006)

Lee articulates why *Jackass* is able to surpass the aesthetics of human destruction and achieve something greater. Steve-O and other performers consistently demonstrate a state of being that is open to actual risk. They show us how to play in a way that has been lost in much of contemporary risk society and how to break our overreliance on safe, overly managed activities. They remind us that we can loosen up and clutch into the shards of the unknown—we will probably not get too hurt—so we may manifest a more open, playful life.

## RISKY GAMES ARE POLITICALLY AVANT-GARDE

Much of the popular critical discourse around videogames over the past few decades has been around safety and violence. Similarly, much of the popular critical discourse around sports in the United States has focused on injuries and safety. Beyond sports and games, other ludic media such as *Jackass* has been criticized as encouraging people to injure or kill themselves or others as they imitate or invent risky behavior inspired by the franchise.

These criticisms are justified and should weigh in debates on risk society sports, games, and entertainment. People who defend the right for *Jackass*, or violent videogames for that matter, to exist tend to do so on legal grounds such as our protections around free speech as well as with values of individual liberty and the pursuit of happiness. People who defend American football invoke cultural tradition, history of the sport, and the popular entertainment it provides. Both sides of these debates have valid points. I simply wish to add another point to consider.

Experiences that allow us to voluntarily engage in risky behavior enable us to face, feel, and transform ourselves as well as our world. They prepare us to accept more uncertainty in life and even playfully thrive in the face of justifiable fear. If left unmitigated, risk society is destructive on a global scale as it nationalizes, institutionalizes, and normalizes fear. The United States' response to 9/11 with the War on Terror and TSA security theater were fueled in part by America's inability to accept lingering perceptions of risk. The Obama Administration's expansion of drone warfare to kill potential enemy combatants in their homes, sometimes along with the collateral damage and death of their friends and families, also stem from our inability to accept the risk of letting them live. If considering potential negative effects of risky games on society let us also remember the positive effects, such as helping to inoculate society against fear that can be fueled and manipulated to justify war, hate, intolerance, nationalism, and rise of police and surveillance states.

In *Avant-garde Videogames: Playing with Technoculture* (2014), I describe how avant-garde political art and games blend domains as well as problematize dichotomies, such as safe/dangerous, private/public, sacred/profane, in transformative ways. An iconic example is Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964-1966), which she first performed in 1964 in Japan. The artist walked onto a theater stage, knelt down and placed a scissors on the stage nearby. All she said was "cut". One by one, audience members got up from their seats and proceeded to cut off pieces of her clothing. When Ono was stripped down to her bra and underwear, the audience stopped cutting and everyone simply sat in their seats. The next year Ono performed *Cut Piece* at Carnegie Hall in New York and the audience behaved differently. For example, an audience member menacingly walked around Ono brandishing the scissors in a threating way and proceeded to cut off her bra and underwear, resulting in a symbolic kind of rape. Challenging popular constructs of risk society, *Cut Piece* blends intimate space with public spectacle. It places trust in the hands of strangers. Ono hopes they will treat her

with respect but it is ultimately each person's decision how to treat the silent, vulnerable artist. The piece demonstrates how to risk one's dignity publically to achieve more social trust.

The game *BorderXing Guide* (2002–2003) enables players to engage the risk of arrest through acts of political dissent. Developed by Heath Bunting and Kayle Brandon and sponsored by the Tate Gallery London, *BorderXing Guide* was an attempt to "delete the border" by hacking national boundaries. Deployed from 2002–2003 the game emboldened and aided players crossing the borders of European countries surreptitiously and illegally. Only accessible in tactical geographic locations, an online database conveyed procedures for crossing borders undetected by police and military. By throwing a colossal magic circle over European states, *BorderXing Guide* players could engage in sociopolitical dissent through the playful traversal of space.

*Pac-Manhattan*, developed in 2004 by students at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, is a location-based game in which players run around Manhattan. A player dressed up as Pac-Man tries to avoid other players dressed up as the ghosts Blinky, Inky Pinky, and Clyde. *Pac-Manhattan* players run through traffic and crowded sidewalks, risking potential citation by police, physical injury from moving vehicles, and social judgment from playing wildly and disruptively in public. Beyond allowing players to engage in various kinds of risk, playing *Pac-Manhattan* exerts a sociopolitical force because it reclaims public space as a venue for whimsical play.

I hope this brief look at other risky games provides some perspective on the genre. Rather than provide a formula to design risky games, I will simply offer this. Technoculture increasingly funnels our proclivities for play into safe and manageable mechanisms, which we then increasingly take for granted as the way things are. We swipe right on sex partners the same way we match three, retweet, order food, and vote. Our day is a long, safe mosaic feed of playful choices and tiny surprises. Social media becomes a great game as does the political process, dating and everything else. As our daily choices seem less consequential the real world seems more so, more volatile, more unpredictable, more terrifying from climate change to terrorism. Every election becomes the most important election in history. There is a growing gulf between the way we inconsequentially and safely play in the world, and the dire rhetoric and perceptions we have about the world. The more we can connect the two through risky play the more we can live and perform in the world in ways that are earnest, yearned for, and transformative.

## CONCLUSION

Games that incorporate actual risk by design can help us overcome delimiting habits, norms, and laws. They help make us resilient to manipulation through fear. Riskier games expose our self-imposed limitations concerning risk and

provide opportunities for us to grow past them. They encourage us to handle greater uncertainty with playful grace. This opens up our world to be fundamentally reconfigured through play. The more we risk of our world and ourselves the more we can reveal, examine, and reconfigure. The types of risk and the aspects of the world that we transform may have to do with physical safety and the sense of our body's fortitude; or our conceptions of public space and the appropriate kind of behaviors that space affords; or legal constructs of space from national borders to the demarcation of private property; or they may be more narrative or personal in nature—allowing players to face unique fears of humiliation, specific traumas or potential injuries. Whatever the case may be we should design more of our games to be broken and risky in myriad ways if we want to advance the medium of games as well as realize and reclaim the real potential of play that has been disappearing in our overly fearful risk society.

**REVIEW EXCERPTS**

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# Review excerpts for Bust A Cup

## Reclaiming Risk in Play

"The paper also opens itself to critique by not considering arguments that games are safe for good reason. For example, how will the paper stand up to criticisms citing severe injury and death following the *Jackass* television franchise (e.g. 2011 case of Matt-Dillon Shannon's defense he got the idea to set a 16 year old friend on fire, ultimately killing them, after watching *Jackass*)? What about the connections some have drawn between rough-and-tumble play and bullying? How will it contend with arguments that regulatory boards and lawsuits exist for a reason? How will it contend with the idea that you can already virtually take risks via games, so 'real'risk isn't necessary? Where's the line between risk-taking for amusement and risk-taking as self harm? What's the responsibility of designers and developers in managing risk, or informing players? What safety precautions were undertaken for the university's ethics/legal committee to approve the play of the game on campus? Did they approve it? If not, will they be worried when this is published? Whilst I don't think the above questions need to be answered one-by-one to make the article publishable, I've written them in the hope they inspire reflection on the content that is already there.".

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# NorthPoint Courtesy Services Development and Design Summary

The videogame discussed in this essay is freely available at http://northpointcourtesyservices.com/downloads/

## INTRODUCTION

As we address the topic of games on games, we turned our focus towards *first-person shooters* (FPS), one of the most popular genres of computer game at the moment. Contemporary FPS games populate the genre continuum from "realistic" (*Rainbow Six Siege, ARMA, Insurgency*) to fantastic (*Halo, Bioshock, Destiny)*. However, no matter the setting or context, a constant of the FPS genre is the horde of nameless *non-player characters* (NPCs) that make up the waves of grunts and cannon fodder for the player character to enact their will against through the affordances provided by the designers. This melding of player will and designer limitations, in the vast majority of instances, results in NPCs being shot and killed with some form of weaponry, thus allowing the player to progress through the game.

As frequent players of FPS games, we sought to critique the relationship between player and NPCs in our *NorthPoint Courtesy Services*. Our original aim was to create a game where the player would play as an NPC in an FPS, but we felt that in the conflation of the two roles would result in a game that only reinforces the very element we were attempting to critique. Instead, we chose to put the player in the role of a job applicant to be an NPC in an FPS game. We felt that this absurd premise would enable us to comment and reflect on a number of elements: the relationship in FPS games between player and NPCs, and between player and game designer, the process of writing an algorithm with the purpose of "dying", and finally the ethical frameworks that these relationships and actions operate through and within. We agree with Miguel Sicart (2009) in his statement that "we become players not only by learning to play games, but by developing a sense of computer game ethics and values that gives us the tools to ethically experience games" (p. 9). Furthermore, our design of *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* pays credence to Sicart's central thesis regarding the relationship between players, computer games, and ethics:

> As designed objects, computer games create practices that could be considered unethical. Yet these practices are voluntarily undertaken by a moral agent who not only has the capacity, but also the duty to develop herself as an ethical being by means of practicing her own player-centric ethical thinking while preserving the pleasures and balances of the game experience. The player is a moral user capable of reflecting ethically about her presence in the game, and aware of how that experience configures her values both inside the game world and in relation to the world outside the game. (Sicart, 2009, p. 17)

Specifically, it is the "player-centric ethical thinking" and "preserving the pleasures and balances of the game experience" that we were most interested in exploring in the development of *NorthPoint Courtesy Services*. Our game was designed to challenge the collective ethics that we as players assume while playing and enjoying FPS games. We asked ourselves what are the ethical choices being practiced by the game developer when he permits or disallows the player to perform specific actions upon an NPC? And how does the player maintain ethical autonomy while being complicit in gameplay that may run contrary to their own morality? *Can* they maintain ethical autonomy? It was through these questions that the design of our game began to take shape.

## DESIGN PERSPECTIVES

*NorthPoint Courtesy Services* puts the player in the role of a job applicant applying for a position at the titular company. The player must complete forms asking about personal information and medical history. They player also must pass several reaction and accuracy tests to evaluate their hand/eye coordination. What is slowly revealed over the course of the game, however, is that the player is actually an NPC in another "player's" game. The game ends with our player being placed into a room where they wait for the game's player to arrive. Immediately upon the player's arrival, our player is kicked back to the title screen where they are informed that "they have died".

As the player plays *NorthPoint Courtesy Services*, she slowly realizes that her choices are already predetermined and that external input that has any lasting effect on the game state is incredibly limited. Our choice to limit player input to such a degree reflects our goal of replicating the development of an algorithm as a player-character. Because the player acts as a specific type of NPC in an FPS, complete with the limited agency of a computer algorithm, the choices that she makes throughout the game are ultimately meaningless. The way that the personal information and medical forms accept the player's input (altering it so that it fits the parameters specified by the hypothetical game inside of our game) points to the regulated and scripted behaviors of artificial intelligence systems as they are regulated by algorithmically defined parameters. By the end of the game, when the player's NPC is shot by the in-game "player", our hope

is that our player will take a moment to consider how the algorithms of NPCs in FPS games are built into service for a player's ego.

We looked to games such as *Frog Fractions* (Twinbeard Studio, 2012), *dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy, 2012), and *Dr. Langeskov, the Tiger, and the Terribly Cursed Emerald: A Whirlwind Heist* (Crows Crows Crows, 2015) for design inspiration and approaches on how to create engaging games while using a mechanic to limit player input. We also drew from the countless FPS games that we have played, although *Doom* (id Software, 1993) and its introduction of "monster closets" was especially important for our game design. We assume that many of our players will be familiar with walking into a room in an FPS with a low-level NPC grunt and shooting it dead. The aesthetic of the game is based on the job-application kiosks one might find at a Wal-Mart or Target in order to reinforce the notion that the player is applying for a low-level, entry job with the shadowy NorthPoint Courtesy Services company. The name of our game was also carefully selected: astute readers will notice that *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* is an acronym for NPCs. While NorthPoint acts merely as a descriptor, Courtesy Services alludes to the fact that NPCs in FPS games are designed to be easily conquered foils for the player to overcome, succumbing to the player's dominance in an act of generous deference.

The interface for the questionnaires needed to be engaging without being overly playful. In their design, we considered the experience and expectations of using a series of forms online and providing appropriate feedback about the active input field and those already filled in by the player. The way which the game changes the player's input for a number of the questions is meant to demonstrate how they are, as the algorithm, at the mercy of the system and have only the agency that the system permits them. Each of the mini-games needed to present the initial premise of an achievable goal before the inevitable reveal that "failure" was the way to finish the segment, purposely presenting easy scenarios before making them intentionally impossible to mirror the tutorial sections of games. However, the difference is that rather than teaching the player how to play the game (as a traditional tutorial would), our mini-games are teaching them how to consider their "failure" as success. The process of failing to succeed is meant to reflect the algorithmic purpose of NPCs: their "failure" (dying) generates success for the game's player.

While we hope that *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* will appeal to most players on some level, we recognize that there are limitations to the game. With more time, we would have included more another screen or two of documentation for the player to complete, as well as one more mini-games. We also recognize that the intentions behind our game may not connect with non-FPS players. There was also some discussion about whether we should put a description of the finale, or some sort of *denouement* text, that would drive the point of the game home for the player. However, we decided against it preferred that the gameplay shoulder the intent of the design. This may lead to uncertain or un-

intended conclusions by our players, but it allows our players to reach their own conclusions about the game, privileging the player's own opinions and experience with the game. The decision to leave the end somewhat vague and in the player's hands acts as a way to remind them that the experience exists because of them and, to paraphrase Sicart, keeps players at the center of the critique.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our overall intent in the development and design of *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* was twofold: 1) to critique the embedded ethics of FPS design without using the FPS format to do so, and 2) to consider how algorithms both operate from and perpetuate states of boredom. FPS games are often hyper-violent with gameplay emphases on speed, power, control, and physical domination. We used non-FPS gameplay for the majority of our game as a way to resist this narrative of the genre, focusing instead on the idea of the computer algorithm that is created to wait. The mini-games and medical history forms are meant to act as metaphors for the development of the algorithm. Rather than a narrative of power and domination, the FPS NPC is about routine, a lack of agency, and subservience to the player.

Literature on FPS games has addressed the multitudes of subjectivities at work between the player and the game (Rehak, 2003; Taylor, 2003; Pinchbeck, 2008; Hitchens, 2011; Wolf, 2012; Klevjer, 2013; Therrien, 2015). Our game attempts to address one of those subjectivities through its presentation of the player as algorithm. Whereas FPS games typically privilege the subjectivity of a body-in-action, the default state of our algorithms is one of waiting and inaction. Although our player is interacting with our system, the choices they are making ultimately produce the same outcome. The game reinforces the *if/then processes* that define the AI's behaviors insist that the player activate certain requirements so that they can run. McKenzie Wark (2007) writes about this relationship in *Gamer Theory*:

> As the gamer becomes attuned to the game, gamer and game become one event, one battle, one action; an oscillating between the line dividing self from other and the line connecting them as one substance. If the line dividing provides a moment of autonomous self, the line connecting provides a moment of selfless purpose. In games, action has its limits. It is an endless bit-flip targeting performs between targeter and target. … Games are a repository for a certain atopian labor, which has the power to confront the necessity of its own choosing. Games do not offer a contemplative response to boredom. (p. 162)

As the player of *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* moves further and further through the NPC application process in the game, they are subjugating themselves to the algorithmic expectations and requirements of the hypothetical game within our game. And those algorithmic expectations and requirements

for *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* are for the player to code themselves into existence, wait, and perish, just as they would be for an NPC in any mainstream FPS game. The algorithm on hold exemplifies what Alexander Galloway (2006) would call a diegetic machinic state, or an "ambience act" (pp. 10, 17). During the ambience act, "micromovements often come in the form of pseudorandom repetition of rote gamic action, or ordered collections of repetition that cycle with different periodicities to add complexity to the ambience act" (p. 10). By the end of our game, the player of *Northpoint Courtesy Services* has coalesced with the ambient act of the game-inside-of-a-game. There is nothing for them to do until the "player-character" arrives and gives the algorithm purpose. When the "player-character" enters our player's space, the player is permitted to spring to life and the ambience act is transformed into Galloway's "operator-diegetic" gamic moment, which is any moment of a game which propels the game's central premise forward (p. 17).

We chose to focus *Northpoint Courtesy Services* on inaction in an attempt to resist the notion that FPS games are always about action. In fact, they are always about action when understood from the player's perspective. However, the *vast* majority of most games is about code existing in a state of readiness, being prepared to alter itself as necessary when the player arrives based on conditional statements. In this way, we sought to create a game in which boredom was the expectant and desired result. Wark (2007) again: "The very action of overcoming boredom reproduces it, when gamer and game reach some impasse" (p. 166). In *Northpoint Courtesy Services*, that impasse is the end of the game, since a piece of NPC code in an FPS game that is bored is an NPC that is alive. The arrival of the player-character ends the algorithm's state of waiting, activating and running its loops, but it also means the end of that instance of the algorithm (unless the player-character is a particularly bad shot, low on health, etc.). The player performs the binary switch from 1 to 0 on the NPC, and then moves on. When our player of *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* finishes the application portion of the game and is given her own "monster closet" at the end of the game, they represent the binary switch set to 1, awaiting the arrival of the "player-character" to fulfill their purpose: ego and desire fulfillment for the non-existent "player-character". In this regard, Sicart (2009) reminds us that, "The creators of games are then ethically responsible for the design of the rules and world, while players are responsible for their experience of the game–the ways they interpret and enact the embedded ethical values of a computer game" (p. 59). Our intent with the gameplay of *NorthPoint Courtesy Services* is to give our player the experience of considering how these ethical systems are agreed upon, put into place, and activated by placing our player in the role of an algorithm which only has the ethical agency allotted by a piece of code which has been designed for a specific purpose. The ethics our players experience are, for the most part, the ethics of boredom and inaction. In other words, they are "the machine's act. The user is on hold, but the machine keeps working" (Galloway, 2006, p. 10).

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Following page

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# Review excerpts for NorthPoint Courtesy Services Development and Design Summary

"The concept of agency is also discussed extensively in game studies, and it would really help if the final submission could provide a contribution to the area of research. What is at stake in playing-as-a-non-playing character? Can this process be represented without introducing a different form of action, as in the game designed by the authors? How could boredom and inaction be (differently) represented and made playable? These questions could help the authors when thinking about how to narrow down their video game eliminating other layers which are probably only distracting and unnecessary when confronted with the statement submitted in the written document."

"There are in fact some interesting concepts that could be either articulated or just eliminated from the text. The notions of morality and ethics are mentioned at the beginning of the text, through the work of Sicart, but are not brought to their consequences, and the authors should consider whether these are really necessary. Is there really a question on morality in the game? The game could actually be seen from an ethical perspective, but only if the relation player-simulation is somehow put at the centre."

*"[When they write about the player being a NPC in a game]* From what I have understood by playing the game, this is not immediately clear to the player. In fact, it was not clear to me until I read your text. You might consider if you prefer to make this explicit in the game, or keep it cryptic until the end (or until the player reads an explanation)."

*"[When they write about the game aiming at being boring]* This is extremely interesting and provoking, but it does not describe the game you have designed (so far). I found the game to have only limited moments of boredom, and I was killed almost immediately everytime the FPS started. I didn't have much time to get bored. I believe that period of wait in the 3D environment should be much more central, it should last longer, be more clearly identifiable with the intentions what you have outlined here. It should give a sense of boredom and inaction. Moreover: does the player 'arrive', or activate/enact the NPC? There

are nuances in your narrative of the relation player-NPC which are really crucial and you need to be more precise about what you intend to say."

"*[The last part, when they cite Galloway saying that the machine keeps working while the user is bored]* More and more often, human beings are used to replace AI when the tasks given are too complex for a computer to solve, but easy for humans. Crowdsourcing is the name usually given to this practice. Amazon is one of the most important providers of crowdsourcing services through the Mechanical Turk platform. The slogan used by Amazon to define the service is 'artificial artificial intelligence', as the service simulates the presence of AI by actually using human beings to complete the jobs. The service is only available in the US and India, but many other platforms offer the same service in other areas of the world. You can see there how crowdsourcing is expected to be used as if the employees could think as machines: tasks need to be fragmented and presented as in a programming language. The workers usually take jobs that lasts only a few seconds and are paid through micro-transactions. I see a similarity with what you are doing here. In a future where AI is considered to be key in the development of NPCs, it is very likely that actual human beings will be used to pretend to be machine-controlled NPCs whenever the design of an effective AI is too challenging. Some experts are currently speculating that Facebook is developing an AI which acts as 'Siri' and 'Cortana' do in Apple and Microsoft software, but Facebook is also allowing Indian crowdsourcers to replace the AI whenever the conversation is detected to be too difficult for the AI to comprehend."

*"[when they write that the in-game questionnaire had an aesthetic inspired by job-application kiosks at Wal-Mart]* It actually reminded me of online application forms for academic positions :-)"

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# Illusion Master:

## Extending Self-Presence and Challenging Immersion in and through Digital Games

**ABSTRACT**

This paper provides an extension of the definition of the concept of self-presence (named Objective self-presence) in digital games, and in doing so, challenges the traditional concepts of immersion and presence / self-presence in games. The design process of the submitted game *Illusion Master* is used as a case study to show how the related concepts of presence and immersion can be addressed in a different manner in and through digital games. It is argued that self-presence need not necessarily involve a situation where players feel as if their virtual self is their actual self. In games studies, this definition of presence is very much linked to the concept of immersion, which looks at how a player is surrounded by an immersive new reality. In this paper, it is argued that self-presence can also manifest itself through a double-consciousness where a player is both engrossed in the game, while remaining conscious of him/herself as a human being engaging with a game outside the game world.

**KEYWORDS:** *Objective self-presence, presence, self-presence, immersion, illusion, flow*

### INTRODUCTION TO PAPER & ILLUSION MASTER

The aim of this paper is to support, and elaborate on the intentions behind the designed game artifact *Illusion Master.* The game, along with this corresponding paper, aim to challenge the definitions of the related concepts of unconscious illusion, presence / self-presence, and immersion in the players' experience of digital games, proposing instead that when players are deeply involved in a game, they always remain aware of themselves as players outside the game, irrespective of their level of immersion within the game. The game, which was created before this issue's call for papers and originally meant for exhibition purposes in a contemporary art space, was originally designed as a standalone playable reflexive artefact on the mentioned concepts in game studies. For this reason, I suggest that readers do not read further than this introduction if they haven't yet played the game.

The intentions of the designed game are not made explicit through any form of information screen in the game's menu system. Instead, the experience is meant to be elicited through conventional gameplay and ludic conventions. Indeed, the game is designed in a way that remains playable (and possibly enjoyable) if players do not grasp the academic intentions of the artefact. It is for this reason that this paper aims to not only elaborate on the intentions, but also provide an academic grounding, as well as informally relate these intentions vis-a-vis the design of the game.

The paper will be split in two sections. The first section will look at the related theories of presence / self-presence, immersion, and unconscious illusion in digital games. These will then be challenged particularly vis-à-vis the double-consciousness model introduced by Katie Salen & Eric Zimmermann in Rules of Play (2003), as well as Daniel Vella's player-figure relation model (2014). Building upon these two theories, the paper will then propose an extension of the concept of self-presence, entitled objective self-presence.

The second section of the paper will provide a general introduction to the submitted game *Illusion Master*, briefly discussing its main plot and features in relation to the concepts outlined in the first section. This will act as a springboard to an informal analysis of the design decisions taken in the game vis-a-vis the intentions outlined.

## PRESENCE / SELF-PRESENCE, IMMERSION AND ILLUSION

### Presence

The concept of the feeling of presence vis–à–vis virtual technologies has been widely discussed over a number of years (see e.g. Minsky, 1980; Steuer, 1992; Biocca, 1997; Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Wirth et al., 2003; Lee, 2004), and more recently, applied to digital games (see e.g. McMahan, 2003; Tamborini & Bowman, 2010; Tamborini & Skalski, 2006; Weibel & Wissmath, 2011). Most of these studies, albeit being related in concept, hail from different fields.

However, following the footsteps of Lombard and Ditton, (1997) many researchers seem to be in general agreement that, in somewhat limited terms, a perception of non-mediation lies at the centre of presence inducing experiences, including digital games. (Biocca, 1997; Tamborini & Bowman, 2010) This refers to a state where while playing a game, the player is also likely to not be aware of the game medium while playing. This has also been referred to as immediacy in Bolter & Grusin's (1999) seminal book *Remediation*. Indeed, when elaborating on the state of presence in digital games, Tamborini and Bowman (2010) start by vaguely defining presence as the perception of non-mediation, which make the term not only applicable towards experiences with virtual technologies, but any mediated experiences. Lee (2004) also tentatively defines the term as a "psychological state in which the virtuality of experience is unnoticed" (p. 32), thus once again highlighting the fact that the medium becomes invisible to the user.

At the heart of this non-mediation, which seems to be an integral aspect of the conceptualization of presence, one can also make solid links to other concepts that have also been analyzed as part of the broader study of presence. These include immersion (eg. Biocca & Delaney, 1995; Palmer, 1995), and self-presence (Lee, 2004; Tamborini & Bowman, 2010), which along with the concept of illusion (Grau, 2003) are being challenged in this paper and through the design of the submitted artefact *Illusion Master.*

Self-presence

Apart from the feeling of non-mediation mentioned earlier, various approaches to the theory of presence seem to imply an additional separate virtual subject when playing a game, which is one of the main points that differentiates presence from self-presence. To elaborate on this and give some examples, Steuer (1992) defines presence as "the extent to which one feels present in the mediated environment, rather than the immediate physical environment", (p. 76) referring to a feeling of being there, and also linking it with the feeling of immersion and involvement in a virtual environment. In relation to digital games, self-presence accounts for this separate virtual subject and is simply defined as the way players feel as if their virtual self is their actual self (Lee, 2004; Tamborini & Bowman, 2010). As a sidenote, Yee & Bailenson (2007) show how players also take on different characteristics in the way they interact with others in a game depending on the attractiveness of their avatar, thus emphasizing how much even the physical looks of the virtual self has an impact on the behaviour of the player.

Biocca (1997) was the first to define the particular term self-presence (as opposed to presence) and identified three bodies: The actual body of the user interacting with the virtual environment, the virtual body which acts as the virtual representation of the actual body, and the body schema, defined in this case as 'the user's mental or internal representation of his or her own body' (Biocca, 1999, n.p.) affected by the type of virtual representation. The differentiation between presence and self-presence here is crucial given that in Illusion Master, players take control of a virtual body, i.e. the playable magician.

Immersion & Flow

Immersion as a broad concept has been applied to various media experiences, including film, television and games. It has also been explained in relation to the concepts of presence, flow, and non-mediation (see e.g. Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Wirth et al., 2007; Murray, 1997). This can all be very well linked with the term suspension of disbelief, introduced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817. Referring mostly to written texts at the time, he states that if a writer is able to fill the work with "human interest and a semblance of truth", a reader would suspend the disbelief of the fictional work, and instead embrace it (Coleridge, 2009, p. 239). Indeed, this concept has also been applied to games,

particularly by Janet Murray (1997) who also focuses on the concept of immersion in the experience of digital games.

The ability to escape from real life, as well as the ability for a game to immerse its players seem to remain key characteristics in the design of popular games today. In fact, even Coleridge's concept of suspension of disbelief is discussed in relation to the goal of game design 'because games often deal with fantasy and exaggeration and require that players to some degree "buy into" the fantasy to support engagement and immersion' (Dickey, 2015, p. 48). Similarly, in her seminal book Hamlet on the Holodeck, Janet Murray (1997) directly equates the feeling of being transported into a virtual environment with the experience of immersion. Murray describes immersion as "the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place" (p. 98). She compares this feeling to "the feeling of being submerged in water where we are surrounded by a completely other reality…that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus." The idea of transportation implies that while immersed in a game, players' consciousness is transported from the actual world, to the game world. This is highly criticized by Salen & Zimmermann through the double-consciousness model which we are going to look at briefly.

Similar to presence, the feeling of immersion has been approached in a variety of ways over the years. Lack of authenticity in a game story for instance has been seen as an aspect which hinders both immersion and presence (Rigby & Ryan, 2011). Brown & Cairns (2004) focus on the concept of immersion by conducting experiments and interviewing gamers. They break down the feeling of immersion into three: engagement, engrossment and total immersion, which they equated with a feeling of presence. In their study, they establish how immersion is not a static experience and also mention how the controls must be 'invisible' (a clear link to the experience of non-mediation) for total immersion to take place.

What's striking about Brown and Cairns's study is that they draw parallels between immersion and the concept of flow (Csikszentmihályi, 1990). Flow represents the feeling of immersion in any activity that also involves a high level of enjoyment and fulfilment (Chen, 2007), and was originally described as "the state in which individuals are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter" (Csikszentmihályi, 1990). In this state also known as the zone, players are immersed and highly involved with full focus in the activities presented in the game. Similar to immersion, this is a fragile state which can easily be broken. The study on immersion in games by Jennett et al (2008) also draw parallels between immersion and flow. They state that "like immersion, when in the flow state people become so absorbed in their activities that irrelevant thoughts and perceptions are screened out" (p. 6).

Indeed, the boundaries between immersion and flow are at times very unclear given there are various definitions which are at times conflicting. For instance, Nacke & Lindley (2008) relate immersion with complex and exploratory virtual

environments, a narrative context, a variety of models and textures, as well as dynamic lighting. In contrast, they state that flow is "concentrated on the sequence, pace and difficulty of challenges, [rather] than on environmental settings"

It is of course not the aim of this paper to exhaust the possible differences and similarities between flow and immersion. However, one of the shared characteristics (apart from the feeling of non-mediation mentioned in relation to both presence and immersion) is the loss of self-awareness and being cut off from reality. (Brown & Cairns, 2004) It is this loss of self-awareness that the paper and game seek to challenge. Before that is done however, we must look at the concept of illusion.

## Illusion

The subject of illusion shares a lot of similarities with the mentioned subject of immersion, which *Illusion Master* wilfully attempts to challenge. It makes sense to refer to the concept of illusion here given that it not only has clear links with immersion, but the game itself tackles this subject as a fitting metaphor for both immersion and presence.

According to Oliver Grau, author of *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (2003), immersion is characterized "by diminishing critical distance to what is shown and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening". (p. 13) Grau continues to show how "a constant characteristic of the principle of immersion is to conceal the appearance of the actual illusion medium…The medium becomes invisible". (p. 340) This is already very much in line with the previously mentioned definition of immersion by Janet Murray, who compared the feeling with that of being completely submerged in water "that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus". (p. 98)

The definitions of immersion proposed by both Grau and Murray thus also move very much hand in hand with presence, described earlier as a feeling where the virtuality of experience remains unnoticed (Lee, 2004).

According to Grau, two forms of illusion can be described: conscious illusion and unconscious illusion. Conscious illusion happens when a reader feels she is seeing what is being represented in the virtual work. If we use an example with *Illusion Master*, players see that they are playing as a magician, running along rooftops shooting ghosts. Thus when illusion is conscious, players know that there is no magician beyond the projected image.

The second form of illusion mentioned is unconscious illusion, and this is directly equated with immersion according to Grau. During unconscious illusion, the medium itself becomes invisible, and thus immediate to the player. In the case of games, this could happen when players are totally captivated by the virtual environment, so much so that it becomes something they are totally unaware of as players outside this virtual environment. Grau states that when illusion becomes unconscious, users become immersed in that particular envi-

ronment. In this situation of unconscious illusion, players are thus immersed and self-present in the virtual environment.

The shift from unconscious to conscious illusion is the intention behind *Illusion Master* and arguably acts as a way for players to reflect on their relationship with the medium and on broader concepts such as immersion and self-presence.

The next section of this paper will demonstrate how the design decisions taken in *Illusion Master* are meant to challenge the related concepts of immersion and presence by pushing players to become objectively self-present. This is an extension to the generally understood definition of self-presence which will now be discussed.

## CHALLENGING IMMERSION AND PRESENCE

The feeling of presence that is currently being referred to requires the virtuality of experience to remain unnoticed (Lee, 2004). It seems however problematic to limit or define the feeling of self-presence in this manner for a number of reasons.

Both concepts of presence and immersion as mentioned so far do not seem to factor in the doubling effect that may be at play when gaming. While playing a game, a player is arguably still very much aware of himself in front of a screen. The player is what enables the avatar in the game object (the virtual self) to take actions which ultimately cause a change to the game object. While the analysis of the blurry relationship between the player outside the game and the virtual self lies beyond the scope of this paper, it is nonetheless important to highlight how their relationship cannot simply be considered vis-à-vis characteristics such as non-mediation, immersion, and transportation.

Presence and immersion in general as concepts becomes particularly more problematic when considered vis-à-vis the double-consciousness model, introduced by Salen & Zimmermann in their book *Rules of Play* (2003). Double-consciousness can be defined as a situation wherein the players are "well aware of the artificiality of the play situation" (2003, p. 451). In being aware of this artificiality, it can be argued that players are thus also aware of themselves playing, lending to the idea of double-consciousness which was already referred to in phenomenology by Eugene Fink in 1968 where he used the phrase double existence. Both these terms describe an inherent situation to any form of play where "while playing, man retains a knowledge of his double existence, however greatly reduced this knowledge may be" (Fink, 1968, p. 23).

Salen & Zimmermann attack what they deem as the immersive fallacy in gaming which they define as "the idea that the pleasure of a media experience lies in its ability to sensually transport the participant into an illusory, simulated reality," (p. 450). Indeed, unlike the feelings of presence or immersion, this model negates the idea that a player is transported into another environment, instead looking at the relation between the player and the character in the game.

It is also worth noting here Gordon Calleja's (2011) concept of incorporation, which he defines as "the absorption of a virtual environment into con-

sciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location, as represented by the avatar" (p. 169). Described in such a way, the concept might seem or sound similar to the concept of immersion. However, it is not unidirectional like immersion is, i.e. it does not discuss the transportation of the player into a game world without taking into consideration the player's involvement with the game.

To further add to these perspectives, Vella's player-figure relation model (2014) analyses a phenomenological duality in play, which looks at how players can relate to the playable figure in a subjective or objective manner. In the subjective mode of relation, the player feels she inhabits what Vella refers to as a ludic-subject position and identifies with the game avatar as "I". This is not to say that the player would feel she is the character within the game, but rather that the player feels her subjectivity stands in the game. This is the feeling typically associated with presence and immersion, mentioned earlier. Conversely, in an objective mode of relation, the playable figure "becomes itself present to the player as an object of perception" (p. 3). To summarize, "the distinction is one of playing the figure [subjective] versus playing with the figure [objective]" (p. 3).

## OBJECTIVE SELF-PRESENCE: EXTENDING THE CONCEPT OF PRESENCE

While acknowledging that players might feel as if their virtual self is their actual self when playing a game, or that players might be transported into a simulated place that immerses them by taking over all their attention, this view of presence and immersion has been shown to be quite limiting.

In this paper, and through the ludic conventions in *Illusion Master*, it is argued that the definition of self-presence (or presence in general) can be extended. The term objective self-presence in the experience of digital games is being proposed as a state in which players become reflectively conscious[1].

This objective self-presence proposed in this paper is in many ways similar to the objective mode of relation (Vella, 2014) mentioned earlier where the playable figure "becomes itself present to the player as an object of perception". However, I argue that in the feeling of objective self-presence, it is not simply the playable figure which may become the object of perception to the player, but also the game technology as a whole. In this sense, while acknowledging that players most of the time do not necessarily focus on the mediatory technology (such as a computer or a game console), or the avatar as a separate subject from themselves (as is the case with the subjective mode of relation) when playing a game, I argue that players may still become aware of the virtual experience of digital games. Based on the more widely understood concept of presence, what is being proposed here equates to a situation where one might conclude that the player is no longer present or immersed in the game environment. Conversely, I argue that instead of viewing this as a situation where players are no longer present, objective-self-presence describes a further layer of presence where the player becomes reflectively conscious of her involvement with the game technology.

**1.** The words 'reflectively conscious' are being used here instead of 'aware' as there is a clear distinction between what Edmund Husserl, and later Jean-Paul Sartre refer to as pre-reflective consciousness, and reflective consciousness. A detailed phenomenological analysis of self-consciousness and reflection in the experience of digital games (Micallef, 2016) lies beyond the scope of this paper, but provides further insight into the subject discussed in this paper. of themselves as human entities and their connection with the game technology outside of the virtual space, while possibly and simultaneously remaining absorbed within the virtual experience.

There are also clear similarities between the proposed objective-self-presence and the double-consciousness model (Salen & Zimmermann, 2003). Double-consciousness however seems to describe an inherent, and thus constant situation in play. What is being proposed here however is that while players, as Fink stated, "retain a knowledge of their double existence" (1968, p. 23), they might not constantly be reflectively conscious of the fact that they are human entities outside the game. In other words, players have the potential to become aware of the artificiality of the play situation at all times, rather than being constantly aware of this phenomenon during gameplay.

The next section of the paper will analyse the submitted game artefact *Illusion Master* in relation to the proposed concept of objective self-presence.

## *ILLUSION MASTER*: SUMMARY & INFORMAL ANALYSIS OF DESIGN

### Game summary

*Illusion Master* is a short casual 2D platformer which lets the player take on the role of an unnamed magician who has his magic chest stolen by a mysterious entity. In this stolen chest lies the ultimate power of illusion which the magician needs for that night's performance. Unable to do his performance without his magic tricks, he embarks on a dangerous quest on the theatre rooftop to retrieve his magic chest, only to find various ghosts along the way which he needs to shoot using his wand to keep progressing and level up.

After three minutes shooting ghosts and jumping on the rooftops, the magician mysteriously ends up in his own theatre facing two bosses. Once the first boss is killed, a bigger version of what seems to be an evil clone of the same magician appears and claims to hold this power of illusion. However, shooting the evil clone as generally expected from traditional games will all be in vain. Players can only win if they step out of the 'immersion' created by the same game and become aware of themselves as players outside the game environment interacting with a game object. Only by doing so will they retrieve back the power of illusion that was stolen from the magician at the beginning of the game. Only when they do so and stop playing will they win, as they would have become aware of the 'illusion' of play. In other words, the boss in the game loses all the power when the player realizes she holds this power instead, thus also realizing she is 'objectively present' as a player outside the game.

Once the players manage to beat the magician, the magic chest appears at the centre of the screen. Once opened, this reveals the source of the ultimate power of illusion – an image of the actual player playing the game. *Illusion Master* ends there.

### Objective self-Presence vis-a-vis Illusion Master

In the initial prototypes of the game, it was resulting difficult to find a way to get players to realize how *Illusion Master* was really about an extension of the subject of self-presence. This was more so because the state of objective self-

presence proposed had to be conveyed through gameplay, and not in any other form of explanation.

How could a player achieve the proposed state of self-presence? The way we ultimately attempted to do this was through making the game as immersive as possible and then quickly breaking this same immersion that allegedly get players present (in the traditional definition) in a game. It is argued that a player could more easily feel objectively self-present as proposed in this paper by being pulled away from immersion first.

In the coming sections, the paper will look at the design elements which aim to create immersion, and then later on break it in the game. Before this is done however, I'd like to situate *Illusion Master* among other games that also deliberately make the player aware she is playing a game such as the *Metal Gear Solid* series (1998), *The Stanley Parable* (2013), and *Atum* (2012). What stands out in *Illusion Master*, I would argue as both writer and game designer, is that the intentions of making the player aware she is playing a game are meant as a direct challenge to the game concepts of immersion, presence and unconscious illusion, rather than being merely features of the games. Furthermore, as will be seen later on, the player has to realize himself that she has to stop playing the game to win.

## Designing an immersive *Illusion Master*

As a short experience, *Illusion Master* was created to be as immersive as possible. This is attempted in a number of ways through the design of the game.

*Genre and aesthetics*. The choice behind the genre and aesthetics of the game are not coincidental. When designing *Illusion Master*, it was a design decision to give the game a retro and colourful look in terms of genre & aesthetics. Indeed, the aesthetics chosen for *Illusion Master* are inspired by the fun & colourful classic 8-bit and 16-bit platformer games emanating from the Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis years during the late 80s to mid-90s. This aesthetic could appeal to both children, but more importantly to people in their late 20s and early 30s who would more likely have more fond memories of these games.

The iconic retro game elements used in *Illusion Master* included not only the visuals, but also the sound effects, and the chiptune music used. Other iconographic elements are present throughout, such as the menu graphic, which pays homage to the character pose in the menu of *Sonic the Hedgehog* (1991), the death traps on the rooftops, as well as the death animation of the magician character. The controls of the game, which will be mentioned later, were also designed keeping in mind the simple controls generally associated with traditional platformers.

Having said all this, it was also the intention to make the game seem contemporary. Initially, 8-bit graphics were going to be used in the game, but this idea was later scrapped to make the visual assets look more contemporary, and instead seem like tribute was being paid. Also, despite the fact that the main level of the game ends after 3 minutes, we wanted to use conventions which

are common in endless runner games, which have been very popular as casual games on mobile devices (Schick, 2013).

*Casual game elements*. *Illusion Master* was designed with the intention to be a casual game experience. Casual games according to Jesper Juul (2010) are generally easier to play, pleasant, short, appeal to a wider audience, and involve positive fictions. It was the intention to incorporate as much of these elements in the game design as possible, and in doing so, make the game more appealing and immersive to a wider audience from the onset. For instance, children are targeted as possible players of the game, despite the fact that they might not understand the conceptual intention of the game. Indeed they could still find it enjoyable and relate the experience to the magician character.

The game was designed as a short experience, in which the player could reach the end state in between 5-10 minutes. Furthermore, once the player reaches the end state and the contents of the magic chest are revealed, the core concept of the game would also be uncovered. In this sense, the game is meant to be played once, and not designed with replayability in mind.

As the game is meant to be played once, the intention is to make the game even more appealing and immediately immersive. The general look of the game was designed with positive fictions in mind. This is reflected in the colour palette used throughout. Apart from the colours used, the overall tone of *Illusion Master* also remained positive, while keeping the conflict of the character intact at all times. Both the magician character as well as the enemies were designed to be as cute as possible. Both the ghosts and the bosses were made to seem menacing, albeit in a fun way.

The casual elements in *Illusion Master* are also reflected in the relatively easy game controls designed for the game. Since the game is designed to be played only once, it was highly crucial that the game was simple enough to grasp. In this respect, the game was designed in a way so that the player would only need to worry about three controls – two fire keys, and a jump key. The simple controls of the game meant that anyone from any age could more easily get into the game, without having to spend too much time getting used to the controls. More on the game controls will be discussed later.

Of course, the simplicity of the controls does not necessarily reflect the difficulty of the game. Balancing difficulty according to different players' capabilities, as well as providing adequate feedback were other crucial issues that could affect the immersion created through the game.

*The flow zone and immersion*. When designing the game we wanted it to be both relatively easy to play and grasp, but also provide enough of a challenge to keep players interested. The challenge in the design was in finding the right balance so that it could appeal to both experienced and non-experienced gamers.

The idea of finding the right balance in the game was inspired by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow.

According to the theory of flow, in order for players to enter this state of flow, players should experience three elements. Firstly, they should find that the game has a clear direction and goals. In the case of the *Illusion Master*, players know that they are trying to retrieve the stolen magic chest. They are also prompted to be curious as to what the mysterious power of illusion is. Secondly, the game needs to provide adequate feedback to the players, which we tried incorporating in the game through various feedback mechanisms. These include the sounds used when the player makes a good or a bad choice.

Another aspect of feedback included in the game was the character's levelling up system, which was included at later stages in the design of the game to act as an extrinsic motivator for players to keep improving their performance. The 5-level system thus also aims to keep players immersed in the game. Every time the player manages to kill a ghost, the character gets a point. Five points would allow the player to level up. On the other hand, players would go down 5 points, hence one level, every time they are hit, pushing the player to avoid making mistakes. Of course the levelling system works in tandem with the difficulty of the game.

Finally, a progress bar at the top right of the screen acts as a reminder to show how far the players have managed to progress in the roof top, also creating anticipation as to what would happen once the end of the progress bar is reached.

The third and final requirement of flow is the balance of difficulty mentioned at the beginning of this section, which works in tandem with the level the player would be in at the time. This was one of the hardest issues to tackle. According to the theory, an activity can only keep one immersed if it provides the person with a challenge that is not too hard, but also not too easy. If players find a game too difficult, they might feel too anxious, and as a result stop being immersed in the game. Similarly, players could also stop being immersed if they get bored as a result of the game being too easy.

The design of *Illusion Master* attempts to keep players of varying skills in the flow zone by adapting the level of difficulty based on the players' performance. In the main rooftop section of the game, the more the player manages to kill ghosts without making mistakes, the faster the ghosts run towards the player. If a player makes a mistake, the character level goes down, but the ghosts slow down as well, giving the player more time to concentrate.

In the initial prototypes of the game, it was shown how despite the different speeds of the ghosts, tested players were still finding the game quite easy. To counteract this, two different coloured ghosts were created, which corresponded to two different shooting keys on the keyboard. In this sense, players now had to focus on not only keeping up with the ghosts, but also keeping in mind which keys to press.

Breaking Immersion & becoming objectively self-present

Once the game manages to get the player immersed, the next step was to create a situation where the same immersion could be broken in a way that made sense with the context of the game story. One of the toughest challenges was to think

of a story that could easily allow and justify this breaking of immersion to occur. The character of a magician seemed to be a good choice given his traditional role involves immersing his audiences in the illusion of magic.

For the duration of a magic performance, audiences are likely to stop seeing magic as manipulative tricks, and instead get immersed in the illusion that what they see is actual magic. Arguably, and in a similar fashion, players are likely to play a good game and immerse themselves in it, possibly also forgetting they would be playing a game. A strong parallel thus existed between the magician and a game, as well as a link between magic show audiences and players.

During the gameplay of *Illusion Master*, the player is however put in a conflicting situation. She plays as both a member of the audience, as well as the magician whose job is to immerse his audiences with his magic tricks.

In this sense, the magician in the game is trying to retrieve his power to immerse his audiences, while the player, in helping the magician, is also trying to regain this power of illusion. Since the player is the one that is ultimately controlling the magician, then it also seems to be logical to deduct that the power of illusion (or the power of immersion) also lies in the player who decides to engage with the game in the first place.

The ability for the player to break immersion appears at the end state of the game, when the player magician faces an evil clone of himself. It is subtly implied in the game dialogue that this evil magician is empowered by the player magician's shooting. Indeed, the player will never be in a situation to win if she keeps shooting the evil magician. If players decide to keep doing this, as is generally expected from traditional platformers, they would only be giving the evil magician / game the power of illusion that the player magician is desperately trying to retrieve.

It is worth pointing out here that illusion was chosen as the subject to be challenged rather than directly tackling immersion and self-presence. The reason for this is that the former feels very much appropriate within the game context. Indeed, it does make more sense to show how a magician character in the game has lost his power of illusion, rather than his power of immersion.

Designing a way for players to realize they needed to stop playing without making it seem like a game requirement proved rather trivial. Indeed, if at any point, the player were to follow any specific instruction by the game to stop playing, then the player would have arguably still been immersed when taking the decision. Instead, the player had to realize on her own.

Should the player realize she needs to stop playing to win, the evil magician finally dies and the stolen magic chest finally appears. I would like to focus briefly on this final boss fight in the game. Should the player keep interacting by shooting the evil magician, then she is perpetuating her immersion within the game. The player's immersion in the game is ultimately what the evil magician requires in order for him to remain alive and hold on to the power of illusion. Thus, the reason the final evil magician dies when the player deliberately stops playing is that he realizes he no longer has the power to immerse the player.

Thus at this stage, the power of illusion is finally handed to the player. Furthermore he is shown to have identical features to the protagonist as a hint to the player that the evil magician, who at that stage holds the power of illusion, is actually the same as the player who really holds this power without realizing it.

Once the player beats the final magician, the player is no longer in control of the magician in the game, who walks towards the magic chest on his own. It is this crucial moment that shows that the power of illusion ultimately belongs to the player, who initially decided to embark on this journey with the magician in the first place.

It is thus the player who could all along decide whether to be immersed or not in the game. This phenomenon is experienced through the player becoming objectively self-present, i.e. when she becomes reflectively conscious of the fact that she needs to reconfigure the way she relates with the avatar and interacts with the game device.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to propose a further layer of the feeling of self-presence in games, as well as to challenge the concept of immersion associated with it. *Illusion Master* was used as a case study to analyse the proposed extension of the definition of self-presence through a game, which arguably attempts to make the player aware of herself playing the game, as well as her relationship with the game medium.

The proposed feeling of objective self-presence, as well as the challenging of the concept of immersion contrasts with the characteristics of the same concepts as popularly understood in games studies. I ultimately hope that this discussion will open up new avenues for the study and analysis of presence in digital games, as well as add to the current definition of self- presence.

### REVIEW EXCERPTS

Following page

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# Review excerpts for Illusion Master

## Extending Self-Presence and Challenging Immersion in and through Digital Games

"game aesthetics and mechanics should be framed through further designers' lenses in order to motivate choices and outline future challenges. In addition, the concept of "flow" should be connected to immersion and presence in a more effective way. [Indeed] the concept of "flow" [should be tied] to your argument (e.g., what are the consequences of triggering this state in terms of immersion and presence?) strengthening the part about the final boss, which is the most significant passage of the game (according the theme of the article) but sounds overlooked in comparison with the rest. "
*Reviewer 1 Enrico Gandolfi*

" The hierarchy and relationship between the artifact and the paper is not entirely clear. […] As a reader, I had the impression I should 1) read the theoretical intro / literature review in the paper, 2) play the game, 3) come back to the paper. Is this what the author intended? Or should players/readers first experience the game and its challenge to immersion, and then proceed to the paper? Most options are fine for me, but the author should be clearer on this point. As a consequence of this, the clarity of the author's argument would be improved if he could articulate better what the game actually is in relation to the paper. Is the game presented as some kind of demonstration of the reasoning expressed in the paper? Is the game an incipit for the paper? Should the game stand on its own? Is the game some sort of "Research through Design" effort with which the author aims at developing design sensibilities by means of experimental artifacts? Is it more a philosophical experiment? Is it a critical reflection? Is it more akin to art for art's sake?"
*Reviewer 2 Anonymous*

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# The Self-Reflexive Tabletop Role-Playing Game

**ABSTRACT**
Tabletop role-playing games combine performance, procedures, and improvisation to both tell stories and reflect on the nature of storytelling. This article discusses the three games *1,001 Nights* by Meguey Baker, *What Is a Role-Playing Game?* by Epidiah Ravachol, and *World Wide Wrestling* by Nathan D. Paoletta in terms of how their procedures of play and framing devices comment on the tabletop role-playing game medium. Taken together, these three "games on games" demonstrate the inherent tensions of player motivation, collective fiction creation, and selling a "performance" to one's fellow players, and how RPG theory helps us to understand them.

**KEYWORDS:** *Analog games, Role-playing games, self-reflexivity, 1,001 Nights, World Wide Wrestling*

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary game studies frequently ignores analog (i.e., board, card, social, dice, tabletop and live-action role-playing) games in favor of video games (Torner, Trammell, Waldron, 2014). Yet the field does so at its own peril. TRPGs are formidable "simulation engines" in their own right (Dormans, 2006) and form the substratum of most modern video games (Barton, 2008; Peterson, 2012), including blockbuster titles such as *Mass Effect* (2007) and *Fallout 4* (2015). Affordances and constraints of video games have conversely impacted tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) design, such as *World of Warcraft's* (2004) influence on 4th Edition *Dungeons and Dragons* (2008). Design principles and their ideological propositions cut across boundaries of gameplay. The below discussion of self-reflexivity in TRPGs thus has ramifications beyond just the small role-playing game theory community, offering a means of evaluating and interpreting the meaning of games as texts within broader social frameworks of reference. This article constitutes a reading of three indie TRPG games – *1,001 Nights* (2006) by Meguey Baker, *What Is a Role-Playing*

*Game?* (hereafter referred to *WIARPG*, 2013) by Epidiah Ravachol, and *World Wide Wrestling* (2014) by Nathan D. Paoletta – that deal with the very mechanisms of TRPGs themselves. Through the tale-within-a-tale oral aesthetics (*1,001 Nights*), improvisational satire (*WIARPG*) and performative fakery (*World Wide Wrestling*), the games demonstrate and critique how collaborative fiction is created, reinforced, and contested by groups of role-players gathered around a table. At stake is, as posited by Michael Hitchens and Anders Drachen (2009), the very definition of what a role-playing game actually is.

## WHAT IS A ROLE-PLAYING GAME?

In 2013, TRPG designer Ravachol needed a business card, so he invented a new genre of TRPG: the nano-game. *Vast & Starlit* became a business-card-sized *Guardians of the Galaxy*-esque game about escaped space convicts on the run in a stolen starship. Narrative tension in the TRPG revolves around contested leadership and potential adventure in galactic exploration. The game, published on a piece of glossy, color-stock cardboard, sold for $1 and sparked a burst of nano-game ideation and creation in global RPG communities. Then, inspired by years of responding to complaints about his Jenga-based RPG *Dread*(2005) "not being a role-playing game", Ravachol released *WIARPG*, a self-reflexive nano-game in a similar vein that articulates through *Gedankenspiel* game rules the following definition of an RPG:

> It's a game you play with friends in a social setting. ...
>
> It's an exploration of intriguing or fanciful scenarios. ...
>
> It's a chance to be someone you're not. ...
>
> It's a celebration of sticky situations. ...
>
> It's collaborative daydreaming. ...
>
> It's exercise for your personal sense of drama. ...
>
> It's a way to trick ourselves into creating interesting things. ...
>
> It's something you've been doing all along. (Ravachol, 2013a).

Collective fiction creation is already a messy procedure, and the game itself is suitably gonzo: 3-5 players take on the roles of bank-robbers who have the perfect cover, for they are also astronauts scheduled to launch that day. One player is the leader of the bank robbery, a second the leader of the space mission, and yet another is an astro-robber with a pang of conscience and wants them to turn them-

selves in. The game creates a *farce*, a form of comedy that uses highly improbable situations and crude characters to answer the question "How are they going to pull this off?" The TRPG itself presents no answer. Ravachol's minimalist rules not only produce a series of absurd and increasingly silly play scenarios in the course of an hour, but also correspond with a specific argument about *what role-playing games are*. Playing the game means a confrontation with game theory in the raw, particularly with respect to emergence and improvisation.

As Felan Parker (2015) has recently argued, TRPGs can themselves function as forms of criticism and reflection on other media. Yet as Ravachol's example proves, TRPGs can also critique and reflect upon themselves.[1] The rules for the game remain inseparable from the philosophical propositions made by the game designer about the medium, which means by proxy that the play itself remains in dialog with each stated premise. Playing the game means acquiescing to a specific vision of TRPGs as a medium: a chaotic form of group entertainment that can cut right to the most intense moments of a given narrative. In the TRPG community, an informal theoretical concept circulates called the *pause-play effect*. Characters that exist on a character sheet prior to gameplay are as if "paused" on a video, frozen in time as objects of sheer potentiality until they actually become used in play, during which emergent properties such as player unpredictability, and dice-roll outcomes will inevitably (and drastically) determine this character's fate in the narrative (Costikyan, 2013). In *WIARPG*, the time from creating one's character to gameplay is simply too quick to promote TRPGs as anything other than a form of improvisation with extreme narrative stakes.

TRPGs use presentation and implementation of rules to adjust temporality and how we frame time (Torner, 2015). *WIARPG* uses its rules to put players in the middle of the action as quickly as possible, with "the action" already pre-framed by potentially irresponsible decisions they have made which are then integrated into the gameplay without problem. Did someone choose to bring a rocket launcher to the bank robbery? Excellent. Does the traitor choose to remain loyal to her friends after all? Then the players at the table can appreciate the moment-to-moment dramatic irony, just as the traitor player experiences the emotional conflict as a first person audience.[2] *WIARPG* offers not only a written statement of criticism and self-reflection on TRPGs, but also presumably enacts this statement through the emergent properties of play. The game uses *explicit self-reflexivity* to give groups of players both a window into designer-based TRPG theory as well as a couple of hours of dumb fun.

## SELF-REFLEXIVITY

The question remains: what is self-reflexivity and how do we locate it in TRPG products? Rey Chow (2011) defines reflexivity in theater as "conscious form of staging, an intermedial event that exceeds the genre of drama" (p. 138). Exceeding the medium or genre in question renders it unfamiliar for certain intervals, allowing the viewers and/or participants a glimpse and commentary

**1.** Ravachol's game prompted several other games as responses, including Vincent Baker's recent *What If a Role-Playing Game* (2015).

**2.** The first person audience is a concept in role-playing aesthetics that dictates the centrality of players both watching RPG events unfold as as player well as participating with and "feeling" them as a character (Stenros, 2010).

on its inner workings. A film such as *Contempt* (*Le Mépris*, 1963), for example, opens with a still shot of a camera on tracks sliding toward the camera, making conspicuous the process of the very film being watched. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) makes conspicuous the processes and outcomes of literary storytelling by watching the influence of various texts as they impact disparate eras in the novel. In theater, Bertolt Brecht (1964) is held up as the standard-bearer for intellectual-political self-reflexivity. His *Verfremdungseffekt* [alienation effect] techniques, such as interrupting the action with song commentary or showcasing patchwork sets that call attention to themselves as sets, expose the inner workings of the theater medium itself. After all, the power of theater to immerse and persuade its audience captivated Brecht: "One has to admire the theatre folk who, with so feeble a reflection of the real world, can move the feelings of their audience so much more strongly than does the world itself" (Brecht 1964, p. 187). Interestingly enough, semiotics scholar David Myers (2003) grapples again with a related question. Myers claims that games toy with human systems of signification through *mimicry* (p. 51).[3] Mimicry means that the system presents a semblance of accomplishing some real world task – shooting a target, running, negotiating – but the sign system often points to the *system* itself, rather than to some real referent. In *WIARPG*, for example, the act of robbing a bank is *mimicked* in such a way as to point to the TRPG as a medium: player uncertainty about the traitor's course of action and the high potential for any given character screwing up an aspect of the mission mean that the operant processes of the TRPG *themselves* are the main engine of suspense. The astrorobbers are only dangerous and volatile in the diegesis because RPG play is inherently characterized as "sticky" and chaotic.

As a new performing art (Mackay, 2001), TRPGs contain notable instances of design in which the mechanisms of the medium itself – and its corresponding capacity to move its organizers and participants – stand in the foreground. We can learn to recognize and interpret these instances. Furthermore, self-reflexivity in this medium resembles the self-reflexive video game in its having "no winning conditions, ... [being] roughly executed, short-lived and deliberately annoying" (Gualeni, 2013). For example, *WIARPG* states that TRPGs permit the "exercise [of] your personal sense of drama" (Ravachol, 2013a), which then corresponds with deliberately presenting one's fellow players with fictional adversity and invoking the rules only when even more complications in the already chaotic astrorobber sequence of events are needed. Indeed, Brian Sutton-Smith (2006) would likely locate RPGs as straddling "performance play" (i.e., inhabiting a character for others) and "informal social play" (i.e., gossip, jokes, potlucks). According to Mackay (2001), TRPGs consist of "role-playing performances, extraperformative conversations, and character planning" (p. 126). These performances, including our act of calibrating them and persuading other players to accept and play off of them, can be thematized in a game's procedures and content. A self-reflexive TRPGs is one that, in the writ-

**3.** Myers' concept of *mimicry* requires distinction from Caillois' (2001) famous concept of *mimicry*, which itself is comparable to role-playing. Whereas Caillois speaks of mimesis –– playing a pretend version of a real thing –– Myers' definition talks of systems copying the function and outcomes of other systems, with play as an emergent property thereof..

ten text or play-as-text, renders conscious and unfamiliar these performances and the mechanisms that produce them. They expose the machinery, whilst keeping it running.

For game studies, this study reaffirms the importance of game ontology (Zagal, et al., 2007), which seeks "… generalizations across [a] range of concrete design choices as embodied in specific games" (p. 22). Such dimensions include "interface, rules, goals, entities, and entity manipulation" (p. 25). For TRPGs, *interfaces* include the actual table, dice, information sheets, and players themselves. *Rules* include the systems governing play. *Goals* include any player motivation encouraged by the system and social circumstances: competition (gamism), creating believable imaginary people in imaginary worlds (simulationism), and spinning an engaging story (narrativism).[4] *Entities* are the various diegetic and extradiegetic "facts" established in the narrated fiction: a sword does 2D8 damage; Phyllis is mad at Marshall and won't let him into the house yet; Skeletor has a "Climb" skill. *Entity manipulation* involves agency over and conscious experimentation with these entities: I hit him with my sword, Marshall uses his predicament to make his escape, Skeletor takes a penalty to climb Snake Mountain in the rain. Self-reflexive TRPGs accomplish a commentary on both all these elements, as well as on the hierarchy itself.

*WIARPG* comments on the TRPG ontology by explicitly directing the "system" away from the tiny business card toward the players themselves, such that all present are cognizant that it is their creative heavy-lifting that brings the game to life. The game argues that the moving parts (i.e., interfaces, rules, and goals) of TRPGs are neither opaque nor inaccessible to players, but rather hinge on the loaded statements players make around the entities as they manipulate them: "Can my brother be in the bank too? My brother's now here" and "Let's cut from the robbery to us in the cockpit of the spaceship". *WIARPG* draws attention the powers that players hold and that they need only the barest minimum of alibi to entertain themselves. But *1,001 Nights* and *World Wide Wrestling* draw attention to the fact that such shared imaginative space does not exist outside of pre-existing social relations, further highlighting and estranging the act of role-playing for the TRPG players.

## STORYTELLING IN *1,001 NIGHTS*

The evolving cultural work *Arabian Nights* is a many-centuries-old collection of adapted, revised tales based around framing devices and embedded narratives. Night after night, as the story goes, Scheherazade tells the newly married Sultan tales with cliffhanger endings that continuously stay her execution at the hands of her husband. As a piece of self-reflexive fiction, the tale-within-a-tale structure allows us to see how humans shape tales to both comment on their society as well as to survive to tell more tales: storytellers cast themselves as wisefolk warning villagers, writers like Charles Dickens lengthen their stories based on financial models such as serial subscriptions, film directors use

**4.** The threefold model (GNS) remains a contested form of designer-centered theorizing based on the assumption that player motivations sculpt expectations of play and about the RPG system in question (Kim, 2008).

their current film as their résumé for their next film, and so forth. Meguey Baker's *1,001 Nights* systematizes these commentary and survival elements, as well as the more-than-passing-resemblance between a TRPG session and a group of storytellers. In *1,001 Nights*, a group of role-players play out a group of storytellers at the Sultan's Court who in turn act out their personal jealousies and desires through the simple tales they relate. The game's design and framing devices allow for even the most simple and/or incoherent tale-within-a-tale to become laden with interpersonal meaning, thematizing the inherent social borders and permeability of the "magic circle" of play (Stenros, 2012). It does so by folding player jealousies into the explicit rules of the game, as well as engaging with TRPG "stance theory".

*1,001 Nights* never calls itself a TRPG and, indeed, it does not have to. Instead, the rules tell us to "give each player a pencil and a character sheet … [and] create your characters" (Baker, 2006, p. 9). Players sensually embed their characters in the diegesis by assigning them attributes related to the five senses – hearing, touch, sight, smell, and taste – as well as choosing Arabic and/or Persian names from a list and suitable clothing. But these superficial characteristics are then used as weapons against their characters. Each player must pick what her/his character envies about each other character, such as "Cassim his fine clothes" or "Kalima her innocence and youth" (p. 18), such that every character is in theory in a passive-aggressive antagonistic relationship with every other character at the table. Players complement these with Ambitions – overarching character goals that drive them onward – balanced with check boxes for their Safety and Freedom. Player-characters (PCs) tell stories in Court in which they cast each other as the stories' figures, but they may invoke the wrath of the Sultan and risk beheading (Safety), make progress toward their goals (Ambition), or seek a way out of this place (Freedom). In this fashion, the tale-within-a-tale enacts metaphors for the PCs' diegetic concerns. A story told by the licentious cook ostensibly about a Pied Piper of Hamelin figure may actually turn out to be about competing desires for the handmaiden whom he cannot woo. A Sinbad action-adventure tale might turn into a rags-to-riches slapstick when told by a poor character in envy of wealthier characters. The metaphorization of real material through fictional forms and the ambiguities that creates lies at the heart of this game.

David Jara has commented that the game "can be read (and played!) as a reflection on the practice of role-playing itself … TRPGs can be understood as a practice where fiction is revealed as a mode of – and thus not in opposition to – real human interaction" (Jara, 2015, p. 7). The ambiguity of play identified by Brian Sutton-Smith (2006) interweaves with the very elements that make *1,001 Nights* "fun", namely identifying how humans meddle with and subvert the very stories they are using to make an argument or confirm a normative point. Jara sees "non-representational meaning" as an aesthetic feature of the TRPG, and *1,001 Nights* as one of the games that highlights it: that the fiction of TRPGs does not reflect reality on a one-to-one relationship, but

rather reflects upon, contrasts and compares its own mediation. Jara's framework divides the game world of *1,001 Nights* into "two narratological levels … the digetic … being the palace court … and the second, the "supernatural", hypo-diegetic, fairy-tale worlds of the stories told in court" (p. 4). TRPGs tend to foreground player motivation and choice as the main telos behind any in-game action. Even whilst playing in a meticulously designed dungeon or investigative mystery, players seem more likely to remember Ben's spontaneous haggling over a knife and rope, or the inopportune moment when he later failed a roll, than the overall plotline of the game itself. *1,001 Nights* thus invokes the metagame, or the external factors that affect regular game play. As Josh Call writes, most RPGs revolve around the "generation of a 'strategic map' that reveals how stakeholders can use their power to move from one scenario to another, and which moves are likely to occur in view of the stakeholders' preferences" (Call, 2012, p. 327). But while Call's "strategic map" invokes the importance of the metagame, *1,001 Nights* acknowledges and frames the metagame itself as a potential subject of commentary, distinguishing what we would see as self-reflexivity about the medium. Stance theory helps explain why this would be so pleasurable for a TRPG audience.

Kevin Hardwick (1995) coined stance theory on a thread with TRPG discussants on the rec.games.frp.advocacy (RGFA) newsgroup as a refinement of the "in-character vs. out-of-character" model to distinguish the player's own motivations from those of their character. The theory would later prove influential in the Forge theory forum discussions (Edwards, 2004; Boss, 2008), a body of work with which Ravachol, Baker, and Paoletta's games are in direct dialogue. Players assuming an *Actor stance* with their characters form decisions and actions "using only knowledge and perceptions that the character would have" (Edwards). Players assuming *Author stance* make character decisions based on what they as a player want, but "then retroactively 'motivates' the character to perform them" (Edwards). For example, a player who wants more action might have her character start an unnecessary fight, and then justify it as being something the character would do, given the circumstances. Without the retroactive motivation, players have assumed *Pawn stance* toward their character, akin to most computer RPGs: the character is simply a vehicle for fulfilling whatever the player wants without justification. Finally, *Director stance* means that players have the capability of framing one's environment, whole scenes, the kind and timing of events that happen to the character, and so on. The Director position in a TRPG provides one of the most powerful tools to reflect on the medium itself, as the player is able to frame their own interpretation of their performative acts into actual, diegetic TRPG performance. TRPG play often sees oscillation between Actor and Author stance, with Pawn stance perceived as poor play. However, *1,001 Nights* renders ambiguous all four stances, with each interrogating the other.

Metagaming and muddled stances infuse the very essence of *1,001 Nights* sessions. Courtiers are trapped in their milieu unless otherwise released, with all their sensory attributes, Envies, and Ambitions all transparent knowledge for all the other players (and possibly the PCs). One by one, each Courtier tells a story, assuming the role of the gamemaster (GM) and casting the rest of the PCs as characters in what amounts to a mini-session of a TRPG. As play unfolds, players get the chance to ask yes-or-no questions of the story such as "Will the blind man be hanged?" or "Will the duck finds its mother?" and earn dice toward Safety, Ambition, and Freedom as these questions are resolved. The PCs-as-other-characters are more-or-less free to adopt whichever stance they see fit while trying to answer these questions within the scenario-within-a-scenario. Actor stance would delineate a character trying desperately to remain true to the character they have been provided, while Author and Pawn stance would, in this case, represent the PC steering their character toward their metagame goals and anxieties (Montola, Saitta and Stenros, 2015). In *1,001 Nights*, Author and Pawn stances actually represent "good" role-playing, insofar as the goal is to reveal one's PC's desires and envies through a character whom they are playing. But an engaging and enriching story can nevertheless be enhanced by someone assuming Actor stance, playing their character straight, and then applying the metaphor generated by the performance as metagame analysis on the PCs' social conditions afterwards: perhaps the butcher hiding the Golden Fleece reflects how we keep close our darkest secrets, or perhaps the twilight of the fairytale sultanate reflects the *ennui*felt by PCs unable to extract themselves from their milieu. *1,001 Nights* incorporates that very act of hermeneutic interpretation of fiction with respect to real life as a core game mechanic. Thus *1,001 Nights* teaches us how to read TRPGs as texts and performances. As Daniel Mackay articulates it: "Although the role-playing game is a performance and, therefore, becomes itself in the very moment of its disappearance, the performance contributes toward building an aesthetic object for contemplation after it has become a memory" (Mackay, 2001, p.121). We can read not only the tale, but the metagaming surrounding the tale, as rich material expressing the use of fiction in the cloistered, stifling society of the Sultan's Court. Explicitly oscillating between the stances in game allow players to see human interaction for what it is, and our stories as instrumental means to an end that can be beautiful in their own right. Whereas *WIARPG* celebrates the gleeful chaos that core loops of the TRPG may generate, *1,001 Nights* permits us to read the TRPG in terms of the subtle positioning that people do within ordered realms of decorum and censorship. In this respect, *World Wide Wrestling* serves as a worthy third intervention, a sly commentary on the necessity of both order and chaos in selling fiction to one's fellow players.

## KAYFABE IN WORLD WIDE WRESTLING

Nathan D. Paoletta's *World Wide Wrestling* is a game about professional wrestling insofar as the sport itself offers a *portrayal* of combat independent of the actual requirement to physically defend oneself.[5] That is to say: the TRPG acknowledges professional wrestling as a world of performative fakery, cultivating a relationship between performer, writer, and audience in which all are both simultaneously suspending and actively nurturing their disbelief. In Paoletta's words:

> To play this game well, you need to get used to the double-think of the modern wrestling fan. There are always two concurrent stories. The obvious one is the story "on-screen" told by wrestlers, managers, valets and authority figures as they get into feuds, cut each other down on the mic and settle their differences in the ring (the kayfabe story, for you wrestling fans). The other one is the "legit" story that happens off camera, as the real people in the costumes try to advance their careers, attract more eyeballs to the product, and do what's… wait for it… *best for business* (Paoletta, 2014, p. 3).

In other words, players examine the process through which their characters take on wrestling-universe personas to then entertain an "'imaginary viewing audience', which in reality consists of: themselves" (Paoletta, p. 3). The multiple levels of fiction satisfyingly layer on top of one another, with no binary – player/character, performer/audience, real/fake performance – remaining intact to judge the meta-levels of play. While the game's PCs-as-playing-characters may sound similar to *1,001 Nights* above, *World Wide Wrestling* reflects on the TRPG practice as social practice in different ways. Specifically, *World Wide Wrestling* sells the fellow players not on the delicate reading of each others' in-game performances, but on the socially acceptable feigned credulity surrounding those performances, the blurred lines between character motivation and action on display for all to see. In this regard, the game offers a nuanced mechanical comparison between TRPGs and professional wrestling, including the numerous frames through which meaning is generated in both.

Using the example of *Tomb Raider* (1996), Celia Pearce argues that characters in any game are by necessity only half-formed, and completed by play:

> Lara Croft is a partially formed character; she is in essence a cartoon who serves as an avatar onto which the player is meant to project her – or more often, his – own interpretation. It is important that the character is incomplete, because if the character is too developed there is nothing compelling for the player to contribute. (Pearce, 2004, p.152)

Ordinarily, players do not highlight the moment at which one makes one's contributions to the character. In *World Wide Wrestling*, however, one does so in order to communicate vital information. Players play Talent, or rather, Pearce's

**5.** *World Wide Wrestling* is one of the many popular hacks of Vincent Baker's *Apocalypse World* (2010), which unleashed a wave of TRPG publishing activity once designers discovered that the system bridged well between conventions of traditional and freeform TRPGs.

"partially formed character" who then, her/himself, chooses a Gimmick that would correspond with what TRPG players would call a character class: The Monster, The Veteran, The Jobber, etc. These Gimmicks have both fiction and metafiction baked into them: The Jobber, for example, is a "nobody" who then will likely be playing a Heel – the scripted "bad guy" of a given fight – for someone more famous to beat up. Staring at this layered fictional creation would be nigh impossible without the socio-cultural framework of professional wrestling viewing practices: a player is playing a character (Talent) who is playing a persona embodying a current archetype (Gimmick) who is playing a wrestling-match role ("Heel"). Players receiving this performance are also playing the authors and audience, which means they are – as with *1,001 Nights* – invited to read all of the layers of performance and motivation as interweaving texts. The word "role-playing" strains to keep pace with the refracting roles being played. Yet play hangs together thanks to the "operational aesthetics" of pro wrestling: "it engages viewers in the illusion of the wrestling drama while it also allows viewers to scrutinize its operations" (Lipscomb, 2005, p. 154). Instrumental to professional wrestling's dynamics of scrutiny and performance are excessive, over-the-top gestures that clearly broadcast the ring and ringside action itself, leaving the audience unambiguous material to put under the intense micrcoscope of wrestling fandom.

Selling one's wrestling performances and insightful fandom form the primary bases of play in *World Wide Wrestling*. This is encapsulated in the dynamics of "kayfabe", or the self-contained fiction being generated by the Talent characters. Kayfabe through play-acted feuds and iconic redemption stories becomes the most legible textual unit through which the game might be read. Case in point: the game requires the use of a prop microphone to help amplify one's grandstanding. Talent use Moves, which are important and memorable actions a PC can take, to drive the storyline that the imaginary audience is intended to enjoy and interpret. In practice, this means players playing a given Talent PC need to give a clear, resonant performance of their particular Gimmick to sell their overall character persona. If one's Talent is doing the Gimmick of the Anti-Hero, for example, one has the Move "Mouth of the People" which encourages the PC to "speak truth to power" and roll 2D6. As an *Apocalypse World* hack, *World Wide Wrestling*'s Move system then dictates that something interesting happen regardless of the roll being a success (10+), partial success (7-9) or miss (6-). Positive results of "speaking truth to power" correspond with outcomes convincing in the kayfabe: "they shut the hell up right now; you get booked in a match with them; you gain +1 Heat with them. On a miss, you get beat down by their cronies" (Paoletta). Players have an incentive to yell at other players in wrestler-speak through a fake microphone, and both the system and player conspire to let this yelling have a mechanical impact on the storylines and Talent subtexts in motion. PCs build up a numerical Momentum score through Moves to help improve their later rolls. But a PC's Momentum also

heightens the narrative stakes for an underdog to take her/him down in later matches. And since the results of performative and fictional failure fall onto a Talent character rather than on the player her/himself, then s/he has an alibi to "play to lose" (Stark, 2012), to enjoy tragic downfalls and sad wrestler declines as well as underdog victories.

*World Wide Wrestling*'s self-reflexivity emphasizes TRPGs as performing art (Mackay, 2001), rather than as diegetic enactment of player feelings (as in *1,001 Nights*) or as creativity engines powered by radical player agency (as in *WIARPG*). Whatever the game state, players are encouraged to perform their role, Gimmick, or Talent to excess as dramatic content for other players to enjoy. On the flipside, the other players get to adopt the imaginary audience role that situates them as expert readers of an ever-increasingly opaque wrestling soap opera. System, genre expectations, and player behavior collude to continuously meditate on the act of playing a role that is sort of like oneself and sort of a strategic performance to get what one wants.

## CONCLUSION

Self-referentiality in media is nothing new, and the TRPGs discussed here are certainly not even the first analog games in recent history that have commented on the legacies of the hobby. RPGs are, in their most basic form, just people acting in a fictional game world through a playable character (Hitchens and Drachen, 2009). But rather than treat RPG player behavior as a kind of in-joke as per *Munchkin* (2001) or *HackMaster* (2001), *WIARPG*, *1,001 Nights*, and *World Wide Wrestling* celebrate the potentialities for self-examination and self-critique inherent in the medium. *WIARPG* reveals the basic conceits needed to create a role-playing game, and then leaves the rest up to the players in order to prove its own thesis. *1,001 Nights* frames tales within tales to show how players, given their own confined social milieus, move between stances and motivations with respect to the characters they portray. *World Wide Wrestling*envisions TRPGs as a trash-talking universe of collaborative media performance and feigned competition. *WIARPG* comments on the TRPG interface, *1,001 Nights* on the TRPG player goals, and *World Wide Wrestling* on the fluid player-to-character emotional space that brings TRPG groups back together week after week, begging for more. Most important of all, these games reinforce the idea that collaboration and what Karl Bergström (2012) calls "playing for togetherness" allow TRPGs to look at their own processes with analytic precision. Fiction can be brought into the world, debated without breaking character, and shifted according to the needs of the players and genre in question. Thus the self-reflexivity to be found in TRPGs informs broader discourses about how media are capable of reflecting on themselves. With self-reflection, comes analysis, evolution, and the long-term ascent of a medium, the human performative mechanisms of which have only begun to be explored in-depth.

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