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**Performing Videogames:  
Understanding Digital Play, Agency, and  
Engagement through Live Performance**

**By**

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Thesis submitted to the University Of Dublin for the degree of  
Doctor Of Philosophy. 2013.

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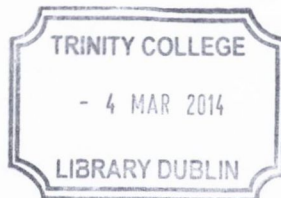
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## Summary

This thesis is a contribution to the fields of digital cultural studies, game studies, and studies of theatre and performance. I will consider the aesthetic, structural and technological exchanges, interactions, and remediations between video gaming and live performance.

The thesis begins with an overview of videogame history and definitions, drawing from performance studies, anthropological studies, and newly emergent theories of game studies. From this overview the thesis then moves into the analysis of a number of contemporary performances from Europe and North America. These performances are arranged into three separate categories according to the mode in which they engage with videogames. In the first category, 'Reimagining', this thesis considers performances that draw primarily on the aesthetic or narrative of existing games. These are considered with particular attention to those elements of games and game culture that they highlight. In the second category, 'The Player on Stage' performances that attempt to represent the subjective experience of the player are analysed with particular consideration for both theories of film reception and bodily engagement with the game. In the final category of 'Playing the Game Live' this thesis considers two performances that create an interactive performance space by drawing on existing game structures.

Through these analyses the processes of death, learning, and ideological engagement with videogames is explored, drawing particular attention to the position of the player in videogames. This position is then further explored with reference to both critical frameworks from film and the player's body. Through this the player's body is shown to be a contested object and player engagement is outlined as oscillating between narrative and ludic forms of engagement. Finally, the player's position as author of these narratives is considered as the systems of authorship and engagement in a live performance setting illustrate the complex interrelationships between pre-determined game structure and narrative development.

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## Introduction

This thesis is presented as a study of interactions between videogames and live performance in what might be described as 'standard' theatre configurations. While there has been extensive research on the subject of gameplay and performance with regards to pervasive and ubiquitous gaming (such as the EU funded IPerG project<sup>1</sup>) there has been little, if any, account of those theatre performances that engage with videogames as both cultural artefact and structural informant in a more traditional theatre configuration. Furthermore, there has been significant consideration of the inherent performativity of digital engagement by scholars considering such programmes as Multi-User Dungeons, *Second Life*, and Internet Relay Chat programmes.<sup>2</sup> However, these considerations have nearly always been centred on those performances that have happened *within* digital environments, engaging with live performances which are mediated by digital systems and communication networks.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pervasive-gaming.org/index.php>, last accessed February 24<sup>th</sup> 2013

<sup>2</sup> See for example Danet, Brenda *Cyberpl@y: Communicating Online* (Oxford: Berg, 2001) or Jones, D. E. "I, Avatar: Constructions of Self and Place in Second Life and the technological imagination" *Communication, Culture, and Technology*, Vol 6 (Georgetown: Gnoivs, January, 2006), or McGonigal, J. "All Gameplay is Performance: The State of the Art Game," (USA: UC Berkeley, 2005).

This thesis focuses primarily on the understanding of representations of the medium of videogames in live performances which take place within theatre settings. That is to say, those performances in which the performers and audience are *physically present* within the same space. Additionally, in the examples considered, the performers may use technology such as projection or game software but it is never the primary or sole means of representation.

In the following chapters I intend to present three distinct methods or categories of performance engagement with videogames as both medium and cultural artefact. These categories are 1) 'Plays set in a Videogame', 2) 'The Player on Stage' and, 3) 'Playing the Game Live.'

Through this structure I will interrogate not only examples of this form of engagement, but also aim to explore some of the operations and phenomena of videogames themselves. I will suggest that each example method of engagement with videogames highlights a different aspect of videogame operations and interaction. While this is not an exhaustive list by any means, I believe that the examples cited do address key aspects of the medium of videogames and form robust examples of particular methodologies for theatre/videogame interaction.

In the first category of 'Plays set in a Videogame', I will discuss three performances that present fictional narratives set in a virtual environment. That is to say that the fictional world presented by the performance is part of a videogame. It is *not* that the *actual* performance takes place inside a



piece of software. In this category I will consider the performance works: *Adventure Quest*,<sup>3</sup> *Theater of The Arcade*,<sup>4</sup> and *Doom Raider*.<sup>5</sup>

In the second category of 'The Player on Stage', I will discuss performances that attempt to represent, on stage, the subjective experience of playing a videogame. In this category I will consider those methods appropriated by performers, and how they might inform an understanding of the process of engagement inherent in the videogame as interactive medium. This category will primarily focus on two contemporary Irish performances: *Man of Valour* and *Connected*.

Finally, in the third category of 'Playing the Game Live', I will consider two performances which appropriate systems of interactivity from videogames to give the audience an opportunity to interact with a live performance in a structured fashion. I will consider how this combination both informs an understanding of videogames and changes the structure of the performance.

### **Discussions by chapter**

In the opening chapter of this thesis, I will begin by outlining the main points of the history of videogame development and criticism, with particular attention paid to the evolving definition of games in recent decades, including works by Huizinga,<sup>6</sup> Caillois,<sup>7</sup> and Juul.<sup>8</sup> These

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<sup>3</sup> First performed in The Brick Theater, New York, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> First performed in The Brick Theater, New York, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> First performed in The Civic Theatre, Tallaght, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens*, (London: Routledge 1998).

definitions will act as the foundation by which I will consider the videogame as a medium for the purposes of my analyses. In Chapter I, I will also introduce some of the analytical frameworks that I will be using throughout this thesis to consider a variety of performances, in particular I will discuss concepts of remediation and intermediality as proposed by Bolter and Grusin,<sup>9</sup> and Chapple and Kattenbelt,<sup>10</sup> respectively. For the remainder of the thesis I will discuss critical works as they arise in the chapters, rather than include an exhaustive literary review.

**First Category: 'Plays Set in a Videogame'**

In Chapter II I will begin with the first performance in the category of 'Plays set in a videogame'. The chapter is an analysis of Richard Lovejoy and Chris Chappell's *Adventure Quest* performed as part of the *Game Play* festival, New York 2009. I will discuss the play *Adventure Quest* as theatre staged in a fictional videogame world. I will consider *Adventure Quest's* aesthetic appropriations from the video game genre known as 'adventure gaming.' This work will consider how *Adventure Quest* may be understood in terms of remediation and intermediality through its appropriations from the medium of digital games. I will question how these configurations

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<sup>7</sup> Caillois, Roger, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962).

<sup>8</sup> Juul, Jesper, *Half-Real: Videogames between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Bolter, J, and Grusin, R, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, London: MIT Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Chapple, Freda and Chiel Kattenbelt, eds., *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).

operate within *Adventure Quest* with particular reference to the position of the player and the operation of narrative and identity in this piece.

In Chapter III both *Adventure Quest* and *Doom Raider* will serve as primary points of analysis to further interrogate the operation of certain game mechanics and how they might be staged. More specifically this chapter is a contrasting analysis of the treatment of videogame death in two performances: Sneaky Snake's *Adventure Quest*, and Fishamble's *Doom Raider*. In this chapter I will consider the operation of the game mechanic known as the 'save game,' its operation within a gameplay experience, and how this operation may be staged in live performances. By drawing focus to the performances' treatment of character within a videogame and the role of death in their world, I will argue that *Adventure Quest* and *Doom Raider* challenge the narrative experience of gameplay through their treatment of virtual death.

In Chapter IV, the performance piece *Theater of the Arcade* will serve as the central text for analysis. I will focus primarily on a section of the play entitled *Magdalena Magellan Mars* that combined the fictional setting and ludic action of the 1979 Atari arcade game *Asteroids*, with the distinctive writing style of playwright David Mamet. By working with reference to Celia Pearce's<sup>11</sup> article on narrative operation in videogames, this chapter will position *Theater of the Arcade* as both narrative augmentation and a representation of experiential narrative. I will consider if, by appropriating

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<sup>11</sup> Pearce, Celia 'Towards a Game Theory of Game' in *First Person*, ed. Wardip-fruin and Harrigan, (London: MIT Press, 2004) 143-154.

the writing style of David Mamet (particularly plays such as *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*.) *Magdalena Magellan Mars* can be read as a representation of the game experience, and as a critique of a value set that the mechanics and operation of *Asteroids* may reinforce.

### **Second Category: 'The Player On Stage'**

In Chapter V I will focus solely on Irish theatre company Corn Exchange's 2011 piece *Man Of Valour*, directed by Annie Ryan and performed by Paul Reid. In this chapter I will consider the position of the actor's body as object in film, and the player's body as neglected or non-entity when engaging in the act of digital gameplay. I will argue that through its modes of representation, *Man Of Valour* attempts to reclaim the actor's body as live agent, remediating Hollywood film through performance and thus challenging the paradigm of actor-as-object and recreating Vivian Sobchack's 'film body'<sup>12</sup> on stage. I will show that, through this process, *Man of Valour* develops a sophisticated methodology for representing the subjective experience of videogame play on stage, which is highly reliant on cinematic phenomena.

In Chapter VI, I will present an analysis of the play *Connected* as written and performed by Karl Quinn and Will Irvine as part of the Absolut Fringe Festival, Ireland, 2010. My analysis of the performance will focus on the

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<sup>12</sup> Sobchack, Vivian: "The Scene of The Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic 'Presence'" from <http://studio.berkeley.edu/niemeyer/stories/seminal-essays.htm#sobchack> last accessed Jan 16<sup>th</sup> 2011.

representation of subjective gameplay experience with specific reference to multi-player and multi-user virtual environments. Through comparisons with Corn Exchange's *Man Of Valour*, this chapter will further explore the position of the body as it relates to gameplay experience and endeavour to theorise both these performances' attempts to represent the subjective experience of the player on stage. By drawing on Graeme Kirkpatrick's essay 'Controller, Hand, Screen: Aesthetic Form in the Computer Game',<sup>13</sup> I will argue that a synthesis of Newman's and Maetes' seemingly conflicting theories of game engagement may be found in the consideration of the body as a contested object in the course of a gameplay session. I will then discuss this framework of contested body in conjunction with *Connected's* representation of the gameplay experience.

### **Third Category: 'Playing the Game Live'**

In Chapter VII, I will again focus on a single performance. This chapter is an analysis of German theatre group Rimini Protokoll's *Best Before* and its appropriation of videogame elements to inform its construction. This chapter posits that through borrowing elements from Role-Playing and Massively Multiplayer Online games, *Best Before* aims to interrogate the experience of both community-based play, and the nature of choice in both Role-Playing games and 'real life.' Through comparisons with both video game structures and analysis of online communities by scholars

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<sup>13</sup> Kirkpatrick, Graeme, "Controller, Hand, Screen: Aesthetic Form in the Computer Game" *Games and Culture*, Vol 4, No. 2 (SAGE Publications, 2009): 127 – 143.

such as Nessim Watson,<sup>14</sup> this chapter will consider those elements appropriated by Rimini Protokoll from the genre of gaming known as the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game). I will consider the interaction between these elements and the live performance setting, with particular focus on the operation of player agency and character creation in a virtual environment. Rather than consider the nature of the digital self as a wider philosophical problem, this chapter will instead focus on the operation of the ludic elements of the in-performance game *Best Land*. By highlighting these elements, this chapter will illustrate the system by which Rimini Protokoll aimed to recreate the individual's player experience for the audience in a live theatre setting.

In Chapter VIII, I will consider an alternative attempt to recreate player experience that does not rely on computer hardware (as *Best Land*) in its execution, but instead draws from the textual structure of a specific videogame genre to inform its construction. This chapter is an analysis of the play *BrainExplode!* written by Richard Lovejoy and performed by Sneaky Snake Productions as part of the *Game Play* festival, New York, 2011. In this chapter I will consider the digital game genre commonly referred to as 'adventure gaming,' and the production of *BrainExplode!* as a theatrical remediation of the adventure game genre. I will argue that the control structure of *BrainExplode!* serves to divide the audience into two

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<sup>14</sup> Particularly: Watson, Nessim "Why we argue about virtual community: A case study of the Phish.net fan community" in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, Jones, Steven Ed. (London: Sage Publications, 1997) 102-132.

groups of 'participants' in the execution of the performance by creating two levels of interactivity within the piece. I will consider if, in borrowing the structure of the adventure game genre, the piece could be understood as a performed hypertext, creating a system of dual-authorship between the performers and the audience for each performance.

Finally, in the conclusion of this thesis, having considered these varying categories of performance interacting with videogaming, I will consider some of the central affinities between the two media. I will recap briefly the methods considered and some of their key advantages and disadvantages in contrast to one another. In analysing the performances considered in this thesis, a more robust understanding of digital play is reached. The operational process of death, learning, and ideological engagement in videogames is shown to be expanded by the first category of performances, highlighting the importance of the player and their position in gaming. In the second category of performances the position of the player is shown to be problematised, positioning the player's body as a contested object. Finally, in the last category of performances, the authorship of game experience is illustrated as a complex series of interrelationships between players and the systems inherent in the game. This relationship is shown to be highly dependant on well structured game systems, and therefore not an equal relationship between players and designers but rather a ongoing process in which player engagement with the game generates narrative which is informed by the game structure.

## Chapter I:

### Videogames, History, and, Terminology

In 1962, in the electrical engineering department of MIT, a man named Steve Russell had been working with some friends in their spare time on some software for one of the newest computers in the university. This software told the computer (an expensive Programmed Data Processor 1, or PDP-1 with an early form of Cathode-Ray Tube display,) to display two small objects on screen, which could move and generate new objects depending on user input. These objects were representative of spaceships, the objects they generated were missiles, and the software was called *Spacewar!*<sup>1</sup> The software proved to be a popular distraction among Russell's academic peers. Though electrical engineers had previously programmed computer algorithms that would allow the user to engage in games of Tic-Tac-Toe, or guide a figure around a simple maze, Russell's *Spacewar!* proved to be the most popular piece of competitive interactive software designed exclusively for use on a computer. As such, *Spacewar!* is largely considered to be the first computer game. Subsequently, as computing became more and more commonplace in universities, many variations of *Spacewar!* and other games began to

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<sup>1</sup> See Barton, Matt, and Loguidice, Bill, "The History of Spacewar!: The Best Waste of Time in the History of the Universe", [http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/4047/the\\_history\\_of\\_spacewar\\_the\\_best.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/4047/the_history_of_spacewar_the_best.php), last accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2013.



circulate within the academic and computer-enthusiast communities. New games began to appear, programmed and altered by others working in the field. Games programmed by other students in their spare time were passed around networks or simply exchanged on a hard media format between users, including purely text-based systems, which did not rely on graphical representation to create the game world.

A little later in 1968, Ralph H Baer<sup>2</sup>, working in a small office at the electronics company Sanders Associates Inc., constructed a device that could plug into any standard television set and allow the user to play games. Initially called 'The Brown Box,' the system was a switch-operated electrical unit that sent standard video signals to a television to display simple graphics, while receiving inputs from a simple control system, which allowed the user to manipulate the image on screen. The system allowed users to play a wide range of games including simple tennis simulations and maze games. After marketing it to a number of different groups Baer secured a deal with electronics company Magnavox, who agreed to produce a production version of the 'Brown Box' with a few alterations. This new system, called the Magnavox Odyssey, sent images in black and white rather than the Brown Box's colour system, included no sounds, and used a replaceable cartridge system rather than switch operation. The system was the first home-console videogame system.

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<sup>2</sup> See Baer, Ralph "Genesis: How the Home Video Games Industry Began", [http://www.ralphbaer.com/how\\_video\\_games.htm](http://www.ralphbaer.com/how_video_games.htm), last accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2013.

Some years later (having played *Spacewar!* while at college), Atari founder Nolan Bushnell took inspiration from the pinball arcades of American theme parks and designed a stand-alone system that would allow players to play a short session of a *Spacewar!*-like programme called *Computer Space* in exchange for a small fee. Bushnell used an arrangement much like Baer's, which used a standard television set as the display system for the unit. Though the project was only moderately successful, Bushnell was undeterred and began to pursue a contract with a larger distributor. Bushnell's company Atari came to an arrangement with distribution company Midway for a self-contained coin-operated game system containing a game called *PONG*, which largely resembled one of the games available on Baer's system. Released in 1972, *PONG* was a simple game in which two players competed against each other (or a single player against a computer opponent) in a game that resembled a simple table tennis match. The game proved to be hugely successful, selling over 2,500 units in its first year. In fact, the game was so successful that it is widely considered to be the launch of the booming videogame arcade industry that blossomed in the USA in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

Bushnell, Baer, and Russell are the fathers of videogames. Their work served to insert videogaming into the cultural landscape. However, these

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<sup>3</sup> There are numerous titles on the rise of the videogame and arcade culture, for examples see Kline, Stephen, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig De Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*, (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003) and Wolf, Mark J. P. *The Medium of the Videogame* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

multiple threads of development have led to some confusion with regards terminology. Often in discussions of games that utilise an electronic or computing device coupled with a video display, the classification of the game is referred to in varying terms, most popularly 'computer games' or 'videogames.' The distinction arises from those cases whereby a game is designed as a stand-alone piece of software to be used with a standard computer. In this case the computer is a working tool designed for multiple tasks and the software is simply one of the tasks that the computer can do, a game that runs on a computer is hence a 'computer game'.

In the second case, the defining feature is not the computer system which allows the software to run, but the use of a video display system hooked up to a purpose built game-playing machine, commonly referred to as a 'games console' or more simply, 'console'. It is a dedicated processing system for the playing of games, which uses a video display, hence the moniker 'videogames.' However, as technology has advanced, the functionality of computers, consoles, and even mobile phones has changed radically and the terms 'computer game' and 'videogame' have become largely interchangeable. Mark Wolf considers the 'computer game' to be a sub-set of videogames as a whole<sup>4</sup>, however, he acknowledges the difficulty even in this definition, as games are now generally released as 'cross-platform,' allowing players to purchase copies of the software for either personal computers or dedicated consoles.

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<sup>4</sup> Wolf, Mark J. P. *The Medium of the Videogame* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 17.

Similarly, many console manufacturers are now adding features to their products that allow them to function as more than simply dedicated gaming machines. Conversely, Henry Lowood uses the term 'computer games' as a catch-all phrase for many forms of software based electronic entertainment, setting the term videogames as subset of computer games. Lowood then uses the term PC games when referring to games designed exclusively for domestic computer systems.<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of this thesis I will endeavour to refer to all gaming software, regardless of platform, as videogames or at times more simply, 'games'. Additionally, when referring to the act of playing videogames, I will often use the term 'gaming'.

From these origins the videogame industry has grown to be one of the biggest industries in the world, with earnings even outstripping Hollywood film as a popular entertainment product. Despite the decline of the arcade videogame culture, home videogaming has gone from strength to strength, with a huge range of games and hardware available to the public. In fact, it was reported that in 2011 alone the videogame industry was worth approximately \$74 billion<sup>6</sup>, a figure comparable to the Hollywood film industry.<sup>7</sup> Large franchises such as Nintendo's *Mario Bros.* or Capcom's

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<sup>5</sup> Lowood, Henry 'High-Performance Play: The Making of Machinima' in *Videogames and Art*, edited by Andy Clarke and Grethe Mitchell. (London: Intellect, 2007) 59 – 79.

<sup>6</sup> Webber, Rachel, "More than \$74 billion will be spent on games in 2011" in *Games Industry International*, <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2011-07-05-more-than-USD74-billion-will-be-spent-on-games-in-2011> last accessed 15<sup>th</sup> Nov 2012.

<sup>7</sup> See: "How much does Hollywood Earn?" <http://www.informationisbeautiful.net/2012/how-much-does-hollywood-earn/> last accessed 15<sup>th</sup> Nov 2012.

*Resident Evil* have grown significantly with several titles exploring the actions of a set system of mechanics or following a central, at times episodic, narrative across each game.

The popularity of the medium has insured that videogames have become deeply imbedded in the cultural landscape. Many videogame characters have become cultural icons, with characters such as Nintendo's Mario<sup>8</sup> or the aliens from Taito's *Space Invaders*<sup>9</sup> appearing as references in street art, music, and film. The 'pixilated' artistic style necessitated by early videogame technology has become almost ubiquitous in popular culture, while entire orchestral music events such as *Videogames Live!*<sup>10</sup> are dedicated to reproducing soundtracks from popular videogames in a live setting. Groups like The Protomen<sup>11</sup> and artists like Zak Gorman<sup>12</sup> have used the narrative fiction of specific videogame titles to create new original works that further explore the emotions of central characters or focus on other elements of the fictional universe created originally created by the game designer. Several big budget films have been based on popular videogames with games such as *Tomb Raider*<sup>13</sup> and *Max Payne*<sup>14</sup> being adapted to film for worldwide distribution. Additionally, videogames have

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<sup>8</sup> from Nintendo's *Super Mario Bros* franchise and associated intellectual properties.

<sup>9</sup> *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> *Videogames Live!* (Mystical Stone Entertainment, 2005 – present). Currently touring at time of writing.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.protomen.com/> last accessed 7<sup>th</sup> Jan 2013.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://magicalgametime.com/> last accessed 7<sup>th</sup> Jan 2013.

<sup>13</sup> *Tomb Raider* (Eidos, 1996), adapted to film in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, Dir. Simon West, (Paramount Pictures, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> *Max Payne*, (Remedy Entertainment, 2001), adapted to film in *Max Payne*, Dir. John Moore, (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2008).

responded to film and several titles are being released as tie-in products to popular franchises such as Hasbro's *Transformers*. More recently, the development of Smartphone technology and online marketplaces for digital downloads have greatly increased the popularity of so-called 'casual games,' which are designed for short play sessions with little or no instruction required by the player. This has served to make titles such as *Angry Birds* highly recognised products.

The wide range of games, financial viability of the medium along with new methods of digital and online software distribution made the act of game design much more accessible to individuals, many of whom push the boundaries of gaming as a concept. Online distribution has also contributed to the popularity of fan-made alterations to existing games (known as 'mods') which may do anything from slightly change the core mechanics by adding new levels or player abilities to the game; right up to complete redesigns which use the central software engine of the game to create wholly new game experiences which can be enjoyed as games in their own right, such as Dan Pinchbeck and Robert Briscoe's *Dear Esther*.<sup>15</sup>

More recently, artists and game designers have begun exploring the nature of gaming in its own right. The ease of distribution offered by digital and online channels has led to the rise of a large number of both 'indie games' and 'games as art' both of which aim to use games as a more

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<sup>15</sup> *Dear Esther*, (thechineseroom/Robert Briscoe, 2012) uses the Half-life 2 'Source' engine. See <http://dear-esther.com/> last accessed 7<sup>th</sup> Jan 2013.

expressive medium, redefining the game object as something more than simple entertainment. Programmers who create such works are referred to interchangeably as artists, designers, or developers, reflecting the usually individual nature of the process, which necessitates a wide skill base.

Artist/Developers such as Pippin Barr are experimenting with using the frame of 'game' to present interactive software that explores both philosophical and social concerns such as the effect of war on the human mind, or even the experience of attending Marina Abramović's *The Artist Is Present* in New York's Museum of Modern Art.<sup>16</sup> Some of these explorations aimed to redefine the formal concept of games by creating games that feature little or no player action, heavily repeated action, or are incredibly difficult to play. Other artists have begun using games to directly communicate more personal experiences such as the experience of transgender modification surgery<sup>17</sup>, using the medium of the videogame to make the player an active participant in the exploration of these topics. By requiring players to take action at certain points, or by manipulating the player's ability to control the game in varying ways, artist/developers can challenge the passive experience of information consumption and exploration and also attempt to illicit embodied emotional responses from the player. Other designers, such as Terry Kavanagh, have sought to explore a single mode of interaction or game mechanics, creating games

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<sup>16</sup> *The Artist is Present*, Pippin Barr, <http://www.pippinbarr.com/games/> last accessed 16<sup>th</sup> Nov 2012.

<sup>17</sup> See *Dys4ia*, (dessaeegea, 2012), <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/591565> last accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2013.

that include hundreds of variations on a single theme. By combining a wide variety of interactive strategies and presentation styles these individuals and small development groups have presented challenges to the nature of the medium of gaming that have been steadily pushing the boundaries of videogaming as an interactive medium.

Alongside this exploration of the medium through artistic and commercial practice, writers and scholars from both the industry and academia have begun to develop a videogame criticism, which addresses the unique position of the videogame as an interactive medium. Popular commentary and industry sites such as *Gamasutra*<sup>18</sup> have begun to consider the operation of games both in economic terms and formal terms, considering the success or failure of the various game design elements that exist in current popular industry games. These considerations have largely focused on refining the process of game design by identifying key elements of 'successful' game design and the opportunities of implementing these elements elsewhere. New schools of academic study have also arisen which approach similar concerns with regards 'successful' game design. However, there have also been many recent attempts to address the operation of games as a medium, as critics and scholars attempt to move away from theories of performance and film studies as tools to analyse both the images displayed by game software and the experience of the player themselves. These explorations, while still in quite early stages, have begun to shape an analytical school that

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<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.gamasutra.com/> last accessed 7<sup>th</sup> Jan 2013.



might be referred to as 'game studies', which aims to understand and define the operation, philosophy, and impact of games as a medium.

### **Defining Games**

Some of the early studies of games draw heavily on social/anthropological studies of the act of play, with pieces such as Caillois' *Man, Play, and Games*<sup>19</sup> and Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*<sup>20</sup> emerging in the early twentieth century. Both works attempt to analyse the position of the playful act in a larger social context, defining the nature of play and how it operates in society. These pieces largely discuss the proposed function of play in both forming relationships and imbuing knowledge into the play participants. Huizinga describes play as a significant function of life in both humans and animals, while remaining outside normal social behaviour. Huizinga states that play is 'a well-defined quality of action which is different from "ordinary" life.'<sup>21</sup> In this case, Huizinga does not seek to reach a specific definition of *games*, but rather considers the act of play and playfulness in general.

Similarly, Erving Goffman draws on the act of play and its difference from 'ordinary' life in his discussions on the 'framing' of action,<sup>22</sup> though in Goffman's case he references zoological analysis of the act of play in

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<sup>19</sup> Caillois, Roger, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962).

<sup>20</sup> Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens*, (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid* 4.

<sup>22</sup> Goffman, Erving, *Frame Analysis, An Essay on The Organization of Experience*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986).

animals (rather than humans) to inform his discussion of indicating movement from one frame to another.<sup>23</sup> Goffman's notion of the 'the frame' provides a useful tool for understanding the operation of play as a separate set of activities, each with their own meanings that exist only with reference to other objects within the frame. For example, we can understand a game of rugby in these terms; the game is 'framed' in multiple ways. It is framed spatially by the playing pitch and the uniforms of the players, and temporally by the presence of a referee who announces the beginning and end of the game time. Within this frame the actions of the players take on a double meaning, the simple action of carrying a rugby ball across the try-line at the end of the pitch is not just movement of an oblong leather ball, but is the advent of 'scoring a try' (i.e. gaining five points in the game). This is an action that only holds relevance within the game time itself and is framed as such. Were a player to carry the ball across the line outside of game time, it would not possess this double meaning. The action is no longer within the 'frame' of a rugby match.

Caillois attempts to move from Huizinga's ideas to play in general towards a more formal definition of games. He proposes that games are free to engage in, that they are separate from normal society, that the results are uncertain or unpredictable, and that they are fundamentally unproductive

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, Ch 3 "Keys and Keyings" 40 – 83.

creating no goods or wealth whatsoever.<sup>24</sup> More importantly, Caillois defines play as *governed by rules* and containing elements of *make-believe*.<sup>25</sup> These definitions eliminate the considerations of 'playfulness' or free-form play from Caillois' works, and draw focus instead to the consideration of rules and rule structures within games. However, these definitions are not without their difficulties when considering the videogame object.

While this is by no means a complete history of the study of play and games, the work of the above-mentioned authors highlights some of the central considerations upon which an understanding of the nature of games and play has been built, particularly that the act of play exists as socially separate from daily life.<sup>26</sup> More recently scholars have revisited this understanding of play in order to begin defining the nature of the videogame as a unique medium, and in part to address the limits of Caillois' previous definitions. Jesper Juul in particular has attempted to consider these definitions in a modern context.

#### **Jesper Juul, the limits of Caillois**

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<sup>24</sup> Caillois, R, *Man Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962) 10.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 10.

<sup>26</sup> There have, of course been significant further studies into the field of non-videogame play and its operation, for example Sutton-Smith, B, *The Ambiguity of Play*, (London : Harvard University Press, 1997). However, here I am aiming only to illustrate some of the initial considerations of play and the notion of rule structures as a distinct element of games and in particular videogames.

Jesper Juul, in his book *Half-Real*,<sup>27</sup> attempts to further address the issue of defining games. He illustrates some of the difficulties with Caillois' model (which he refers to as the 'classic' model) such as its exclusion of professional sports and gambling. For example, if a game of football is played professionally, the fact that the players earn a wage is a fundamental part of playing the game. Under Caillois' model, this would eliminate professional football from the realm of 'games,' as the commercialisation of the game leads to the production of wealth for the players. This similarly eliminates gambling, as players may earn money from other players or a casino, and even play professionally in order to draw a living wage. Additionally, if someone plays a game professionally then they may become dependant on that game for their living; as such can the game be considered to be 'voluntary' any longer?

In addressing this, Juul instead chooses to cite rule structures as the central element of game, and concludes that it is these very rule structures that allow a game to come into existence: "The rules of a game add *meaning* and *enable actions* by setting up *differences* between potential moves and events."<sup>28</sup>

This favouring of rules allows us to consider how games may operate within a digital environment, by considering the computer to be the system, which enforces the rules of the game. For example, in a game of

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<sup>27</sup> Juul, Jesper, *Half-Real: Videogames between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

tennis the rules of the game are both explicit and implicit. The explicit rules are those dictated by the written rules of the game itself, and enforced by the umpire. The implicit rules are those that are dictated by the physical limitations of the world in which the game is played: players cannot fly, the ball can only travel so fast and so forth. In the 'real' world, the laws of physics enforce these implicit rules. In a videogame version of tennis, however, these implicit rules must be coded into the computer itself in order for them to take effect in the game. Thus the computer becomes the system, which enforces the rules of the game in their entirety.

Ultimately, Juul reaches a definition of games that is largely based on the structural nature of games:

A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.<sup>29</sup>

It is this definition of games that I will draw from for the remainder of this thesis and treat as the central definition of games. In several cases I will refer to the interaction between sets of rules within a game. In these cases I will be considering the procedural operation that occurs when these two rules are enacted. These interactions largely dictate particular moments and behavioural affordances made to the player and how these affordances can affect (or be affected) by the game environment. I will

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 36.

consider these interactions to be the game mechanics, as in the functional operation of the game rules, rather than simply the rules themselves in isolation. When considering how the game actually *plays* or when two or more rules are interacting within a game, I will refer to this as a game *mechanic*.

When discussing the overall experience of playing a game I will refer to this as *gameplay*. Quite simply, a game consists of rules among other elements. These rules dictate the value and properties of objects and actions within a game. Rules interact during a game's 'run time' (the period during which a game is being played) to produce game mechanics; these mechanics may be intended or unintended on the part of the game designer and may even interact with one another. In videogames these rules and mechanics are enforced by the computational hardware being used, and the software running on said hardware. Finally, a player interacts with these rules and mechanics to experience gameplay.

This experience of gameplay is entirely dependant on the action of the player. As academic Alexander Galloway argues, games are an 'action-based' medium and exist only when the software is engaged by the player. He states: "... an active medium is one whose every materiality moves and restructures itself – pixels turning on and off, bits shifting in hardware registers, disks spinning up and spinning down."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Galloway, Alexander, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) 3.

What Galloway refers to here is the change that occurs in the software as players engage with it. Each change acts in response to player action, and the totality of these actions and responses are what form the game as a whole. As such, the true existence of the game emerges only from interaction between the player and the rules. This mode of interactivity necessitates a much more active audience member than what might be considered standard in cultural analysis of theatre. In theatre practice it can be considered that the 'active audience' is one which brings with them a series of preconceptions and expectations and their experience of any cultural object is an active navigation of the work presented through these preconceptions and expectations. With each new image or sound presented the audience member is undergoing a process of framing, interpretations, and re-interpretations, all of which combine to give meaning to the work received. This reading, however, is often a solely internalised experience and rarely requires the audience to offer direct input to the performance. In videogames this process of interpretation occurs alongside the player's active input into the software. In order for the player to receive more information to be interpreted and impart meaning, he or she must take action. Fabian Schäfer notes that 'digital gameplayers both produce and consume their own experience.'<sup>31</sup> As such games cannot be considered as fixed texts, as in film or some elements of performance studies, but must be considered in terms of their temporal

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<sup>31</sup> Schäfer, Fabian, "Ludic Philosophy: Subjectivity, Choice, and Virtual Death in digital media", *Digital Culture and Education*, Vol 1, Issue 2, (2009) 116 – 128.

operation, and how players engage with them. In short, games require action on the part of the player for the game to progress, to exist. The game must *be played* in order to *be*.

Nevertheless, videogames do exhibit certain aesthetic tendencies and formal consistencies, such as tensions between narrative fiction and the operation of rule systems within the game, the use of particular command structures and common game-mechanics, and so forth. As such, rather than consider a focus on the social-anthropological processes of play and games in general, videogames may be considered as a unique form of fluid text developed from a combination of distinct elements. These elements can be used to navigate the operation of videogames and how they may be considered in conjunction with other media. These elements of videogames and gameplay will be discussed in later chapters, as they relate to each individual analysis.

In addition to using the work of the scholars mentioned previously, it is also necessary to form an understanding of the operation of live performance when combined with other media.

### **Schechner**

Richard Schechner is perhaps one of the most influential theatre scholars to approach 'play' and games with reference to theatre and performance. Drawing heavily from ritual studies and the works of anthropologists such as Victor Turner, Schechner contextualises performance alongside ritual practice, focusing strongly on religious performance and the



transformation of meaning through the framing of action.<sup>32</sup> Schechner also considers play in this context, discussing play as an operation within the ritual process. The majority of Schechner's considerations revolve around the transformation of 'states of reality' and the process by which play as a general activity is initiated, interpreted, or transformed. Through this Schechner considers the porous nature of realities within the act of play, suggesting that the very notion of a 'frame' around play is 'too stiff, too impermeable',<sup>33</sup> suggesting instead that the nature of play is one of simultaneous and constant transformation present almost continuously like a web around life. In doing so, Schechner highlights the communal and performative aspects of play and describes the process of making performance as the epitome of play.

However, in his consideration of play Schechner is primarily concerned with play and its wider operation in a society and performance context. Rather than considering particular games in a play context, Schechner instead considers the potential playfulness of particular ritual performances, or ritualised actions. While Schechner's work in the field of play and performance studies is invaluable, the focus of this thesis is the interaction between theatre and the videogame as a specific cultural object and medium, rather than a consideration of play in general, or a

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<sup>32</sup> See Schechner, Richard, *Performance Theory*, (London: Routledge, 1977).

<sup>33</sup> Schechner, Richard, *The Future of Ritual*, (London: Routledge, 1993) 41.

consideration of the performativity of videogames themselves. As such, Schechner's work will not feature heavily in this thesis.<sup>34</sup>

## **Remediation**

In recent times, theatre, both in text and performance, has begun to engage with videogames as both cultural object and experiential medium. In order to attempt to understand these interactions on the part of the performances discussed in this thesis I will draw on theories of remediation as discussed in Bolter and Grusin, and Chapple and Kattenbelt, respectively.

In *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin<sup>35</sup> discuss the nature of media as a mode of representation. In particular they discuss the representation of media in other media, for example, the presentation of paintings on computer screens. This process is what is referred to as remediation. The discussion of remediation is centred on the concept of the 'desire for liveness,' or immediacy in all media. In some cases this 'desire for liveness' manifests itself in media's attempts to become near invisible, denying its own existence in the process of delivering information to an individual. They describe it as: '...

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<sup>34</sup> For works that specifically consider the performativity of videogames see Fernández-Vara, C. "Play's the thing: A Framework to Study Videogames as Performance." *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice, and Theory*, from DIGRA conference proceedings 2009 or McGonigal, J. "All Gameplay is Performance: The State of the Art Game," (USA: UC Berkeley, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Bolter, J, and Grusin, R, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, (London: MIT Press, 2000).

attempting to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation.<sup>36</sup>

To this end, Bolter and Grusin reference 'reality television' as an attempt to escape the viewer's knowledge of the systems of organisation and editing inherent in television broadcasting. The 'reality TV' show aims to create a sense of immediate and authentic experience in which the medium is not recognised as influencing the object/information/experience shown. In other words, a 'reality TV' show holds the pretence that this is 'what actually happened' and the medium of television is in no way influencing how we are receiving this experience. In this case the medium of television is attempting to become transparent, to give the illusion that the experience is unmediated. Even in those cases whereby individual media are represented in other media this 'logic of transparent immediacy'<sup>37</sup> can be said to be operating, as in the case of reading books in a digital format, whereby the computer or digital device attempts to become 'invisible' in favour of the book presented. However, as Bolter and Grusin point out, this illusion is inherently flawed as it is predicated on 'erasing' (or seeming to erase) the existence of the medium. Yet any representation is always-already operating within a framework of comparisons to other media and even its own self with claims of 'just like real life,' 'as it actually happened' or 'even better than the real thing'- all of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 21.

which lay claim to superiority over other forms of reported action and draw direct comparison between the medium and 'real life' itself.

In contradiction to this logic of transparency, Bolter and Grusin also highlight a process of hypermediacy<sup>38</sup> whereby the presence of the medium is vigorously highlighted to create an experience for the viewer that is in itself 'real' and immediate. If the logic of transparency attempts to offer us a unified visual space in which the view of the world is immediate and 'real', hypermediacy offers us a heterogeneous space in which the view of the world is a dense interlocking web of viewpoints and representations in which the only 'real' is our own response. Bolter and Grusin reference the work of artist Richard Hamilton<sup>39</sup> as an illustration of this. Hamilton's work *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* features a juxtaposition of images in collage in a form that seems to adhere to a simple interior photograph of a household. However as each image is taken from a different source (mostly advertising or marketing material) each seems oddly out of place, clearly not a 'natural' part of the whole image. Through this process, Hamilton's work highlights the nature of its own assembly, while also creating an estrangement of the individual images within the image. Hence the medium of photography and digital manipulation itself is highlighted, while the presence of images of technology such as tape recorders, and indeed

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 39.

the title of the piece itself, draws consideration of the myriad of ubiquitous media forms that are present in the contemporary home.

Hypermediacy and transparency are important to considerations of the videogame in live representations as each performance enlists either a conscious strategy of hypermediacy or transparency in its approach to videogames. Hypermediacy may be used by a performance in order to directly juxtapose the media as in *Adventure Quest's*<sup>40</sup> aesthetic appropriations from the point-and-click adventure game into the live performance setting. While a logic of transparency and immediacy may be used in order to represent the videogame experience in an immediate fashion, as in *Connected's* appropriations of Hollywood film techniques.<sup>41</sup> These logics are reflected in the nature of the remediation within each piece, and as will be discussed, each have issues arising in their application to an understanding of videogames as each assumes the videogame experience to be one of either hypermediacy or transparency depending on the nature of a player's engagement with the game. This will give rise to the question of the nature of player experience, which will be discussed later in this thesis. In the cases whereby performances have acquired or appropriated these logics and qualities, techniques, or strategies from other media, I will refer to these as 'acts of remediation.' I will consider these acts of remediation to be an active process of interconnected communication between media, which creates an

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<sup>40</sup> See Chapter II.

<sup>41</sup> See Chapter VI.

interdependence between the media for a process of understanding and creation of meaning on the part of the viewer/player/audience.

### **Intermediality**

When considering the actual operation of these acts of remediation within a theatre context, it is important to consider how theatre may differ from other media in the methods and systems of remediation being used. Philip Auslander, in his work *Liveness*, discussed the impact that remediation has had on live performance suggesting: 'Live performance now often incorporates mediatization to the degree that the live event itself is a product of media technologies'.<sup>42</sup> Auslander also discusses the complex inter-relationship between the cinematic, the televisual, and the live, illustrating the different methods of presentation each take and how they might be considered to relate to each other. In particular throughout the work Auslander emphasises the importance of the 'live' and/or 'authentic' performance as central to any discussion of mediated performances, though later problematises this notion through consideration of the mediated performance. However, Auslander's work doesn't limit his discussion to theatre, instead Auslander prefers to consider 'liveness' on much wider terms, discussing concerts, live broadcast, and the nature of liveness in economic and legal terms.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 25.

In *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*,<sup>43</sup> Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt present a series of texts on the subject of theatre and remediation. The work is a collection of pieces discussing the use of other media in particular live performances, and heavily references Bolter and Grusin's terminology. Kattenbelt frames the discussion by referencing the position of theatre as a 'composite' art, in that it often combines multiple systems of representation in a given performance.<sup>44</sup>

While the work relies heavily on concepts and operations outlined in Bolter and Grusin's work, *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance* is more concerned with theatre, as opposed to visual art, digital works, or more generalised concepts of 'the live.' However, much like Auslander, Kattenbelt considers the 'liveness' of theatre to then be its defining feature. Following from this, consideration of the conflict between the 'live' and the technologically or digitally mediated must be considered in the context of the live performance. In considering theatre to be a 'composite' art, i.e. one which is comprised of multiple art forms under a single heading, Kattenbelt describes the medium of theatre as a 'hypermedium,' able to contain all other arts forms under a single heading.<sup>45</sup> However, this unified status of 'hypermedium' does not create a homogeneous space on the live

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<sup>43</sup> Chapple, Freda and Chiel Kattenbelt, eds., *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).

<sup>44</sup> 'Theatre as the Art of the Performer and the Stage of Intermediality' in *Ibid*, 29 -39

<sup>45</sup> This concept is one which is frequently revisited throughout theatre history. Theorists and practioners from Aristotle to Richard Wagner and Antonin Artaud have identified the unique position of theatre as inclusive to several art forms.

stage. Instead the juxtaposition of elements often leads to a process of hypermediacy in which the disparate elements are fore-grounded for the audience as much for their medium of representation as for their content. This is particularly evident in those cases whereby the limitations of the physical are highlighted or even overcome by the use of digital technology. Andy Lavender<sup>46</sup> discusses one such process in his analysis of Klaus Obermaier and Chris Haring's *D.A.V.E.* in which a single dancer has images projected onto his body which seem to distort his physical self in ways that would be impossible in 'real life'. This process sharply defines the 'liveness' of the performance against the malleability of digital technology. Lavender uses this example to discuss how the process of hypermediacy on the live stage may be considered as a 'deeply pleasurable' experience, adding texture to an event. Lavender suggests that the *mise-en-scène* of a performance is always an activity of combination and synthesis between the elements presented, and that theatre's use of hypermediacy plays to that. He describes this: 'spectators enjoy recognition of the edge between the actual and the virtual, the real and the fabricated.'<sup>47</sup>

Though perhaps this edge between the actual and the virtual may be obscured within those live performances that consciously appropriate a logic of transparency, the process of interrelation between stage elements still remains, though this process may not be as emphasised. Alternatively

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, Lavender, Andy "Mise En Scène, Hypermediacy and the Sensorium" 85 – 66.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 65.



these processes may have been subsumed into a cultural lexicon of semiotic navigation, in which an audience is so familiar with particularly ubiquitous tendencies and conventions as to render them invisible or near-invisible. This embedded ubiquity may counter the hypermedial effects of the theatre's status as 'composite' and result in a logic of transparency operating on the stage without the director/designer/performer intending it.<sup>48</sup> In these cases, while the theatre is indeed operating as a composite art form, it is the dominant cultural understanding that unifies the space for the spectator, rather than simply the medium of theatre itself. Such is the case in *Man Of Valour*, whereby although the performance at first presents a logic of hypermediacy through its borrowing from famous cinema, it relies on the audience's cultural decoding to achieve a logic of transparency through which the subjective experience of an individual may be represented on stage. This process is discussed in greater detail in Chapter V.

All the performances discussed later in this thesis may be considered to be intermedial performances in that they exist in, or create a state of intermediality through the combination of different media. Each enacts certain processes of remediation that vary depending on the performance's method of engagement with videogames as cultural object or subjective experience. The terms may be delineated further by considering that these performances exist in a *state* of intermediality while

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<sup>48</sup> For a more in-depth discussion on embeddness, performance, and technology see Causey, M., *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness*, (London: Routledge, 2006).

enacting a *process* of remediation. In all cases, the performances selected are primarily 'live' performances. Though many use technology in their presentation, I have avoided selecting performances that are heavily mediated by actual hardware such as television screens, or projection mapping technologies. This is in the hopes that these performances will highlight how certain structural principles or dramatic tendencies of videogames may be integrated into live performance and further understood in a theatre context through the consideration of those performance and textual techniques employed. While in all cases these videogame traits are a product of the hardware that allows videogames to exist, this thesis aims not to discuss the use of videogame hardware on stage, but rather to illustrate those traits of the videogame as a *medium* and how they may be appropriated into performance for theatre. In short, this is not a thesis which aims to discuss performance in the digital or virtual environments of gaming technology, but rather one which aims to discuss a selection of works which have appropriated videogames as cultural artefact to inform their performance structures.

### **Conclusion**

Having outlined a simple definition of gaming and some historical context with regards the development of both videogaming and videogame criticism, it is clear that despite a lack of specific criticism with regards theatre and videogaming in particular, there are analytical tools in existence which will allow for an exploration and theorisation of some examples of live performance engaging with videogames in a live context.

The concepts of remediation as put forward by Bolter and Grusin and framed through the term 'intermediality' Chapple and Kattenbelt, provide a useful structure for understanding the relationships between live performance and multiple media. These structures are not only dependant on the formal organisation or tendencies of the media in use, but also on the cultural understanding and experience of such. By combing these frameworks for the analysis of live performance with both Jesper Juul and Alexander Galloway's frameworks for definition of games and analysis at the point of rule structure, I will provide some analysis of these engagements. These analyses will illustrate some central operations of videogames, including issues of authorship, agency, and player engagement. Perhaps one of the simplest of these interactions between videogames and performance in a live context is Sneaky Snake Production's staging of a videogame as fixed text, in their performance *Adventure Quest*, which will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

**Section I:**

**Plays Set In a Videogame**

## Chapter II:

### *Adventure Quest*

*Adventure Quest* is a play written by Richard Lovejoy and Chris Chappell in 2009 and was created as an exploration of the videogame genre known as 'adventure gaming,' a narrative driven form of videogame which focuses on a protagonist solving multiple puzzles to achieve their goal, rather than on physical or combat challenges. The piece centres on the exploits of a character referred to in the text as 'Hero' as he attempts to rescue the town of Perilton from its evil ruler, 'Evilicus'. The performance borrows heavily from the aesthetic of a number of popular 'adventure games' to inform its construction, while exploring the dynamics of character in relation to the formal authority of both games and theatre as the media it seeks to combine. The performance's borrowing of both aesthetics and structural elements from the adventure game genre created an intermedial performance, which contained attempted reproductions of many of the aesthetic, textual, and narrative phenomena of the graphic adventure game. Additionally the performance's treatment of the lead character's position within the fictional world depicted has much in common with the formal experimentation of character explored in the historical avant-garde of theatre. Through these interactions the performance draws attention to the positions of both the player and designer during videogame engagement.

*Adventure Quest* was first performed in The Brick Theater, New York as part of The Brick Theater's 2009 *Antidepressant* festival, and subsequently as part of the 2009 *Game Play* festival. Produced by Sneaky Snake Productions, the performance itself took place over approximately 90 minutes and featured a cast of eight, some performers playing multiple roles. Performers were dressed in simple costumes deigned to indicate a generic 'medieval' time period and fantasy setting (this included long robes, hemmed tunics and leggings etc.). The staging was minimal, with the majority of the scene information (time of day, location, etc.) being communicated by a projected background, which changed as the scenes moved on.



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<sup>1</sup> A promotional image from *Adventure Quest*, image by Kimberly Craven, courtesy of The Brick Theater. Note 'taskbar' at top of projected image displaying total score.

The projected background images were heavily informed by the graphical layout of adventure games created by the prolific game company Sierra Online, particularly games such as *Kings' Quest*,<sup>2</sup> *Conquests of Camelot: The Search for The Grail*<sup>3</sup> and *Quest for Glory*.<sup>4</sup> These games were some of the earliest iterations of a graphically displayed virtual environment in the adventure game genre, displaying the topography and characters of the virtual environment in which the game narrative was set.<sup>5</sup> The layout across Sierra Online's graphic adventure games displayed fairly consistent tendencies. The most common factor was a white bar or other solid coloured bar, which would be placed across the top of the screen at all times displaying the player's current score and some additional information such as the game's title or current sound settings. The score would usually be displayed in a format that showed the remaining number of points left to be achieved (the format 'X of Y points'). This score would be updated as players progressed through the game. Similarly in *Adventure Quest*, each of the projected backgrounds display a white border at the top of the screen, displaying a total score out of three hundred and twenty and the words 'Sound: On.' The projections featured simply drawn static scenes and there was no animation aside from the changing score figure. They relied on a cell-shading or 'cartoonish' style.

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<sup>2</sup> *King's Quest*, (Sierra Online, 1984).

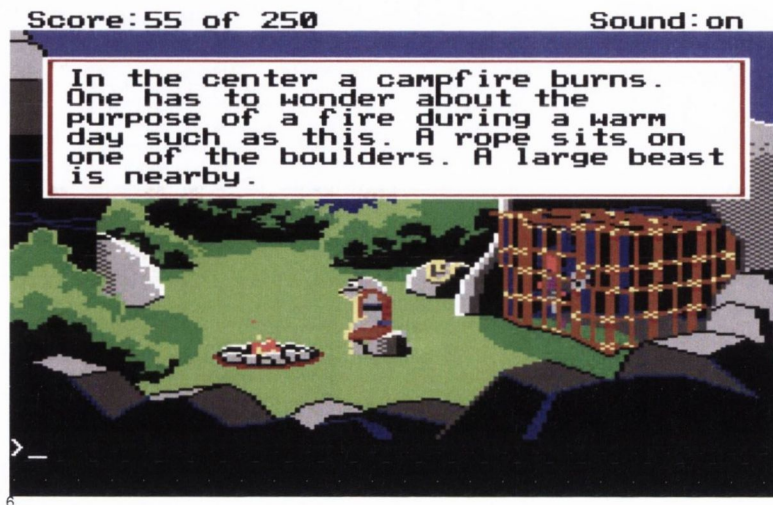
<sup>3</sup> *Conquests of Camelot: The Search for The Grail*, (Sierra Online, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> *Quest for Glory*, (Sierra Online, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter VIII: Brain Explode! For a more detailed discussion on the history of the adventure game genre.

Sound design for the production aimed to reproduce the aesthetic qualities of computer-generated sound from those games, which inspired the performance. The most common sound card available on personal computers at the time of Sierra Online's releases was only capable of producing 32-bit sound. Therefore, music for the performance was designed to create a low-fidelity, 32-bit style score for the production. Furthermore, certain events or actions within the production, such as an increase in the displayed score, were accompanied by sound effects that would have been commonplace in game sound design for the period. These appropriations lent the production a sense of nostalgia, setting the performance in a very specific historical gaming period, namely that of the adventure games of the '80s and '90s. Furthermore, by drawing on older games, the performance allows itself to focus more heavily on the games operation (which in many ways has remained a near constant for adventure games in the last twenty years) rather than focusing on other elements of game design, such as graphical fidelity or combat-based mechanics. By focusing on the operation of the game rather than these other elements, the performance is free to create questions of character and agency within both theatre and videogame narrative structures.





Many of Sierra Online's adventure games, being developed from the original text-based adventure game format, produced text onscreen to be read in response to player action. These included descriptions of the environment, negative responses from the game when the player attempted an incorrect action, and statements of save/load actions by the game software. For *Adventure Quest*, this text was not displayed but read by an off-stage actor speaking into a microphone. Correspondingly, older adventure games required the player to input command-line text in order to interact with the software. In the case of the performance, this text was not displayed on screen (as would be the case in the graphic adventure game) but instead was spoken by the performer playing the part of the 'Hero' in the game.

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<sup>6</sup> Image from *Space Quest II: Vohaul's Revenge*, (Sierra, 1987).

The production also borrowed somewhat from the more humorous elements of the adventure game genre, using outlandish fantasy settings and situations as the backdrop for its narrative, while also including characters within these settings who appear easily distracted or duped.

*Adventure Quest* draws on elements of the theatrical avant-garde to challenge narrative form and formal authorial power in both videogames and theatre, while remediating distinct aesthetic phenomena of the graphic adventure game throughout the performance. The combination of both these media leads to a hypermediacy in which the operation of both live performance and digital gameplay are highlighted on stage and become a central focus of the piece. Furthermore, *Adventure Quest's* challenge to formal authorial power in scripted fiction through its treatment of the central characters' agency, coupled with the remediation of digital gaming, challenges the position of the player in the game by refusing to adhere to the traditional structures of character control (text input, etc.) in the digital game environment.

#### **Adventure Quest as Hypermedia**

By representing the medium of the videogame on stage, *Adventure Quest* is a remediation of the videogame. As discussed by Bolter and Grusin, remediation can be understood as both the mediation of existing media (such as the presentation of a novel through a computer display) and the reforming of a medium into another (such as in the use of film techniques

in videogame cutscenes.<sup>7</sup>) In the case of *Adventure Quest* the performance combines techniques and media-specific phenomena from both theatre and the adventure game genre as it existed in the late twentieth century. Through its remediation of the graphic adventure game, *Adventure Quest* exists in a state of intermediality, drawing simultaneously from both media to inform its structure. *Adventure Quest* does not attempt to reconcile the distinct inconsistencies between live and the digital.

Instead the performance makes frequent note of these differences, and in so doing foregrounds not the narrative content of the performance, but the conflicting media themselves. This exposure of the medium through which the performance is communicating, in contrast to the medium from which it is drawing inspiration, can be understood in terms of Bolter & Grusin's logic of hypermediacy. For Bolter & Grusin, the goal of the majority of expressive forms, particularly since the Renaissance, has been to achieve a kind of 'transparent immediacy',<sup>8</sup> in which the medium itself is either 'forgotten' by the recipient or obscured by the subject matter contained therein. This immediacy is pursued through a number of techniques, including the pursuit of a transparent interface, and the attempt to mask or deny the processes involved in the creation of the media object. Often this relies on creating a single unified point of view for the work, from which the medium can be said to 'dissolve' leaving the viewer to confront the content without hindrance of the medium. This may include techniques such as the

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<sup>7</sup> Bolter, J and Grusin, R, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, (London: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

pursuit of photorealism in digital graphics, or the 'trompe l'oeil' style of painting. Conversely, the logic of hypermediacy is one that highlights the presence of the medium itself. For Bolter and Grusin, this is a primarily visual logic, which refuses to provide the viewer with a single unified point of view, and instead favours multiple points of view and a heterogeneity of contents that is continuously contextualised and framed within the medium's interface. By continuously referring to the interface, the medium becomes a point of high-focus for the observer or user, denying the possibility of a transparent immediacy in favour of this hypermediacy. For Bolter and Grusin this logic is best exemplified by the 'windowed' style of modern computer interaction, the multiplicity of windows leading to a heterogeneous landscape of shifting viewpoints, while the interactive nature of the computer medium continuously reframes these windows in terms of the operating system's interface.

However, just as the logic of transparent immediacy can be pursued by a masking or denial of the processes of a medium, so can a logic of hypermediacy be pursued by the highlighting of these processes. Bolter and Grusin recognise this in the works of Richard Hamilton, whose collage style pieces highlight both the process of photography and the recombination of images through digital or artificial means.<sup>9</sup> For Bolter and Grusin, this work is dependant on the multiplicity of images. However, this same logic of hypermediacy can be pursued through the exposition of process in works that do not contain the same multiplicity of image. Works

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 38 – 39.

by web collective artists such as Jodi can serve to create hypermediacy by creating webpages which have seemingly multiple errors contained therein, creating erratic and strange experiences. Similarly 'Glitch art,' which produces posters and art artefacts that have been disturbed or otherwise tampered with by errors in the printing or digitisation process can serve to highlight the fragility of the tools used to create works which might otherwise follow a logic of transparent immediacy. This framing of technical error or anomalies serves to highlight the normally hidden process behind the creation of similar works, and so serves to create hypermediacy.

*Adventure Quest's* treatment of the adventure game genre similarly pursues a strategy of hypermediacy. Though the performance contrasts the live and the virtual through its performance style, with actors carrying out repeated gestures and actions reminiscent of computer animation, the performance also pursues a logic of hypermediacy through the exposure of the digital process and design limitations that (historically) formed adventure games. This technique is most evident in *Adventure Quest's* reproduction of the 'game screen' through the set's use of projected backgrounds throughout the performance. For each scene a large screen covered the back wall of the performance space. On this screen a series of static images were projected. Large cartoon-style images showed the audience a series of indices to place and time for each scene. These images are constructed in a low-resolution format, and include elements of distorted perspective and use a bright colour palette. The use of a bright

colour palette and distorted perspective reminds the viewer at all times that the image is mediated. The use of a low-resolution format, particularly on a large screen, renders the individual pixels which make up the image highly visible, confronting the viewer with the information that these images are computer rendered and subject to a particular process. Current computational technology allows for much more photorealistic image generation, so by using a low-resolution format the performance further draws attention to the processes behind its creation. The use of a low-resolution format serves as an index to the performance's inspirational or source material: adventure games produced in the late decades of the twentieth century. The remediation of the 'game background' in this live context becomes a pointed focus of the *mise-en-scène* for the performance. Thereby, not only are the projected images themselves, but also the material from which they draw inspiration are highlighted by the performance. This hypermediacy also reinforced continuously throughout the performance through the inclusion of a points system within the performance.

In many of the Sierra Online adventure games, players were given a continuous score rating in the upper right corner of the screen (see image below). This points system operates much the same as the points system originally used in *ADVENT*,<sup>10</sup> one of the first ever adventure games created. Points were displayed as a subset of total possible points (e.g.

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<sup>10</sup> *ADVENT*, (Crowther, Will, and Woods, Don, 1976), for more on this game see Chapter VIII.

Score: 149 of 250). As players performed various actions and solved various puzzles they were awarded a point for each correct solution or completed action. Some simple actions would carry no point value, while other more obscure actions might carry a 'bonus' or 'hidden' point value. As such, it was possible to complete the game without getting a full score, and potentially very difficult to find the last actions in the game that would grant the player the final elusive points required for the full score.



The projected background in *Adventure Quest* included a points display in the upper left of the screen. As the performance begins we see that the score is 208 points of a possible 320. Throughout the performance this score changes in response to various actions taken by the lead character, reaching an eventual total of 298, a total accumulation of 90 points during the performance. On each occasion a particular short musical tone is

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<sup>11</sup> A screenshot from *King's Quest IV: The Perils of Rosella*, (Sierra Online, 1988).

played and the background display updates accordingly. The 'Hero' character is awarded points for a wide variety of actions including talking to other characters, exchanging or combining items, and committing acts of murder. The awarding of points is so prolific and the actions associated so varied, that it permeates the performance throughout. The inclusion of this points system, with accompanying sound cues, further highlights the performance's remediation of the Sierra Online style of graphic adventure game. It provides a continuous index to the game mechanics that drive the medium of the adventure game forward and serve to prevent a development of a transparent immediacy to the performance. Even once the performance has established a pattern of point awards within the fictional game presented, it then attempts to break this pattern through the use of unusual point awards. At one moment in particular a character within the performance (the Innkeeper) announces: 'A round of points for everyone!'<sup>12</sup> In response to which the usual 'points music' plays and the score is updated. However, additional other short tones play and other characters on stage react in response as they are also awarded points. The stage directions read: 'Point music 282 of 320. Innkeeper point music. Receptionist point music. Peasant girl point music.'<sup>13</sup> This moment serves to highlight the in-game points system of the audience. By subverting the established pattern, the performance calls attention to it once more and

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<sup>12</sup> Lovejoy, Richard *Adventure Quest*, (USA: unpublished, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



reminds the audience once again that the fictional world presented is subject to the processes of game mechanics and is a mediated event.

By combining this style with live performers on stage, the incongruity between the projected, computer generated backgrounds and the live performer in theatre serve to highlight the process within the theatre space itself. The actors are not, and cannot ever be, part of the projected background by virtue of their status as 'real.' Yet the actors respond to the background as if it were 'real' and are costumed in a similarly bright colour palette. At every turn the mise-en-scène of the performance space is informing the audience of the process of theatrical remediation. Furthermore, the behaviour of the performers on stage creates in itself a form of hypermediacy, which draws specifically on the limitations of the digital game systems of the time.

#### **The Performer's Body as a site of Hypermediacy**

By remediating the aesthetic elements of the 'classic' (1980s and 90s) adventure game genre through the bodies of the performer, *Adventure Quest* transforms the performers themselves into part of a hypermedia strategy. Through the use of physical and verbal repetition in both performer action (stiff stilted movement) and script (often repeating short responses even when potentially inappropriate), the limitations and shortcomings of the old software are highlighted, while the contrast to the live body is reinforced. This draws attention to the process of mediation in use. These repetitions take place throughout the performance and are

examples of *Adventure Quest* appropriation of both aesthetic and structural qualities of the adventure game genre.

Much like Karl Quinn and Will Irvine's treatment of the software *Second Life* in the performance of *Connected*,<sup>14</sup> Richard Lovejoy's *Adventure Quest* remediates the digital body of video game characters through the bodies of the performers on stage. Many virtual environments are populated with computer generated autonomous creatures or characters, ranging from digital representations of humans and animals to more fantastical creations designed by the software animation team. In videogames these autonomous computer controlled characters are referred to as non-player characters or NPCs.

As discussed in Chapter VI, many designers of virtual environments include a simple animation loop for avatars when they are 'inert', these animations can include simple breathing motions, scratching, or shuffling of weight. The principle behind these short animation loops is to make the character seem more 'lifelike' on screen. The same is held to be true for the design of NPCs in games. Often, during a gameplay session, players will be viewing a screen that contains non-player characters rendered 'inert' for some time. In order to make these characters seem more 'lifelike', designers will often include short animation loops of the characters performing a particular activity, though making no particular progress. Examples include bar tenders continuously polishing the same

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<sup>14</sup> For more on this performance see Chapter VI.

glass, construction workers repeatedly welding the same spot on a length of pipe, and so on. Owing to the limitations of the software at the time, these animations in classic adventure games are usually quite a short sequence, lasting no more than three or four seconds. As players may be in a single area (or 'screen') of the game for extended periods of time (sometimes hours if they can't solve a particular puzzle) the futility of the NPC's actions can become glaringly apparent. Furthermore, as these animations are the NPC's default status in classic adventure games, they do not react to the movements of the player's character unless pertinent to the game mechanics. *Adventure Quest* appropriates these elements throughout the show. The opening stage directions note:

All characters aside from the Hero have a repeated physical tic they continuously do. This is not to say they are robotic – their movements should be lively, and potentially even elaborate – just so long as they are looped.<sup>15</sup>

This stage direction designates all characters in the performance as NPCs, each with their own animation loop to perform. While this remediation serves to recreate the aesthetic tendencies of the classic adventure game through the movement of the body on stage, the performance's subversion of this status in giving the NPC's agency beyond the confines of the established performance language frames the remediation in the logic of hypermediacy. At several points the character 'Peasant Girl' engages with the Hero of the piece, however, at times she breaks from the prescribed performance style: 'She suddenly regards him

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<sup>15</sup> Lovejoy, Richard *Adventure Quest*, (USA: unpublished, 2009).

in an organic fashion. The 'NPC' vacancy she possessed dissolves'.<sup>16</sup> However the status as 'NPC' is almost immediately reinforced as: 'Shaking it off suddenly, she goes back into a more neutral disconnection.'<sup>17</sup>

Here the performance is highlighting the unnatural nature of the supposedly 'natural' movements that NPC characters are given in a game. This moment is recollected again in the text, as the stage directions state: 'The Hero approaches the Peasant Girl. He stares at her, trying to recreate the moment they shared earlier. She vacantly stares off into space, repeating her standard gesture.'<sup>18</sup>

Here the repetition of a single gesture of movement becomes framed as unnatural, and out of place. The unnaturalness of the performer's vacant stare into space when confronted with another body attempting to gain their attention is further highlighted by the performers' own status as 'real.' Here the performance reminds us both of the process and limitations of NPC animation in the classic adventure game, and also of the process of representation in use in the live stage space and thus the conflict between these two systems of representation become evident, evoking a state of hypermediacy.

A similar process occurs with dialogue exchange within the performance. Often in classic adventure games NPCs will repeat large sections of information for the player without any acknowledgement that the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

conversation has already taken place. This is due to a limited amount of script being written for each character and is particularly evident in those cases whereby the character's opening dialogue, or greeting, remains unchanged. *Adventure Quest* references this tendency in the opening scene of the performance whereby the lead character talks to a soldier standing guard outside a gate. The first exchange lasts some time as the guard has approximately twelve lines of dialogue to deliver. However, once the lead character addresses the guard again, the guard's opening dialogue (and delivery) remains unchanged, in complete disregard to the previous exchange. This pattern is repeated by other characters throughout the performance. The pattern is again subverted by the Peasant Girl character, whom the Hero seems to 'free' from the bounds of her looped animation through a long sequence of dialogue and interaction. Yet, once the Hero murders someone in the presence of the Peasant Girl (an act that other characters had previously blatantly ignored) and she runs away. Upon returning to her home to speak to the Peasant Girl, the hero finds that she has returned to her looped animation, and now greets him without any recognition or acknowledgement of the previous scene, which so horrified her. The performance illustrates this seemingly complete lack of memory on the part of NPCs in these games, drawing focus to the operation of the authorial system in both the performance and the game genre being remediated by reminding the audience that the NPCs have no agency of their own.

### **Staging game mechanics**

The performance of digital video games in a live theatre setting challenges the performer with effectively communicating the additional texts or game objects created by the game that are not directly attributed to an individual character or are distinct and separate from the fictional narrative of the world. These objects can include a menu screen, the pause command, or simple on-screen tutorial information, all of which is provided for the player's benefit and comprises an essential part of the game itself. However, these elements rarely have any existence within the fictional world created by the game's narrative functions. For example, when a player 'pauses' the game, this is a purely software and mechanical operation, stopping time within the game world without altering the course of narrative progress. As will be discussed in Chapter IV, players of command-line based adventure games could input any command they wished into the game system and would be provided with a response. In those cases where the game adopts a dominant second-person narrative style, this response would provide players with more information about the game's virtual environment yet remain separate and distinct from the virtual environment and narrative itself. In this case the 'narrative voice', though it may communicate to the player via text or recorded voice files, is without corporeal manifestation within the game-world, delivering information to the player as part of the interaction process. This voice becomes akin to the voice of the software itself, being in the privileged position of holding all the required information to further the game (as it must in order to effectively respond to the player's commands). The game

software interprets commands issued by the player and if they are 'correct' (i.e. within the designer-determined series of possible actions), then the game responds with a representation of that action. The narrative voice becomes a representation of the rule system in operation during a play session, as it is the system which communicates to players the success or failure of their chosen command input.

In those cases whereby the player is interacting via (or more accurately with) a particular in-game character (as in many LucasArts<sup>19</sup> games), then the player's actions are responded to by an agent within the game's fictional narrative. However, those responses are an exchange between the player and character alone and are never acknowledged by other characters within the game's virtual environment.

Excepting those instances whereby a game-designer appropriates a directly self-referential or otherwise post-modernist internal logic to critique or call attention to this formal tendency, these are often limited to moments of dialogue interaction between the player controlled character and other in-game characters or short dialogue jokes.<sup>20</sup> In those cases where the player is engaging with the second-person narrative voice, it is this narrative voice which responds to the player's command and only if this

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<sup>19</sup> Such as the *Monkey Island*, or *Indiana Jones* series of games.

<sup>20</sup> For example in *The Curse of Monkey Island*, (Lucas Arts, 1997), the player must instruct the lead character to drink a strange cocktail which places him in a 'death-like' trance. When collecting his body, one of the other in game characters remarks, 'That's strange, I didn't think you could die in a Lucas Arts adventure game.'

voice 'approves' of the player's command does it receive representation in the game world.

As *Adventure Quest* operates as a remediation of the classic adventure game, particularly inspired by those produced by Sierra-Online, the performance also engaged with this second-person narrative voice. In this case, the performance opted to represent this narrative voice through the medium of sound design, using a live actor speaking into a microphone backstage. In this way the narrative voice of the software is maintained but still denied a corporeal existence on stage, remaining instead mediated by the theatre's public address system. Those commands which would normally be given by a player, were also given representation in *Adventure Quest* by the character Hero, speaking text that resembled those commands which would ordinarily be input by the player. As the character Hero speaks these commands the actor playing the narrative voice (referred to in the script as 'Voice') responds, speaking text that resembles typical game responses:

HERO: Look at gate.

VOICE: The large iron gate is foreboding. It appears to be locked.

HERO: Open gate.

VOICE: The gate is locked.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Lovejoy, Richard *Adventure Quest*, (USA: unpublished, 2009).



The Voice's responses also serve to dictate the allowable action on stage, interpreting Hero's commands and returning a response that is either manifest through performer action or denied any representation.

HERO: Kick gate.

*The Hero goes to begin the action, but is interrupted by the voice.*

VOICE: You can't do that.<sup>22</sup>

In this case, the Voice has denied the Hero the kicking of the gate and provided a response quite common in adventure games: 'You can't do that.' This phrase provides a simple catch-all response and can be considered the equivalent of 'bad command' response. It is a response heard multiple times throughout the performance as the character of Hero iterates numerous commands attempting to solve the problems presented to him. This series of exchanges between Hero and Voice serve to position Hero as a representation of both player and in-game character, however this configuration is challenged as the performance continues.

### **The Position of the Player**

This configuration of adventure game elements on the live stage is not entirely unproblematic. As the Hero takes on the role of representing the game-player's text input through spoken word, this blurs the line between the in-game character and the supposed player of this game and at times

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

presents a challenge to the role of the player and the formal authority of the game structure. By openly attempting to stage a classic adventure game, the performance of *Adventure Quest* infers the existence of a game-player. We assume that this player is engaging in a play session of this fictitious 'Adventure Quest' game and that what we as an audience see is the narrative of that gameplay session performed on stage. Though the player is absent, we assume his or her presence through the overt reference to game structures made by the performance. If this particular performance is a 'staged game', and games require players, then logically this game too must have a player.

The existence of such a player suggests the existence of an additional 'real world' that exists within the fictional realm of the performance, but outside of and separate to the game-world represented on stage. This inference is supported by, and in support of, the hypermedial nature of this performance. What we are viewing is a fictional virtual environment, within a fictional 'real world'. However, this fictional 'real world' has no representation on stage, and other than the fundamental requirement of a game to have players, is given no allusion to in the performance. *Adventure Quest* uses the character Hero to deliver those lines of command that would normally be made by a player engaging in a command line interface adventure game. As such, we assume that all statements of input made by the character Hero are the direct commands from the player themselves. The Hero becomes the embodied vehicle through which the player interacts with the stage. Though the player is not

present on stage, his/her presence is represented by the commands the Hero is stating and carrying out. However, the Hero also exists as a character within the fictional world of the game itself. Here the performer takes on a dual role as a representation of both Hero and Player. The character is simultaneously representing the inferred existence of the gameplayer and the 'real' or corporeal (in the virtual world of the game) presence of the in-game character of 'Hero.' Yet, this duality of representation is not clearly delineated or demarcated in the performance of *Adventure Quest*. For the first third of the performance the character 'Hero' communicates only through direct stated commands, to which the other characters or Voice respond accordingly. At various stages the Hero character swears or issues crude or ridiculous commands (such as referring to an NPC as a 'fucking dick magician'),<sup>23</sup> in much the same fashion as a frustrated or juvenile player might. In these cases the Voice responds consistently and in a fashion akin to responses found in other text-input adventure games. For example, at one point the Hero says 'Balls,' to which the Voice replies 'I don't understand.' A fairly common reply from the software that suggests that it has been unable to match an available action to that command. It is also a reply which has been established in the lexicon of responses from 'The Voice' in an earlier sequence of commands from the Hero, which includes vulgar descriptions of the object to be interacted with. This suggests that the software does

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

not recognise the object listed in the command because it does not match the predetermined list of object descriptors.<sup>24</sup>

The consistency of these replies serves to frame each of the Hero's statements as input from the player, which is responded to by the software as represented by the other performers or The Voice. At first, the only statement by the Hero that is not responded to is the simple command of 'Save,' whereby the player is telling the game software to save his or her current progress. However, at a later stage in the performance the Hero, having murdered someone, makes a statement that is not responded to, and then proceeds to break from the established pattern of line delivery and begins directly addressing the other characters in the first person:

HERO: Think about my past and how I am capable of so easily taking a life.

*No Response. The Hero looks at the Merchant and Beggar, who seem undisturbed by the corpse lying near them.*

HERO: Sorry you guys had to see such a ... horrible act.

*They do not respond.*

HERO: I had to save the beautiful peasant girl, you understand.

*They do not respond.*

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<sup>24</sup> For a fuller discussion on the nature of parsing and text based command interface in adventure games, consult Chapter VIII: *Brain Explode!*

HERO: Right. Have a good one, see you guys soon!

*The Hero Exits West.*<sup>25</sup>

Alongside this change in line structure, there is a marked change in the performer's manner. His somewhat stiff and aggressive demeanour is briefly replaced by a more earnest, sombre tone. Following this scene, the Hero reverts to his previous manner and pattern of speech, that of direct commands, seemingly representing an assumed player's input. Such exchanges complicate the position of the Hero on stage. By referring to himself in the first person, we are made aware of the Hero as an agent, distinct from the player, yet is still subject to the commands of the player. The Hero's statement 'Think about my past...' is not responded to by the Voice, but does elicit further speech from the Hero. Are we to understand that the player has commanded the Hero to become self-aware, and that the software accommodates this command? As such, is the Hero's seemingly self-aware response just another element of the game script or is it a spontaneous break from the formal authority of the game structure? These issues are partly addressed by the performance as it progresses. It is notable that the Hero's statements to other characters on stage are not met with responses, or acknowledged in any way. Seemingly they are unable to respond to the Hero in a format outside the prescribed game structure. This is made explicit in the performance as:

HERO: Merchant, I need advice I...

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<sup>25</sup> Lovejoy, Richard *Adventure Quest*, (USA: unpublished, 2009).

*He considers.*

HERO: Talk to Merchant.

MERCHANT: I have wares for sale! Step right up and buy some wares!<sup>26</sup>

The Hero then breaks into a long monologue, in which he confesses that he doesn't know his own name, he has no memory prior to a point (presumably the beginning of the game) where he had zero points and was trapped in a brig. Tellingly the Merchant does not respond to this at all, until the Hero says:

HERO: Hello? Talk to Merchant.

MERCHANT: I have wares for sale! Step right up and buy some wares!<sup>27</sup>

Clearly the Merchant is rendered unable to respond to the Hero's metaphysical crisis, or indeed unable to respond in any way other than that prescribed by the game script. Much like the Peasant Girl, and indeed every other character in *Adventure Quest*, he is locked in a pattern of repetition. The lack of response from the Voice suggests that the monologue was not a command input by the player (at least not one which the software acknowledges). This suggests that the Hero is now acting completely independently of the player. Similarly, the Hero's ability to

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

understand and manipulate the Merchant (by using the statement 'Talk to Merchant' to illicit a response) further frames the Hero as an independent self-aware agent embedded within the game world, and places the position (and indeed the very existence) of the inferred 'player' into question.

This exchange is the first in a series of moments whereby the character of Hero begins to use either first person reference, or direct address to characters, as opposed to the previous address of 'ask X about...'. Each of these moments problematises the assumed position of the player, as their existence is denied by the Hero's independent and self-aware actions. This dichotomy is one of the central components of the performance of *Adventure Quest* and represents a challenge to the formal authority of the game structure.

### **Challenging the structures**

The presence of a self-aware 'living' agent within both a game and theatrical context produces a number of challenges to the forms it occupies. *Adventure Quest's* positioning of the Hero character as an independent agent presents a challenge to formal structure of gaming in much the same way as Pirandello's work *Six Characters in Search of an Author* challenges that of the theatre. Written in 1921, the play centres on the interruption of theatre rehearsals by six strangers. These strangers identify themselves as 'unfinished characters' and state that they are looking for an author to complete their stories. The six characters are

portrayed by the play as living, breathing agents, independent of the formal or creative constraints of the theatre, yet dependent on it for their very existence. Elinor Fuchs gives cursory study of these characters, suggesting that: 'The six characters are definable, substantial, and continuous but become strangely truncated aesthetic objects through their very exaggeration of these traits.'<sup>28</sup>

Fuchs suggests that the conflict between the formal structures of the creative process and the apparent 'freedom' of the characters, serve only to further highlight the fictitious nature of these six strangers. A similar comparison can be drawn with the character of the Hero from *Adventure Quest*. While his behaviour and actions possesses the appearance of a 'real' life, as distinct from the automated processes of the other characters that occupy the stage, we are constantly aware that he exists within a performance of a video game. In this case it is the framing, and the presence of hypermedial elements previously discussed, which reminds us of his status as 'character'. Fuchs' study of the additional characters in Pirandello's *Six Characters In Search of An Author* can be compared to the existence of those NPCs with which the Hero is forced to interact. Fuchs writes: 'The others, the actors, seem to have the attributes of unmediated and spontaneous life, but at the same time are undefined and insubstantial.'<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Fuchs, Elinor, *The Death of Character*, (USA: Indiana University Press, 1996) 34.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



So too are the NPCs of *Adventure Quest*. These characters each possess signs of life, existence, and agency, yet these signifiers are rendered strange or insufficient by the performer's repetitive movements or the cyclical structure of the script. Throughout the performance, there are several moments where the Hero begins to engage with the Peasant Girl in a way that frames both characters as 'liberated' from their position as mere programming products, suggesting that a process of transcendence is possible within the game software. The Peasant Girl (who is later revealed to be an evil character) addresses this directly, saying to the Hero: 'Hello? Its like you're absent, vacant. You aren't even here! I thought I had awoken you...' <sup>30</sup>

The implication is that the Hero's status as living being is one that has been bestowed upon him by the Peasant Girl, and not by a player command to 'Think about my past...'. The creation of a free and live agent within the game software has been spontaneously generated from inside the structure itself, and is free of all player influence. However, though the Hero's actions may seem liberated, his existence is still constrained by the limitations of the software that has generated him. Furthermore, it is evident that he, much like Pirandello's six characters, possesses this apparent freedom from programming precisely because *he has been written or programmed to do so*. As Fuchs says of the characters in

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<sup>30</sup> Lovejoy, Richard *Adventure Quest*, (USA: unpublished, 2009).

Pirandello's play: 'Ironically, both groups can accede to a state of 'living' character only in the moment of theatrical enactment.'<sup>31</sup>

The characters of Pirandello's play only exist for the duration of the performance; as the curtain is drawn they effectively cease to exist. So too can the characters of *Adventure Quest* exist only within the constraints of the software presented. They exist only as long as the software is running. Once the game reaches completion, the software is no longer executed by the hardware and the representation no longer generated. This finality of existence is addressed by the performance in its closing scenes. The final sequence is a marriage ceremony in which the Hero, having saved the town, is to be wed to the Mayor's daughter, whom he saved from certain death. The sequence is like any other ending in a fantasy game in which the hero character receives accolades and praise from the people he has saved and their respected leader. In this case however, the Hero is aware that the end of the ceremony will mark the end of the game and does his utmost to prevent its conclusion. However, he fails, and the ceremony is concluded. The final stage directions read: 'Lights fade out. Five seconds. Jump to full brightness. The stage is empty. Hold for twenty seconds.'<sup>32</sup>

The fade out follows a typical 'fade to black' strategy to mark the ending of the play, however the presentation of an empty stage is the stark reminder that, once the game has come to its conclusion, the virtual world (and the

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<sup>31</sup> Fuchs, Elinor, *The Death of Character*, (USA: Indiana University Press, 1996), 34.

<sup>32</sup> Lovejoy, Richard *Adventure Quest*, (USA: unpublished, 2009).

characters in it) no longer exist. As the game has come to a conclusion, the game software has come to completion and the hardware is no longer generating the characters or the virtual environment.

In many ways, *Adventure Quest* illustrates a similar creative 'panic' on the behalf of the author. The nature of identity and agency are called into question by the notion of the existence of a virtual world, just as Pirandello's works suggest that the power of the human mind to override reality destabilises notions of the self (as in *Henry IV* or *Six Characters in Search of an Author*). In both these works the creative impulses of man have served to override the natural order of either the world or of man himself. For Pirandello, there is an ongoing tension between the creative ability of man, and the potential for this creative ability to gain its own agency and act beyond the wishes and desires of the original author. Similarly, the polish writer Tadeusz Rozewicz gives the appearance of such agency to the lead character in his play *The Card Index*<sup>33</sup>, which centres on the actions of a character also named 'Hero'. Rozewicz creates the appearance of such agency by allowing this character to defy the structure of the play and the wishes of the chorus by simply 'doing nothing' on stage. Halina Filipowicz<sup>34</sup> notes that Rozewicz's play is heavily centred on role identities and the loss of the self as a phenomenon of life in post-war Poland.

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<sup>33</sup> Rozewicz, Tadeusz, *The Card Index and Other Plays*, (London: Calder & Boyars, 1969).

<sup>34</sup> Filipowicz, Halina "Theatrical Reality in the Plays of Tadeusz Rozewicz" *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol 26, No 4 (winter 1982) 447-459.

In *Adventure Quest* this same tension of roles and identity is explored through both theatre and videogames. In both Pirandello and Rozewicz works, the loss (or conflict) of the self through the imposition of imagined realities are central themes, the power of the human mind either as individual or collective is posited as a potentially overwhelming entity. At the centre of a player's engagement with a videogame is an interaction with an imagined reality in the form of a virtual world and fictional narrative. By drawing on these theatrical modernist strategies, *Adventure Quest* is able to posit questions about the role of the player and the player's identity when engaging with the imagined reality of an adventure game, thereby problematising the notion of player agency.

#### **Independent of the player**

The reframing of the formal constraints of the game structure (particularly those constraints around the nature of character) serves as part of an overall challenge, which *Adventure Quest* poses, to the position of player within the game space. By constructing a semblance of independent agency for the Hero character, and drawing focus to the precarious nature of the virtual world's very existence, *Adventure Quest* can be said to operate as a challenge to the position of authorship in much the same way as Pirandello's *Six Characters*. In both cases fictional creations have supposedly adopted a life of their own, distinct and separate from their original author. Their on-stage existence suggests that the role of author is no longer necessary as these characters move and speak without prompt, yet their very nature makes them wholly dependant on authorship in order

to fulfil their full potential. In the case of Pirandello's *Six Characters*, this author is the man who abandoned the 'family' characters when they were still 'unfinished'. However, in *Adventure Quest*, the challenge to authorship addresses both the game designer and the gameplayer.

The challenge to the role of the game designer is similar to the challenge posed to the role of author by the existence of Pirandello's six family members in *Six Characters*. Presumably the game designer scripted a number of characters and events within certain parameters that are now being exceeded by the independent actions of the Hero character. However, the authorship of a game is not solely limited to the choices made by the game designer, as the experience is also authored in part by the player. In order for the game to play out, the player must engage with the software. Furthermore the hypertext nature of the adventure game as a series of linking text elements gives the player a high degree of authorship over his or her game experience, interacting with the virtual world and reconfiguring the elements contained therein in ways which may be unique from play session to play session. Hence, both the game designer and the player jointly hold the role of 'game authorship' in an adventure game.<sup>35</sup>

The player in *Adventure Quest* exists in a tenuous position within the performance as they have no corporeal existence on stage. In fact, the player's very existence is only inferred by the performance's appropriation

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<sup>35</sup> Again, for a fuller discussion on the subject of authorship in the adventure game see Chapter VIII.

of game aesthetics that provide an overt framing to the performance as game. These aesthetics purposefully draw upon the nostalgia of the audience for what was once a very popular game format. This highlights the once immersive nature of now dated technology, while simultaneously reinforcing the notion that the world presented is a virtual one. The recreation of stiff animation loops and lo-fidelity audio further serve to firmly root the audience in a position of recollection, particularly the recollection of the act of game play and the necessity of a player. As such, we assume that the commands being uttered by the Hero are the commands being communicated by the player. This allows the audience to vicariously experience the act of 'playing' *Adventure Quest*, by using the memories of play and previous graphical technology to interpret the action on stage. However once the hero character is 'awakened' (to use the Peasant Girl's terms) we are given evidence of the character's own understanding of the systems of interaction required by the virtual environment he occupies, and the position of the player becomes an unstable assumption. This is particularly evident in the moment mentioned earlier when he addresses the Merchant with 'Talk to Merchant.' By framing the Hero's actions as such, the status of his previous lines are called into question. If the Hero is able to independently generate his own commands, then has there been a player engaging in this game from the start? Or has the software been running independently without player assistance? Alternatively, has the player been suddenly made redundant by the actions of the Hero character? As such are we as audience to

assume that the player has now been removed from his or her position as co-author of the game experience and now redefined as viewer, passively observing the exploits of the Hero character? The actions of the Hero character suggest that what we are seeing is an independent agent, who was originally under the commands of an external force (i.e., the player). The agent has somehow broken free from the constraints of the digital world. This transformation can be seen as instigated early in the performance through the line uttered by the Hero, 'Think about my life and how I am capable of so easily taking a life'. This suggests that the player issued a command, which has succeeded. The player has instigated a degree of self-awareness in the Hero character, and though the Hero's actions do not take on an immediate marked change, there is a clear shift from this point in the Hero's relationship to the other characters on stage. This would indeed suggest that the absent player figure is transformed into a passive viewer from this point onwards. This transformation of the inferred player into passive viewer creates a conflict with the already established foregrounding of the act of digital play, created by the aesthetics of the performance as previously mentioned. It also further exceeds the expectations of the audience as, while current technology may give the appearance of independent thought, the dated systems being referenced by the performance's aesthetic certainly were not capable of such an act.

*Adventure Quest* further complicates the issue, as heated exchanges between the Voice and the Hero show. As the performance progresses,

the character Voice, which has been functioning as a representation of the game narrator for the duration, begins to enter into conversation with the Hero. Whereupon the Voice attempts to drive the Hero on, interrupting action and reminding the Hero: 'Shouldn't you be focusing on saving the Mayor's daughter?'<sup>36</sup>

At numerous stages the Hero argues with the Voice, demanding answers as to why certain actions must be performed. As the Voice is akin to the voice of the software itself, being in the privileged position of holding all the required information to further the game, this creates the impression that the Hero character is arguing with the software itself, fighting the programming, which is attempting to realign the Hero with the prescribed actions of the game. While at times these arguments resemble those frustrations that a player might have through the course of gameplay ('that's a stupid solution' and so on), the Hero's status as independent agent denies this reading of the interactions between the two as an exchange between player and game.

This is a conflict that is never fully resolved in *Adventure Quest*. Instead the stage is 'wiped clean' at the end of the marriage scene previously discussed. The presence of the white empty space as the final scene of the performance suggests that the anomaly of the Hero's existence has simply been destroyed by the completion of the software cycle. While at times we see the Hero struggle against performing certain actions which

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<sup>36</sup> Lovejoy, Richard *Adventure Quest*, (USA: unpublished, 2009).



will further the game, the opposition between him and Voice suggests that the Hero is not struggling against the player attempting to regain control of the software but more of the software attempting to regain control of the Hero. In essence the game is happening without the player's involvement and the medium's position as one which requires player input is challenged. Hence the conclusion of the piece may be seen as both a software operation and reflection of the player-game relationship. This software operation sterilises the stage and returns the game to the 'status quo' of requiring player input to proceed. By choosing not to directly address the problematic existence of the Hero character and his actions in terms of the player relationship, the performance leaves the inferred player in a position of limbo. As the role of player is the primary point from which a user may access any adventure game, this leaves the audience of *Adventure Quest* unsure of their own position. Denied the vicarious experience of a player engaging with a game session, we are instead placed in an uncertain position whereby our potential relationship to the game being represented on stage is undefined, with each new interaction and deviation from the structural norms leading to further destabilisation of the established logic. This destabilisation is vital to the operation of *Adventure Quest* as the performance highlights and then complicates the position of both the player and the audience, while raising troubling theoretical questions of life and existence within a digital videogame.

## Chapter III:

### ***Doom Raider, Adventure Quest, and Virtual Death***

The player's relationship to the digital environments presented by digital games is not limited to the puppet-master relationship of avatar-player. Nor is it purely a relationship of object manipulation as in more abstract games such as *Tetris*<sup>1</sup> or *Bejeweled*.<sup>2</sup> Instead players of digital games enter into a simultaneous series of relationships with multiple elements of the game, interacting to, and drawing information from, a wide array of sources generating from the software as it runs. As James Newman notes: 'Rather than 'becoming' a particular character in the gameworld, seeing the world through their eyes, the player encounters the game by relating to everything within the gameworld simultaneously.'<sup>3</sup>

Newman's use of the term 'gameworld' is encompassing the virtual environment presented and those elements of additional game information (score, health, etc.) that are also presented to the player in the mise-en-scène of the game. Though in many cases, these additional elements are not subject to manipulation in the same way as the virtual environment,

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<sup>1</sup> *Tetris*, (Alexey Pajitnov, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> *Bejeweled*, (Popcap Games, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Newman, James, 'The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames' *Game Studies* vol3, issue 1, (July 2002) <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman/> last accessed 16<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

what Newman's argument points out is the multitude of additional interactive opportunities made available to the player throughout the course of a play session. These additional interactive opportunities include the use of game mechanics to manipulate time and space within the virtual environment in ways that may have no narrative framework within the game itself. The most common of these manipulations is the use of 'save games' and multiple lives. These mechanics, while very common in computer games, have a huge impact on the operation of the virtual worlds presented and on the player's experience of the game itself. These interactions afford players the ability to influence time and space within the game world, and can effectively be used as a tool to remove 'death' or the act of 'dying' from the virtual world. Rather than discuss the metaphysics of death within a game structure, I will instead endeavour to explore the materialist operation of death within the games and consider how some performances may guide this understanding.

Both of the performances, *Adventure Quest* and *Doom Raider*, address the concept of the manipulation of time through game mechanics, and explore the potential effects it might have on a given character. While *Adventure Quest* focuses on the 'save game' mechanic, representing acts of both saving and restoring game states to alter the course of events in the game, *Doom Raider* uses a 'checkpoint/multiple lives' style mechanic to explore these aspects. In both cases the performances illustrate characters who are subject to rearrangements of time and space, but still retain their memory of these manipulations. The character's ability to

remember and in some cases instigate these manipulations further challenges the position of the gameplayer in these performances, while exploring the position of the 'deathless' character within a game narrative.

### **Jesper Juul and The Manipulation of Time and Death.**

In his book *Half-Real*<sup>4</sup>, Jesper Juul discusses the nature of time in videogames as existing in a dual structure, the passage of time in the virtual game world is experienced by us in terms of the passage of time in the 'real world' yet does not follow the same linear flow as 'real time.' Juul draws a series of comparisons by which he considers 'play time' (i.e. the length of time a player dedicates to a play session) along side 'fictional time' (i.e. the length of time passing in the fictional world presented).

Juul illustrates how the passage of time in a game can differ drastically from the passage of time in the real world. For example, two minutes of play time can translate as an entire year of 'fictional time' in games such as Maxis' *Sim City*.<sup>5</sup> However, both fictional time and play time remain connected through the real time processing by the computational hardware of the player's interaction with the software. Hence, the player's real-time actions also assume a dual temporal meaning within the game. However, this relationship between game time and play time can be interrupted. Events such as loading screens and cut scenes can extend play time while essentially 'freezing' game time. A player may reach an

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<sup>4</sup> Juul, Jesper, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, (London: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> *Sim City*, (Maxis, 1989).

area whereby the software must pause to load additional environment elements in order to assure smooth software performance in this new area. This creates a disconnect between fictional time and play time as the action extends the actual time a player spends with the software, but does not effect the passage of time in the fictional world of the videogame.<sup>6</sup>

The same can occur with saving and loading games, as well as instances of waypoints and character death. For example, while playing Epic's *Gears Of War*<sup>7</sup> a player may fail to complete a certain challenge, resulting in the death of the player character, Marcus Fenix. The game will then give the player the option to 'restart from checkpoint'. Should the player choose to do so, the game resets to a certain point prior to the player's failure and the player is allowed to play on. In this case, the fictional time has also been reset and the player will be subject to events already played. Characters will converse and reveal information to each other as if for the first time, though the player will have already heard this information and perhaps be quite familiar with it through the repetition. Additionally, there may be instances by which a player has missed an optional goal in a previous section of a game and may then choose to go 'reload' a previous checkpoint or save game in order to repeat a completed section as if it were new. Though Juul does not list it as such, this process can be considered a standard violation of time in games.

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<sup>6</sup> Juul, Jesper, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, (London: MIT Press, 2005), chapter 4 'Fiction', 121 – 162.

<sup>7</sup> *Gears of War*, (Epic Games, 2006).

## **Saving a Game**

The act of 'saving' a game (i.e. recording player progress in order to revisit it at a later stage) has a relatively long history in videogames. Early computer-based games made use of removable or rewritable media such as floppy disks, to save an individual's game progress allowing players to create linked gameplay sessions in which the player picked up from where they last finished playing. Console and arcade-system based games, however, did not include this feature at first. Players were required to start every play session from the very beginning of the game, unless they had obtained code known as passcodes or 'cheat codes', which would allow them to start the game from a later level. Players' progress in games was then only recorded by means of a 'high score' counter that displayed which players had achieved top score from a given play session. This high-score table was first introduced in 1978 by games company Taito, with the game *Space Invaders*.<sup>8</sup>

This meant that early arcade and console games did not support the 'episodic' style of gameplay that was afforded by computer-based gaming. Instead play sessions were each independent of one another, each one creating its own narrative experience for the player without reference to the previous game. In order to allow players to continue playing, even after initial failure at certain challenges, players were often afforded a standard three chances (or 'lives') for each time they began the game, similar to the

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<sup>8</sup> *Space Invaders*, (Taito, 1978).

traditional American pinball machines. Juul highlights the existence of these three lives as a point of tension between the fictional world of the game and the rule structure of the game.<sup>9</sup> He highlights the Nintendo game *Donkey Kong*<sup>10</sup> as an example of this. In *Donkey Kong*, the player assumes the role of the character Mario, who must rescue a princess from a vicious monkey who has kidnapped her and is keeping the would-be rescuers at bay by throwing various lethal objects at them from a height. The player is granted three attempts at the game, (described as lives) so that if the player's character is killed by one of these objects, they can start again. Juul highlights the narrative tension in this, questioning the nature of the player character's ability to reincarnate himself after death. Juul suggests that this presents an incoherent fictional world to the player and the tension can only be resolved by appealing to the rules of the game, namely that: 'With only one life, the game would be too hard.'<sup>11</sup> Juul then concludes that: 'Mario is not reincarnated (fiction); the player just has three Marios (rules.)'<sup>12</sup>

However, assessing Mario's three lives based on the fictional world of the game still creates a difficulty as we are left wondering if each of these three Marios feels the same way about the princess. Despite Juul's explanation, the tension between the fictional world and the rule structure

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<sup>9</sup> Juul, Jesper, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, (London: MIT Press, 2005), 123.

<sup>10</sup> *Donkey Kong*, (Nintendo, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> Juul, Jesper, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, (London: MIT Press, 2005), 130.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

within the game still exists. Are we to consider each of these Marios as an independent agent; do they have an awareness of their predecessor's existence? No indication of such awareness is given within the game itself, and as such any learning or new actions of behalf of Mario must be assumed to be an artefact of the player's actions. It is this learning process which this chapter will discuss, both in terms of extra lives and the 'save game' feature.

It was not until Nintendo developed game cartridges that included a battery-powered RAM component, that console games supported a save game feature. The first Nintendo game to make use of this feature was *The Legend Of Zelda*,<sup>13</sup> released in 1986. This save feature essentially removed the need for multiple lives in games (though it was still retained by many early games).<sup>14</sup> This transformed console gaming sessions into a more episodic process by which players could experience the total length of a game over a number of separate play sessions. The creation of the save game also afforded console players with opportunities for temporal manipulations of the virtual environment as previously mentioned. The multiple-lives mechanic has been phased out of the majority of modern console games instead favouring a mechanic whereby the player is returned to a previous temporal point in the game, or alternatively is penalised in some fashion (through a set waiting period, or the deduction of points) before their character is 'respawned' (i.e. brought back to life) at

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<sup>13</sup> *The Legend Of Zelda*, (Nintendo, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> such as those in Nintendo's *Mario* franchise, for example.



a specifically designated checkpoint. Otherwise, a player may be told that their failure has caused a 'game over' state, but they are given an opportunity to load an earlier save game and attempt once more. This creates a system by which the player may be considered to have an unlimited number of attempts available to them. These manipulations of time, space, and the virtual body are unique in videogaming, and present a challenge to the temporal limitations of the 'real body' by affording the player character a kind of immunity to death.

### **Virtual Death and Respawning**

With this multiplicity of lives and the manipulation of time and space within virtual environments, death loses its original meaning within said virtual environment. In the majority of cases, death in a video game can be overcome by using one of the player's extra lives, returning to a 'respawn point' or previous checkpoint in the game, or loading a previous save. Though there are examples of games in which the player's death is final, nearly all of the co-called 'AAA' titles (i.e. the most widely distributed titles from the large production houses) utilise these mechanics extensively. As such, for the majority of videogames, death is not the 'final end' that it is usually considered to be in 'real life'. Hence the meaning of death is dramatically altered within a gameplay session. Fabian Schafer, in his analysis of virtual death<sup>15</sup>, contextualises virtual death within the rule

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<sup>15</sup> Schafer, Fabian, "Ludic Philosophy: Subjectivity, choice and virtual death in digital media," *Digital Culture & Education*, Vol 1, Issue 2, 116-128.

structure of a game, suggesting that death in games becomes meaningful only in relation to the operation of the game itself. Schafer uses the example of Valve Software's popular *Counter-Strike*<sup>16</sup> game, an online multiplayer first-person shooter, in which players compete against one another in a variety of game configurations. These configurations can include players being pitted against one another for points or until only one player is left alive (commonly known as 'Deathmatch') or with players being grouped in teams, with the goal of eliminating the opposing team in combat ('Team Deathmatch'). The game also includes a number of configurations that involve simple objectives in a capture-the-flag style setting. As Schafer notes, games such as *Unreal Tournament*,<sup>17</sup> and *Quake III Arena*,<sup>18</sup> follow similar formats and utilise a 'respawn' mechanic, whereby if players are killed within the virtual environment, they are brought back to life (usually after a ten second wait time) in a particular area of the game level and allowed to play on. However, Schafer notes that this is not the case in *Counter-Strike*, whereby players are afforded only one life within each round. Should their character be killed by an opposing player, the player is not reincarnated within the game world, but instead relegated to a position of spectator for the remainder of the round. This alteration to standard game mechanics was originally designed to encourage much more strategic and team-based play on the part of the players. For Schafer, this alteration imparts more meaning onto the act of

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<sup>16</sup> *Counter-Strike*, (Valve Corporation, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> *Unreal Tournament*, (Epic Games, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> *Quake III Arena*, (Id Software, 1999).

virtual death and perhaps makes for a more engaging gameplay experience:

I suggest that this is also one of the most important reasons behind the popularity of *Counter-Strike*, because in this case virtual death takes on higher stakes than is usually found in digital games on the first-person shooter genre. Death is much more real because it is irreversible (at least for the duration of a single round).<sup>19</sup>

In this case, virtual death has become a punishment for the player's failure, resulting in a near-permanent state of disconnection from their virtual body. But what of those instances whereby player death is not a permanent state for the duration of the round? In those multiplayer games in which death is almost immediately reversible through respawning, the act of death is no longer a final departure from the virtual body, but instead an act of learning on the part of the player. Players must give away their position in a game level in order to fire upon other players. A frequent complaint of multiplayer games is the act of 'camping' by which a player may chose a particularly inaccessible or advantageous part of the game map and wait in hiding for unsuspecting enemy players to pass by, only to kill them before they can retaliate (this is generally considered bad form). In these cases, the killed player returns to the level with knowledge of the 'camping' player's location and as such can hunt down their aggressor to seek revenge. Similarly, as death becomes less final, the player is afforded the opportunity to take more 'risks' while playing, creating an environment where a player may feel more comfortable exploring the

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<sup>19</sup> Schafer, Fabian, "Ludic Philosophy: Subjectivity, choice and virtual death in digital media," *Digital Culture & Education*, Vol 1, Issue 2, 123.

possibilities of the virtual environment in sometimes reckless or otherwise dangerous ways. Through this process, the act of death becomes detached from its original meaning and is transformed into an act of learning; the experience of death can inform the subsequent actions of the player for the remainder of the level. Through multiple repetitions, players begin to become highly familiar with the topography of the virtual environment. Players enter a process of learning through repetition of those areas that are tactically advantageous and how they may exploit them.

### **Death as Learning in Single Player Games**

This redefinition of death in virtual environments as an imbedded act of learning within the game mechanics is not exclusive to the multiplayer first person shooter format. Death operates as a learning act in single-player experiences also, and indeed in every game in which the mechanics of the game allows the player to exert these standard violations of time that allow them to overcome death. For the player, every virtual death is observed, yet the player him or herself remains physically unchanged. As such, the act of dying becomes a site of exploration for the player in a single-player game experience, allowing them to test and explore the boundaries of the virtual world presented. By separating death from total failure or disconnection from the game, a space is created in which players can be challenged beyond their original capabilities. In those cases in which the player is met with a challenge they cannot overcome, this insulation against total failure allows the player to attempt a problem multiple times,

learning through repetition and trial and error how to navigate the challenges presented to them. The use of a checkpoint system in a game design separates these challenges into individual sections or scenes for the player to experience, thus preventing the player from having to re-play long sections of the game in order to reach the single moment they are having trouble with. The use of a checkpoint system also provides players with obtainable short-term goals, sub-dividing each level of the game into a number of smaller levels to be overcome and providing respite and reassurance for the player as they are given clear indications of progression. Gavin Kostick's *Doom Raider*,<sup>20</sup> which draws inspiration from the game franchise *Tomb Raider*,<sup>21</sup> centres its exploration of videogames on this checkpoint mechanic and the ideas of memory, illustrating moments of failure and death, reincarnation, repetition and success through the course of a linear series of challenges.

This checkpoint system can also be combined with a save-game mechanic, allowing players to save their progress at particular physical locations within the game's virtual environment. These are generally referred to as 'save points'. The discovery of new save points often marks the beginning of new level sequences within a game world, while allowing players opportunity to save their progress so that they can return to that point should they fail the challenges ahead, while also allowing players to

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<sup>20</sup> Produced by Irish theatre company Fishamble in 1999/2000.

<sup>21</sup> Currently published by Square-Enix. The first *Tomb Raider* game was developed by Core Design and released in 1996. The most recent iteration, *Lara Croft and The Guardian of Light* was developed by Crystal Dynamics and released in 2010.

save their progress at a particular point and return to the game at a later stage. Often, if a player wishes to save their game they are required to travel to that save point within the virtual environment. Alternatively, some games will allow the player to save at any point, however, they will be returned to the nearest checkpoint or save point (though with other post-save progress such as score, equipment, etc. removed) once they reload their saved game.

A 'save game' mechanic that operates independently of a checkpoint system allows for a much freer manipulation of the game by players. In those cases whereby players are afforded the opportunity to save their progress (including their character's physical position in the virtual environment) at any stage of the game, the opportunity arises for player to take much greater risks and explore a wider variety of approaches to a given set of circumstances. The 'save game' mechanic becomes incorporated into the player's gameplay strategies, becoming an almost mandatory action before the player undertakes any risk.

At the same time, the negation of risk afforded by the mechanic is open to exploitation. For example, in the popular role-playing game *Fallout 3*,<sup>22</sup> the player may choose to steal from, or even kill, practically every character in the game. In the case of stealing from another character, the player runs the risk of being caught by the character and potentially ending up in a fight they cannot win. This jeopardy is calculated by the combination of a

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<sup>22</sup> *Fallout 3*, (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008).

number of factors in the game, including how the player has developed his or her character's skills, a higher 'Sneak' skill means a greater chance of success. In those cases whereby a player is unsure, or perhaps unlikely to succeed in an act of theft, the player can save their game, attempt to steal from the character, and should they prove unsuccessful, simply reload their previous save game and try again, or alternatively decide not to attempt to steal at all and simply continue on. The same can be said to be true for optional combat moments, whereby a player can choose to enter into combat with a non-player character, assured that, should they lose, they may simply load a previous save and try again. Alternatively should the player for any reason regret killing a particular non-player character; they may undo that action by loading a saved game that was created prior to the attack. Thus the act of game saving allows players to reverse death not only for themselves, but also for other characters within the game world. This mechanic can also be particularly useful where players have found that they may have made a fatal error earlier in the game, the correction of which will drastically alter the progress of game events.

Owing to this flexibility and the opportunities afforded by the 'save game', the act of saving a game can often become part of a player's planning process when encountering new areas. Much as in the example of theft in *Fallout 3*, players may save their game prior to venturing into unknown areas or taking other potentially disastrous risks. In many ways, this manipulation of time allows the players to bring an almost omniscient quality to their control of the in-game character. By using this 'save game'

mechanic, players are able to 'adventure into the future' to examine possible outcomes of their decisions, before returning to the game's 'present' (the point at which they decided to save the game and began experimenting) to pursue a considered course of action. Hence the process of death and failure is not insulated against fully, but instead reinforced as a site and opportunity for learning and experimentation within a single-player narrative environment.

The 'save game' mechanic also allows players to create save games at key moments in the development of a game's plot. In those games that use a series of branching narrative lines, a player may be presented with several options for their progression, each resulting in a different game experience and in some cases, a different ending narrative sequence for the game. These decisions can often have a profound effect on the progression of the game and on subsequent narrative content for the remainder of play. By allowing players to save their games at any stage, the save-game mechanic allows players to create save points at the moments where the narrative plot lines might diverge. Players can then later revisit these points in order to explore alternate game routes, and discover alternative narrative material. This allows players to fully explore the narrative content of a game, comparing and contrasting differing material and developing new meaning for their gameplay experience. The immunity from failure granted to the player by the 'save game' can encourage the player to make in-game choices which they would normally be hesitant to follow, revealing new experiences and methods of



gameplay. Not only is death redefined in this process, but so too are all the relationships formed within the gameplay experience.

Character relationships can be explored and tested by the player, allowing them to choose which particular path they wish to follow. Because every choice also carries with it the inherent loss of potential (the potential of the alternative choice, or 'opportunity cost' in economics terms) the 'save game' allows players to revisit difficult choices and further explore this moment of loss of potential. This process may be particularly rewarding for the player in these cases by which the game poses difficult moral choices to the player, allowing them to explore the consequences of both actions before making a final commitment, or pursuing a decision while retaining the ability to reverse the choice should it prove unwise.

The 'save game' also allows the player to visit the game over a series of play sessions, creating an episodic experience for the player.

### **Representing the Manipulation of Game-time on Stage**

Both Sneaky Snake's *Adventure Quest* and Gavin Kostick's *Doom Raider* address the issue of manipulation of death in gameplay, and in each case the format in which these explorations are addressed is dictated by the particular games used as source material. Common to both productions, however, is the issue of character memory, as distinct from that of player memory, chiefly concerning the issue of the retention of information by in-game characters when undergoing the process of restoration. For *Doom Raider* this issue is explored using a 'checkpoint' system of game time

manipulation, as used in the game *Tomb Raider*. In *Adventure Quest* this exploration is conducted through the representation of a 'save anywhere' system, as was common to adventure games at the time.

### **How *Doom Raider* does it**

Gavin Kostick's *Doom Raider* was first performed in The Civic Theatre, Tallaght, Ireland in 2000 as part of theatre company Fishamble's Y2K festival. Inspired by the anxiety surrounding the so-called 'Y2K Bug,' Fishamble's festival included a series of six plays, which were commissioned as responses to 'the time in which we lived.'<sup>23</sup> Gavin Kostick's *Doom Raider* took its inspiration from videogames and a desire to explore physical theatre.<sup>24</sup> The performance itself consisted of a number of wooden boxes in varying heights and two performers. The first performer was female and dressed in shorts and a vest, with guns strapped to her sides in a style designed to echo that of the lead character from the *Tomb Raider* franchise: Lara Croft. The second performer was dressed entirely in black, including gloves and face covering. The two performers worked together to reproduce the movement of the digital game character Lara Croft, including mid-air cartwheels, swan dives, and back flips which would otherwise be physically impossible without assistance.

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<sup>23</sup> From company website <http://fishamble.com/y2k-festival> last accessed 27th April, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> From unpublished interviews with the writer, 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb 2011.



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Through this movement method, the performance constructed the lead character as super-human or otherwise unbounded by the traditional constraints of physics. In doing so, *Doom Raider* occupied a point of hypermediacy, reproducing and highlighting the operation of the digital world it drew inspiration from.

The performance further emphasised the malleable nature of physics in a virtual environment through its manipulation of time and space, featuring frequent repetition and restaging. Through the performance, the lead character faced a series of challenges and trials, constructed in a linear fashion in much the same way as the *Tomb Raider* games. Events included long periods of time underwater, climbing through dark caves,

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<sup>25</sup> Screenshot from *Tomb Raider III*, (Core Design, 1998).

and being attacked by various wild animals. Though these challenges were never fully visually represented on stage, their presence was indicated by a combination of visual and aural indices. The lighting design for the piece reflected the environment the lead character was currently occupying, using dark shadowy effects for caves, and so on. The sound design for the piece similarly worked to inform the audience of setting and situation. At times the sound design went even further, indicating the presence of wild, attacking animals purely through sound clips. The performer would then respond to the empty stage as if it contained whatever creature was being indicated by the sound design. In many cases, sounds were sampled directly from the *Tomb Raider* videogames, further strengthening the aesthetic link between the two pieces. However, the performance did not feature the presence of a player, and at no stage gave any indication of the lead character being under the control of a player or indeed any other 'non-present' entity.

As previously mentioned, throughout the performance the lead character is faced with a number of challenges and trials. At various stages the performer would fail these trials, resulting in their death. Each death is almost instantaneously reversed, and the performance 'reset' to a previous point, much like in a game. This resetting serves to reframe the act of death in a virtual environment as a learning experience rather than a final end. For example in an early encounter with dogs (indicated by a sound clip of dogs barking), the performer reaches for her guns only to then duck and contort her body as if she has suddenly been mauled by the

creatures, the scene blacks out and we are returned to a few moments prior to the dog event. Much like in a checkpoint system in a game, the character is instantly brought back to life at a predetermined earlier point in the game. Death has been reversed through a manipulation of time only possible in a videogame. Drawing such a clear aesthetic link between the popular videogame *Tomb Raider* and the performance, *Doom Raider* provides the audience with the necessary framing to read this sequence of death and rebirth as a representation of a videogame process. Subsequently the performance moves towards the same encounter again, however this time the performer draws her guns before the dogs have arrived. Once the dogs arrive the performer immediately shakes the guns in the supposed direction of the dogs approach. This is accompanied by gunshot sound effects and the sound of dogs whimpering in pain. The audience reads this as the performer shooting the dogs. In no way could the character have had knowledge of the dog's existence prior to this (or at least no clue of such premonitions are given to the audience). Therefore, the audience assumes that this is the same encounter they have already seen. The lead character has clearly learned from their previous encounter and subsequent death and this time they are ready for the dogs before they arrive. Through the digital manipulation of time and space, the act of death has been reversed, but the knowledge of the experience has remained with the character. *Doom Raider* provides the audience with a representation of death as a learning experience in a virtual environment. In this case the site of learning is ambiguous in its

positioning, as the performance does not make a clear delineation between player and character. This conflation of player and character may serve to raise similar questions as to those raised in *Adventure Quest* regarding the position of the player. Nevertheless the work also effectively serves to also highlight the functional operation of 'death' within the execution of game actions.

### **How *Adventure Quest* does it**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Sneaky Snake's *Adventure Quest* draws heavily on videogames from the adventure genre to inform its performance. The production presents the progress of a central Hero character through a virtual environment, solving a series of puzzles and interactions in much the same way as a player would in an adventure game. Through the appropriation of textual commands as spoken word for the lead character, the performance transforms the actions or commands of an external player into an embodied action on the part of the lead character. Though no player is present in the performance, his or her existence is inferred by the actions of the hero character. At first we assume the Hero's statements of 'Look at beggar' etc. are representations of the text inputs from an unrepresented player who is currently engaging in a play session of *Adventure Quest*. Statements made by the Hero follow a structure similar to the standard command structure used in adventure games. Any deviation from this is, at least initially, met with a response of 'I don't understand' from the narrative voice. As these commands also include a command to 'save' at various points in the game, we also

assume that the Hero's dialogue is representative of nearly all player inputs into the software they are operating, and not just those commands issued to the assumed player-character 'Hero'. However, as the performance progresses, it becomes evident that the Hero character is acting independently of an unseen agent (i.e. without the player) and seems to acquire an agency of his own, thereby challenging the position of player in traditional game configurations. However, the Hero is still constrained to operating within the limits of the game software, still needing traditionally constructed 'text-input' style commands to communicate with other characters in this virtual environment.

As mentioned, *Adventure Quest* also includes a representation of the narrative voice commonly found in adventure gaming. In traditional adventure game configurations, this narrative voice becomes an audio representation of the software's processes, informing the player as to changes in the game environment and providing narrative framework for those player actions that are incompatible with the game. In Sneaky Snake's *Adventure Quest* this narrative voice is represented by an offstage performer speaking into a microphone, thus projecting their disembodied voice across the theatre's public address system. For *Adventure Quest* this character of 'Voice' also became an agent of the software itself, and representative of the formal authority of the game system, driving the Hero towards the intended path of progression within the game narrative. Throughout the course of the performance, the Hero

character remains subject to a series of special and temporal manipulations through the operation of a 'save and restore' mechanic.

As many games in the 'adventure gaming' genre could take several dedicated hours to complete, even once players know the correct solutions to puzzles within the game, the provision of a system whereby players could save their progress at any stage in the game became necessary for game designers. This was easily achieved as the majority of adventure games were designed to be played on computer systems, rather than consoles, and as such could take advantage of either the built in RAM capacity of the computer, or the use of removable storage media (such as floppy disks) for the program to create 'save files', which would record the player's progress. As such, this 'save and restore' mechanic was prolific in the adventure game genre from an early stage. In Sneaky Snake's *Adventure Quest* the operation of this mechanic is represented through the Hero character, the Voice character, and manipulations of the staging in *Adventure Quest*, primarily a lighting blackout, followed by a return to a previous staging configuration (actors move in blackout to previous blocking, the background changes etc.).

Death also features heavily in the performance, as Hero kills nearly every character he meets throughout the course of the production, and in several instances is killed by others. These deaths are transient events, manipulated by the 'save and restore' mechanic included in the performance. By including multiple instances of these manipulations of time, with explicit reference to death, *Adventure Quest* focuses on the



nature of death in a virtual environment, illustrating its transformation from final end to learning experience through the actions presented on stage. Furthermore, by utilising a central character that appears to be acting independently of the player, the performance raises questions about the nature of existence and the nature of memory within this re-contextualisation of death.

### **Restoring from Death, Restoring from Choice in *Adventure Quest***

The first occurrence of the representation of a loaded save game in *Adventure Quest* takes place in the fifth scene of the performance. The Hero character enters a 'cemetery area', the projected background changes to show an illustration of tombstones and twisting paths. The rest of the stage is almost bare, with a single large painted prop-tombstone placed on stage. Near this tombstone is a character the script identifies as 'Cemetery Man'. The location is confirmed for the audience through the use of the Voice character, which states: 'You are in the town cemetery. A strange man beckons you over.'<sup>26</sup>

The Hero then walks across the stage towards the man and says: 'Look at Man.'

From which receives the following response: 'VOICE: He looks untrustworthy.'

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<sup>26</sup> Lovejoy, Richard *Adventure Quest*, (USA: unpublished, 2009).

The Hero character then states the command to 'save' before stating, 'Talk to man', which begins an exchange between the Hero and the Cemetery Man character. The Cemetery Man character asks the Hero if he wants to buy a 'curse of death' to which the Hero responds: 'Buy curse of death from man.'<sup>27</sup>

The Cemetery Man begins to laugh, and from behind the prop tombstone, another performer emerges, dressed as a ghost, and touches the Hero character. The Hero screams, clutching his chest as if struck with a heart attack, and collapses to the floor. Seemingly the touch of the ghost has killed him. This is confirmed for the audience by the narrative voice:

VOICE: Maybe it wasn't a good idea to purchase a curse of death as it made you dead. Restore.<sup>28</sup>

Immediately following the word 'Restore' all the performers resume their positions on stage at the point at which the Hero character stated 'save.' The Hero once again begins a conversation with the Cemetery Man by stating 'Talk to Man', however, this time, when he is offered the opportunity to purchase a curse of death, the Hero simply exits the scene.

In this relatively short sequence, *Adventure Quest* represents the use of death as a learning process in gameplay. At this stage in the performance, the division between Hero and player is not yet clear, and we are still operating on the assumption that the Hero's commands are representative

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

of the inputs of an inferred player; as such it may be best to refer to the actions of the character as those of a Hero/player pairing. In this case, when hearing the description that a certain character is untrustworthy, the Hero/player responds by creating a save game (through the command 'save'), a precautionary measure prior to entering a potentially risky series of events. Essentially the save function has been used to negate the possible risk posed by this untrustworthy character.

By representing the save function in this way, *Adventure Quest* is acknowledging the save function's place as part of a player's planning process when engaging in a play session. Later, as we see the division between player and Hero develop, this planning trait is passed onto the Hero, suggesting the character has gained a conscious awareness that he can manipulate time. In this case, the Hero/player's precaution proves useful as the Hero/player is killed for their decision to purchase a 'curse of death' from the Cemetery Man. The system responds through the Voice's somewhat glib statement describing the results of the Hero/player's actions (this tone is a common accordance in many Sierra Online adventure games). The statement of 'Restore' can be interpreted as the point at which the previous 'save game' file is reloaded into the performance's fictitious game system, resulting in a reversal of time to a previous point in the action, namely before the Hero/Player purchased a 'curse of death'. However, this is not a complete reversal of time, though the Cemetery Man may be responding to the Hero/player as before, the Hero/player has learned from the death experience and does not purchase

a 'curse of death' from this character. Though time has been reversed, undoing the demise of the Hero character, the Hero has retained the memory of death, or at least the memory of his cause of death, and refuses to repeat his actions. As such, the act of death and the subsequent reversal of time is transformed from manipulations of a linear series of events, into an embodied learning experience on the part of the Hero/player. Similar instances of save/death/restore occur throughout the performance. However, as the performance develops and begins to challenge the formal authority of game design,<sup>29</sup> the Hero and the Voice begin to move to an oppositional relationship. This opposition provides the performance with space in which to challenge some of the operations of this save/death/restore sequence.

#### **Further Explorations of Save/Load in *Adventure Quest***

As the opposition between the Hero and Voice characters grows, *Adventure Quest* begins to further explore the experience of death and reversible time from the perspective of the individual. One notable occurrence takes place in scene 31.<sup>30</sup> The Hero, having scaled the walls of a cathedral, is confronted with the presence of two 'Cultist' characters, arguing over the plans of their evil master. The scene is sparsely staged, again relying primarily on the presence of a projected background and the descriptive narrative of the Voice character to indicate to the audience the location of the scene. At first, the two performers playing the roles of the

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<sup>29</sup> See previous chapter for more on this.

<sup>30</sup> Lovejoy, Richard *Adventure Quest*, (USA: unpublished, 2009).

cultists are playing out their argument through mime. We are unable to hear what they are saying to each other until the Hero character issues the command 'eavesdrop on cultists'. The cultist's argument is a short six-line exchange, which the two performers repeat continuously.

This repetition is an illustration of the characters being in a short text cycle, a common design configuration for non-player characters in classic adventure games that lacked the hardware resources to produce lengthy animation and text sequences for minor characters.<sup>31</sup> The Hero character then attempts to converse with the two cultists, who at first ignore him. However, once the Hero utters the command, 'Interrupt argument', the two turn on him, producing knives and repeatedly stabbing the Hero. The Hero cries out in pain, begging the two cultists to stop before collapsing to the ground and lying prone. The two cultists stop stabbing the Hero and an extended silence follows. After this pause, the two cultists return to their argument, repeating their original exchange and gestures. Once the cultists have completed a single repetition, the Voice states: 'Restore'. There is a black out, and the scene reverts to two scenes previous, with the background image changing to illustrate an alleyway just off the main town square. The Hero's score (constantly displayed in the top right corner of the projected background) was previously 232 but has now been returned to 230, the additional two points having been gained from his scaling of the cathedral. As the lights come back up, we see the Hero

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<sup>31</sup> Again, see previous chapter for further discussion on this topic.

visibly distressed, feeling his face and torso where he had previously been stabbed by the cultists.

HERO: I thought you were just going to... going to just let me be dead. I...<sup>32</sup>

The Hero's clearly distressed response illustrates for us for the first time, that the operation and experience of death for the individual is an embodied experience. By grabbing the places where he has been stabbed, we are shown that the Hero retains not only the knowledge of his death, but also the memory of the physical experience of it, the positioning of the wounds and the feeling of dying. Though the Hero has been subject to death and its subsequent reversal previously in the performance, they have been almost instantaneous. However, in this case, the act of restoration is delayed significantly, and the Hero is forced to remain in his lifeless state as the cultists resume their cycle of argument. It is perhaps for this reason that the Hero's physical reaction to his restoration (grabbing the previously injured areas) is more remarkable. His contact with his newly restored flesh serves to assure him that he has once again been made whole. The Hero's statement is addressed towards the Voice, who ostensibly holds the power to decide when a game is restored. The use of the phrasing 'just let me be dead', suggests both a fear of abandonment by the Voice and an acknowledgement that true death remains an unknown for the Hero. The phrase infers that, in the context of *Adventure*

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<sup>32</sup> Lovejoy, Richard *Adventure Quest*, (USA: unpublished, 2009).

*Quest*, just 'being dead' is an unheard of proposition. The performer's frantic movements and panicked expression give way to the fear of this unknown and the thought that a fundamental change in the save/load mechanic may have disastrous effects for the Hero's very existence. The anxiety comes less from the experience of being stabbed to death, and more from the experience of death as outside the normal save/load cycle. The Hero subsequently returns to the cathedral, seemingly unafraid, only to be killed again by the cultists having attempted a direct attack. This time however, the Hero is restored much more quickly, and gives no concession to this death event, no acknowledgement of the physical pain of the stabbing. The restoration this time has been prompt, and the status quo of a deathless virtual environment is restored.

### **Conclusion**

Though the use of a save/load mechanic in videogames is so prolific as to almost justify the term 'ubiquitous', it is often a mechanic that benefits player experience more than in-game conditions. Rarely does a player encounter a game by which returning to a previous save point will allow them to retain any progress made prior to that 'reloading' action. New items, weapons, etc., that the player may have collected are returned to their previous location as the game resets to the previously saved point in time. The player's character gains no physical advantage, nor new abilities to help them overcome those challenges that have bested them only moments ago. Instead, the benefits are almost always purely cognitive, the player learns more about their surroundings and ideally will be able to

use this new knowledge to better utilise the existing abilities given to them by the game software.

*Adventure Quest* and *Doom Raider* present the manipulation of death in a virtual environment as an operation without the presence of a player. In doing so, both productions shift the focus of death in a videogame away from the mechanics of player behaviour and towards questions of memory and trauma on the part of the characters portrayed. By removing the presence of the player from the action represented, yet maintaining a clear aesthetic, narrative, and structural link to specific videogame practices, the player's experience of the game sequence is suppressed or removed from the performance. Instead, the focus of the performance moves from player experience to those isolated elements of game structure that are retained, in this case the save/load mechanic and the act of death as learning experience. The performances consider these elements alongside the characters occupying the virtual world in which they take effect. Thus the process of manipulation, learning, and planning on the part of the player is now resituated as taking place within the character represented. By presenting these elements as independent from player experience, *Adventure Quest* and *Doom Raider* both challenge the position of player in the videogame context, and instead raise questions of the potential psychological implications of existence in a world where manipulation of time and the reversal of death are normal occurrences.



## Chapter IV:

### *Theater of the Arcade*

The previous chapters of this thesis have focused on the configurations of live performance and videogames that are primarily concerned with the exploration of videogames in a somewhat general fashion. Of the two works previously discussed only Kostick's *Doom Raider* has explicitly tied itself to a single game or series of games, with *Adventure Quest* instead focusing on either more general videogame experiences and the operation of particular game mechanics, or the exploration of particular game genres within gaming culture. Piper McKenzie's *Theater of the Arcade*, written by Jeff Lewonczyk, focuses exclusively on five specific videogames as the centre point of its explorations of videogames in a theatrical setting. Fully titled *Theater of the Arcade: Five Videogames Adapted for the Stage*, Lewonczyk's piece was first performed in The Brick Theater, New York as part of the *Game Play* festival 2010. The performance featured 6 actors, each playing multiple roles across five short plays. Each play lasted roughly ten to fifteen minutes; each focused on a single videogame and was written in such a way as to emulate the style of a specific playwright. The pieces can be considered as an augmentation to the embedded narratives of the existing videogames, but also as a means of challenging those narratives and the dominant ideologies the game mechanics may

enforce. These additions and challenges can also be understood in terms of the culture of 'fan fiction', whereby fans of a particular film, game, or TV series create their own works of fiction borrowing from the original's canon of existing characters and settings in order to structure their own pieces, often redefining relationships between characters in ways that are incongruent with the original material.<sup>1</sup>

The videogames selected by Lewonczyk are some of the most popular early videogames available, each being part of the early 'arcade culture' of the early- to mid-1980s when large videogame arcades were a popular staple in the United States of America, and home game systems were still in their early stages of distribution. The games selected were: *Pac-Man*,<sup>2</sup> *Frogger*<sup>3</sup> *Asteroids*<sup>4</sup> *Donkey Kong*,<sup>5</sup> and *Super Mario Bros.*<sup>6</sup> These games were selected both for their popularity and their simplicity, as each game used a relatively simple narrative drive and set of game mechanics, and yet were important milestones in the early development of videogames. The narrative of each of these games is extremely limited, and in many cases must be inferred by the player through their experience of the game mechanics themselves. For example, in Namco's *Pac-Man*, the player-character Pac-man's relationship to the virtual environment is defined

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most popular of these practices is so-called 'slash fiction', which places two existing characters in romantic or sexual relationships with each other that would not exist, or be compatible with the original source material.

<sup>2</sup> *Pac-Man*, (Namco, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> *Frogger*, (Konami, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> *Asteroids*, (Atari, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> *Donkey Kong*, (Nintendo, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> *Super Mario Bros.*, (Nintendo, 1985).

purely in terms of game mechanics: eating pellets means a higher score, eating all the pellets on a level moves the game to the next level, touching ghosts means failure. No clues are provided to the player as to who Pac-man is, or why he is in this situation. Similarly, Atari's *Asteroids* provided players with almost no narrative framing to the game action. Cabinet art depicted a series of spaceships shooting at large asteroids in space, allowing the player to infer that the triangular shape on screen that they were controlling was a representation of a spaceship, and their task was to eliminate the 'asteroids' from the screen. The player's task never develops beyond this and as such the narrative experience of the game is limited to the experiential narrative of the individual game session: how the individual player performed in that play session, how many points they gained etc. Only Nintendo's *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario Bros.* provided anything approaching a traditional 'plot' to frame player action and in both cases focused on the character of Mario and his rescue of a kidnapped princess from evil forces.

By selecting games with simple, clear mechanics, and minimal narrative framework, Lewonczyk has a large scope for interpretation and exploration within set parameters, but is given little opportunity to create disjointed or direct challenges to the established narrative. The simple characterisation and game goals provide the writer with a set of very direct desires to explore, but without the difficulty of a fully developed set of character traits. Lewonczyk states:

I picked them for the archetypal value of their characters and situations – taking into consideration which ones would be recognized by the widest range of people – as well as which ones had easily dramatizable (not a word!) situations to play with.<sup>7</sup>

Each of the selected games have also proven to be highly popular titles, with both *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario Bros.* spawning huge international franchises that continue to produce content to this day, while titles such as *Asteroids* and *Pac-Man* enjoy the status of ‘best selling games of their era.’ The choice of such popular titles is also vitally important to the audience's ability to identify with each piece, as the games from which the individual short texts drew inspiration were not named for the audience. The selection of popular, easily identifiable pieces allowed the audiences to draw meaning from the works with relatively little framing within the pieces. In fact, *Theater of the Arcade* relied on a huge amount of prior knowledge on the part of the audience, as no explanation was provided as to which games or playwrights were being used to generate each text.

The playwrights used for inspiration by the performance were: Tennessee Williams, Sam Shepard, Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, and David Mamet. Again, each was chosen for his recognisability and unique style (particularly to an American audience). Audience members were given no

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<sup>7</sup> [sic] From unpublished e-mail to the author, 13<sup>th</sup> October 2011.

indication as to what combination of game and writer was being presented in each piece. The result was a series of pieces that required quite a wide breadth of knowledge in both fields on behalf of the audience in order to fully understand the pieces. Despite this, the performance was well received critically, receiving several nominations in the New York Innovative Theatre awards for 2011. The pairings of each playwright and videogame were as follows:

*Donkey Kong* was reimagined through Tennessee Williams, creating a piece entitled *The Alabaster Nymph*, in which an abusive husband living in a tenement apartment in the American south accuses his wife of cheating on him with an Italian plumber. *Super Mario Bros.* was reimagined through Sam Shepard to create a piece entitled *Savage of The Heart*, in which two brothers meet in the desert to reconcile their differences over a shared love interest, while experimenting with mind-altering mushrooms. *Pac-Man* was reimagined as a piece entitled *Der Rundegelbenimmersatt*, an anti-industrialist, agit-prop theatre piece written in the style of Bertolt Brecht, featuring a wealthy industrialist who is tormented by four former employees dressed as ghosts. *Frogger* was transposed to a performance entitled *Monologue for Single Player (A Sleight of Green)*, which was written in a sparse and isolated style, featuring short clipped sentences and slow highly specific movements, designed to emulate the writing style of Samuel Beckett. Finally, Atari's *Asteroids* was written in the style of David Mamet, entitled *Magdalena Magellan Mars* and set in the offices of

an asteroid demolition company, in which spaceship pilots must compete in the highly driven corporate system in order to keep their jobs.

In each case the pieces attempted to address the most common themes and structures of the writers they were inspired by, in some cases focusing on notable style tendencies from individual works rather than the writers collected works (*Magdalena Magellan Mars*, for example, seems much more akin to Mamet's *American Buffalo* or *Glengarry Glen Ross*, than to many of Mamet's subsequent works). Character relationships within these pieces were structured largely around the internal mechanics of the games themselves, but also added additional narrative information which at the time served to challenge or subvert the established or assumed narratives operating within the original games.

### **Narrative in Games**

Celia Pearce, in her article 'Towards a Game Theory of Game',<sup>8</sup> discusses the nature of narrative operation within videogames, rejecting the traditional literary and film approaches to the study of narrative and 'text'. She discounts such approaches as wholly unsuited to games as the operation of games is centred on the act of play, rather than on story or plot as in most films and literary texts. Pearce's article argues that the operation of character and plot in games is not driven by empathy (as in

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<sup>8</sup> Pearce, Celia, "Towards a Game Theory of Game" *First Person*, ed. Wardip-fruin and Harrigan, (London: MIT Press, 2004), 143-154.

the Aristotelian model),<sup>9</sup> but through *agency* and the act of doing. However, despite these limitations, Pearce does identify a number of useful narrative operations that take place during a gameplay session.

For Pearce, the narrative in games comprises not only of those emergent narratives that arise from gameplay, but also from the interactions around gameplay, listing 'performative' narrative (that which an observer experiences while watching a play session) and 'descriptive' narrative operations (the retelling of game events to third parties post-play session) as important factors to consider. Further to this, Pearce also lists 'augmentary narrative' operations. This refers to those layers of information and contextual frameworks that enhance the other narrative operations. Though Pearce seems to limit this to some elements of journalistic reporting in the remainder of her article, this augmentary narrative operation can be considered to include anything from the back-story descriptions in a game's manual to the artwork on the game's box or arcade cabinet.

This expands the discussion of narrative beyond the simple exchange between player and game and towards a more holistic approach, centering the game experience in a social space. She identifies six narrative operations in all, noting that only the first mode, the 'Experiential' or emergent narrative experienced by the player that develops from the game mechanics as they are played is present in all games, whereas the

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<sup>9</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell et al. (London: Harvard University Press, 1995).

others are present in varying configurations or in some cases not at all. In those cases whereby a game has an explicit narrative framework to guide the action, as is common in most AAA retail games, Pearce refers to this as 'metastory', and in those cases where the player is given free reign to create their own narratives (such as games like Maxim's *The Sims*), Pearce classifies these as story-'systems or kits' for the player to use, allowing the player to combine a number of differing elements to form a cohesive narrative. She notes that often a game will contain both metastory and story systems, for example Activision Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*, whereby the overall narrative of the Warcraft universe is present (the metastory of warring factions), however, the individual player is afforded opportunity to construct their own story through shaping the adventure of a character they can create for themselves.

By delineating the narrative operations of gameplay in such a way, Pearce expands the way in which we might think about the narrative experience of games, beyond those narratives which emerge for the player solely through the course of gameplay. In the case of the videogames used by *Theater of the Arcade*, each contains relatively little metastory, and as such are reliant on game mechanics (and hence experiential narrative operation) to drive player engagement. As such, *Theater of the Arcade* occupies two spaces of narrative operation. The work functions as an exploration of the experiential narrative of the videogames used, as it derives the majority of its inspiration from games that are almost purely based on experiential engagement. The work also functions as an



augmentary narrative for the games themselves, adding information and altering the framework through which the game can be understood. These operations may be considered as challenges to the experience of the gameplayer in two distinct ways. Firstly, by drawing on the experiential narrative of the game, the pieces position themselves in such a way as to criticise the process of ideological interpolation, which the game mechanics may generate. By drawing on the methods by which established theatre writers have criticised central elements of the experience of contemporary western society, *Theater of the Arcade* creates an opportunity for the experience of these games to be critiqued by those same methods. Secondly, by creating new narratives, which draw upon the games, the performance operates as a critique through its consideration of those relationships or narrative elements which may have been neglected by game designers. *Theater of the Arcade*, offers new perspectives on previously unconsidered elements of the game's fictional worlds.

### **Dominant Ideologies in Gameplay and Representational Mechanics**

In a series of critical examinations on videogames, game developer James Portnow<sup>10</sup> highlights the operation of narrative mechanics in the 1980 Atari game *Missile Command*. Through a discussion on the operation of the game's simple aim of defending a series of cities against oncoming missiles, Portnow highlights how the game reproduces difficult moral

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<sup>10</sup> from <http://penny-arcade.com/patv/episode/narrative-mechanics>, last accessed 25<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

choices in a war-time situation by placing high value on objects that have low strategic advantage. In this case the objects are the cities the player must defend. By allowing some cities to be destroyed, progressing through the game is significantly easier, however the surviving cities have a very high point value at the end of each level, and loss of every city results in loss of the game. Portnow argues that this mechanical operation reinforces the moral dilemma of 'the lives of the few vs. the lives of the many,' and as such ultimately leads the player to the conclusion that nuclear war is an unwinnable prospect and should be avoided at all costs.

Martijn van Zwieten carries this argument further in a paper entitled, 'Danger Close: Contesting ideologies and contemporary military conflict in first-person shooters',<sup>11</sup> by arguing that the process of gameplay in the popular franchise *Medal of Honor*, or indeed in all First Person Shooters (FPS), operates as an ideological interpellator. For Van Zwieten, the mechanics of the FPS (which rely heavily on violent actions) create a narrative in which the only viable method of conflict resolution is through violent military confrontation. Further to this, he argues that by placing the gun as the central point of focus in the FPS, the mechanics present the gun as the ultimate piece of human technology and the central power component of the player's near-invulnerability in the game, rendering all enemy forces as weak and destructible.

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<sup>11</sup> van Zwieten, Martijn, 'Danger Close: Contesting ideologies and contemporary military conflict in first-person shooters,' from DIGRA proceedings 2011.

These positions are enforced by the game mechanics of 'kill or be killed,' as the player is pitted against multiple enemies, which he or she must eliminate or be eliminated him or herself. Furthermore, the reliance on hyper-realism in the operation aesthetic construction and in-game physics engines, (through the use of gravity, bullet velocities, etc., which are closely modelled on the real world) within the game, create a so-called 'realistic' look and feel to the game experience. For Van Zwieten, this realism serves as a key element of the ideological interpellation, presenting to the player what is happening on screen as an 'authentic' representation of events that 'could actually happen'. Van Zwieten's argument is perhaps a little extreme, as he fails to reference the use of shifting perspectives, and more advanced mechanical operations in modern FPS games, deciding instead to brand the association with the 'military-entertainment complex' as 'prototypical'.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, his argument's reliance on the aesthetic values of the game deny such modifications as reduced graphical fidelity in exchange for more effective software performance, a common adjustment made by players. Nevertheless, the principle of ideological interpellation through game mechanics remains a relevant concern, particularly with reference to experiential and augmentary narrative operations. In the case of *Medal of Honor*, it is the game mechanics that place the player in a world where violent action is the only possible means of conflict resolution. In *Missile Command* (a game with very low graphical fidelity by today's standards),

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

the operation of the game mechanics instead place the player in a world where violent conflict is ultimately a futile and unwinnable exercise, drawing the player into an ideological standpoint with explicit reference to long-range missiles and nuclear war (a popular concern at the time of the game's creation, owing to the cold war).

In a similar vein, the games selected by Lewonczyk for *Theater of the Arcade* can be considered to be operating as ideological interpellators through their game mechanics, and hence the operation of ideology becomes entwined with the *experiential narrative* of a game, which emerges in a play session. By representing the experiential narrative operation of a videogame through stage performance, *Theater of the Arcade* creates a space to critique these operations and, by drawing focus to these operations, can challenge the dominant ideologies inherent in the mechanical operations of the game.

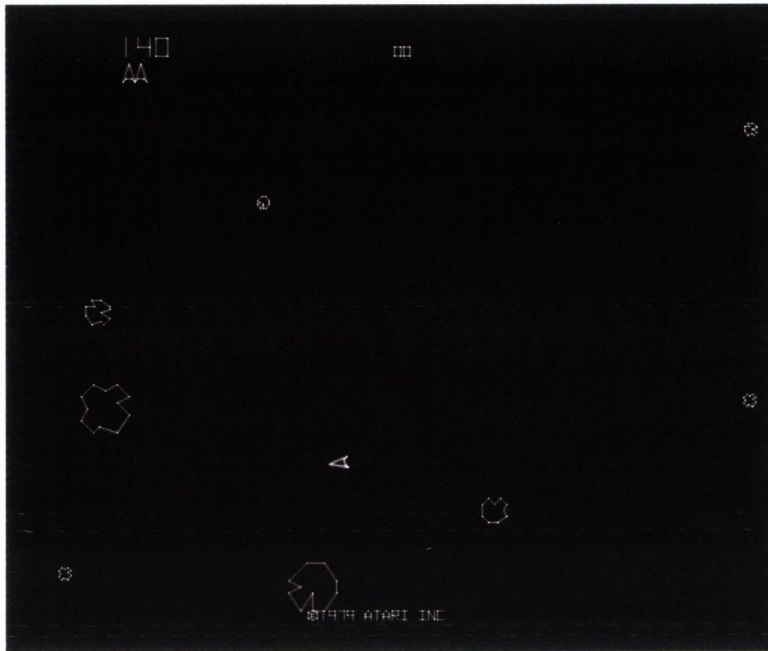
### **Asteriods**

Rather than discuss each script in *Theater of the Arcade*, (including analysis of ideological operation and overview of the writer referenced by the work) I will instead focus on *Magdalena Magellan Mars*, the script that referenced David Mamet in its writing style, while drawing inspiration from the 1981 Atari game *Asteroids*. Through this analysis I hope to highlight the ability of such theatrical appropriations of videogames to problematise the ideological operations within the original videogame source material. While additional consideration of the four other scripts may yield insight

into both the work and the nature of pastiche and the postmodern, such considerations are beyond the intended scope of this thesis.

*Asteroids* was a game created for Atari and released to the arcade market in 1979, with home console versions being released for the Atari 2600 in 1981. The game was created using simple vector graphics, whereby the objects created on screen are a combination of points and lines, generated using simple mathematical code and displayed in a monochrome colour pallet. In *Asteroids* the player controls a small triangular shape that acts as a representation of a spaceship. The player is tasked with the destruction of large jagged objects that enter the screen; these objects are representations of the asteroids after which the game is named. The destruction of these asteroids is accomplished by navigating the spaceship around the screen and firing 'bullets' (small dots fly from the spaceship once the player presses a given input) at each asteroid.

Successful strikes break the asteroids into a number of fragments or smaller asteroids, with the smaller asteroids moving faster than the original large shape. Successive strikes to these smaller asteroids will divide them further. Once the fragments have been divided into a small enough size, a final strike will eliminate the asteroid from the play-screen. Should a player's ship be hit by an asteroid, it is destroyed and a life deducted from the player's total (which begins at a total of three). The elimination of asteroids increases the player's total score, with extra lives being awarded at various score limits.



<sup>13</sup>

Early versions of the game included a small loophole in the programming, which would allow players to occupy a nearly untouchable space in the screen, acquiring points without being in danger of collision with any objects. A player's ten highest scores were stored by the game and displayed at the end of a play session. At the end of a game (once a player had lost his/her lives) if a player had reached a high-score they were given an opportunity to type in three letters to distinguish this score as theirs. In those editions installed in arcade cabinets, a player's high-scores were displayed at intervals when the system was not being used.

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<sup>13</sup> A screenshot from *Asteroids*, (Atari, 1979).

### **Ideology in Asteroids**

*Asteroids* is operating with two ideological frameworks. Firstly, for the player as individual within the game context only, and secondly, as part of a competitive social framework created by the arcade culture and 'highscores'. The operation of *Asteroids* interpellates the individual into a view of nature as dominated by technology. The act of destruction within the game is an elimination of the chaotic and aggressive elements of nature (the asteroids) by the superior object of human technology. The player's three lives give superior status above the asteroids that do not enjoy such a cycle of near-immortality. Games writer Paul Schuytema notes: 'Senior engineer Steve Calfee reflected that *Asteroids* appeals to some low, primitive drive in the human mind to clean and take control of the environment.'<sup>14</sup>

Viewed as such, the experiential narrative of *Asteroids* is one of control over nature and the natural world. By presenting players with a system whereby the player is placed in direct conflict with the environment, *Asteroids* reinforces an approach to nature as something chaotic that must be dominated by man's technological advancement so that neat 'order' can be restored. It is an ideology which values strict and static order over chaotic emergence. The empty screen is just that; constant and predictable in its state of emptiness. Points given to the player reward

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<sup>14</sup> From George, G.D. 'All About Asteroids' in '*The Atari Times*' September, 2001 <http://www.ataritimes.com/article.php?showarticle=174>, last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> May, 2012.

each step towards this sterile order, enough points gives the player an extra life. Should the player refuse to shoot the asteroids, or fail to hit them in time, his or her ship will be struck by one of these rogue entities and destroyed. Hence, the control and dominance of the natural world assures the player's immortality; the key to longevity is thus not only through the mastery of the natural world, but also through the replacement of this natural world with man-made order. The experiential narrative of *Asteroids* acts as an ideological interpellator which draws the player into an individualist, man versus nature dialogue in which nature is inherently dangerous and hostile.

By including a high-score system, players are able to log their total number of awarded points into a scoreboard that is periodically displayed as the machine is idle. This scoreboard becomes a system of gauging a player's ability to play the game, the achievement of highest points being representative of an individual player's 'mastery' of chaotic and dangerous nature. By becoming part of public display, the player's performance becomes a competition against not only the game, but also his or her fellow players. A player's ability to knock another player's high score from the scoreboard allowed players to compete with each other for longevity within the game. As long as your high-score is on the board, the game 'remembers' you, giving you longevity beyond the individual play session. Should a player be knocked from the high-scores, they are 'forgotten' by the game and their efforts in that particular play session, however admirable, become simply irrelevant. Hence, each rank on the scoreboard



became a strict hierarchy of players based on their ability to subdue the natural world (or at least to exploit a glitch in the game.)

The interactions between these two ideological operations serve to deliver a message that survival and superiority is a competitive, individualist exercise. Players cannot co-operate to achieve a high-score; the game is designed with a single player in mind, and the achievement of a high-score (and the extension of one's existence within the game world and larger world of the arcade hall) will inevitably lead to the elimination of another player from the scoreboard. This creates a status of competition in *Asteroids* which exists not only between the player and nature, but also between the players and each other. *Theater of the Arcade*, or more specifically: the piece *Magdalena Magellan Mars*, utilises performance to critique this competitive ideology.

### ***Magdalena Magellan Mars***

Angela Thomas<sup>15</sup> discusses the potentially transgressive nature of fan fiction as a means of critical response to existing works, and describes fan fiction as a particularly vibrant means of creative exploration: "Writers of fan fiction can be described as active manipulators and designers of

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas, Angela, "Fan Fiction Online: Engagement, critical response and affective play through writing" *Australia Journal of Language and Literacy*, vol. 29. No.3 (2006), 226-239.

original texts, using given cultural artifacts as a scaffold and launching point from which to develop considerable and worthwhile originality.<sup>16</sup>

With particular reference to two writers ('Tiana' and 'Jandalf') working in an online community that draws from the canon of J.R.R. Tolkien's 'Middle Earth' and Gene Rodenbury's *Star Trek* universes, Thomas notes that often fan fiction writers present challenges to the hetero-normative, male-dominated meta-narratives which are inherent in these works. By focusing their stories on strong female characters that are often given little attention in the original inspirational material, many writers of fan fiction explore elements of the original works that they may feel to be neglected. One example cited discusses pieces based in the *Star Wars* fictional universe in which writers explore the potential of female Jedi warriors. This is notable, as in the original *Star Wars* films, all the Jedi are male. These and similar explorations may challenge the dominant ideology of the original works, creating new universes in which the actions of characters are not only adapted but also retrospectively re-framed in the original works. Marianne MacDonald<sup>17</sup> notes similarly that writers of so-called 'slash' fiction (fan fiction that focuses on sexual relationships between characters) based on J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series of books can often 'demonstrate greater compassion and psychological insight than does

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 227.

<sup>17</sup> MacDonald, Marianne "Harry Potter and The Fan Fiction Phenom" in *Gay Lesbian Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1, (January 2006), 28 – 30.

Rowling.<sup>18</sup> Henry Jenkins also comments on the practice of fan fiction in relation to the *Harry Potter* franchise.<sup>19</sup> He suggests that the process of creating fan fiction also serves an important function of exploring a cultural landscape. The process of parody, reimagination, recreation, and appropriation serves not only to satisfy the participatory desires of the fan creating such work, but also serves to interrogate the particular work's position in the larger socio-cultural landscape.

*Magdalena Magellan Mars* is in many ways a piece of fan fiction. It is a new work created in the *Asteroids* fictional universe, portraying a version of event which may differ from the designers original intent. The piece could be considered as created by Lewonczyk in homage to the game *Asteroids* and the work of David Mamet. In doing so, Lewonczyk is both challenging the ideological frame work of *Asteroids* and interrogating its larger position in videogame culture.

The piece itself is a short text for four performers, three male and one female. The piece is set in an isolated spacestation somewhere outside an asteroid belt near the planet Mars. The piece opens with the character Bill attempting to tell a story to Jackson, as they are both waiting for a third character, Murphy, to arrive. During the course of the scene Murphy arrives and we learn that Jackson is the director of operations on the base.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>19</sup> Jenkins, Henry *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, (London: New York University Press, 2008).

He has called a meeting because of, 'Budget cuts. Decreased productivity. Lower profit margins.'<sup>20</sup>

As a result of these budget cuts, one of the two men (Bill and Murphy) will be made redundant. Jackson informs the two that an 'efficiency expert' is being brought in to handle the situation, and is, in fact, already on the station.

The following scenes are a series of short interviews in which the character Mary (the efficiency expert) asks Bill and Murphy about their work, destroying asteroids in 'the belt'. The scenes are highly reminiscent of Blake's scene from the film version of David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*,<sup>21</sup> with Mary berating both characters not only for their lack of performance, but also for their lack of understanding of the business:

MARY: I can tell you why. It's because you're wrong. You do not turn Lupishko into dust.

MURPHY: I do not?

MARY: You turn Lupishkos into *nothing*.<sup>22</sup>

She then further aggressively informs the men of their shortcomings:

Failure can't be measured in floating hunks of stone – but people. People are the vector on which failure travels.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Lewonczyk, Jeff, *Theater of the Arcade*, unpublished.

<sup>21</sup> *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Dir. Foley, James, (New Line Cinema, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> Lewonczyk, Jeff, *Theater of the Arcade*, unpublished.

Ultimately, Mary decides that Murphy has been in space too long, and is no longer performing to an acceptable standard. She demands that Murphy admit his failures, to which he breaks down, realising he is finished, but unable to accept a return to earth.

In the final scene of the play, Bill and Jackson are alone in the station. Jackson attempts to send Bill back out to work and Bill refuses, challenging Jackson's authority with his own value as a worker and the threat of what his leaving will do to Jackson's own career. Bill shows a shrewd understanding of the performance-based assessment system of the company, threatening Jackson:

You raise a red flag on me, your career is over. Two pilots in one, what? Week? Month? No such thing up here, sure, but still. You're fucking finished.<sup>24</sup>

Bill's reversal of the power situation places him effectively in control of the station, and the play concludes with Bill demanding that Jackson call him 'champion'.

While the performance addresses the anxieties of long-term exposure to isolation in space, a matter which *Asteroids* completely ignores, *Magdalena Magellan Mars* also explores this competitive and violent structures within the game experience. By directly referencing the player's typical actions in the character's recounting of their work, *Magdalena*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

*Magellan Mars* presents characters that are deeply dependant on this mode of operation. The violent and repressive language of the characters (constant swearing, derogatory language, etc.) serves to reflect on the destructive nature of their work. The structure of the corporation for which they work equally reflects the game experience. By selecting workers on a purely performance-based analysis, Bill and Murphy's achievements become like a scoreboard. Ultimately, we find that Murphy has slipped down this scoreboard and, as an underperforming player on the scoreboard of *Asteroids*, he is eliminated by the achievements of his fellow pilot, never to be seen again.

### **Mamet and *Asteroids***

*Magdalena Magellan Mars* heavily references the works of playwright David Mamet. Lewonczyk's text and the actor's performances appropriate or perhaps even parody many recognisable tendencies of Mamet's work. While this allows the performance to present an element of humour through this parody, it also poses a challenge to the experiential narrative and ideology of *Asteroids*. The text most markedly follows Mamet in its use of short, clipped sentences and an extreme use of profanity in the lines. This profanity is at its most extreme as Jackson announces the company's intent to fire one of the pilots and the characters Bill and Murphy find themselves threatened. This profanity and verbal violence in the face of uncertainty is a frequent trope of Mamet's works. By appropriating or at least imitating this trope, Lewonczyk suggests that the game *Asteroids* is corrosive to the self.

Janet Haedicke notes the use of profanity in Mamet's plays and particularly associates it with the uncertain positioning of the characters: 'Mamet's characters often channel their desperation into what becomes a litany of obscenities'.<sup>25</sup> An example of this can be found in Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*, when the character Roma berates Williamson after the office has been broken into:

You stupid fucking cunt. *You*, Williamson... I'm talking to *you*, shithead... You just cost me *six thousand dollars*.<sup>26</sup>

He continues:

What are you doing to do about it? What are you going to do about it, asshole. You stupid fucking *cunt*. You *idiot*. Whoever told you you could work with *men*?<sup>27</sup>

For Haedicke, Mamet's use of violent language (and indeed physical violence) is an expression of helplessness on the part of the characters and an endemic result of the destructive power of 'The American Dream.' The violent language and actions of characters such as Roma stem from an inherent instability in their lives. This instability also manifests in the characters identities. Roma's need to emphasise his position as a 'man' and Williamson as 'other' is a reflection of the sudden uncertainty the office robbery has cast upon Roma's career and future.

Haedicke labels these tendencies in Mamet's work as explorations of the 'corrosive hierarchies' operating in American society. Haedicke sees

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<sup>25</sup> Haedicke, Janet "Chapter 25 David Mamet: America on the American Stage" in *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*, David Krasner ed (Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Mamet, David, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, (London: Methuen, 2004), 57.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

Mamet's characters as victims to an ideological structure in which the only appropriate response is extreme misogyny and aggressive behaviour. Steven Price<sup>28</sup> similarly recognises Mamet's works as an exploration of the American Dream, which has become corrupted and creates characters who define themselves by their roles, which are at once destructive and uncertain. Price also notes an almost universal disdain for the 'managerial class' in Mamet's plays, a position that is almost constantly under attack by other characters in Mamet's work.

In borrowing from Mamet's characters, Lewonczyk's *Magdalena Magellan Mars* shares this drive to critique established systems. It illustrates the corrosive nature of a hierarchal system. It is the dependence on this system that has worn Murphy into breaking down and begging for his job in the penultimate scene of the piece. Bill and Murphy have become defined by their jobs and feel not only assured, but empowered by it, as Bill says: 'It takes a special man to blow shit up'.<sup>29</sup>

However, their position is tenuous and stressful, failure a continuous threat. This dichotomy between the empowering nature of technological mastery and the tenuous nature of their jobs has led to their isolation and aggressive behaviour, indicated by their constant use of violent language. This behaviour is further reinforced by the very nature of the job and is

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<sup>28</sup> Price, Steven, *The Plays, Screenplays and Films of David Mamet*, (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Lewonczyk, Jeff, *Theater of the Arcade*, unpublished.



ultimately not only an oppression of nature, but also an oppression of the self.

BILL: You want me to say it's me.

MARY: Yes

BILL: The obstacle is me.

MARY: The obstacle is you. The belt can be invalidated. We have the resources. The inevitability of power.<sup>30</sup>

For Bill and Murphy, the only way that they can define themselves is through outstanding performance, through succeeding in their task above everything else:

BILL: Jackson? Why don't you remind me of that simple fact. The fact that I'm a champion.<sup>31</sup>

This oppression of the self mirrors the faceless nature of playing *Asteroids*. The player is not recognised by the game, it gives no indication to the player that he or she is different from any other player until the player has reached the scoreboard. The player must subdue nature in order to succeed, and in doing so, must accept the suppression of their own identity by the game's refusal to engage with them beyond the role of 'player' until after they have proven themselves worthy of the high-score table. By representing characters that are engaged in such a process as

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

their daily lives, *Magdalena Magellan Mars* illustrates the detrimental effects of such a 'corrosive hierarchy' and challenges the ideological operation of the game.

## **Conclusion**

By drawing on a series of writers' styles and techniques to create stage responses to a selection of classic arcade games, Piper McKenzie's *Theater of the Arcade* presents a series of challenges to the game experience. In much the same way as fan fiction can serve to re-frame the actions of characters within a given works, *Theater of the Arcade* creates new argumentative narrative experiences for the player by re-framing the experiential narrative of gameplay. The use of established writers allows *Theater of the Arcade* to focus its challenges to particular elements of each of these games, such as using Mamet to highlight the aggressive nature of *Asteroids*, or Beckett to highlight the hollowness of *Frogger*. These explorations encourage a re-examination of the games and provide us with a familiar lexicon of discussion with which to address those issues of player experience (ideological interpellation, aggressive competition etc.) that arise. The existing critiques of Mamet allow us to apply these same assessments to the source material of the videogames referenced (rather than Mamet's original source material of American Society). This mode of discourse creates a space in which a critical assessment of games can be made not only in terms of ludic or narrative construction, but also in terms of ideological operation. Much as artists create work that can challenge the position of other works (such as plays, films, the

operation of television, etc.), the company Piper McKenzie has created a work that examines the position of these highly influential early games. The play *Theater of the Arcade* confronts the audience with the suggestion that arcade games are more than simple digital distractions or acts of play which can be easily discounted as 'outside' of day to day life. The performance aims to illustrate the conversation between the games and wider American society.

In the following chapters, I will consider those performances which aim to understand the game experience at a much more individual level. In each of the previous works studied, the experience of the player him or herself is given no direct representation. While the operation of game fictions and rules may be understood in a wider context by these performances, the subjective experience of the player is not accounted for in any substantial way. The following chapters discuss two performances that have attempted to represent the subjective experience of the player during a gameplay session.

**Section 2:**

**The Player On Stage**

## Chapter V:

### *Man of Valour*

Performed as a touring piece in 2011, Corn Exchange's *Man Of Valour* is a one-man show centred on the emotional breakdown and subsequent redemption of an office worker named Farrell Blinks. Directed by Annie Ryan and written by Michael West, the production focused heavily on themes of life in urban environments, reality in contrast to imagination, paternal relationships, and death. The production lasted approximately ninety minutes and featured a complex interlocking of both sophisticated traditional physical theatre techniques and contemporary digital performance elements. The performer (Paul Reid) was costumed in a simple dark two-piece suit, with shirt and tie and stylised full-face make-up based on *commedia dell' arte* tradition. Reid utilised a combination of physical theatre, *commedia dell' arte*, and mime techniques to create the onstage world, while the production also used a wide array of ambient audio sounds, original musical compositions and video projection to augment the world created by Reid. Additionally the spaces delineated by Reid's gestures were also on occasion demarcated or otherwise indexed by floor patterns produced by the production's lighting design, though more often the design favoured more subtle indication of changes to scenes. Through the combination of these performance and technological

elements, *Man of Valour* remediated Hollywood film through performance while retaining the actor's position as live agent within the space.

The performance was generally well received, with reviewers frequently referencing the 'cinematic' quality of the piece.<sup>1</sup> The production toured internationally, playing in the Cork Midsummer Festival, the Edinburgh Fringe and the Dublin Fringe theatre festivals. The plot of the piece follows the life of a tax office employee named Farrell Blinks, who lives a life of fear and distracted solitude, frequently daydreaming as a means of escape from his unfulfilled existence. Through the course of the play, Farrell receives a package: the ashes of his estranged and now deceased father. This encounter proves extremely stressful for Farrell, who is unwilling to accept responsibility for his father's remains. Through this encounter and Farrell's subsequent actions in response, we see a breakdown in the character as his day-dreams begin to take on a nightmarish quality, steadily bleeding into his reality. We see Farrell's internal struggle embodied as he wrestles both figuratively and literally with his own internal demons, while struggling to interact with the other occupants of the city he lives in. While *Man Of Valour* uses no live cameras or pre-recorded sequences of performance, the techniques used to delineate the worlds of the text are of a cinematic quality, drawing on conventions familiar to the cinema-going audience, such as distorted/subjective time sequences and images of the distorted self,

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<sup>1</sup> Fintan Walsh gives a particularly thorough comparison in *Irish Theatre Magazine*, <http://www.irishtheatremagazine.ie/Reviews/Current/Man-of-Valour> last accessed 19th Dec 2011.

drawn from horror film tradition. However, these elements are not created solely through the use of projection or theatrical special effects, but rather are remediated through the body of the actor using physical theatre techniques, which are then augmented by the technological elements present in the space (i.e., stage lighting and some projected static images on the upstage wall). As such the performance allows for the theatrical embodiment of a subjective experience more typically rendered through film. Furthermore, this embodied subjective experience allows *Man Of Valour* to present a theatrical methodology that provides for the external presentation of an internal experience. However, this methodology draws heavily on the cultural primacy of the Hollywood film for its effectiveness. This reliance on Hollywood is interesting when the production uses this performance methodology for the presentation of an individual's internal experience when playing a digital videogame. At two points within the performance, the character Farrell is depicted at home engaging in a play session of combat-based single player videogame. His experience is represented on stage in the same fashion as his day-dreams, using a combination of physical performance and cinema reference to depict how the character is relating to the events within the game, and how his state of mind effects this relationship. By representing the videogame experience through the twin frameworks of both Hollywood film and physical performance, *Man of Valour* produces challenges to both the personal subjective experience of digital gameplay and the position of the player's body in that experience.

## **Corn Exchange and the Commedia dell' arte**

Corn Exchange is an Irish theatre company founded in 1995 by director Annie Ryan, it's work is typically associated with performance styles derived from *commedia dell' arte* tradition, using heavily codified make-up in productions that is derived from the masks and make-up configurations of traditional *commedia dell' arte* performance. Director Annie Ryan also lists influences by the work of American theatre artists Bryne & Joyce Piven, and the improvisational comedy styles prevalent in Second City and other comedy improvisation groups in Chicago in the 1970s and '80s.<sup>2</sup>

*Commedia dell' arte*, or more simply, *commedia*, is a prescribed performance system which originated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Italy. *Commedia* has since formed into a series of highly codified performance elements and structures, which dictate the image, structure, and content of pieces performed in the style. Corn Exchange, through their work with the *commedia* style, attempt to relate *commedia* to a more contemporary audience through the introduction of new elements drawn from contemporary life.

By drawing on *commedia dell' arte* styles, the performances of Corn Exchange are highly visual and draw focus to the performing body in space. The performance of *Man of Valour* is no different. The performer wears makeup that is inspired by *commedia* masks throughout the performance and though a single actor performs multiple characters, the

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<sup>2</sup> Unpublished interview by the author, 20<sup>th</sup> Dec 2011.



characters are highly stylised, each with specific gestures and sounds associated with them. In many cases the dialogue of the ancillary characters in the performance is gibberish or near-gibberish much like the traditional *grummelot* and *concetti* elements of *commedia* style.<sup>3</sup>



For example, early in the production, the character Farrell arrives in his office. Though the stage is bare, the actor (Reid) moves in a distinct and definite pattern as if avoiding obstacles around him. Suddenly, mid-stage right he spins around and steps upstage, making a breathy ‘whup’ sound with his mouth, finishing in a crouched position with his hands out in front

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<sup>3</sup> For more indepth discussion of the history of *Commedia* and its elements see Rudlin, John, *Commedia dell’Arte: An Actor’s Handbook*, (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Performer Paul Reid in costume and *commedia* style makeup in *Man Of Valour*. Image courtesy of Annie Ryan. Here, Reid is miming the character of Farrell standing in a train carriage.

of him, fingertips moving quickly and begins producing a rhythmic clicking noise with his mouth. Reid brushes his hair and looks towards the spot where he was previously standing, he blinks and says, in an effeminate voice 'Hi, Farrell,' before standing, spinning and returning to the place he once stood. His body takes on a nervous appearance and, staring at the place he was once crouched, Reid murmurs something before running across the stage. We have just seen the first interaction between Farrell and one of his co-workers. Additionally, this quick spin becomes the visual indicator that Reid is 'changing characters' and is used frequently in the performance.

Each of the actor's body movements become read not just as emotional signifiers for the character themselves, but also as a series of indexes for setting and props. Additionally, while the actor's body is transformed by these methods from live performer into text/object for the audience to interpret, the remediation of elements of Hollywood film (particularly more action and science-fiction driven films) redefines the actor's relationship to the audience beyond that of performing object. Through the combining of this highly visual theatre methodology with particular strategies of film, which this chapter will investigate further, *Man of Valour* presents a unique theatrical approach to the representation of internal experience. This somewhat paradoxically gives the actor a position, not of performing object, but of active subject.

## Remediating Hollywood Film

*Man of Valour* remediates several elements of film, particularly elements from the Hollywood action genre, as the production draws heavily on famous special effect sequences. They include distortions of time, space, and the human body in varying spectacular ways. These remediations are performed by the actor Paul Reid through the physical manipulation of his body in conjunction with sounds produced orally by the performer, which are then amplified by a headset microphone. At times the effect is heightened by sound, lighting and audio/visual elements of the design, however, for the most part, the effect relies solely on the movements of the performer himself. Looking at the sequence in the office mentioned previously, there is an example of this remediation as the performance draws from the popular *Star Wars*<sup>5</sup> films while illustrating Farrell's interaction with a fly. Approximately six minutes into the performance, Reid mimes a scene where the character Farrell is photocopying documents. Reid indicates a fly entering the scene, distracting the character Farrell from the work.

By moving his head around, while making a continuous buzzing noise (which gains or decreases in volume), the actor indicates the position of this imaginary fly relative to himself. He begins swinging his right fist in front of him while waving his left hand. He produces a distinct 'swish' sound, which simulates the movement of Farrell's supposed paper

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<sup>5</sup> *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, Dir. Lucas, George, (LucasFilm, 1977).

weapon through the air. Reid's swinging becomes more energetic and each swing a little longer, gaining from similar to stage sword combat, simultaneously dramatic music begins to build in the background. With his back facing the audience but right hand out to one side, he joins his right and left fists, then moves his left fist from his right in a straight line, making a 'rissssh' sound, before returning his fists to a joined position, and turning around once again to face the audience, this time in a battle ready crouch, while the music begins to reach a crescendo. The paper has been extended into a much longer tool for fighting this fly. Reid once again begins waving his hands as if attempting to strike the fly with this imaginary sword. Suddenly he points with his left hand to the position he had been looking at, moves and moves his finger a little to indicate the position of the fly. Reid then raises his other hand and moves his hands quickly apart making a 'boof' sound. The fly has suddenly expanded to something the size of a football. Reid then moves his finger quickly from that position to his chest making a 'psshew' sound, followed by an expression of shock on his face, indicating that the fly creature has shot some sort of energy bolt at him. Reid then continues a sequence of quick arm movements accompanied by further 'psshew' sounds as if Farrell is using the weapon he is holding to deflect the attacks of this fly creature. This is both a parody of (and a remediation of) a sequence in George Lucas' film *Star Wars* in which the character Luke Skywalker is sparring a small floating orb as part of his Jedi training.



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The weapon indicated by Reid's gestures' is to be read by audiences as a lightsaber (an energy based sword used in the film), while the fly is transformed into the floating orb used by Luke in the scene. The actor's gestures are similar to those used by the character Luke in deflecting the small energy discharges from the floating orb. The use of physical theatre to achieve this moment of intertextuality creates a performed remediation, one which is solely dependant on the behaviour of the actor to maintain its stability. Should the performer stop, turn to the audience, and take a bow, then the performance is rendered as a completed *stage* performance and loses the cinematic qualities it possessed. No artefact of the remediated sequences (save perhaps the performer's perspiration) remains, as the remediation is dependant on the performance of the actor's physical body.

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<sup>6</sup> Screenshot of Luke's lightsaber training scene from *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, Dir. Lucas, George, (LucasFilm, 1977).

The cinematic qualities of the performance are maintained through a series of referent moments, such as the one just described. Each of these moments are part of the performance's representation of the character Farrell's subjective experience of reality and the vivid internal expressions of his imagination. Objects and events are indexed by the performer's movements such as contorting his body into a small space to indicate a crowded LUAS, or moving his upper body suddenly backwards as if hit by an explosion. In each case the actions are accompanied by audio 'clues', which impart meaning to the movements. In several cases these audio clues are an approximation of sound effects commonly found in special effects sequences of Hollywood film. For example, unusually slow movement on the part of the performer may be accompanied by a slow 'whoosh' sound or a deepening elongated tone as might be found in the slow-motion sequences frequently used by Michael Bay in films such as *Transformers*<sup>7</sup> or *Bad Boys*.<sup>8</sup> This combination of sound and motion serves as an indicator to the audience that the sequence is to be read not in theatrical but in cinematic terms; we are viewing a 'slow-motion' film sequence live on stage.

Over time the performance builds on this vocabulary of effect remediation, as famous effect scenes from a wide variety of films are referenced, from a character climbing into the plumbing of a toilet (as in Danny Boyle's

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<sup>7</sup> *Transformers*, Dir. Bay, Michael, (Paramount Pictures, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> *Bad Boys*, Dir. Bay, Michael, (Columbia Pictures, 1995).

*Trainspotting*<sup>9</sup>) to an evil pursuer liquefying himself to pass through a locked gate (as in James Cameron's *Terminator 2*<sup>10</sup>). In each case the performance is dependant on the cultural embeddness of effects-driven cinema to communicate its meaning, creating a dense intertextuality for the audience to interpret. Indeed, even the transition from Farrell's imagination to the 'reality' of the performance draws on post-modern film technique such as that found in Aronofsky's *Requiem For A Dream*,<sup>11</sup> in that the viewer is presented with a sequence of events (often catastrophic or violent in nature), which are instantly discounted as the narrative returns to the status quo. These sequences are intended to be subjective illustrations, showing the viewer the inner workings of a particular character's mind. Farrell's final strike on the fly creature is revealed to be pointless, and the actor follows this triumphant swing with a reiteration of the photocopier sounds, the dramatic music abruptly ends, and we are left with a character with a look of confused disappointment on his face. This illustrates Farrell's realisation that his lightsaber was just a sheet of paper, the battle with the fly purely imaginative and he is still 'stuck' in reality. The prevalence of catastrophic sequences in *Man Of Valour* (which are subsequently ignored by the overall narrative, i.e., not part of the 'real' world of the play), enforces the reading of play as the subjective experience of lead character Farrell. Without the culturally embedded

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<sup>9</sup> *Trainspotting*, Dir. Boyle, Danny, (Channel Four Films, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> *Terminator 2*, Dir. Cameron, James, (TriStar Pictures, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> *Requiem for A Dream*, Dir. Aronofsky, Darren, (Artizan Entertainment, 2000).

understanding of such effects, the piece becomes unreadable to an audience. This wider logic of effects-driven cinema can be understood as what Tom Gunning referred to as the Cinema of Attractions.

### **Cinema Of Attractions**

The 'Cinema of Attractions,' is a term for a mode of cinema that prioritises the image, and visual elements of cinema rather than the narrative. The term is largely attributed to an essay of the same name from film critic Tom Gunning.<sup>12</sup> In his essay, Gunning discusses the nature of early cinema (approx. 1900 to 1907) and the role that spectacle and the spectacular played in audience reception. Gunning argues that for many early cinema-goers and filmmakers, the primary appeal of film was not in the ability of the medium to communicate narrative, but was instead found in the visual nature of the medium. Gunning describes this emphasis on the visual as the 'Cinema of Attractions', and argues that these films operate in a much more overt relationship to their audience. Gunning states that: 'In contrast to the voyeuristic aspect of narrative cinema analyzed by Christian Metz, this is an exhibitionist cinema.'<sup>13</sup>

Gunning goes on to describe the various elements of the Cinema of Attractions as it appeared up to 1907. He notes the re-use of certain sequences in different films of the time, and that the familiarity of these

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<sup>12</sup> Gunning, Tom: "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde" *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed Wanda Strauven, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006) 381- 388.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 382.



sequences suggest that the attraction is not merely to the technology producing the image, but rather simply to the *image itself*. Through his emphasis on the effect of the spectacle beyond simple amazement at the technology of the moving picture itself, Gunning frames the use of the spectacular in cinema as an effective mode of non-narrative cinema.

This consideration of non-narrative cinema has since been repurposed by numerous critics in order to theorise modern Hollywood films that are heavily effects-driven, particularly in action-based films which similarly prioritise spectacle over narrative. In essence, the term, 'Cinema of Attractions', can now be applied not only to those films produced in the early days of cinema history, but also those more contemporary works such as those from which *Man of Valour* draws inspiration. In fact, much of the performance relies heavily on principles established in modern effects-driven cinema for its connection to the audience. Vivian Sobchack<sup>14</sup> draws on Gunning's essay in connection with Heidegger's work, *The Question Concerning Technology*, theorising the 'slow-motion effect' as it appears in Yimou Zhang's *Hero*. Similarly to Gunning, Sobchack argues that the use of special effects in film is effective beyond a simple display of the abilities of the technology. She expands on the notion that the spectacular in cinema goes beyond our amazement at the technology's ability to create seemingly real images of physical impossibilities, suggesting that the

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<sup>14</sup> Sobchack, Vivian: "Cutting to the Quick: Techne, Physis, and Poiesis and the Attractions of slow motion" *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed Wanda Strauven, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 337 – 351.

significant question is: ‘... less about our belief in the *reality* of the live-action image than about our wonderment at the profoundly *real grip* that image had on embodied consciousness.’<sup>15</sup> Sobchack draws this into comparison with Heidegger, suggesting that the fascination with the image is an example of: ‘... catching sight of what comes to presence *in* technology, instead of merely gaping *at* the technological.’<sup>16</sup>

Sobchack is asserting that the spectacular image is fulfilling Heidegger’s notion of the creative aspect, or essence technology, that which ‘brings-forth’ or ‘exposes.’ Here the primacy of the image itself is reinforced, as detached from the narrative structure of film almost as an individual ‘unit’ of attraction.

A similar process takes place in *Man Of Valour*, as the complex displays of physical virtuosity result in images which are amazing not only for their skill, but also for the way they redefine the performers’ body and the space around him. Eivind Røssaak<sup>17</sup> similarly considers motion-based effects with regards the Cinema of Attractions in her discussion of the Wachowski brothers’ film *The Matrix*. Again the emphasis is placed not on the narrative elements of the film but instead on the effects of the cinematography within the piece. Røssaak considers the effect the use of ‘bullet time’, the cinematographic technique of showing an image of ‘frozen

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 340, original emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 340, Sobchack quoting from Heidegger’s *The Question Concerning Technology*, emphasis her own.

<sup>17</sup> Røssaak, Eivind, “Figures of Sensation: Between Still and Moving images” in Ibid, 321 – 336.

time' around which the camera pivots through 90-180 degrees: 'A slice of time is extended spatially and space (a body) is explored temporally.'<sup>18</sup> So too is Reid's body explored in this way, as a the remediation of slow-motion cinema effects into live performance styles references this same cognitive space of bodily contemplation. Through the suggested distortion of time, the image presented is divorced from the flow of action initially presented. The performer executes a seemingly impossible movement while time slows down. Again, the emphasis is placed on the image itself, detached from the narrative of the piece.

In film terms Røssaak considers the 'bullet time' effect in *The Matrix* to have repositioned the body presented in the image, transforming it into something more akin to sculpture, an object devoid of agency, and as such functions as an interruption to the narrative of the piece. Dick Tomasovic<sup>19</sup> briefly attempts to explore this conflict between attraction and narration in his analysis of Sam Raimi's *Spiderman* films. He notes that often the nature of characters in many comics (including those which form the basis for Raimi's films) have a fundamental attachment to the supernatural, the unreal, or the spectacular, providing a narrative logic for the presentation of spectacular events. Tomasovic characterises narrative in these cases as being subservient to the logic of attraction, providing a framework in which these events can happen. He says that: 'Without the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 324.

<sup>19</sup> Tomasovic, Dick: "The Hollywood Cobweb: New Laws of Attraction (The Spectacular mechanics of Blockbusters)" in Ibid, 309 – 318.

character, there is no attraction. The dichotomy of narration/attraction becomes actually the condition of the attraction.<sup>20</sup>

A similar framework exists within Corn Exchange's *Man Of Valour*. The character Farrell is imbued with an almost supernatural imagination, which is illustrated by Reid's performance. By presenting the piece primarily from his subjective view, a framework is established for the creation of spectacular events. Through the illustration of these similar manipulations of time and space (Farrell's movements in 'slow-motion,' the catastrophic collapse of buildings around him,) the actor's body becomes a site for both intertextual reading as the audience consider his movements in a film context, and a cinema of attractions methodology as these remediated effects transpose to the stage. As such, the audience begin to read the actor's actions in these film terms, each moment of manipulation of space and time (particularly those which are extremely violent) become understood as cinematic moments portrayed on stage. The intension of the performance is so clear, and the vocabulary of effects driven films so prominent in contemporary audiences' minds, that these readings are simultaneous and the performer occupies a position as both intertextual object and 'unit of attraction' simultaneously. Yet the interaction between these two states produces a distinctly different experience.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 314.

## The Actor is the Camera

In its remediation of the cinematic, *Man of Valour* can be said to be recreating Sobchack's proposed 'film body' on stage, through both actor, script, and staging. In her article 'The Scene of The Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic 'Presence,'" Sobchack<sup>21</sup> discusses the nature of the cinematic image and the viewer's experience of the same, in particular with reference to the influence digital representation has had on our lives and theories of 'presence'.

Sobchack differentiates between those influences that are 'cinematic' and those that are 'electronic', illustrating that the cinematic experience is rooted both temporally and spatially in a way that gives it a presence of its own. This is opposed to those electronic representations and interactions that, through networked interactions, are almost 'centreless' and as such seem to 'belong to no-body.'<sup>22</sup> To illustrate this separation Sobchack postulates a refined 'film body,' which is a centred subject to which we have all become accustomed to in our daily lives. This 'film body' is not a digital representation of the human body, but rather the combination of different film elements in a cinematic-subject, which is constructed around the technological materials of the cinematic process: '...the camera its

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<sup>21</sup> Sobchack, Vivian: "The Scene of The Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic 'Presence'" from <http://studio.berkeley.edu/niemeyer/stories/seminal-essays.htm#sobchack> last accessed 16<sup>th</sup> Jan 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

perceptive organ, the projector its expressive organ, the screen its discrete and material center.<sup>23</sup>

The 'film body' undergoes experiences both temporally and spatially in a wholly subjective fashion (namely the subjective experience of the camera, the film body's perceptive organ,) this subjectivity is unique in its manipulation of both time and space, allowing it to exist both continuously in the 'here' and 'now' through our viewing of the image, while traversing time and space through the in-camera of post-production effects of slow-motion, reversed time, flashbacks, cross cuts, etc. Perhaps put more simply, one could say that there exists a cinematic subject, which experiences the world of a given film-text in its own unique way, and expresses this experience through the mode of representation we know as cinema. This expression carries with it a spatial embodiment as the film-body occupies a specific 'There' in the 'Here' of the film-text world. As cinema has become culturally embedded, we have become more and more familiar with this 'film body' and its operations, accepting the dichotomy of the 'film body' as simultaneous subject-object, accepting that the 'film body's' experiences are consumed as both subjective view-point and as moving-image object.

If it is considered that *Man Of Valour* draws heavily on film and particularly Cinema of Attraction to inform its performance methodology, then the position of Sobchack's 'film body' in this configuration must also be

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

considered. Through *Man of Valour's* reliance on techniques of physical theatre to achieve the remediation of film, the 'film body' is also brought to the stage. The 'film body' now occupies both the stage and the actor's body, as both the performer's spatial orientation (or our kinaesthetic understanding of it) and the character's subjective experience are the central elements represented on the stage. To this end the character Farrell's view of the world can be likened to that of the camera's view, while the actor's movement in the space becomes the communication of that subjective experience. Annie Ryan states that: 'The actor is the camera, the staging is the editing.'<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps it might be more accurate to suggest (using Sobcheck's terms) that the staging is the projector, this remediated 'film body's' expressive medium, embodied by the actor Paul Reid. Reid's illustrations of objects, in conjunction with the lighting and audio-visual design of the piece define the 'here' of the cinematic world, while his embodiment of Farrell (as central subject of the piece) defines the 'there', or defined physical presence of the 'film body's' viewing centre. As Reid oscillates between the performance of visual effects, ancillary characters and the lead role of Farrell, the perceptive organ of this staged 'film body' remains positioned congruent to Farrell's subjective experience, yet at times moves to a position independent of Farrell, as the audience begin to observe the character's existence as a physical presence within a wider fictional world. Here the 'film body's' perceptual position is moved to that of the individual

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<sup>24</sup> From unpublished interview by the author 20<sup>th</sup> Dec 2011.

audience members, while retaining its connection to Farrell through the representation of his subjective experiences. By remediating the film effects through physical theatre (and hence the Cinema of Attractions) so too does *Man of Valour* remediate Sobchack's 'film body', transporting this subjective body from its traditional home of the film-theatre to a new home on the stage. However the 'film body's' physical presence within Farrell must be continuously redefined in order to retain its existence. The redefinition is necessary as a 'film body' is only rendered present on stage for as long as the performer is remediating it. The presence of these film elements are held in a tenuous link, which is fully dependant on the behaviour of the performer for its validation and representation (i.e. once the actor pauses, turns to the audience and takes a bow, the performance is rendered as a completed *stage* performance and at once loses its cinematic qualities). Furthermore, the link to Farrell's subjective experience is essential as that is the 'supernatural' connection which allows the performance to draw on the Cinema of Attraction and bring with that methodology a remediated 'film body'. To simplify, without Farrell's imagination there are no 'cinematic' elements for the performance to draw on, and without these cinematic elements, the film body ceases to exist. As such Farrell's subjective experience becomes irrevocably intertwined with a language of representation firmly rooted in cinema.

However, this mode of representation is not only applied to the fictional elements of Farrell's imagination, but also to his experience while playing a videogame alone. Here the subjective experience of videogame



engagement is filtered through a 'film body' rooted in the Cinema of Attractions and presented on stage through physical theatre, yet the systems in operation in contemporary videogames are at times vastly different to those in operation in contemporary cinema or in physical theatre. As such, *Man of Valour's* representation of the subjective experience of videogameplay requires theoretical consideration.

### **Gameplay in *Man Of Valour***

Approximately 15 minutes into *Man Of Valour* we first see the first instance of gameplay in the production. The instance of gameplay illustrates the character Farrell playing a videogame, then moves to a representation of Farrell's subjective experience of this action. The performance language used in this sequence is in keeping with the performance language established elsewhere in the performance. As such, this scene illustrates Farrell's experience of gameplay in a cinema context. This recontextualisation of the gameplay experience as a subset of the cinema experience raises questions about the nature of gameplay experience, and how players identify themselves within a game experience.

The scene begins with sequence of gestures indicating that the character Farrell has arrived home, turned on the television, and made himself dinner. The final section of this sequence illustrates Farrell playing a computer game. This begins with Reid in a 'seated' position, indicating he is in front of the television previously indicated. He has his hands level in front of him, elbows bent, just below chest height. The fingers of his hands

are curled, though not closed, with thumbs on top. Reid's hands are close together but not touching. His index fingers and thumbs begin to twitch and Reid begins to make 'rat-a-tat' noises while moving his body slightly to the left and then right. He then mutters in a low tone, American-accented voice, 'In a world where you are alone, you are alone' before resuming 'rat-a-tat' noises and finger twitching. This continues for a few seconds before Reid again speaks, this time saying in a quiet, seemingly distant voice 'get to the bridge' before making a low rumbling noise and resuming the 'rat-a-tat' noises. Here Reid's hands are positioned in a grip similar to that which one might adopt when holding a controller for a videogaming console system (most commonly the Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3). The twitching of his index fingers correspond to the pulling of the trigger shaped buttons on the back of such a controller, while his thumb positioning corresponds to the joystick positions of the same. The 'rat-a-tat' and rumbling sounds can be read as gunfire and explosions generated by the game system. While the exact game and console are not made explicit, we can infer from the combination of gestures and sounds that Farrell is seated in front of his television, playing a combat-based video game on a current generation console using conventional hand-held controls (as opposed to 'gesture' or 'motion based' controls in which the physical movements of the player are registered by the game as input.)

Having established that the character Farrell is playing a console-based video game, there is a dramatic change on stage. Reid moves his hands apart, placing one close to his waist and the other out in front of him,

fingers curled, palms up. The lighting changes to a darker state, while quick-tempo orchestral brass music begins playing. Reid's 'rat-a-tat' sounds become much louder as he vocalises an approximation of machine gun fire. With each sound, Reid shakes his hands before turning to the right and shouting across the stage in a voice distinctly different to Farrell's: 'What's the mission?' Reid's hand positions suggest a rifle or similar weapon, while his shaking motion in accompaniment to the 'rat-a-tat' sounds are a signifier for the firing of this weapon and the effect of the subsequent recoil from the weapons operation. The overall impression is of a character imbedded in a heavy combat war zone, perhaps the simulated war that Farrell is participating in through his game. Suddenly the sound of someone knocking on a door is played through the venue's P.A., Reid quickly returns to his previous crouched position, hands again curled as if holding a controller, the music stops and the lighting returns to its previous state. Once again we have been shown a sequence of cinematic action that is proven to have little or no bearing on the 'real' world of the performance. Reid's gestures bring us into the internal world of Farrell's gameplay experience, suggesting that when playing the game Farrell considers himself to be transformed into a character in the game, becoming an accomplished combatant in a violent environment. His change in stance, and most notably voice, suggests that it is not Farrell himself occupying this position, but rather Farrell has exchanged himself for another character, he is now a soldier on a mission.

The sudden knocking sound, and Reid's subsequent return to his previous crouched position return us to the status quo, reveal to us that this sequence is yet again an expression of Farrell's subjective experience, confirming that this transformation from urban middle class office worker into embattled soldier is 'all in his head'.

However, despite the reference to gameplay, this expression is still a remediation of cinematic language. The previous moments of Farrell's imagination displayed on stage (such as the lightsaber fight with the fly) have established a language and methodology of film remediation for the performance. Through the repetition of these cinematic manipulations of time, space, and the body (usually associated with violent action) a consistent framework for reading these moments of transformation is afforded to the audience. We begin reading any sudden motions or violent acts as potentially cinematic explorations of Farrell's imagination. Quite simply, Farrell's imagination becomes viewed in terms of the cinematic, and as such we read Farrell's subjective experience of gameplay in these terms. Even the inclusion of the phrase 'In a world where you are alone: you are alone,' (stated in a deepened voice,) calls to mind the iconic narration style of Don La Fontaine,<sup>25</sup> whose particular advertisement narration style became synonymous with big-budget Hollywood film. In

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<sup>25</sup> Don La Fontaine's possessed a particularly deep voice and his work in recording voiceover material for film trailers and other advertisements was prolific. IMDB suggests that by the time of his death Don had performed voice over work for over 5,000 film trailers. (see <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0480963/bio> last accessed 21st Jan 2013.

short, *Man of Valour* invites the audience to read the experience of playing a videogame in terms of film.

By encouraging audiences to read the subjective gameplay experience of the character Farrell in terms of film, *Man of Valour* frames the contemporary videogame as a sub-category of film. The interactivity of the medium is acknowledged though the indication of control systems in Farrell's hand, yet the means by which the actual personal experience of playing a game is represented on stage is through the methodology of combining physical theatre and the Cinema of Attractions. As such, the videogame is reduced from its position of unique medium<sup>26</sup> to a position of 'interactive film' in which the player becomes a character within a narrative, occupying a position *other* than themselves (i.e., as different gender, skill set, nationality etc.). The player's actual self is traded for the role offered by the game, and this role carries with it its own narrative and individual characteristics. Furthermore, this transformation dictates player behaviour, as players assume the role of a defined and particular character, so too must they assume that character's goals, language and so forth, in order to maintain the internal logic of the game. This reading of videogames raises the question of how players relate to narrative and characters within a videogame and in particular how (or indeed, if) players identify their role within a game during a gameplay session.

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<sup>26</sup> See earlier chapters for a more complete overview of videogames as a medium.

## How We Relate to Games.

The ways in which a player identifies him/herself within a videogame, and how a player relates to in-game characters (if at all) are widely debated by scholars and industry professionals.<sup>27</sup> Part of the difficulty with creating a theory for player-game identification lies in the differences between videogame structures. For example the operation of player identity in a third-person shooter (where the player is provided with a visual representation of the character they are controlling) may differ entirely from that present in a real-time strategy game, in which the player is not given a direct representation on screen and instead has influence over multiple elements of the game purely through an established game interface. In *Man of Valour* Reid's actions suggest that Farrell is playing a combat-based game on a current or seventh-generation console,<sup>28</sup> and that he is in control of a single character. From this we can assume that he

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<sup>27</sup> For some examples see: Newman, James, "The Myth of The Ergodic Videogame: Some Thoughts on Player-Character Relationships in Videogames" *Game Studies*, Vol 2, Issue 1, (July 2002), <http://gamestudies.org/0102/newman/>, See also: Crick, Timothy, "The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming" *Games and Culture*, Vol 6, Issue 3, SAGE publications, (2011) 259 – 269, see also: website <http://www.gamasutra.com>.

<sup>28</sup> Gaming consoles are often grouped by 'generation,' each generation marking a substantial change in hardware. The Magnavox Odyssey would be considered a 1<sup>st</sup> generation console, while a Playstation 2 would be considered a 6<sup>th</sup> generation console. Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3 are both examples of 7<sup>th</sup> generation consoles. Farrell may be playing a previous generation console such as Sony's Playstation 2 (a 6<sup>th</sup> generation console) or indeed any console that uses a two handed grip controller with trigger-style buttons under the controller. However given the performance dates of the production it is more likely that of a 7<sup>th</sup> generation console, being the current contemporary generation, was the intended object for the audience.

is playing either a first-person or third-person shooter style game, though the exact details are impossible to extrapolate from the performance alone. Owing to this, and the difficulty in considering player identification across multiple game genres, this chapter will focus mainly on player identification with regards to first and third-person gameplay, while drawing on other examples in which the player's position in the game is clearly associated with a particular character or avatar.<sup>29</sup>

### **Games as Mask**

In his essay 'A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games',<sup>30</sup> the game-studies scholar Michael Mateas explores the concept of character in relation to the nature of interactivity in contemporary computer games. His essay draws heavily on both Janet Murray's works<sup>31</sup> on the subject of interactive virtual environments and Aristotle's *Poetics*, aiming to create a new poetics to be applied to interactive narrative, and particularly in those instances where the player assumes the role of a first-person character in a dramatic story. Brenda Laurel in *Computers as Theatre*<sup>32</sup> makes a similar effort in her discussions of human-computer interaction. Yet, Laurel's discussions are centred on the point of interaction

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<sup>29</sup> As is the case in platform games such as Nintendo's *Super Mario Bros.*, the player's position is clearly defined as being in control of the character Mario, all their actions and interactions with the game are performed through him.

<sup>30</sup> Mateas, Michael, "A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games" in *FirstPerson: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, (London: MIT Press, 2004), 19 – 34.

<sup>31</sup> Most particularly Murray's *Hamlet On The Holodeck*.

<sup>32</sup> Laurel, Brenda, *Computers as Theatre*, (London: Addison-Wesley, 1991).

between an individual and the hardware itself and how dramatic structure might inform this. In a sense, Brenda Laurel's focus is more on the process of interface itself rather than the processes of interaction within a given game. Mateas avoids discussion of *Poetics* in the same terms as Laurel by avoiding discussing the principles of interaction and hardware usage. Instead he focuses on how the existence or necessity of interaction and agency affects narrative framework in videogames. This extends Mateas' work beyond computers and into narrative frameworks for games as a whole. Much of the essay is focused on the central conflict between a prescribed series of events and the freedom of choice offered by those interactive elements of a game. Mateas highlights the difficulty in providing players with seemingly meaningful choices (or agency) while still providing the key dramatic elements of character and plot.<sup>33</sup> He draws on Murray's discussions of immersion, agency, and transformation to address the player's position within an interactive narrative space, and to highlight these elements as desirable. Mateas' article attempts to use Aristotelian terms to address the issue that a player's will can at times be at odds with that of the character they are playing. Mateas describes character almost as a centre point to Aristotle's terms,<sup>34</sup> through the interconnection of a number of 'formal causes'; he states:

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<sup>33</sup> Mateas, Michael, 'A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games' in *FirstPerson: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, (London: MIT Press, 2004) 20.

<sup>34</sup> More specifically the unities of Plot, Character, Thought, Language, Pattern, and Spectacle.



The characters required in the play are determined by the plot... A character's thought processes are determined by the kind of character they are. The language spoken by the characters is determined by their thought. The patterns (song) present in the play are determined, to a large extent, by the character's language (more generally their actions).<sup>35</sup>

These elements form an internal 'logic' to the fictional world presented, a causality that is interpreted by the audience as they engage with the drama. Mateas proposes to introduce interaction to the Aristotelian model of drama at the point of 'character'. The difficulty is that the thought processes, needs, and desires, of a player may differ wildly from those of the character. A player's choices may potentially be in direct conflict with the internal logic of the fictional world of the game, a player may not want to enter into the same relationships as the character they are provided to play as, and this resistance can be detrimental to a player's relationship with the game as a whole, reducing their sense of agency. Aside from the obvious hardware restrictions preventing players from doing 'anything they want', Mateas also proposes a number of game-design elements which guide the player's action in ways that maintain the internal logic of the game world while providing players with a sense of individual agency. Mateas describes these elements and the restraints for the hardware as 'affordances'. He suggests that affordances create a balance between two groups: those negative forms of constraint which limit those actions that can be taken by the player (hardware restrictions, limits of the virtual world, control mapping, etc.) and positive forms of constraint wherein design inherently 'cries out' for a certain method of usage: 'For example,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 23.

the handle on a teapot affords picking up the teapot with your hand. The handle cries out to be grasped.<sup>36</sup>

For Mateas not only the balance between these affordances is key to the production of a feeling of agency, but the very presence of this balance is what allows agency to exist alongside the Aristotelian category of 'character'. His exploration of the topic then moves to further examine Murray's<sup>37</sup> ideas of immersion and transformation. Mateas considers immersion and three methods of creating immersion as suggested by Murray: Participation with a mask/avatar, participation as a visit, and the creation of seamless interface mechanics. Mateas considers agency to be integral to a feeling of immersion, arguing that avatars can be considered as a package of affordances which constrain the player's behaviour in various ways, while suggesting that the term 'visit' suggests a way of framing a high number of negative constraints (i.e. the visitor won't be able to do much). Mateas then considers Murray's discussion of transformation, particularly that of transformation as variety, describing it as a third-person, observation-centred experience, rather than the first-person interactive experience of agency. This observation-centred experience requires the player to be at least given the impression that the systems presented to them are observably malleable in response to their individual and specific actions, giving the player an awareness of the variety of experiences offered to them. Mateas however does not consider a

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 26.

definition of transformation as masquerade in conjunction with his theory of agency and affordances.

By limiting his discussion to transformation as variety, Mateas fails to make the connection between the immersive qualities of the avatar and the transformative qualities of the mask. By controlling an avatar (wearing a mask), the player can indeed be described as subject to the affordances granted by that avatar (i.e., if the player's avatar is determined by the designer to be a brash, violent man with conservative views and a penchant for weaponry, it is unlikely that a player would be able to use that character to express their contrary opinions). If, additionally, the affordances of the game environment support those characteristics, for example, if an armed man is attempting to rob your character, then the player's actions are even further coerced into the appropriate range for that character (i.e., handing over your money is not an option, you must seriously injure or kill the robber to defend yourself).<sup>38</sup>

In gameplay a number of factors combine to alter the player's behaviour into a pattern more acceptable to the internal logic of the game world. By wearing the avatar, the player becomes subject to its affordances. Both Nina LeNoir<sup>39</sup> and Brenda Danet<sup>40</sup> both remark on this inherent

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<sup>38</sup> This is in many ways comparable to Laurel's suggestion that Aristotle's unities of Character and Action may be used as 'constraints' to guide human behaviour in human-computer interaction. (See Laurel, Brenda, *Computers as Theatre*, London: Addison-Wesley, 1991, 99 – 112)

<sup>39</sup> As quoted in Sant, Toni, "A Second Life for online performance: Understanding present developments through an historical context."

performativity to digital engagement in their discussion on performance in digital environments. Both scholars note that the act of communicating to others through digital mediation suggests the use of the digital as a mask, which in turn informs the user's actions. In many of these cases, these masks are self-imposed by the user in the creation of their own avatar. In gameplay however, these masks are imposed by those affordances created by both narrative and interactive strategies implemented by the game designer. These affordances transform the player into something closer to the character by changing the player's behaviour.

*Man Of Valour's* depiction of Farrell's mental transformation (and Reid's physical transformation) from his current self into a hardened, well-armed soldier is a reflection of this inherent performativity in gameplay experiences. Farrell, through his playing of a combat-based game feels transformed into a hardened soldier, complete with a new proficiency in armed combat. This mental process of transformation, as the player occupies the game character, is physicalised by Reid as he changes his posture and gestures, while the addition of theatrical design elements, such as dramatic music and lighting changes, complete the fictional world. Farrell's aggressive behaviour is a stark contrast from his shy demeanour in public, and we are given little indication that the character has any military experience. However, the playing of a video game allows Farrell

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*International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 4.1 (London: Intellect, 2008). 69-79

<sup>40</sup> Danet, Brenda *Cyberpl@y: Communicating Online* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

not only to transform himself mentally, but also to act as the newly transformed figure, through his manipulation of the on-screen character. The process suggested by *Man Of Valour's* representation is that Farrell actually sees himself *as* the character in the game, not that he is simply manipulating a character but in fact embodying that character, and hence existing in the game world as a new version of himself. Mateas' discussion of the integration of agency into dramatic form provides a framework whereby we can analyse the transformation of the self into another character within a game environment, illustrating the systems whereby a player is guided by affordances into the character state desired by the game designer.

However, this transformation is centred on the player's relationship to other characters within the game world. The transformation from self to in-game character infers that the player also adapts their opinions towards other characters. In Mateas' model, the game-design presents the enemy characters and the player *him/herself* in such a way to influence the player's perception, drawing them into a relationship dictated by the affordances provided. The potential political effects of such a transformation have not gone uncommented on, with critics discussing the potential for games as both ideological apparatus and site of gender subversion, though such discussion is beyond the intended scope of this chapter.<sup>41</sup> Mateas' model, though compelling, is decidedly narrative-

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<sup>41</sup> For more discussion on this topic (with specific reference to videogames rather than virtual environments such as second life) see: Van Zwieten,

biased, insisting on the primacy of the game story by centring the discussion on how games might be made fit an Aristotelian structure. Through this the mechanics of the game become subservient to the narrative plot line.

This narrative-centred interpretation of gameplay is not without its critics. James Newman in particular argues, in an article entitled 'The Myth of The Ergodic Videogame'<sup>42</sup> that the very notion of 'character' within games is inappropriate, and that instead a vastly different system of player participation is taking place.

#### **'The Character is Irrelevant'**

In his article, Newman suggests that the player-character relationship is not one of identification but rather one of *vehicular embodiment*. Newman suggests that the character presented to the player is simply: 'a suite of characteristics or equipment utilised and embodied by the controlling player.'<sup>43</sup>

At the forefront of his argument is Newman's assertion that the player's relationship to the game is not solely mediated through those characters that he/she controls but rather is the result of a variety of 'states of

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Martijn "Danger Close: Contesting Ideologies and Contemporary Military Conflict in First-Person Shooters" from DIGRA Proceedings, 2011 and: Kinder, M. *Playing With Power In Movies, Television And Video Games: From Muppet Babies To Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, (London: University Of California Press, 1993).

<sup>42</sup> Newman, James, "The Myth of The Ergodic Videogame: Some Thoughts on Player-Character Relationships in Videogames" in *Game Studies*, Vol 2, Issue 1, (July 2002), <http://gamestudies.org/0102/newman/>

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

engagement' through which the player passes as they engage in a play session. Newman highlights that videogames are rarely meaningfully interactive at all times, and that modern games frequently render a player as merely a viewer through scripted action sequences such as cut-scenes. Newman suggests that in these non-interactive moments (which he describes as 'off-line') our relationship to an on-screen character may be much like that of a film viewer's relationship to a character, however once the player begins playing (an 'on-line' sequence,) this relationship changes as the reception-representation dynamic changes. The player is no longer concerned with the emotional progress of the character but with those in-game challenges posed to the players themselves. Newman suggests that players consider the game environment beyond just the character they control, instead considering the multitude of interlocking rules and in-game objects they have available to them: 'Rather than "becoming" a particular character in the gameworld, seeing the world through their eyes, the player encounters the game by relating to everything within the gameworld simultaneously.'<sup>44</sup>

Newman considers this status as 'outside' character or even 'outside' the game as reinforced by those elements of representation, which create distance in the player. The inclusion of virtual camera effects such as lens-flare or the beading of water droplets on screen position the player as

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

distinctly 'other' to the character they are controlling. Timothy Crick<sup>45</sup> also comments on this appropriation of cinema techniques by game designers, describing the position of the in-game camera as a subjective entity through which we experience the game. This subjectivity is further enforced by the presence of an on-screen 'Heads-Up Display' or 'HUD' whereby players are shown information such as current health, remaining ammunition, etc. These are visual phenomena which often have no narrative framework and are considered to be unnoticed by any 'in-game' characters. Like the lens flare effects they are purely for the benefit of the player. By drawing on Sobchack's discussions of cinema, Crick describes this creation of a subjective point of view as part of the 'game body',<sup>46</sup> stating that players' control of the game in third and first person perspective games extends not only to the player-character but also to this 'game body' as it is located within the game world.

The distance this creates leads Crick to the conclusion that players should be considered to be acting *on* the screen rather than *in* it, changing the images presented to them from an external position of observation. *Man Of Valour* makes no attempt to illustrate these important elements of the 'game body'. By omitting any illustration of lens flare or other 'unnatural' elements of the game such as the HUD, we are shown an experience that is rooted firmly in the 'realist' logic of Hollywood cinema. Were we to see

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<sup>45</sup> Crick, Timothy, "The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming" *Games and Culture*, Vol 6, Issue 3, SAGE publications, (2011) 259 – 269.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*



such details as remaining ammo, this would require a narrative framework which 'excuses' its existence (for example the ammo display on Ridley's gun in the film *Aliens*). Videogames do not require such framework as the information is required as part of the game mechanics. This information is purely a ludic screen element, distinct and isolated from the narrative. It is this distinction between narrative and ludic elements in the representation of the game world that forms a key part of Crick's 'game body'.<sup>47</sup>



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Newman acknowledges the presence of these visual phenomena, and considers them illustrative of the player's relationship to the game world as *beyond* that of the perspective of the player-character, showing that the

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<sup>47</sup> It is an interesting side note that some games, such as Edios' recent *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* or Valve's *Half-Life* series seek to blur the lines between these elements, providing elaborate narrative structures involving space-age suits or ocular implants to explain the floating numbers present on the player's screen.

<sup>48</sup> A screenshot from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, Infinity Ward, 2009. Note extra information provided to the player on screen such as remaining ammo, position on the game map, and assigned targets.

player's involvement with the games comes not from the visual relationship but rather at the level of *interface*. As such, the character's position in the game world is considered by the player not as a developed entity to which the player can relate or even transform into, but rather is considered in terms of the game mechanics themselves:

It doesn't matter that it's a burly guy – or even a guy – or even perhaps a human. That the hang glider can turn faster is a big deal; this affects the way the game plays. This affects my chances of getting a good score.<sup>49</sup>

For Newman, narrative and aesthetics within game design are secondary concerns for the player; the most important factors are those that influence the outcome of the gameplay session. The player's relationship to the character is not one of player transformation but rather one of strategic choice, through the selection of game influencing characteristics that allow for optimal gameplay strategy.

Considering the action presented in *Man Of Valour* in these terms highlights the important omissions from Farrell's process of gameplay. Game elements such as HUD, or objective markers are notably absent, denying the creation of a distinct 'game body'. Without the presence of an established 'game body' as distinct and different from the embodied 'film body' that *Man Of Valour* remediates, the experience presented is seemingly in denial of the ludic (game mechanics/rule-based) elements of the videogame experience. Furthermore, *Man Of Valour* omits

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<sup>49</sup> From Newman, James, "The Myth of The Ergodic Videogame: Some Thoughts on Player-Character Relationships in Videogames" *Game Studies*, Vol 2, Issue 1, (July 2002), <http://gamestudies.org/0102/newman/>.

representation of those 'strategic choices' made by players in relation to both their character's actions, and the environment which they occupy. There is little or no indication of the landscape in which Farrell is playing; the focus is almost entirely on his actions against an unseen enemy. As Newman says, players engage not just to the character on screen but also to the environment in which that character is situated. Each ledge, crevice, and gap in the virtual terrain offers both challenges and tactical advantages to the contemporary videogame player. This is particularly true of combat-based games whereby elements of the virtual environment can be used to 'take cover' by manoeuvring one's character so that a building, rocky outcrop, or other objects of the environment are placed between the player's character and the enemy troops. Taking cover to avoid enemy gunfire is a key tactic for players who want to complete the game successfully, and many contemporary combat-based games have specific commands available to players for just such action. It is unusual that the landscape is not depicted in this sequence as objects in Farrell's environment (such as the photocopier in the office) are meticulously 'created' by Reid's gestures in several other sections of the piece. These objects, in conjunction with others such as mimed doors, desks, and windows, work with the lighting design to give each scene a sense of place. This allows the audience to understand (at least in rough terms) the style, size, and function of the physical spaces Farrell occupies in his day-to-day life. It is strange, then, that the gameplay sequence omits any such depictions of the virtual space. Reid does not depict for us any of Farrell's

options for cover from enemy fire, nor does he illustrate the existence of tactically superior ground for Farrell to occupy. Lack of representation of this space prevents us from judging Farrell's relationship to it, or suggests that Farrell has no relationship to it. While it could be considered that Farrell has applied some manner of 'cheat code' to alter the parameters of the game so that his character has no need to interact with the environment, no such process is indicated or suggested by Reid's behaviour. We must assume that Farrell is playing the game 'as is'. As such, the representation is incomplete, illustrating only Farrell's relationship to the character in terms of personal identification and transformation, while ignoring his relationship to the virtual world his character occupies. For *Man of Valour*, the process of game engagement is one of personal transformation rather than a relationship to a virtual environment and set of rules. This process of transformation in *Man of Valour* is understood in terms of film though the performance language previously established.

The presence of continuous fire on the part of the player (Farrell) in *Man Of Valour* further places the representation of game experience in a film frame, were we to consider Farrell to be an amateur player then the presence of the popular limited ammo game mechanic should result in the depletion of his weapon, however this does not happen, Farrell like a Hollywood action star continues to fire seemingly limitless bullets. Given this reading, *Man Of Valour's* representation of the subjective experience of videogame play lacks the illustration of those ludic elements of

experience that Newman identifies as so essential to the process of gameplay engagement. In doing so, *Man Of Valour's* representation of the act of gameplay becomes a representation of a passive participation, subject to the restrictions of the narrative frameworks provided by the game, rather than an 'active' experience of engaging with a set of rules which produce emergent behaviour. This tension between the active player and passive viewer raises questions as to the prevalence of narrative over ludic engagement, particularly at the point of player-character.

Adrienne Shaw, who used empirical research to consider the issue of player-character relationships, further supports Newman's argument of simultaneous engagement; in her paper<sup>50</sup> Shaw presents the results of a number of surveys and interviews with a wide range of videogame players. While her research is focused on members of what she terms 'marginalised groups',<sup>51</sup> her paper highlights the wide range of reactions produced in response to a wide range of variables. In particular Shaw identifies the difference between an avatar as representation of self created by the player, and a player-character as a pre-determined character created by designer and controlled by the player.

For Shaw, the process of identification is almost always self-referential. The player's relationship to the character is one of vehicular embodiment,

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<sup>50</sup> Shaw, Adrienne "He Could Be a Bunny Rabbit for All I Care: Exploring Identification in Digital Games" from DIGRA Proceedings 2011.

<sup>51</sup> Specifically those who identified themselves as non-heterosexual, non-male, and not primarily white/anglo.

in that the character is viewed as the medium through which they play the game, yet distinct and separate from themselves. However, Shaw also notes the huge variety of responses her research produced, many of which were contradictory in nature. This is unsurprising given the wide range of game types her research covers, including both abstract music-based games such as *Rock Band*<sup>52</sup> alongside heavily narrative rich games such as *Mass Effect*.<sup>53</sup> This leaves us at a theoretical crossroads, whereby there is ample argument for both a narrative and ludic-based analysis of the subjective gameplay experience, and each addresses the action in *Man of Valour* differently. Mateas' argument for an Aristotelian narrative structure in games illustrates the potential for transformation on the part of the player. The conditions of the game shape the player's experience into that of a defined character, dictating their behaviour through certain positive and negative restrictions referred to as 'affordances'. This model allows us to understand the process of personal transformation that Farrell undergoes when engaging in a gameplay session in *Man of Valour*.

Additionally, by drawing on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Mateas' argument provides a theoretical framework, which is understood in terms of theatre and the dramatic arts, and as such can also relate to the more traditional live performance and theatrical elements in *Man of Valour*. However, Newman's theory challenges this. His work illustrates the importance of a player's relationship not only to the characters within the game, but also to

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<sup>52</sup> *Rock Band*, (Harmonix, 2007).

<sup>53</sup> *Mass Effect*, (BioWare, 2007).

the game environment as a whole, focusing particularly on game mechanics. By prioritising narrative engagement with games, *Man Of Valour's* representation of the subjective game experience the other elements of the game such as 'game body,' kinaesthetic relationships, and optimal player strategies are ignored in favour of a representation that draws more heavily on the Hollywood effects-driven Cinema of Attractions for its mode of communication. Within this narrative driven structure *Man Of Valour* still provides an arguably robust depiction of the gameplay experience, creating a clear performance language for illustrating the separation of the 'in-game' world from Farrell's reality. However by prioritising this narrative drive, the process of engagement is categorised as a more passive experience than Newman's discussion of games suggests. This raises the question of whether or not the two theories of Newman and Mateas can be reconciled or synthesised to create a new framework whereby gameplay experience can be understood in terms of both narrative *and* ludic engagement. It may perhaps be through the consideration of the position of the body when playing that may best reconcile these two theories. I will address these considerations in Chapter VI.

## Chapter VI:

### *Connected*

Will Irvine and Karl Quinn's *Connected* was first performed in Dublin as part of the Absolut Fringe Festival, 2010. The product of the festival's 'Show in a Bag' performance development programme, *Connected* was developed by Irvine and Quinn in conjunction with Irish theatre company Fishamble. Marketing material for the performance promised an exploration of 'friendship in the digital age'<sup>1</sup> while the show also promised to address the question 'What happens when the boundaries between our online world and our daily lives start to blur?'<sup>2</sup> The performance lasted 60 minutes, it was directed by Iseult Golden and contained two performers (Quinn and Irvine) each playing a single character. The set was minimal, consisting of two black plastic chairs, initially placed mid-stage left and mid-stage right, with a grey panel approximately 12 feet wide by 6 feet high (subdivided into six squares) placed just upstage centre, hanging approximately four feet from the floor. Placed on the floor was a large grey mat, which delineated the performance space within the larger stage space. The performers were costumed in brightly coloured shirts (Quinn in

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<sup>1</sup> From Project Theatre website <http://www.projectartscentre.ie/programme/whats-on/1185-connected-> last accessed 20th June 2013.

<sup>2</sup> From Fishamble website <http://fishamble.com/literary/showinabag/show-in-a-bag-2010> last accessed 20th June 2013.



orange and Irving in green), each wore a dark tie, with dark trousers and black shoes. Much like Corn Exchange's *Man of Valour*, Irvine and Quinn's *Connected* drew heavily on physical theatre as its primary means of representation; however *Connected* made much more overt use of pre-recorded sound elements than *Man of Valour*.

The show itself follows the interactions of two friends and co-workers, 'Daz' (played by Quinn) and 'Simon' (played by Irvine), who are both employed in the accounts department of an undisclosed firm. The action takes place over several days, during which time we are shown the two engaging in a series of online activities in lieu of the work they are actually employed to do. The most central of these engagements are the playing of a first-person-shooter (FPS) style game in an online multiplayer environment, and a series of interactions with Linden Lab's once popular online virtual environment program, *Second Life*.<sup>3</sup> The performance moves from moments of representation of the character's gameplay experience to representation of their 'real' life working in the office.

The two characters, Daz and Simon, are friends, yet are continually at odds with one another, often insulting and attacking each other for various perceived flaws. Throughout the course of the performance the character Daz attempts to humiliate Simon by introducing him to the programme *Second Life*. Having convinced Simon to create an avatar to use in the programme, Daz then creates an alternate avatar for himself and enters

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<sup>3</sup> *Second Life*, (Linden Lab, 2003).

the virtual world, posing as a woman in an attempt to convince Simon to divulge personal information. Much like *Man of Valour*, *Connected* may be seen to represent the subjective experience of digital gameplay in terms of film, but only when representing those sequences of gameplay which concern the FPS style games.

When representing those digital interactions that take place within the *Second Life* construct, *Connected* retains representation of digital phenomena which, though visual in nature, is not derivative of film or dependent on the embedded nature of film culture in its audience. Instead *Connected* offers a remediation of *Second Life* that includes representation through language of the subjective experience of engaging with the software, while illustrating through physical theatre techniques some of the functions and limitations of the software. Through these representations of engagement with a digital environment, both through first-person shooters and multi-user virtual constructs, *Connected* highlights an anxiety about the position of the body when engaging in these commonplace practices. The performance suggests a simple Cartesian dualism<sup>4</sup> of body and mind, whereby the mind is a separate and intangible existence with no physical representation. Through engagement with the virtual in *Connected*, the body is rejected in favour of the virtual world. Though this anxiety may be said to be present in *Man of Valour*

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Cartesian Dualism see Decartes, René, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Ed. Cottingham, John, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Hawthorne, James 'Cartesian Dualism' in *Persons: Human and Devine*, eds. Van Inwagen, Peter, and Zimmerman, Dean, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 87 – 98.

through its representation of the transformational power of videogaming, Quinn and Irvine address the topic directly through the narrative content of the performance, as well as the methodology of representation. *Connected* raises strong questions of trans-gender performance through Daz's creation and subsequent operation of a female avatar within *Second Life*. However, through its representation of first-person shooter gameplay, *Connected* explores beyond the complications of male/female binaries in a digital environment and raises further issues surrounding identity, nationality, death, and the place of the body in a digital gameplay session.

By drawing comparisons between *Man of Valour* and *Connected*, considerations of the body's role in gameplay experience can be explored. As discussed in Chapter V, there is a conflict between the narrative and mechanical engagement between players and games in a gameplay session. Through the discussion of the body in a digital space a synthesis of the apparently conflicting theories of player engagement discussed in Chapter V may be reached. In a model which draws on the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, a theory can be explored which considers consciousness as neglecting the body. This consciousness can then exist as operating in an oscillating state between narrative and ludic engagement in the virtual environment during a gameplay session. The performance methodology of *Connected* illustrates this approach to gameplay experience, while also considering those non-narrative interactive elements of player/software interaction.

### **First Person Shooting in *Connected***

The first representation of the subjective experience of gameplay appears right at the start of *Connected*, in a sequence depicting a war zone. This sequence illustrates a performance methodology, which has much in common with *Man of Valour's* treatment of the experience of first-person shooter videogames. Through the appropriation of Hollywood film tropes and remediation of film sequences, *Connected* places the videogame experience as a variation of the experience of cinema.

*Connected* begins with the stage in darkness. The sound of an air-raid siren plays and a spotlight comes up downstage right, into which Quinn runs, holding his hands out in front of him, palms up, as if carrying a rifle. There is an audio cue of gunfire, which Quinn responds to, flinching and ducking before turning upstage to face the far wall. The sound of machine-gun fire is played in bursts and Quinn shakes his hands in unison with each burst. This is accompanied by pulsing lighting effects before a second spotlight is revealed upstage left. Irvine enters this spotlight, crouched low, holding his hands in a similar fashion to Quinn. There is another gunfire sound effect, this time a single shot and Irvine drops to the floor in a state of panic. Lying on the floor he calls out 'Dwalt! Dwalt is that you?' to which Quinn replies, in a deepened voice and Americanised accent 'Get the fuck over here, I'll cover you.' Much like in *Man of Valour*, the gestures of the two actors are an index to a war zone. The background sound design which includes the use of air-raid sirens and gunfire tell us that we are in a combat zone, while Quinn and Irvine's behaviour indicate

that they are two armed combatants on the same side. Quinn's hand position and gestures in response to the machine-gun sound effect are to indicate that he is holding a machine-gun and firing on an unseen enemy. However, unlike *Man Of Valour*, the actors do not produce the firing sound but instead the effect comes from a pre-recorded audio design.

The two then discuss their next moves, Quinn often stopping to 'fire' upstage at the enemy. Irvine points with his finger on the floor, illustrating the path they should each take to 'plant the charges.' In response to this Quinn curls his hands into open fists, bringing each to his face and making a biting motion before pulling them away. He then makes a kissing motion towards each hand. Irvine asks, 'What the fuck are you doing?', to which Quinn replies, 'Fuck the civilians!', before making two throwing motions upstage. There is an explosion sound effect accompanied by more pulsing light and the two performers slowly move their upper bodies downstage before rolling away into the darkness. The lights fade to black.

Quinn's actions were clearly meant to indicate the arming and throwing of two grenades. The biting motion was to indicate the pulling of the triggering 'pin.' While the Americanized accents and liberal use of profanity are reminiscent of Hollywood war films and popular combat-fiction television series, the pulling of a grenade is a clear action-film trope, as it is an action nearly impossible to perform in real life without incurring serious dental damage, yet one that frequently appears in war films. In conjunction with this, the actor's response to the 'explosion' upstage (the slow movement backwards) is a clear remediation of time manipulation in

film; much like in *Man Of Valour*, the performer's movement is meant to be read as an moment of 'slow-motion'. These actions frame this opening sequence as a remediation of the American militaristic action-film, a pastiche of a number of different Hollywood and TV tropes (such as pulling the pin from a grenade with one's teeth), which appear commonly in combat-based fictions. This provides the audience with a frame to the action, encouraging them to read it as a film in this style.

Immediately after this 'explosion' a spotlight comes on downstage centre where Irvine is laying clutching his leg as if wounded. The scene that follows is a remediation of a clichéd exchange that appears in many Hollywood war films, that of 'the dying friend'.

Kneeling in the spotlight stage left, Quinn cradles Irvine's prostrate body and begins to speak, telling Irvine, 'You gotta live, you got hit, you're pissed off, but you can't just sign out.' As he speaks, melancholic violin music begins to play in the background, slowly fading up in volume to provide a melodramatic background to the exchange. This addition of music is much like the use of classical arias, and soft pieces written for strings, which frequently appear at emotional heights in war films just as *Saving Private Ryan*. The music provides a striking contrast to the violence surrounding the characters and serves to heighten the emotional nature of the scene. Irvine responds by questioning the validity of their actions, asking: 'What's the point of all this? Every day we sign-in, suit up, and point bullets at our so-called enemies and laugh as we see their heads, arms, and legs get blown to bits.' Quinn's response focuses on the

experience offered, stating: 'We're doing something here, Heff? We're living in a way we never could any place else. We get to be heroes! We get to be more than just some shmuck writing up reports in an office.' The exchange continues, with Irvine insisting that he wants out, while Quinn refuses to listen. Finally, Quinn picks Irvine up again and begins to move across the stage stating: 'Dwalt Heffernan never leaves a man behind. I ain't knocking on your mamma's front door with a box of ashes and a shitty letter from Uncle Sam about how good a soldier you were.'

Irvine responds with a 'look out' and as the two reach centre stage, there is a loud explosion sound effect, while a bright spotlight comes up centre stage. The two grab the backs of the chairs previously used as cover and slowly lift them over their heads to a position downstage, sitting down as the lights fade to black. Almost immediately upon the blackout, the lighting state changes to a wide, well lit space covering an area the size of the grey floor laid down. The two actors are positioned sitting on the chairs, leaning forward. Each actor is positioned with their left hand raised directly in front of them, palms flat, fingers out stretched, while their right is placed on the same level, but lightly to the right, palm down fingers slightly curled. The two raise their hands and sit back, sighing with disappointment. Quinn exclaims (this time in his own fully Irish accent), 'Balls! I'm dead!' To which Irvine replies (also in his own accent) 'Me, too'. The hand positions of the two are clearly to indicate hands on a computer keyboard and mouse, suddenly the costume of shirt and tie makes sense as we infer that these are two friends playing games at personal computers in an office, contrary

to Irvine's previous assertions the two are in fact 'just some shmuck writing up reports in an office.'

The sequence the audience have just witnessed is then retrospectively re-interpreted by the audience not as a remediated Hollywood war film, but as staged gaming experience, in which the two characters (Daz and Simon) were playing characters in a conflict-oriented game. This representation is in many ways similar to the representation of gameplay experience in *Man of Valour*, through the appropriation of film elements to represent player experience as a sub-set of film experience. As in *Man Of Valour*, both actors in the performance adopt a more Americanised accent when speaking in the soldier character, the action is centred on violence, and both utilise similar gestures to indicate weaponry. However, though *Connected's* representation of the experience is in many ways similar to *Man of Valour's*, it is also much more direct in its approach to the how players relate to the games they are playing.

For instance, the players in *Connected* have a clearly defined objective (planting the charges), the achievement of which is hindered by the presence of enemy soldiers. This hindrance is no trivial matter; the two manoeuvre, take cover, and are eventually defeated by an enemy presence. The existence of this non-trivial hindrance is key to the challenge and mechanics of gameplay. This obstacle against the player's actions can be considered in terms of Mateas' 'affordances' as a kind of restriction on the player's range of actions. However, these obstacles also encourage player problem-solving, experimentation, short-term planning



(as when Irvine instructs Quinn as to their next moves) and improvisation (as with Quinn's throwing of the grenades). All of these player actions are central parts of the action of 'play'. The performers' representation (or discussion) of their environment around them, including discussion of short-term planning (around the environment) show a relationship to the virtual space in which they are engaged. The relationship of performers' costume to the action presented is also noteworthy. The inclusion of so many recognisable Hollywood film tropes (the sequence with the grenade) coupled with the manipulation of time (the slow motion reaction to the explosion) frame the opening sequence of *Connected* for the audience as a staged Hollywood war film. The use of clichéd phrases in caricature American accents coupled with nonchalant attitude to gratuitous violence, and melodramatic monologues provide an index to the audience that this is not a direct restaging, but rather a parody of the 'war film' style made so popular by films such as *Platoon*<sup>5</sup>, *Saving Private Ryan*<sup>6</sup>, and *Full Metal Jacket*<sup>7</sup>. However, the performers' costumes are incongruous with this parody, and prevent a clear reading of the sequence by the audience. The retrospective re-framing of the sequence as gameplay reconciles this tension by drawing a link between Daz and Simon's existence in the 'real' world and their existence in the game world. This use of costume as a link to the performers 'real' existence also suggests that, while playing the

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<sup>5</sup> *Platoon*, Dir. Stone, Oliver, (Orion Pictures, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> *Saving Private Ryan*, Dir. Spielberg, Steven, (Paramount Pictures, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> *Full metal Jacket*, Dir. Kubrick, Stanley, (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1987).

game, they are merely playing a role while they themselves remain fundamentally unchanged.



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Their physical selves remain in shirt and tie, even though their experience may be transporting them into a war-zone. This is the first indication to us

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<sup>8</sup> Image showing Will Irvine and Karl Quinn in *Connected*. Note Karl's hand position as indicating typing on a computer keyboard.

of the presence of a Cartesian dualism<sup>9</sup> in operation within this performance's interpretation of the player's experience. The piece represents the performers' bodies as still rooted within the 'office space', but their actions, experiences, and the way in which they relate to the virtual world created are all-consuming. Their shirt and tie clad bodies are not acknowledged as such, and the two seem to inhabit new bodies, complete with a new reality that is purely cognitive, or derived from their imagination. By presenting these actions through mime, the audience too is forced to use their imagination to create this world, and we see the virtual as a fiction of the mind in contrast to the reality of the body. This separation of body and mind also raises questions about how the actions of the body may translate into 'virtual' action. This process of telepresence is further interrogated later in this chapter.

Despite the retrospective reframing of the opening sequence as gameplay, the piece does not remove the film terms from the production's interpretation of gameplay experience. While the tension generated by the incongruous costuming is resolved, those elements that framed the sequence as war-film parody are still present. The addition of melodramatic music to heighten the monologues of the two characters is an example of this. Often music in contemporary video games will respond to in-game action, acting as a distinctly functional element producing faster

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<sup>9</sup> In this case, meaning humans as having a purely cognitive element and a purely physical element, and this physical element being neglected as the cognitive element engages with the virtual world of the game. For more see Chapter V.

tempo pieces on the appearance of enemy units for example. However, it is rare that a game would produce a melodramatic sequence of strings such as is heard as 'Heffernan' (Quinn) cradles the injured body of 'Gluckman' (Irvine) during a gameplay moment.<sup>10</sup>

There are examples of games in which music alters in response to player injury such as in Epic Game's *Gears of War*. However, in popular contemporary videogames this music takes on a dark and foreboding, or fast-tempo and anxious quality, so as to alert the player to the danger that they are in. It is also commonplace for a game to produce a particular musical sequence on a player's death, such as sequence of notes played in Nintendo's *Super Mario Bros.* once a player has lost a life. In each case the music is in response to player action. In *Connected* the music seems to respond not to the player's actions, but to the content of their speeches. The rising strings and brass accompanying Daz's speech seem to reference emotionally charged monologue scenes such as in Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day*<sup>11</sup>, rather than serving to alert Simon that his character is seriously injured and will die without player assistance. While the possibility of software being able to generate such accompanying music in response to a player's voice is not beyond the bounds of current technology, it is certainly not commonplace in

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<sup>10</sup> Such music may occur during a pre-scripted sequence or cut-scene. But in these cases the player is not playing the game but instead has become a viewer of the pre-recorded action. If Quinn and Irvine were to be watching a cut-scene during this monologue, their deaths would be pre-scripted and would not necessarily mean a failure of the level.

<sup>11</sup> *Independence Day*, Emmerich, Roland, (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1995).

contemporary video gaming. However, this use of additional exegetic sound design to heighten emotional text is prevalent in Hollywood film. This further strengthens the framing of the game sequence as film for the audience. Even once the retrospective re-framing has occurred, the characters still discuss their in-game actions in terms of film. Once it is revealed to us that the two characters were indeed in a video game (via the sequence described above), Daz and Simon proceed to discuss their play session, including the outcome and progress made. This discussion is held in almost exclusively film terms; Daz declares: '15 hours of playtime down the drain! We're gonna have to do the whole mission again. What the hell was all that Speilsberg [sic] speech about?' To which Simon replies: 'Speilsbergs? You're the one who went all Full Metal Jacket!'

This combination of film and gaming terms alters the representation of the gameplay experience. Much like in *Man Of Valour*, *Connected* frames the contemporary videogame experience as a sub-category of the film experience. The suggestion is that by playing a videogame, players become active agents in an interactive movie. In the case of *Connected*, the movie may be a Hollywood action or war film like *Platoon* or *Saving Private Ryan*. The players (Daz and Simon) read this as such and each respond accordingly, each adopting a persona or set of actions drawn from popular Hollywood films. This creates a tension between the narrative elements and aesthetic elements of the two media. By framing the game experience in terms of film, *Connected* produces a methodology of representation similar to *Man of Valour*. Narrative and aesthetic

elements (the monologues, the Americanised accents) drawn from film sources, take precedence over those elements of emergent gameplay and game-specific aesthetic: graphical additions to the screen, emergent player behaviour, etc., that are unique to contemporary videogaming as a medium. However, *Connected* does introduce a different methodology to this in a later stage of the performance, as the characters interact with the program, *Second Life*, and in doing so further reinforces a theory of a divided self within the gameplay experience.

### ***Second Life***

*Second Life* is a large-scale multi-user virtual reality environment. The program was created by US company Linden Labs and was launched in mid-2003. The program itself consists of a representation of virtual space in which users can interact with each other and the environment through digital constructs known as 'avatars'. *Second Life* is highly focused on customisation and user-generated content within the program. Users can own virtual land, access the appropriate coding to create and sell virtual goods, including virtual houses, and clothing. Users' avatars are also highly customisable, though generally limited to bipedal form with a wide range of alterable physical features. Though they act as the representation of the user in this virtual world, this representation does not need to correspond to the user's actual physical self, and often doesn't. In general, avatars are human in appearance and highly normative, though many alternatives such as human-animal hybrids or fantastically costumed individuals are also popular. As avatars are a fully customisable

representation of the user in a virtual space, without mandatory ties to reality, they take on a highly performative role.



Donald Jones<sup>13</sup> notes that this performativity produces a common trend in representation, namely a heavy grounding in idealised sexuality: ‘...both female and male bodies are highly gendered, with large breasts or broad shoulders.’<sup>14</sup> The process of communicating and interacting with the environment solely through these representations leads to a favouring of the digital identity over the real within the programme. The user’s actual

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<sup>12</sup> A screenshot from *Second Life*, (Linden Lab, 2003) showing the editing options for an avatar’s face.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, Donald E., ‘I, Avatar: Constructuions of Self and Place in Second Life and the technological imagination’ in *Communication, Culture, and Technology*, (Gnoivs, Georgetown, Vol 6, January, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

real physical characteristics are irrelevant provided the user has a system of input for the programme with which they can control and manipulate their avatar. This fluidity of identity offered by the program has made *Second Life* the subject of much debate over issues of cross-gender identification within virtual environments, many of which carry on from such early discussions of Multi-User Dungeons.<sup>15</sup> This anxiety over the fluidity of gender within a networked virtual environment is explored by *Connected*. However, rather than focus on the issue of gender exploration, I wish to consider the contrast between *Connected*'s representation of the experience of *Second Life* and the performance's representation of the experience of videogame play. Though this analysis will include discussion of the body's position within this experience and its relationship to the virtual environment, the discussion of specific gender exploration within *Second Life* is beyond the scope of this particular study. Furthermore, the subject of gender identity in virtual worlds has been explored at length by several scholars to date.<sup>16</sup>

Though it is an interactive virtual environment, *Second Life* is not a videogame. However, the program does contain many similarities to a videogame. Users are represented through a digital construct, which they

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<sup>15</sup> For example Turkle, Sherry *Life On The Screen: Identity in the Age of The Internet*, (London: Phoenix, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> For examples see O'Farrell, Mary Ann and Vallone, Lynne eds. *Virtual gender: fantasies of subjectivity and embodiment*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999) see also: Murray, C and Sixsmith, J, 'The Corporeal Body in Virtual Reality' in *Ethos*, Vol 27, No. 3, (Sept 1999), and see also: Cesario, Mario, and Hopsch, Lena 'The Body in Digital Space' from ISEA proceedings, Istanbul, 2011.



control via keyboard and mouse or hand-held controller. This construct exists in a virtual environment that the user may interact with, and both avatar and environment are represented on screen in 'third person' fashion with the user's point of view behind and above the avatar, similar to many videogames. Additionally, this representation is augmented with an interface overlay showing information such as the avatar's position in a world map, nearby players, inventory, and so forth. This additional information is much like the HUD (Head's Up Display) frequently used in videogames to provide the player with information such as remaining ammunition and current objective. This additional information has little or no narrative place within the virtual world of *Second Life*; it is a purely functional artefact of the program which has no existence within the virtual environment as you cannot see other users' additional information framing their avatar.

Furthermore, users of *Second Life* are subject to rules within the virtual environment. These rules exist both implicitly and explicitly. Implicit rules are those governed by the software itself, similar to videogame software, and include things such as the virtual physics within the game. Items have gravity, objects have a virtual height, depth, weight, and thickness, and an avatar is usually unable to walk through walls or fall through the floor. These implicit rules are, however, subject to alteration by the user through various settings and interaction options afforded by the designers, for example, a user's avatar can be rendered able to fly at the click of a button.

Explicit rules are those set down in the user-end agreement, and various publications of Linden Labs themselves. These rules generally govern user conduct and issues relating to the *Second Life* community, particularly around issues of fraud and intellectual property theft. Yet, though *Second Life* has a number of both developer and community rules regarding user conduct, it does not have a clear obtainable goal, nor any competitive outcome for the user to become attached to, and therefore can not be considered a game. Though individual users may set their own rule and goal sets *within* the *Second Life* program, the program itself is designed for users simply to explore and create in a virtual environment. You cannot 'win' *Second Life*.

Nevertheless, the similarities are sufficient to warrant comparison between the two representations within *Connected*.

### ***Second Life in Connected***

Approximately a quarter of an hour into *Connected*'s performance, the characters raise the subject of *Second Life*. While berating Simon for his ability (or inability) to woo the opposite sex, Daz suggests to Simon that he should try creating an avatar in *Second Life* in order to practice his chat-up lines. Pre-empting Simon's discomfort, Daz informs Simon that he has already created an avatar for Simon to use, one with 'a few improvements' on the original. In stark contrast to Simon's thin Caucasian appearance, we discover through an exchange of dialogue that Daz has created an avatar for Simon which is highly sexualised: an African-American

bodybuilder named 'DonkeyCock'. Simon rejects this avatar and declares that he will design one of his own. The sequence that follows depicts both the creation of Simon's avatar and his attempts to navigate through the virtual space. The methodology of this representation is in stark contrast to those used in the earlier sequence of gameplay, whereby both Simon and Daz are engaged in a combat-based videogame. While representing *Second Life, Connected* engages much more fundamentally with the aesthetic phenomenon of a virtual interactive environment, including issues of interface display, control, and graphical fidelity.

The sequence begins with the performer, Irvine (as Simon), sitting on a chair stage left, with arms raised in front of him as if using a computer keyboard and mouse. Lights darken around him, focusing to a square white spotlight encompassing Irvine's upper torso and face. This is accompanied by a quiet sound effect, a 'woosh' sound, similar to wind blowing. This transition indicates a shift in focus from the Irvine's interaction with Quinn to his interactions with the mimed computer in front of him. Irvine (as Simon) narrates his actions as he sits and begins by reinforcing the fluidity of identity within the program stating: 'Right, *Second Life*, be who ever you want to be.' Irvine then moves his hands so that both are in front of him, palms closer together but fingers separated, as if typing on the keyboard. His narration indicates the initial steps of avatar creation; at each statement the performer moves his fingers, as if entering the text via the mimed keyboard: 'Avatar name.... Sisyphus.' And again: 'Starting look... well, male, obviously.'

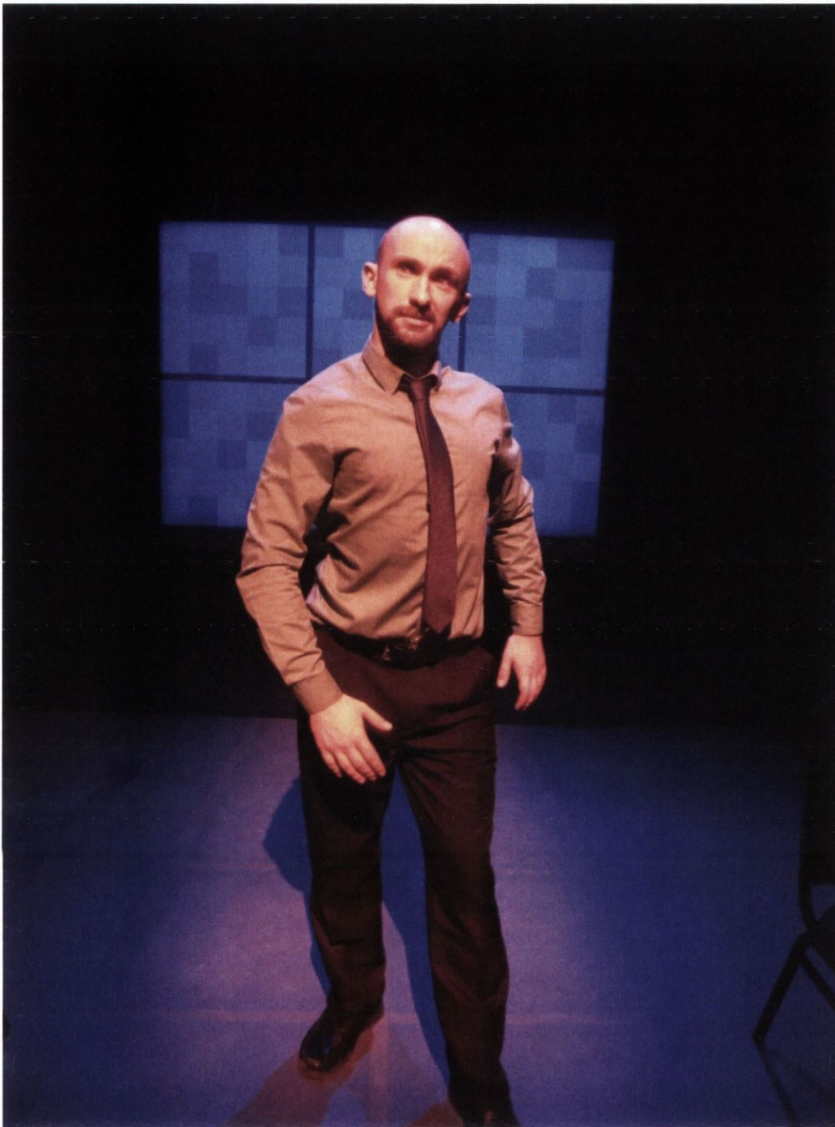
Simon then says, 'Enter' while pressing one finger down, simulating the pressing of the 'enter' or 'return' key usually used to finalise the entering of text. At this moment, Irvine then stands and moves to a point mid-stage centre. Lights change to a pink mid-stage wash, with a blue colour projected onto the back wall. Gentile jazz-style music begins to play in the background. Irvine then turns to face the audience standing stiffly in place, swaying slightly from side to side. To his right, Quinn is kneeling just beyond the focus of the front light, facing upstage with right arm held out towards centre stage, elbow bent, index finger pointing upwards. The effect is such that only Quinn's hand and arm are visible next to Irvine on stage. Irvine begins to speak, still as Simon, he states: 'Options.' At this point Quinn raises his hand slightly and moves his finger, making an audible 'click' sound. Irvine again speaks: 'Body type.' Quinn repeats his movement, this time moving his hand to a point slightly lower than before, repeating the 'click' sound. Again Irvine speaks, in a questioning tone: 'Muscular?' Quinn once more repeats his movement, this time however moving his hand slightly further towards centre stage and making two click sounds in quick succession. In response to Quinn's movement, Irvine bends his torso forward and curls his arms in front of his chest, clenching his fists. He then begins to slowly rotate on the spot, taking small steps with his feet while keeping his torso as level as possible. He then asks: 'A bit much... Skinny?'

Quinn's movement is repeated, this time lowering his hand slightly and again making two quick 'click' sounds. Irvine stands up straight, facing the

audience. He places one hand in front of his crotch and one behind his back. He moves his feet close together and elongates his spine, standing as tall as he can. Once again Irvine begins to rotate on the spot using small steps. This sequence is a remediation of the process of avatar creation in *Second Life*. The transition from tightly focused 'natural' white light, to the more dream-like pink wash creates an indicator for the audience that the scene has changed to a virtual location. Irvine's stiff stance and slight swaying motion is an approximation of the standard avatar 'inert' pose. Avatars created in *Second Life* remain continuously animated, moving slightly from side to side in order to create a more 'lifelike' appearance. This is a common strategy adopted by designers and programmers when creating agents within a virtual environment. As living beings are nearly incapable of remaining perfectly still at any time, it being necessary to breathe, to shift weight distribution in order to stay comfortable, etc., designers will frequently include 'inert' animations for any virtual 'living being.' These animations may range from a simple swaying motion (as in *Second Life*) to more complicated body scratching, sighing, stretching, and so forth (as in Nintendo's *Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess*).<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, these motions do not always appear as natural, and can in fact imbue the characters with an uncanny or mechanised appearance.

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<sup>17</sup> *Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, (Nintendo, 2006).



<sup>18</sup>

This is particularly true in the program, *Second Life*, which has a comparatively low level of graphical fidelity. Irvine's stiff swaying motion is a recreation of this 'inert' animation, and as such creates an unsettling

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<sup>18</sup> Image of Will Irvine's 'stiff' avatar stance from *Connected*, Iseult Golden.

appearance owing to its stiff, and ironically 'unnatural' appearance. This unnatural appearance serves further to indicate to the audience that we are no longer observing the physical body of the character Simon, but rather his virtual body, the avatar. Irvine's subsequent positions (muscular, skinny, etc.) are similarly unnatural in their construction. Irvine's arm positions denote a cartoonish nature in the avatar he is embodying. His flexed biceps and tense position for the 'muscular' setting seem the much exaggerated posture of a professional body-builder, and suggest the over-sexualised nature of the *Second Life* avatar. Each position is extreme; even the seemingly normal 'athletic' setting which Simon eventually chooses causes Irvine to raise his chest forward to create the illusion of broadened shoulders.

Quinn's movements are representational of the interface used when designing one's avatar. His hand position at first is somewhat unusual, and the audible clicks at first have no visible effect on the staging. However, once Irvine responds to Quinn's doubled click sound, through the transformation of his body position, it becomes clear that Quinn's hand is a representation of Simon's mouse pointer, moving across the screen of his computer. Each 'click' is the sound created by Simon selecting an option on the avatar creation interface, with Quinn's hand moving to indicate the position of each selectable option. The combination of these factors serves to illustrate to the audience that the image presented is a remediation of the avatar creation process. Irvine occupies the role of the modifiable avatar, while his voice remains that of the character Simon,

instigating changes. Simon's choices (and subsequent interface with the computer in front of him) are vocalised by Irvine, and physicalised by Quinn, while the result of these choices is physicalised by Irvine's body position. In this way, *Connected* illustrates the varying levels at which the user engages with the virtual environment presented. The user is represented in the virtual environment by the avatar, yet interacts with the program beyond a simple one-to-one conversion of user action. The user is also active in engaging with the wider interface of the programme, and subsequently relates *simultaneously* to both his/her avatar and the additional elements of the program presented. The representation depicts a division of the self, which seems to expand on the Cartesian dualism of body and mind creating three distinct elements to the user's existence. *Connected* separates the user into thought (the user's actual decisions) action (the manipulation of the interface, and the user's avatar) and 'physical existence' (the player's [marginalised] body outside of the game.) Through this delineation of real and virtual and the highlighting of the range of physical alternatives available to 'Simon', many of which are in direct contrast to his 'real' appearance, *Connected* suggests that the engagement with *Second Life* is driven by a desire to escape one's own physical existence. Indeed as Quinn quips in the beginning of the play:

We're living in a way we never could any place else. We get to be heroes! We get to be more than just some shmuck writing up reports in an office.



Rather than simply enjoying the experience of immersion, *Connected* at first seems to be highlighting a pleasure in escaping one's own body through virtual interaction, indeed suggesting that the need to escape their own physical bodies is what drives these characters onwards.

This separation between body and the virtual is reinforced at several stages throughout the performance as we continue to see Simon and Daz interact in *Second Life*. Irvine and Quinn each move in unnatural and stiff gestures to signify the on-screen avatars, however most notably are those moments whereby the character Simon manipulates the virtual environment in a way that has no representative correlation in the avatar's movement. At one stage, Daz (inhabiting a female avatar named 'Lulu42') is informed by Simon (inhabiting his 'Sisyphus' avatar) that he has always wanted to go surfing. To this Daz replies: 'Here, click this, and I'll see you on the beach.'

While his avatar holds out her hand, Simon's avatar does likewise. However, he makes no motion to touch, grab, or otherwise interact with the mimed virtual object presented by Daz's avatar. Nevertheless, there is a sudden lighting change and the two actors quickly hop into different positions. This is an indicator that the avatars have suddenly been transported to a different space within the *Second Life* environment, despite having taken seemingly no action to do so. From this the audience can infer that Simon did indeed 'click' on the object presented, which resulted in the program transporting both avatars instantaneously to another location. However this clicking action (selection with the mouse)

has no representation within the virtual environment. This is not an 'immersive' element of the fictional world, but a functional operation within the software. No other user would be able to see Simon's mouse pointer move across the screen towards the object, and instead would merely see both avatars suddenly disappear. This reinforces for the audience the knowledge that Simon, while embodying an avatar in a virtual environment, is also interacting with the program on another level via the interface systems available to him (i.e., sitting in front of his PC). This is a simple, yet very direct illustration of Newman's theory: 'Rather than "becoming" a particular character in the gameworld, seeing the world through their eyes, the player encounters the game by relating to everything within the gameworld simultaneously.'<sup>19</sup>

### **Difference between *Second life* Representation and Game Representation in *Connected***

While *Connected* represents *Second Life* in such a way as to highlight the graphical infidelity and particular aesthetic qualities of the program interface, the performance chooses to illustrate the two characters' experience of gameplay quite differently. Quinn and Irvine's movements are much more fluid and natural in the sequence depicting a combat-based game, while their actions do not suggest the existence of an

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<sup>19</sup> Newman, James, "The Myth of The Ergodic Videogame: Some Thoughts on Player-Character Relationships in Videogames" *Game Studies*, Vol 2, Issue 1, (July 2002), <http://gamestudies.org/0102/newman/>.

additional layer of available player action. There is no indication of any user interface systems presented to the players, or any additional game information, such as health or map location, for the players to act on.

It is true that many contemporary videogames now boast a graphical fidelity far beyond that of *Second Life*. The movements of the player-character appear much more fluid and natural, while the virtual environments which they occupy are supported by complex physics simulations which grow more advanced with each iteration.<sup>20</sup> As such, the representation of the in-game action in a much more fluid way than that of *Second Life* is justifiable and easily understood as a point of contrast between the two levels of graphical fidelity. However, even with these advances in graphics technology, there is still a predominance of additional information provided to players that does not form a part of the virtual environment inhabited by the game characters. This information, such as current weapon selection and remaining ammunition in case of a combat game, can be vital to the player's successful completion of the challenges presented. In the case of ammunition the player must continuously monitor both the total available and the current amount in the virtual weapon's 'clip'. Should their clip run out at the wrong time, they might be forced to reload while out of cover, and as such find themselves unable to defend themselves at a vital moment. Furthermore, information such as current distance from target, friendly player location, and current

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<sup>20</sup> For example several of the games produced on Crytek's latest game engine (the CryEngine 3) have startlingly real light, texture, and particle effects. See *Crysis 2*, (Crytek, 2011).

health status will often be displayed for the player, augmenting the virtual environment with digital notations, forming a HUD that dynamically adapts to the player's actions. This HUD information is displayed solely for the player him or herself. In multiplayer combat an opposing player's HUD is not visible to the player.

Rather than represent the HUD, which has no literal existence within the virtual environment created, *Connected* omits it from its representation of the game experience. Where as in *Second Life* the performance highlights the additional software interfaces and their disconnection from the virtual world, for the videogame experience, *Connected* favours a representation which draws much more heavily on a consistent, narrative driven, 'realist' world (albeit one based on Hollywood realism). This creates a film-centred representation that denies the player's simultaneous relationship with both the systems of digital notation and the virtual world. As stated by Newman,<sup>21</sup> this simultaneous relationship is fundamental to the process of game interaction.

### **Denial of the Body**

The relationship with these additional elements of the game, such as the HUD, do not necessarily distance the player from the game's virtual world and are often unconscious relationships, which develop through the

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<sup>21</sup> Newman, James, "The Myth of The Ergodic Videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames" *Game Studies*, Vol 2, Issue 1, (July 2002), <http://gamestudies.org/0102/newman/> I see also previous chapter.

course of interaction. Graeme Kirkpatrick attempts to theorise these relationships in his essay 'Controller, Hand, Screen: Aesthetic Form in the Computer Game.'<sup>22</sup> For Kirkpatrick, the control interface is the convergent element through which the game experience is formed. As the umbilical connection between the user and the game, all experience is condensed into the interface, which codifies our movements and translates them into corresponding actions on screen. Though Kirkpatrick does not address it, the same is true of gestural controls such as the Nintendo's Wii Remote, Sony's Playstation Move and Microsoft's Kinect. In each case the movements of the player are reinterpreted by the software into actions within the game, be that within the virtual environment or in the additional layer of game interface such as inventory selection, text box opening, etc.

Kirkpatrick argues that this system of interface, though at first perhaps strange, eventually becomes second nature to the player as they become more and more familiar with the control system they are using, eventually allowing them to investigate the limits and opportunities afforded by the interface. He states: 'When we feel we have learned enough of the controller syntax in this way – its basic terms and grammar – we try to speak for ourselves.'<sup>23</sup>

This familiarity with the control system results in a repression of the conscious difference between the real action of button pressing and the

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<sup>22</sup> Kirkpatrick, Graeme, "Controller, Hand, Screen: Aesthetic Form in the Computer Game" *Games and Culture*, Vol 4, No. 2, SAGE Publications, (2009), 127 – 143.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

virtual in-game action. As our movements and interactions with the controller are re-encoded as actions within the virtual world, our body itself becomes re-encoded to the virtual world and subsequently repressed in favour of these virtual actions. Pushing a button is no longer simply pushing a button, but is transformed in a virtual action within the game world. In this case it is not the availability of a fluid virtual identity that offers us an escape from the body, but rather a recodification of the body's movements into the game narrative. The use of language in videogame walkthroughs and guides is indicative of this redefined action, we do not 'push x and the control stick forward to jump the gap' - instead we simply 'jump the gap'. Kirkpatrick uses the example of the popular Quick Time Event as an illustration of this repression. In broad terms, a Quick Time Event is a sequence of animation within a game whereby a player has no control over the action taking place, at some point within this sequence the player will be given the command to press a particular button or combination of buttons in order to prevent a 'game over'. This command usually takes the form of an animation showing an image of the particular button to press and either an arrow indicating the direction of pressure to be applied or simply the word, 'Press'. The prevalence of these sequences is much debated by game enthusiasts as potentially frustrating sequences of game action. Kirkpatrick argues that the intrusion of controller animation in game sequences breaks the repression of action relationships, which the player has established through familiarity with the controller. He argues that seeing the controller on screen highlights its 'otherness',

reminding us that our movements have been redefined by the game's mechanics, and as such the Quick Time Event distances us from the game by asserting the original value of our interaction with the controller (pushing a button).

Kirkpatrick's argument suggests that through the playing of videogame, an exchange takes place whereby the real movements of the body are re-encoded in favour of the action represented on screen. This exchange leads to a neglect of the body by defining the body's movements only in terms of the game, placing the body as secondary to the in-game action. This creates a state whereby the position of the body is in tension between real demands of physical existence and the virtual demands of the game. This 'contested body' gives a framework by which we can reconcile the tension between the narrative and ludic elements of gameplay experience.

Both videogames and *Second Life* provide users opportunity to interact within a virtual world and in doing so, establish a repression of the human body in favour of the virtual one. This creates a telepresence in which the player/user is transported into the virtual world while remaining present in their physical selves, becoming present in this virtual world and the physical at once.<sup>24</sup> This telepresence can be considered pleasurable in itself as Murray mentions: 'The experience of being transported to

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<sup>24</sup> See Taylor, Laurie, "When Seams Fall Apart: Videogame space and the player" *Game Studies*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, (Dec 2003).

elaborately simulated places is pleasurable in itself regardless of the fantasy content.<sup>25</sup>

While for *Second Life* this telepresence is the goal of the program, focusing on the opportunities for expression afforded within a virtual environment, the focus of the videogame is different. Players enter a telepresent state via the umbilical cord of the controller (or their own codified gestures, consumed by a digital reader such as Kinect). This telepresence is latent within the operation of a virtual environment, yet drawn upon by the ludic and narrative elements of the game. Here operation of the game serves to favour the virtual over the physical in the telepresent relationship. The player's physical actions are only considered in terms of their impact on the virtual environment. These impacts are then gauged in terms of either narrative or ludic operation within the game structure. As such, the player's presence in the virtual world oscillates between ludic and narrative engagement.

The representation of the experience of engagement with a virtual environment in *Connected* similarly oscillates between these states, focusing at times on narrative and at times on the operation of the software itself. However, *Connected's* performance methodology does not illustrate the simultaneity of the ludic, narrative, and functional processes in a game experience. Instead the piece favours narrative engagement, which draws on the theme of desire to escape the natural body in favour of the virtual.

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<sup>25</sup> Murray, Janet *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 98.



Quinn's lines in the opening sequence of the performance illustrate this desire:

We're living in a way we never could any place else. We get to be heroes! We get to be more than just some shmuck writing up reports in an office.

This process of transformation or telepresence is illustrated by the moments of functional engagement represented by the performance. These serve as a reminder not only that body has been redefined, but also as to 'how' this redefinition has happened. As such the moments of functional engagement represented in *Connected* provide an aesthetic framework by which the audience can 'read' the onstage action as virtual.

#### **Understanding Games through 'The Contested Body'**

The representations of engagement with digital environments in *Connected* are constructed in such a way as to ignore or discount the physical body of the character engaging with the technology, exchanging the player's physical body for a virtual one. Only once the characters' in-game avatars are dead, or the engagement with the software interrupted or halted, do we see any representation of the characters' physical selves when playing a computer game. In each instance the body is substituted, and the mind engaged in a telepresent form of engagement with a fictional environment. In presenting two differing methods of representation, *Connected* illustrates the dichotomy between engagement in a fictional narrative, and engagement with the bare mechanics of interactive software.

Similarly, *Connected's* representations of the gameplay experience refuses to illustrate the body of the player beyond initial engagement during a gameplay sequence. The player's body is only represented once the gameplay session has been interrupted, or completed (such as the characters' in-game failure at the beginning of the performance), and for the duration of the play session has no real existence on stage. Through these illustrations the fragility of the body's position in these engagements is highlighted, a position which Kirkpatrick's essay similarly illuminates. In many ways, *Connected* provides a robust methodology for the representation of the contested body in virtual environments, and by understanding the body's position in a gameplay session as contested; a framework is provided for further understanding the player experience. However the difficulty of reconciling a player's potentially conflicting ludic and narrative engagements within a gameplay experience still remains.

Chapter V outlined two conflicting arguments for theorising gameplay interaction. Firstly Mateas' theory in which games may be understood through an adaptation of Aristotle's *Poetics* and consideration of Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, as akin to a mask-wearing experience, one which centres almost entirely on the narrative operation of the game.

Conversely, Newman argues that player engagement is in fact *never* at a narrative level but is always a ludic experience of the game's rule structures and set goals. Newman cites the game experience not at the point of player-character relationships but at the point of player-software interface.

By considering the position of the body as contested during a gameplay experience (via Kirkpatrick's discussion of the nature of the controller) I suggest that we can perhaps arrive at a synthesis of these two theories.

Through considering the practical method of interfacing with digital software, the player's body is redefined as part of the fluid and virtual space. It becomes a 'contested' object, serving as a channel through which the player may engage with the virtual world, and the actions of the body are rebranded solely in terms of their effect in the virtual world. However the needs of the body (food, sleep, waste disposal, etc.) are not negated, and prevent a complete transition into the virtual world. Hence the body's position is contested between the physical needs of the body and the definition of bodily action by the hardware and software being used. While this raises issues as to the nature of the virtual body in metaphysical terms,<sup>26</sup> I will instead consider how the player's real body as 'contested' may inform an understanding of the player's subjective experience and the representation of such as presented by *Connected* and *Man of Valour*.

In redefining the actions of the body in videogame terms, player actions become defined in terms of game action. Freed from the grounding of the 'real' body, players occupy an oscillating position of engagement with the game, moving between engagement with the ludic elements of the game

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<sup>26</sup> There already exist numerous discussions on the nature of the virtual body, for example see Murray, CD, and Sixsmith, J "The Corporeal Body in Virtual Reality" *Ethos*, Vol. 27, No. 3, Body, Self, and Technology (Sept, 1999), 315 – 343.

and the narrative elements of the game as each take precedence at different times. Sudden breaks with this engagement can be unpleasant, as Kirkpatrick notes with his discussion on the Quick Time Event, a sudden reminder of our bodies removes the player from their engagement with the game.<sup>27</sup> However, as player engagement with the game increases, the player becomes more comfortable and enjoys a more fluid interaction with the game itself. The simple operative tasks of the game mechanics become second nature as players progress through increasingly difficult ludic challenges; similarly players find greater and greater familiarity with the narrative of their gameplay experience. This narrative can be either an engagement with the game through traditionally written characters designed by the game studio, or an engagement with players' own narrative experience of a non-narrative game.

While players' *initial* engagement with the game may begin from a purely ludic or narrative standpoint, as a gameplay session develops they begin to oscillate between these two states of engagement. In the some cases, as highlighted by Juul,<sup>28</sup> the ludic and narrative elements of the game support each other and act in tandem, narrative goals leading ludic development and ludic operations leading narrative flow. As the player engagement begins to peak, the player begins to engage with the ludic and narrative elements of the game *simultaneously* and the body is further

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<sup>27</sup> Kirkpatrick, Graeme, "Controller, Hand, Screen: Aesthetic Form in the Computer Game" *Games and Culture*, Vol 4, No. 2, SAGE Publications, (2009), 127 – 143

<sup>28</sup> Juul, Jesper, *Half-Real: Videogames between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

distanced. Successes or failures in the game world may lead to uncontrolled or even unconscious actions on behalf of the player's body (leaning the body with the controller, or sudden unintentional vocal outbursts are common). The player's relationship with the game has become a more complex engagement than a single operation of narrative or ludic understanding. The player is kept in a heightened emotional state, ungrounded by the body and through which both ludic and narrative elements of the game may have considerable impact on the player's emotional state. Of course, such a state is unsustainable, and subject to frequent breaks through various means. These breaks from the emotional intensity allow the player's body to reassert itself, complaining of hunger, poor seating position, and so forth. At this point the player is re-grounded by their bodily existence and begins a new cycle of engagement with the game. As before, this cycle may begin with either a narrative or ludic connection, but as the player continues to play, again the two elements begin to intertwine and the player once again moves towards a heightened state of engagement. This process of an engagement cycle is illustrated in part by both *Connected* and *Man of Valour* in their representations of gameplay on stage through the performance methodology they both present.

## **Conclusion**

*Connected's* performance methodology provides us with an illustration of the player experience by which the body becomes contested or repressed through engagement with a virtual environment. The performance provides us with meaningful methods of representing both transitions between virtual and real worlds, while maintaining some illustration of the interface artefacts unique to the medium. Though the contested nature of the body is by no means resolved, by considering this bodily engagement we can understand this separation process as providing the entry point to a game experience. Drawing on Kirkpatrick's article in conjunction with Newman's work provides a framework by which we can identify the operation of this contested body and apply that framework to *Connected's* representation of the gameplay experience. However, when considering games rather than *Second Life*, *Connected's* performance methodology still primarily positions games within a language of film. This representational preference for narrative engagement suggests that the void presented by the neglect of the body can be fully replaced by the narrative process of a virtual world.

*Connected's* performance methodology suggests that it is the characters and fiction of the digital world, rather than the ludic elements of the game, that draws us away from the physical. However, *Connected* also illustrates this separation from the physical, and highlights that the position of the body is contested. Through this process we can understand that, in fact, it is the contested nature of the body in games which allows us to engage with *both* narrative and ludic operations within a gameplay experience.

This experience of gameplay is communicated to the audience vicariously through the characters presented on stage. The following chapters consider two performances which have aimed to go beyond this vicarious experience by capitalising on the live nature of theatre and attempting to use this to re-create the experience of videogame play for the audience by providing opportunity for the audience to interact with the performance using a videogame framework.

### **Section 3:**

## **Playing the Game Live**



## Chapter VII:

### *Best Before*

In 2010, as part of the Cork Midsummer festival, German theatre group Rimini Protokoll staged a series of performances of their interactive performance piece '*Best Before*'. With this work, Rimini Protokoll aims to combine theatre and computer games, promising that: '*Best Before* pulls the multi-player video game out of the virtual realm and rewires it for an intimate theatre setting.'<sup>1</sup> The result of collaboration between Rimini Protokoll and game industry members from the Vancouver region, *Best Before* featured performances from both actors and non-actors interspersed with moments of videogame play in which the audience engaged with a piece of game software designed especially for the performance. Through this integration of live video gaming with performance Rimini Protokoll's *Best Before* brought the individual's player experience into a theatre configuration, allowing it to both interrogate the player's behaviour and their experience of that behaviour, therefore drawing direct comparisons between the game decisions and the personal experience of the performers on stage.

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<sup>1</sup> From Rimini Protokoll website, [http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project\\_4397.html](http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project_4397.html) accessed 20st June 2013.

Rimini Protokoll is the name under which German artists Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzel have been creating performances since 2000. Since then the company have produced in excess of 40 individual projects.<sup>2</sup> Rimini Protokoll's work is characterised by documentary theatre practices and is grouped as part of the 'Reality Trend' or 'Theatre der Zeit' of contemporary German theatre. The company typically centres its performances on 'real-life' events, places, or the lives and actions of individuals with very little performance experience. The company often uses elements of biography and autobiography delivered by these 'non-actors' as central texts to their work.

Performances vary widely from traditional style monologue delivery in proscenium-arch theatre configurations to complex multimedia performances in non-traditional or mobile spaces. Examples include *Radio Muezzin*, a performance that generated its text and performance from workshops with a group of Muezzins from Cairo (members of the Islamic church who act as caretakers for mosques and announce the call to prayer), and was presented in a standard theatre format using the non-actor Muezzins as performers for the piece. Mobile multi-media performances include *Outdoors*, a hybrid theatre piece centred on the rehearsal practices of a Welsh choir group, 'Heartsong Choir', in which audience members use personal digital music players to navigate a performance route with moments of biography and pre-recorded song, culminating in a live choral event. *Best Before* is strongly rooted in Rimini

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Protokoll's documentary format, drawing its performance text in autobiographical form from the lives of a number of individuals whose professions ranged from game designer to traffic warden. Each individual discussed the progress of their own careers and life choices, as well as their relation to the project since its inception. These discussions were used in order to create the text around which the performance was structured, a text which largely retained its biographical nature.

The performance itself was a hybrid of computer-game activity and documentary theatre performance, moving between sequences of audience members engaging with the game software presented and sections of direct presentation of autobiographical text, most commonly in monologue form. The stage presented a number of small tables and various props, behind which sat four performers, with a musician seated to stage left with a guitar connected to a simple amplification system. Dominating the space was a large projection on the back wall, showing a digital representation of the interior of a large empty green box. This green box was the digital environment of 'BestLand', a multi-player video game to be played during the performance. To stage left and stage right, at a height of about eight feet were two signs showing the face of simple control pads, with the buttons notated for their function (jump, move, etc.) These control pads were located either under the auditorium seating or in pockets on the backs of seats in front of a given seat. Audience members were encouraged to pick up these controllers, which would allow them to interact with and control basic avatars in BestLand. The performance

began with an introduction to each of the performers, their lives, and their relationship to the piece. Performers included electronic artist Brady Marks, who designed the software for the game; a former videogame tester and EA employee Duff Armour; traffic controller Ellen Schultz; and researcher Arjan Dhupia. Each performer presented a series of short monologues introducing themselves and telling the audience a little about their history and how they had arrived at this point.



Performers' monologues were usually centred around what jobs they do or used to do, events in their life, and some of their aspirations for the future. Each performer could be loosely classed as 'non-actor', in that the script they were working from was derived, documentary-style, from their own

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<sup>3</sup> Image from Rimini Protokoll's performance of *Best Before* from Push Festival website, <http://pushfestival.ca/2010/10/rimini-protokolls-best-before-a-triumphant-achievement/>, last accessed 13<sup>th</sup> Feb 2013.

lives and they each had little or no formal actor training. Interspersed with this was a series of game moments in which the audience was introduced to the on-screen game, the basic controls available to them, and a few small exercises for audiences to practice these controls with. Additionally, the performers would open the 'back end' of the programme to adjust the game for various reasons including audience turnout (eliminating characters which did not have players) or any software glitches which might require a reset. The remainder of the performance moved between short documentary-style monologues presented by the performers and moments when the audience was asked to make certain decisions about their avatars and the world they inhabited. Players' avatars were simple two-coloured spheres, and players could identify which avatar they controlled by matching the colours to a sticker on the controller. For example, when I attended the performance I had a red and yellow sticker on my controller, indicating that I was in control of the red and yellow sphere on the screen. Once the basic mechanics of 'BestLand' had been introduced, the performers then asked the audience to vote on an issue or make a decision about their avatar during a play sequence. Player decisions were represented by moving their avatar to a geographically significant part of the game world, (i.e., move to the left if you want your character to be a girl, to the right if you want to be a boy). Throughout the performance the avatar's age was displayed on a small stand, stage left, and players decisions were recorded and represented via minor graphical alterations to the player's avatar. Typically a play session would begin with

an update to the avatar's age, a performer would remove a sheet from the stand, displaying a new number and stage, 'you are now aged [number on sheet].' The decisions put to the audience would generally correspond to the 'age' of the avatar, (i.e., when avatars reached age 16 players/audience members were given the option of entering the workplace or engaging in further study). These mechanics formed the central process of the 'BestLand' game and the framework around which the performance progressed.

### **BestLand and the MMO**

*Best Before's* 'BestLand' game software takes a large amount of its inspiration from the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) genre to inform its construction, deriving several key elements from the game genre.

MMORPGs refer to a style of videogame in which a large number of online players simultaneously occupy and interact with a large digital environment via a standard Internet connection. Players take control of a character or number of characters which they can customise and edit within set parameters, taking on a particular role, usually that of a hero, within the fictional narrative of the game (hence the 'Role-playing' element of the game.) Players can act co-operatively or as individuals to complete a number of quests and tasks set out by game designers, or can devise their own activities within the game world.

The MMORPG's history derives largely from table-top role-playing games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*,<sup>4</sup> in which multiple players co-operate to complete quests set out by a single lead player or 'Dungeon master'. This Dungeon Master would propose to players a setting, or story (usually at the entrance to a dense series of caverns, castles, or other fantasy interior spaces) in which the player had a number of options to explore and interact with objects. The Dungeon Master would then use a series of statistic-based rules, in combination with dice-rolls to determine the outcome of certain actions. These games found their way into the digital realm initially through text interface systems designed for single-player experiences with games such as *ADVENT* and *ZORK*.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1970s, programmers began to design text-based adventures which would accommodate multiple players at once, creating digital environments through text-description in much the same fashion as the text-based adventure game. Players could join the game by running particular software on machines within the accessible network of the time (usually a university-based network such as ARPANET<sup>6</sup>). Once within a game, players could interact with these environments and each other through the use of simple text commands. Often players would provide short text descriptions of their characters which other players could access

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<sup>4</sup> *Dungeons and Dragons*, (Wizards of the Coast LLC. 1995 - Present)

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the Text-based adventure see Chapter VII on *BrainExplode!*

<sup>6</sup>ARPANET or The Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, was a US based network and one of the first large scale computer networks created. Its primary function was to assist communications and research between high-level research groups.

in-game (usually through a command such as 'look at [playername]', which would then return the block of text description the player had assigned for themselves.) This allowed players to create simple digital alter-egos, the first 'avatars' in a sense. These early systems were known as 'Multi-User Dungeons' or MUDs in reference to the early dungeon-based text-adventure games, and for the first time allowed a large number of players to simultaneously engage in digital gameplay from remote locations. They existed as 'persistent' games, in that the game software was usually continuously running on a single machine or server which was then accessed by players, rather than requiring each individual player to boot up the software independently on their own machines. These MUDs proved to be highly popular, with several variant systems being designed in the following years, including programmes that attempted to replace the text-based system with graphical representations of both players and the digital environment created. However, it was not until 1997, with the release of Origin Systems' *Ultima Online*,<sup>7</sup> that such graphically represented systems became truly popular and the term 'MMORPG' was coined. *Ultima Online* was the first popular example of an online multi-user game in which hundreds of players were able to occupy and interact with the same digital environment simultaneously, hence the moniker, 'Massively Multi-player.' For a set monthly fee, players were able to access a remote server, maintained and monitored by the game designers, which would host the digital environment that players could

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<sup>7</sup> *Ultima Online*, (Origin Systems, 1997).



explore. Rather than requiring text descriptions of the players, individuals could customise their characters/avatars by selecting from a number of predesigned character classes (knight, mage, etc.) and races (elf, human, etc.) The visual appearance of these characters would then be altered by what in-game equipment they were currently carrying. The game proved very popular and the sheer volume of players within the game, coupled with the longevity of play, created a wide variety of emergent patterns of player behaviour, including complex economic and social systems developing, which were in many cases unique to the game. The game also included an extensive player vs. player combat system, in which players could attack other players in designated areas for various rewards. Since *Ultima Online* several MMORPGs have been developed and released by a wide variety of companies, the current most popular iteration being Blizzard/Activision's *World of Warcraft* series MMORPG, which places players in control of a single character within the fantasy setting of the *Warcraft* franchise. Despite the advances in game development, these MMORPGs still retain a number of similar tendencies and traits that influence both game design and player behaviour. Rimini Protokoll have attempted to integrate many of these traits and tendencies into the software for 'BestLand'. The similarities between 'BestLand' and most MMORPGs can be usefully understood in two categories: The first as those similarities within the digital environment, and the second as those similarities with the game mechanics themselves.



In the case of 'BestLand' the programme is already running when audience/players enter the space and remains running once the audience leave. This creates a persistence of the digital environment, as it exists not within the bounds of the performance itself (i.e., after the fire announcement and before the curtain call), but as a suggested constant. The staging suggests that game environment is continuously generated and that, though it is only populated once audience members enter the space and interact with the programme, its existence extends beyond each performance instance. This is further reinforced within the

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<sup>8</sup> Screenshot from *Ultima Online: Kingdom Reborn* (Electronic Arts, 2007). This edition of *Ultima Online* was available as a free update that had little influence on the core gameplay, however was a significant update to the graphics of the game. Note the editable armour and clothing tabs on the right.

performance as the audience/players' characters are universally affected by a condition set out by the previous audience; they are then, towards the end of the performance, given an option to set a condition for the next audience. The combination of the continuously projected digital environment and a small connection to both previous and following audiences further reinforce the idea that 'BestLand' is a continuous digital place, persistent in its existence much like the digital environments of *Ultima Online* or *World of Warcraft*. However, unlike these online programmes, the population of the digital environment is strictly limited to those who are in attendance of the performance. There are no options for remote access, so those players that are engaging with the software are strictly the audience members present for the performance at that given time. Furthermore the software is running on a single machine accepting commands from multiple controllers, and providing a single output. In contrast MMORPG players would usually be accessing the digital world of their chosen game through a personal computer, allowing each player their own unique perspective on the game at any given time. Though the 'BestLand' software does support several players at once, this is limited to a single machine, with a shared output monitor (the upstage projection.) The limitation of a single machine, with a single screen output prevents players from reaching a viewpoint unique to their own play experience (aside from the minor alterations owing to seating position.) In this way the experience more closely resembles that of co-operative multiplayer experiences on a private console, in which smaller groups of players

(usually between 2 and 4) might play together either in direct competition with each other (as in titles such as Nintendo's *Wii Sports*<sup>9</sup>), or in pursuit of a common goal (as in titles such as Capcom's *Resident Evil 5*<sup>10</sup>).

The audience/player's existence within this digital space could also be considered in terms of the MMORPG. Interaction with the software is provided through individual handheld controllers, each with a small two-colour sticker attached to the face of the controller. This two-colour sticker referenced a small two-colour sphere in 'BestLand' over which the player had control. These spheres were anthropomorphised through the addition of a pair of cartoon eyes giving the spheres a rudimentary 'face'. As the vehicle for player interaction, these spheres each served as the audience/player's avatar for 'BestLand,' and were customisable according to certain choices offered throughout the course of the performance. For example, players could decide if their avatar should be male or female, and the corresponding choice was reflected through a change in the shape of the sphere (top heavy for male, bottom heavy for female.) As the game progressed, players could begin to identify their avatars, not merely as the assigned colour scheme at the initial stages of the game, but as a customised avatar, which represented their unique choices within the game world.

In terms of game mechanics, 'BestLand' most notably seems to borrow the principles of in-game economy through the provision of digital currency

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<sup>9</sup> *Wii Sports*, (Nintendo, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> *Resident Evil 5*, (Capcom, 2009).

to each of the player's avatars. Each player was 'awarded' a certain amount of digital money with which they could occasionally make in-game purchases (such as a car, or a house) that would affect their avatar's appearance. Choices as to what kind of 'employment' their avatar should take also affected the amount of digital currency a player would possess. However, this digital economy was limited as a player could only make single purchases within the game at set times or sequences within the performance; additionally players were not afforded opportunity to trade among themselves. This prevented the development of any kind of interior economy within 'BestLand'. Furthermore, at no point would a player be in a position where they could not afford an option presented to them. Though players' avatars existed in a shared digital space, these restrictions prevented them from existing within a shared economic space, reducing the provision of digital currency to an arbitrary mechanic that afforded no emergent behaviour within the game space and as such, no emergent economy.

#### **'BestLand' and the MMORPG: Some Differences.**

Though *Best Before* proposes 'BestLand' as a multi-player game, players remain largely isolated from one another throughout the course of the performance, with little or no opportunity to interact outside of strictly defined periods of semi-competitive action. Even at this, player avatars are returned to a status quo. Late in the performance, audience/players are given the opportunity to 'pair' with another player through pushing a button on their controller, giving players the potential to directly effect each others

avatars. Pressing the correct button causes a large pink sphere to extend from the player's avatar for a few brief moments. Should two players 'spheres' overlap, those players become paired to one another and are forced by the programme to remain within a set proximity of each other. However, players can separate again at the simple press of a button. Players who are still paired later in the performance are given the option to 'have children'. This leads to the generation of a number of smaller spheres populating the digital space, depending on the number of pairs that say 'yes'.

However, aside from this pairing, the options for interaction between players are in fact extremely limited, and those interactions that are afforded to players are largely without consequence as players are frequently returned to a 'default' state at various points in the performance. For the majority of the game, aside from the pairing mechanic, players are unable to directly affect each other's avatars. There are no options for player vs. player combat (a staple of most MMORPGs), nor are there opportunities for player cooperation towards a common goal. Players cannot attack or challenge one another in order to acquire resources or points, or even simply for the glory of winning in a competition. At one segment of the game, audience/players are invited to race one another from one side of the screen to another, but as each player's avatar movement speed is a pre-set constant (and players cannot affect each other at this point as pairing has not been introduced), there are few variables to make such competition an engaging experience. This isolation

prevents the development of meaningful action within the performance on the behalf of the individual playing. While this does not necessarily limit the player's individual agency, it is detrimental to the development of an in-game community. Such a community is a key element of the MMORPG (and the stated goals of the performance), and shares many similarities to those communities formed online, as will be discussed later.

Furthermore, the arbitrary nature of the digital currency in the game means that there are no shared resources for players to compete for. Players cannot perform actions to accrue more money from one another, nor can they make donations. Furthermore, as money is only allocated in response to choices presented by the game designer, it is not a limited resource. If every player in the game made the same choices, they would all have the same amount of money, as the reward system would dictate so. In a sense, 'BestLand' exists as a kind of utopia where rarity and hardship have been eliminated. Without the presence of scarcity or threat within the game world, players are not in competition either with each other or the game itself, and so have neither impetus nor structure for emergent player behaviour through competitive interaction. The emergence of individual game narratives is dependent on this emergent behaviour, as player choice (when influenced by a knowledge of consequence) greatly informs player's experience. In many ways this drastically alters the function of 'BestLand' to that of a simulator programme such as *Second Life* or *The Sims* in which player's avatars exist within a digital environment but do not strive to achieve a set goal or favoured outcome.

Despite these limitations, audience/players for *Best Before* are still afforded an opportunity to interact with a digital environment in an anonymous fashion through the use of avatars. Though players are at times given opportunity to identify themselves within the theatre space, they are not required to do so, nor are their avatar choices required to reflect the actuality of their own existence or beliefs. Players of 'BestLand' have the chance to identify within the game as a gender other than their own, as a character that experiments with hard drugs, or as an avid gun owner (though they cannot actually fire the gun). Through this anonymity, *Best Before* uses the platform of 'BestLand' to create a microcosm of an online-community.

### **The Nature of Online Community**

The MMORPG, as an online entity allowing players to communicate with one another, naturally gives rise to the formation of communities within the game. These communities, being derived from interaction within a videogame, are not rooted within physical locality but rather are non-centred phenomena based online. Nessim Watson, writing in *Virtual Culture: Identity & Communication in Cyber-Society*,<sup>11</sup> attempts to address some of the issues around the notion of community in an environment where relationships are no longer defined by physical proximity. Rather than accept the dictionary definition of community as one that is

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<sup>11</sup> Watson, Nessim "Why we argue about virtual community: A case study of the Phish.net fan community" in Jones, Steven Ed. *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, (London: Sage Publications, 1997) 102-132.



dependent on individuals living within geographical borders, Watson instead considers community to be based in communication, and shared ideals rather than location. This understanding of an online community is important for considerations of how groups of players interact with each other in MMORPGs.

Using the online activity of a group of fans of the rock band called Phish, Watson identifies a number of key elements of online communities that create tension between traditional community standards, and those of the 'online community'. These factors, which seem most closely aligned with traditional community configurations, include the development of group-specific languages or terminologies which draw from shared experience. These terminologies can vary from a linguistic short-hand that has derived from common contextual action within the group's behaviour, to the invention of wholly new terms, or the redefinition of existing terms used to describe action that is particular to that group. For example the Alternate-Reality-Game-enthusiasts that frequent the Unfiction.com forums have appropriated the term 'trout' to denote information which has already been posted to a particular thread, defining the act of 'trouting' as posting game solutions or details that have already been discovered and shared within the forum.

These linguistic manipulations are the first stage in a group beginning to define itself as a single 'whole unit,' and such tendencies are also present in player behaviour in MMORPGs. These linguistic manipulations become the first terms whereby an online group may begin defining itself against

other online collectives. The use of language in a group specific way delineates one online group from another, and carries within it an inherent value system as certain phrases and acts begin to gather either negative or positive connotations. From these value systems a group morality can then be extrapolated, giving moral guidance to new individuals who join a group. This morality acts as an identifying marker to the group and an index to a kind of shared desire, or common set of goals. This morality also begins to take on a very real impact as the online community begins to self-police in accordance with the behavioural norms it has defined. For Watson, such acts of self-policing, and a defined moral system that is often in opposition to other common behaviours forms the basis of a community and as such is sufficient to class an online group as 'community'. *Best Before*, in its attempts to build a community (insofar as possible within the time constraints of the performance) attempts to encourage this common morality through the choices it offers the players of BestLand. Choices surrounding those issues such as education or gun ownership, result in aesthetic changes to player avatars. While these changes do not directly effect gameplay, they do provide a visual 'snapshot' of the community created within each performance. This visual indicators highlight the lifestyle choices made by those in the performance space with relation to their avatars.

Watson does, however, problematise online community, pointing out both the anonymity and the leisure nature of online activity. The possibility of anonymous communication between users removes a degree of culpability

for an individual's statements. Without this culpability, the sincerity and intimacy of the exchange is called into question and damages the otherwise robust operation of the community. The same may be said for the use of avatars in the MMORPG, however this anonymity is a distinctly different state from pseudonymity, which is less problematic. In the case of anonymous communication exchange the identity of either party is a fluid variable and as such the recognition and establishment of normative behaviour is much more difficult, and the formation of a collective identity much more problematic.<sup>12</sup> However, in those cases whereby pseudonymity is the dominant format of communication, users are afforded the opportunity to construct and maintain a unique identity, which is comprised of all communications made under a given username. This also attaches a degree of accountability to each person's actions and allows him or her to then be more easily judged against the behavioural norms defined by the group. In the case of Phish.net this consistent pseudonymity was reinforced by requiring posters to attach their real 'user-id' to each post.

### **Online Community and the MMORPG**

In many ways players of online videogames begin to exhibit tendencies that are comparable to those outlined by Watson in his consideration of

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<sup>12</sup> In some cases, internet groups such as the users of 4chan.org or the hactivist collective, 'Anonymous', have used a rigorous anonymity as a defining factor of their identity, organising the value of anonymity as a key part of a dominant ideology. However, these instances provide problematic analysis in their own right which would be inappropriate to tackle in this instance.

online communities in general, but with some important differences. The primary difference is that all player actions are contextualised with reference to the game being played. This contextualisation also forms the beginning of customised language and behavioural norms within a group. Terminologies and phrasing develop around common player behaviours and the values associated with those behaviours are most commonly linked to the nature of gameplay strategy. Often, the normative behaviours that develop within a given community for any online game are indicative of the particular play style or desires of the group engaging with that game.

Players who act within these community rules are easily identified engaged by the game into an online pseudonymity. In the MMORPG this pseudonymity is created through the possession of a player avatar and player name, which is permanently attached to the player's individual game account. In this case the player's identity inhabits this avatar/name combination for the duration of gameplay. This gives players accountability for their actions, and a lasting history of behaviour can form around a player's identity. This accountability makes the nature of the game community all the more important, as the identified behaviour of a player can then alter how other players behave towards that player. The use of an avatar as a means of identifying players also reinstates a system of visual cues for hierarchal structure, though this is still based heavily in the

game context. In games such as *World of Warcraft*<sup>13</sup> players' avatars change appearance depending on their skill level and what in-game weapons/armour they are using. As many weapons are only accessible at certain levels of gameplay, well-versed players can tell at a glance at what level other players might be, and adapt their behaviour towards that player accordingly. This is hugely important in modern MMORPGs whereby many instances of gameplay are simply unplayable without co-operation from multiple players who can function as a working team. As such, the community of the MMORPG, while exhibiting similar tendencies to online community, is bound by the nature of the game itself. It is this binding effect which *Best Before* attempts to capture through its treatment of players in BestLand using both descriptive and visual cues.

Importantly, in all cases these visual cues only exist within the virtual environment of the game itself, which again creates an important distinction from the online-communities discussed by Watson. By engaging in a game within a set virtual environment, and using an avatar with which to interact with this virtual world, players become telepresent, moving into the virtual environment via the umbilical of the controller. This telepresence locates the players within a fixed virtual environment and as such reintroduces the notion of a community being defined by their geographic proximity. It is these elements of avatar pseudonymity and community through the shared virtual environment which *Best Before* attempts to appropriate for 'BestLand'.

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<sup>13</sup> *World of Warcraft*, (Activision/Blizzard, 2005).

### **'BestLand' as MMORPG Community Microcosm.**

Rimini Protokoll's appropriation of the multi-player game is primarily focused on elements of choice and online community. The primary means by which they impose this community is through the use of the virtual environment as a substitute for physical location as a means of defining community. The audience/players in *Best Before* are explicitly defined during the performance by their involvement in 'BestLand' by continuous referral on the part of the performers to the audience/players as 'citizens of BestLand'. As such, the performance seeks to impose a community structure upon the audience/players by applying geo-political terminology to a virtual environment, transforming players from individuals engaged in a gaming session to a collective defined by their occupation of a given geo-political space. In this case the geo-political space is a virtual one, the country is 'BestLand'. However, within this structure the relationships to other geo-political bodies is not defined spatially but *temporally*. Though at one stage the citizens of 'BestLand' are offered the opportunity to 'go to war' with another country, this other country's location, political alignment, or population are not known by the players. Nor can this warring country really affect the players, it is simply an idea used to highlight the issue of war within the performance. If players choose to go to war, then a small number of avatars are removed from the screen for a short time before being returned as 'veterans'. However, the players of these avatars have not experienced or even seen what has happened to their avatars; they

posses no 'tales from the front' with which to further reinforce the differences between 'BestLand' and this other country.

A meaningful inter-relationship between two virtual countries does exist in the notion that the citizens of 'BestLand' define themselves temporally against the citizens of previous and future 'BestLands'. Rather than the traditional geo-political assertions which place nationality within a set physical space, the citizens of 'BestLand' are encouraged to identify their role of citizens with reference to the existence of other 'BestLand' iterations in the past and future. In the initial moments of the performance, audience/players are told that the previous audience/player group was presented with a choice, as to an additional effect or game condition that might be enacted on the present players. Though this game condition has only a limited impact on the actual game, it serves to highlight the players as a community, not because of their physical location, but of their temporality. Additionally throughout the performance, the performers constantly make reference to the choices made by the audience/players of both the present performance and previous performances. Phrases often begin with terms like 'You guys don't...' or 'Last weeks' players did...' which serve to contextualise the audience/player behaviour within the history of the performance. Citizens of 'BestLand' are not defined by their position in relation to their neighbouring countries (which ostensibly do not exist) but in relation to previous and indeed future iterations of 'BestLand' as they too are presented with an option to impact the next audience's experience. This is not to say that identity within 'BestLand' is not

independent of spatial relationships. Indeed all existence within the performance is always already with reference to both time and space (the audience are seated in a certain auditorium, the virtual environment is unlike many others, etc.), but in the case of defining the 'BestLand' player community of a given performance, the emphasis is strongly placed on time, rather than space.

Within the community itself, the presence of an avatar within the virtual environment allows for a visual reading of player status and choice history, creating the pseudonymity that gives audience/players accountability for their actions. At various stages within the performance the audience/players are presented with choices for their avatars. These range from simple gender selection to choices about attending school and taking drugs. In each case the choice is a binary either/or selection with no third option, and in each case the player avatars are modified visually in some form to correspond to their choices. For example at one stage audience/players are given a choice: 'should your avatar go to school or stay at home and play videogames?' Should a player decide that their avatar should stay at home and play videogames, their avatar changes to include a small videogame controller attached to the avatar; should they decide to go to school a small mortarboard hat is attached to the avatar. Over time, the avatars gain a number of 'accessories', which indicate the choices they have made throughout the game. These choices also help to define the community of 'BestLand' in general and during the performance the performers will often reference statistics for the audience/player



behaviour during that performance (the gender split, the number of avatars who have chosen to buy a car, etc.). However, as there is little or no public communication between players, nor any significant game advantage to many of the choices presented, these visual cues remain purely an aesthetic appropriation from MMORPG tendencies and do not offer opportunity to build social hierarchies based on visual cues as might happen in *World of Warcraft*. There is no 'best way' to play 'BestLand' so visual indicators of player choice through alterations made to the avatars give no indication of player level, prowess, or game strategy. Additionally, with no communication between players structured into the game, there is little opportunity for players to develop as a community through discussion of the game itself; advantages of differing approaches, and indeed the development of a joint morality or behavioural norms through discussion is rendered impossible.

However, despite the limits of communication within 'BestLand', players are given opportunity to 'self-police' their community through a sequence whereby a leader of 'BestLand' is appointed. Audience/players are invited to race their avatars to a set of podiums created in the virtual environment. The first four to the top are 'up for election.' Each of these four avatars are then examined based on the series of choices they have made throughout the game, and given yes/no questions on issues such as, 'Will you raise taxes in BestLand?'. The winner is then decided by how many other players group around a given candidate, the most popular being elected to the position of 'Leader of BestLand'. Through this simple exercise in

democracy, the audience/players are given opportunity to define the 'BestLand' by majority agreement with a set of actions and promises. Once elected, the leader is given opportunity to either keep to his or her promises or to break them, though the options have very little real impact in the game world. Should a leader choose to break their promises the audience/players are given an opportunity to punish the leader by impeaching and even executing them. Should the majority vote to execute the leader a black hole opens in the virtual environment and the audience/players are invited to use their avatars to push the ex-leader's avatar into said hole, removing the player from the game by 'killing' them. Through this process the community is able to define its morality and what they feel is an appropriate punishment.

This execution also raises the first instance of death in 'BestLand' and poses an interesting problem as it is a permanent 'death'. Players who die in 'BestLand' are kicked from the game permanently, their avatar does not come back to life, nor are they granted a second avatar with which to engage in the game. While most games or interactive virtual environments redefine the process of player death as learning experience thorough systems such as extra-lives, checkpoints and save games, 'BestLand' reinstates death as a final act from which there is no return. In fact, in the final moments of performance 'BestLand' is totally cleansed of citizens as they are all killed off by means of a 'virtual wind' blowing them from the screen. Surprisingly the finality of this death is not mentioned at any stage in the performance, and it would be reasonable for any

audience/player to assume that the rules of death in 'BestLand' are no different to those in other games (i.e., not a final act in which the player loses their very presence within the virtual environment). At the moment of execution, then, there is also a moment of realisation for the audience/player in which they realise there is only 'one shot' at this game. Were 'BestLand' to be a more competitive or violent game this could lead to a dramatic shift in player behaviour, leading to much more conservative choices in order for players to remain active within the game. However, as 'BestLand' provides no further moments in which an avatar's life may be placed at risk, this re-affirmation of a permanent death is given little exploration as a fundamental game mechanic until the final moments of the performance when 'BestLand' is swept clean of all virtual life.

An exploration of the permanence of death within this virtual setting would create a substantial shift in the nature of the performance, which, as previously mentioned, is more focused on the nature of choice and options. Performers frequently discuss their own employment history and the choices they made which have led them to this point. Often the choices presented to the audience/players will align with these themes, the schooling question for example being posed after a performer has mentioned their own education. Yet, as many of these choices presented to the audience/player are without consequence to the game mechanics, and referenced only visually and statistically throughout the performance, the nature of choice is diminished. These choices become almost without consequence and as such nearly meaningless. The single strongest

possible consequence (that of avatar death) is present, yet the audience/players are shielded from it for the majority of the game. Through this configuration Rimini Protokoll's *Best Before* appears to have appropriated the aesthetic tendencies and effects of the multi-player game, yet remained disengaged from the core mechanics of gameplay itself, affording moments of exploration in only limited or isolated instances.

### **Conclusion**

Through appropriating some of the recognisable traits and behaviours of online community and the MMORPG, Rimini Protokoll's *Best Before* creates a performance that allows its audience to experience, as players, some of the basic mechanics of the multi-player game. These moments of shared virtual space, digital pseudonymity, and community self-policing provide audience members with a unique experience from performance to performance, while the presence of live performer monologues maintain a consistency of theme and authorship within the performance, preventing the audience from fully dictating the content of the performance. However, the format of the performance is not without its difficulties.

By continuously introducing new rule sets and options with each initial sequence of gameplay, the mechanics of the game itself cannot arrive at a stability that will allow audience/players to engage with the performance in a meaningful way. This serves as an obstacle for 'BestLand' developing those elements of community that are inherent in the MMORPG genre.

The players of 'BestLand' are prevented from becoming 'game fluent' (i.e., reaching a state whereby they are so familiar with basic mechanics of the game as to be able to develop their own unique and measured play-style and hence, create emergent game behaviours within each game session). This is further enforced by the lack of clear 'win' conditions or favourable endings for individual players. Without this game fluency and structured value system players are unable to express themselves in a meaningful way within the game structure. The choices and development of the 'BestLand' community for any given performance becomes purely reactionary. Without a clear delineation of goals or win conditions the audience/players are prevented from becoming invested in a particular outcome, and so are reduced to simple interaction with a virtual environment rather than a meaningful exploration of a narrative or theme within said environment. This creates a conflict between the performance's stated goals of creating an MMORPG, and the development of those community elements which are so essential do such a game format.

This conflict is a result of a conflict within the format of the performance. 'BestLand' is not holistically integrated into the performance as a whole, but rather is interspersed with moments of non-gameplay whereby the audience/players are rendered fully inactive by the software (which disconnects player control during the performer monologue.) As such the audience/player's relationship to the piece is continuously shifting, preventing them from developing a meaningful cathartic or empathetic relationship with either the performers or indeed their own avatars. Unlike

the engaged oscillation between narrative and ludic engagement as discussed in Chapters V and VI, the frequent changes of focus become problematic in the performance. Much as Kirkpatrick describes the Quick Time Event as a 'dialectical image',<sup>14</sup> so too is the event of the performer monologue in *Best Before*, breaking our experience from its condensed form and highlighting the strange and ridiculous nature of controlling a small ball with a brightly coloured controller. At once the game is dismissed and our attentions are turned to the biographical nature of the non-actor's monologue and the development of our relationship to their life and existence through performance takes precedent over the game. However, this contemplation is sharply sidelined as the game is once again re-introduced shifting the audience/player's attention away from passive information absorption and back towards a task-driven relationship with the performance via the game.

Though Rimini Protokoll's *Best Before* succeeds in giving the appearance of the multi-player game in a theatre format, its approach to integration of the two into a performance is ultimately problematic. In the next chapter this thesis will consider an instance whereby a performance might appropriate game mechanics into a theatre setting while taking advantage of those practices unique to both media to create a unified performance.

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<sup>14</sup> Kirkpatrick, Graeme "Controller, hand, screen: Aesthetic form in the computer game" *Games & Culture*, (April 2008).

## Chapter VIII:

### *BrainExplode!*

First performed in The Brick Theater, New York, as part of the *Game Play* festival 2011, Richard Lovejoy's *BrainExplode!* was a production that attempted to combine the popular '90's video game genre of 'adventure gaming' with live performance. The production promised to deliver a 'fully-interactive theatrical experience,'<sup>1</sup> in which 'audience members will navigate Ray [the protagonist] through a live-action adventure game.'<sup>2</sup> The piece was generally well received, one critic going so far as to state that, '*BrainExplode!* represents a new standard from which all game influence theater [sic] must be judged upon.'<sup>3</sup>

The performance itself took place over a period of approximately 90 minutes and featured three actors, some playing multiple roles. The piece was presented as 'end-on' or proscenium-arch style, with some use of voiceover, though the main character is always live. The audience was divided into two groups, observers making up the vast majority of the audience, with the front row, or total of six, audience members taking on

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<sup>1</sup> From marketing material available on [www.bricktheater.com](http://www.bricktheater.com), last accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2013.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> From Matthew Hawkin's article "Game Play 2011: Romeo and Julietet & BrainExplode!" 16<sup>th</sup> July 2011 from GameSetWatch [http://www.gamesetwatch.com/2011/07/game\\_play\\_2011\\_romeo\\_and\\_ju\\_li.php#more](http://www.gamesetwatch.com/2011/07/game_play_2011_romeo_and_ju_li.php#more) last accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2013.

the role of players of the game. Players interacted with the piece by means of a single microphone passed from player to player, through which the players could directly address the characters they were controlling at the time. These players were briefed prior to the performance, and again within the performance in a small structured sequence that functioned as a 'tutorial'. Players were placed (for the most part) in control of the character, Ray, who has found himself trapped in a strange world with high explosives lodged in his skull. Players must help Ray extract the bomb from his skull before the 60-minute timer runs out, preventing his untimely death, and aiding his escape. Throughout the course of the performance players were invited to explore elements of Ray's family and professional life in order to find solutions to the puzzles presented and to guide the development of the plot.

The piece was an active remediation of the adventure game genre and can be viewed as an example of intermediality in performance. Christopher Balme discusses intermediality as taking a number of forms, most notably in this case as 'the attempt to realize in one medium the aesthetic conventions and/or patterns of seeing and hearing in another medium.'<sup>4</sup> For Balme, productions such as Robert LePage's *Polygraph* are an attempt by theatrical productions to appropriate the representative image and means of production in other media for a live performance context. This is most commonly found in performance that appropriates

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<sup>4</sup> Balme, Christopher, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 206.



film techniques. In some cases performances will also appropriate radio image and means of production into a live context, for example SITI company's *Radio Macbeth*, which combines theatrical convention with many of the methods utilised in the production of radio plays to create additional layers of meaning in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In this case *BrainExplode!* can be said to be appropriating not only the representative image of adventure gaming (an individual solving puzzles through the combination of objects, dialogue, and environment, via the instructions of an exegetic master), but also the *textual structure* and control system of the adventure-game genre through both its performative structure and its development process. This moves *BrainExplode!* beyond intermedial/textual exploration of the cultural phenomenon of adventure gaming and into the live performance of an interactive hypertext fiction.<sup>5</sup>

### **Adventure Gaming**

The genre of computer gaming known as 'adventure gaming' can be considered to have begun in 1976 with the creation of a game originally entitled *ADVENT*. Initially created by Will Crowther, then further expanded upon by Don Woods, *ADVENT*,<sup>6</sup> (which is also known by the names *Colossal Cave Adventure* or more simply *Adventure*) was one of the first examples of interactive fiction to become widely distributed, as it was passed along the growing computer network of the time, ARPANET.

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<sup>5</sup> See Landow, George P, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory & New Media in an Era of Globalization*, (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> *ADVENT*, (Crowther, Will, c. 1976).

Though a relatively small network by today's standards, ARPANET was one of the precursors to today's networked computer structure known as the Internet. The game became widely distributed across this network in the months following its initial release and has become an important constituent of digital gaming history. *ADVENT* was a game based around the exploration of a series of caves inhabited by various magical creatures and containing a wide variety of objects and treasures for the player to collect and interact with. The caves described in the game were based primarily on Crowther's knowledge of a large cave system in Kentucky, USA, which he frequently visited. Crowther and Woods also drew heavily on the tradition of table-top Role-Playing games, particularly *Dungeons & Dragons*, a game in which players take the role of characters exploring environments described for them by another player who takes the role of 'dungeon master'. *ADVENT* was represented purely in text form, players were presented with large blocks of text describing the area they were in, what events were occurring, and what results the player's actions produced.

Players interacted with the game by entering commands in text form, usually in simple commands such as, 'Go East' or 'Pick up lamp'; this process was supported by a system of interpretation usually referred to as 'parsing', whereby the software would identify the object or objects referenced and recognise the command (or 'parser') linking the two objects. Later game designers creating text adventures largely retained this method. However, this control system was not without its inefficiencies

and flaws. The system required some foresight on the part of the designer as the acceptable object tags and verbs must be pre-programmed, forcing the designer to list a number of alternative verbs and descriptions for various actions. This could occasionally lead to frustration during gameplay whereby a player knew the correct sequence of events but was unable to guess the correct command structure recognised by the game for that action (for example: 'Use Key on Door' may be incorrect but 'Put Key in Door' may produce the desired response from the game). *ADVENT*'s initial version also featured a rudimentary points system in which a player's actions generated a points balance as they progressed through the game (to a maximum of 350). As the game's source code was available to those who wished to use it, variations of the game have been created with various adjustments made including higher possible points values.

*ADVENT* is one of the earliest examples of an interactive or hypertext fiction in digital format. Players are given a series of choices and, depending on those choices, the game responds and generates more text, eventually taking the player through a series of encounters with dwarves and monsters while outlining the virtual environment they are exploring. Limitations of the software meant that a player's choices were somewhat limited, but nonetheless the game proved to be quite popular and inspired a large number of designers to create their own series of interactive digital texts. The most popular of these interactive digital texts were those which followed *ADVENT*'s puzzle-based system and became known as the

'adventure game' genre.<sup>7</sup> The majority of in-game puzzles were usually environment-based, requiring analysis or alteration of the virtual environment in order to progress, or dialogue-based, requiring players to interact with other in-game characters. These puzzles were bound by a central narrative element (usually a quest of some description), which drove the games forward and was revealed to a player sequentially as groups of puzzles are solved. In this way the gameplay of adventure games can be described to be (in Jerpser Juul's terms) as *progressive* (i.e., moving from defined section to defined section) rather than *emergent*.<sup>8</sup> As such this format is particularly suited to the communication of more complex narratives, perhaps more so than other game structures. Soon companies began to produce both original games (such as the popular *Zork* series by Infocom) and game adaptations of existing popular fiction (such as *The Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy*, and *The Lord of the Rings*.) These text-based adventures maintained the same formula of text-based command input for the exploration of textually represented digital worlds that contained a series of interactive elements and puzzles for players to solve, while also involving a structured narrative for players to experience. *ADVENT* also became the inspiration for the first action-adventure game, a graphically rendered game based on *ADVENT* called *Adventure*, created by Warren Robinett for the Atari 2600 in 1979.

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<sup>7</sup> These would have included games such as *Zork* (Anderson, T, et al. c. 1977) *Hitchhikers Guide To The Galaxy* (Infocom, 1984) and *Zyll* (IBM, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> See Juul, Jesper, *Half-Real: Videogames between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. (London: MIT Press, 2005).

Furthermore, the creation of text-based interactive virtual environments marked the beginnings of the Multi-User Dungeons or MUDs which have so fascinated early digital theorists.<sup>9</sup>

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Copyright (c) 1981, 1982, 1983 Infocom, Inc. All rights reserved.
ZORK is a registered trademark of Infocom, Inc.
Revision 8B / Serial number 840726

West of House
You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front
door.
There is a small mailbox here.

>open mailbox
Opening the small mailbox reveals a leaflet.

>take the leaflet
Taken.

>read leaflet
"WELCOME TO ZORK!"

ZORK is a game of adventure, danger, and low cunning. In it you will explore
some of the most amazing territory ever seen by mortals. No computer should be
without one!"

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The text-based adventure game allowed players (for the first time in the digital world) to hold some degree of authorship over a narrative game experience. Rather than the combat/challenge based games such as *SpaceWar!*,<sup>11</sup> in which narrative settings were pre-defined and players limited to victory or defeat, the adventure game genre allowed players to make choices redefining what sequence they performed game actions in, what areas of the virtual environment they wished to explore, and which elements they wished to interact with. This freedom of exploration allowed

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<sup>9</sup> One of the most cited discussions of Multi-User Dungeons (LamdaMOO in particular) can be found in Dibble, Julian 'A Rape in Cyberspace' <http://www.juliandibbell.com/articles/a-rape-in-cyberspace/> last accessed 31<sup>st</sup> Jan 2013.

<sup>10</sup> A screenshot from the popular text-based adventure game *Zork*, (Anderson, T et al c.1977).

<sup>11</sup> *Spacewar!*, (Russell, Steve et al, c.1962).

players to generate unique narrative experiences within the game world, each player generating a different narrative for the game's protagonist through their actions. As puzzles in the games could be solved without interacting with every element of the game, descriptive passages, small in-game events, and even whole areas could be missed (or avoided) by players who engaged with these games. As a result, the individual players could experience each virtual environment differently, and while it was possible to exhaustively inspect every element of the game (or simply examine the source code), this was not necessary for a game's completion. Though predetermined storylines were imbedded into the game design and revealed sequentially to the player, these games functioned as an early digital hypertext, creating a series of links between text elements, which could be configured and re-configured by player actions.

As computer technology developed so too did the adventure-game genre. While text-based adventures and similar forms of interactive fiction remain popular among enthusiasts even today, a new form of adventure game quickly replaced the text-adventure game: the graphic adventure. The graphic adventure was, simply, an adventure game whose means of representation were no longer text-based but instead graphically based. The computer displayed the virtual worlds that players were to explore graphically in displays of colour varying from simple 16-bit to 256 colour VGA, these displays included not only the topography of the area but also those objects and characters which could be interacted with. As the format

further developed, games also displayed in the lower half of the screen a series of icons containing text that could combine with elements of the environment (or an on screen inventory) in order to solve the in-game puzzles. This provided designers a simple solution for the parsing problem: they could provide a limited number of verbs in the form of icons for players to use. This also provided players with a continuous view of objects carried in their in-game inventory (rather than requiring them to enter a command to see a list of currently held objects), leading to a heavier focus on inventory-based puzzles in which players were required to collect and use or combine various in-game objects to progress. Instead of requiring text commands from the player, this new format supported GUI (Graphic User Interface) systems, which allowed players to use a mouse pointer to select which objects they wished to interact with, hence the colloquial moniker 'Point-and-Click Adventure Game'. Early iterations of the Point-and-Click Adventure Game often displayed a command line of text above the verb icons so that players could see which command line they were assembling for the game to interpret. The format also required huge amounts of text display, as additional audio files with enough fidelity to reproduce the human voice were unwieldy at the time. As a result, the graphic adventure became a hybrid of visual and textual elements. This was most evident in character interaction, whereby characters on screen 'spoke' by having blocks of text displayed above their heads, while the character's mouth was animated. Often players would be required to

examine in-game objects in more detail to provide clues for the game using the 'look' or 'examine' command.



<sup>12</sup>

This would provide players with short paragraphs of text describing the item and usually giving some hint as to its possible use. This transformed the adventure game from a simple interactive hypertext fiction to a graphically represented virtual world in which a player could explore a hypertext fiction. Elements of plot, character, and game objectives were imbedded in the scenes presented to the players, and unlocked by the player's interaction with these scenes. As these interactions had no prescribed order beyond that required to further the game narrative, these elements could be discovered in different order, or even in some cases missed completely. As computer technology developed, these text blocks

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<sup>12</sup> Screenshot from *The Secret of Monkey Island*, (Lucasfilm Games, 1990). Note the icons at the bottom of the screen listing available actions.



were supplemented and eventually replaced by audio files containing voice actors reading the various descriptions or dialogue lines as needed.

One of the most important additions made by graphic adventures was that, for the first time in adventure gaming, players were represented on screen by defined characters. Previously the description of a player's character (if there was any) was usually limited to a few lines of text to set the scene, the majority of text being dedicated to descriptive passages of the virtual environments in which the game took place. These text descriptions left much to the imagination of the player, as they rarely went beyond any functional detail. Additionally the player was always addressed in the second person, fulfilling the role of the protagonist in the game environment. However, in these new graphic adventure games<sup>13</sup> a player's characters were fully represented on screen, producing a tension between the second-person and third-person narrative perspectives. While some examples exist of first-person perspective adventure games (most famously, Robyn and Rand Miller's *Myst*<sup>14</sup>), the vast majority of graphic adventure games present the player with a character for them to control who is fully represented graphically within the game's mise-en-scène. This moved the player from a position of embedded agent within the game world to a new position: that of a puppet master controlling a kind of avatar figure within the virtual environment presented. Graphic adventure games that represented the player-controlled character placed the player in one

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<sup>13</sup> e.g. *Loom*, (Lucasfilm Games, 1990) and *Space Quest: The Sarien Encounter*, (Sierra, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> *Myst*, (Cyan, 1993).

of two positions: controlling a character which they were to embody via the gaming interface, *or* giving commands to a fully developed protagonist character who is distinctly 'other' from the player.

In those cases in which the player is embodying a character within the game, the player is provided with an external narrative voice, which addresses them directly in response to their actions and various in-game events. This external narrative voice occupies the same role as the descriptive passages in the older text-based format, and while it may exhibit elements of personality through humorous descriptions or responses to commands, it is always in the role of assistant to the player and external to the game narrative itself. The second-person narrative voice is never given a corporeal representation within the game's virtual world and remains a product of the game's rule structure rather than its fictional setting. The player him/herself is clearly placed within a role as part of the narrative through this second person, subject to forces and events of the game's central plot. In this way the player can embody a wide range of characters, while still retaining ownership of the character choices and a sense of personal identification. This narrative format was largely favoured by developers working for Sierra Online, one of the most prolific and successful producers of graphic adventure games in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>15</sup> Their games would often present a player with a graphical representation of a character, which was also to serve as a representation of the player him or herself. It is interesting to note that

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<sup>15</sup> See examples such as the *SpaceQuest* and *PoliceQuest* franchises.

Sierra Online's biggest competitor of the time, LucasArts, heavily favoured the alternative mode of developing the relationship between player and game, placing a character on screen which the player can control, but is distinct and separate from the player themselves.

In the second instance, whereby a player is provided with a fully developed character to control, the narrative structure is drastically altered. Here the player is no longer interacting with a virtual environment through an avatar, but instead is interacting with a particular character *within* that virtual environment.<sup>16</sup> In this format, players did not become the hero of the game, but rather were tasked with *helping* the hero of the game. Players met with characters that already had opinions, hopes, desires and goals before the game had even begun. This allowed designers to exert more narrative control over the game and was a format particularly suited to licensed or franchised game releases (such as LucasArts' popular *Indiana Jones and The Fate of Atlantis*.<sup>17</sup>) These characters themselves became a site of hypertext exploration for the players, as different interactions would reveal additional information about the character that the players were controlling (for example, Guybrush Threepwood's ability to hold his breath for ten minutes,<sup>18</sup> or George Stobbart's love of dog biscuits.<sup>19</sup>) Ernest Adams<sup>20</sup> highlights this as an

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<sup>16</sup> See examples such as the *Monkey Island* and *Indiana Jones* franchises.

<sup>17</sup> *Indiana Jones and The Fate of Atlantis*, (LucasArts, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> See LucasArt's *Monkey Island* franchise.

<sup>19</sup> See *Broken Sword: Shadow of the Templars*, (Revolution Software, 1996).

interesting narrative conflict for designers, as each character must be assumed to be imbued with some form of amnesia, or placed in a setting unfamiliar to the character, as players may force characters to search every element of their own home and collect every object they can, the result being 'you end up carrying around a collection of objects that make you look like a demented bag lady.'<sup>21</sup> He highlights the fact that this structure often forces designers to place their characters in unfamiliar or disrupted settings in which a character's natural familiarity may be plausibly removed.

The player's puppet-master control of already established characters serves to dramatically alter the player/game relationship from that of an embedded narrative experience in which the player is fully immersed, to a more vicarious experience in which the player is placed in a simultaneous role of both agent and observer, issuing commands to a character who's own experiences and reactions are decidedly removed from that of the player. This shift takes place even in those cases whereby narrative mode is first person, from the perspective of the character to be commanded (as in Revolution's *Broken Sword* series). The key difference is that rather than a second-person narrative mode providing functional information as part of the rule structure of the game, the player is instead receiving responses that are firmly rooted in the game's fictional setting. Rather than

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<sup>20</sup> Adams, Ernest, *Designer's Notebook: Three Problems for Interactive Storytellers*, from *Gamasutra* 29<sup>th</sup> Dec 1999  
[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3414/the\\_designers\\_notebook\\_thr\\_ee\\_.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3414/the_designers_notebook_thr_ee_.php) last accessed 20th June 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

being told by the game that a particular item/choice combination is not possible, or that 'you decide against' a particular option (a fictional narrative superimposed over a rule structure, but from a source external to the fictional world of the game), the player is instead met with the opinion of a character within the game's fictional setting. A choice is no longer simply invalid because the game says so, but because the *character* says so.

This in effect now places the rules of the game as subservient to the narrative fiction. Rather than narrative simply providing a framework in which the game action can take place, or serving as a socially/visually codified unit which contains/interprets the rules of the game so that they are easily understood, the fictional construction of the adventure game can serve to dictate the rules of the game itself, providing meaningful explanations for shifting rule structures and alterations of game mechanics, which might otherwise be jarring or unsatisfying to the player. It is this additional level of narrative control on the part of the designer which has led to some adventure games being described as 'interactive movies' rather than simply games of progression. Indeed, adventure games in this narrative mode often feature a number of small 'cut-scenes' (pre-rendered sequences of animation during which the player has no control), which frame the game's action, usually providing both initial plot elements and serving as concluding scenes for the game's narrative. These cut-scenes usually break from the game's dominant point of view, utilising cinema methods for multiple points of view and scene structure.

## Theatrical Interpretations of the Narrative Mode

There have been to date few instances of theatrical remediation of these two configurations of narrative mode in adventure gaming. In the first instance, that of the second-person narrative mode, there are at least two explorations. The first, which is discussed earlier in this thesis is that of Sneaky Snake Productions *Adventurer's Quest*, which extensively remediates the aesthetic qualities of many of Sierra Online's popular adventure gaming titles, while challenging the homogeneity of the narrative structure and problematising the imposition of plot via the second-person narrative mode within an interactive framework. The second, more recent instance is a series of works by German performance group, MachinaEx. Through the combination of theatre and adventure gaming, MachinaEx's goal is to create 'the most immersive game experience you can have.'<sup>22</sup> The result is a series of promenade-style installation performances, which contain interactive props, set pieces, and responsive actors for the audience to communicate with. Each of these installations are containers for a series of puzzles for the audience to solve collectively, the completion of puzzles by any member of the audience producing a response from the performers and furthering the development of the plot. In MachinaEx's works the audience is cast collectively in the role of player. While each member is experiencing the work from a first-person perspective, the work responds to the audience as a group rather than a series of individuals

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<sup>22</sup> From MachinaEx's website [http://machinax.jonashmdesign.de/?page\\_id=2062](http://machinax.jonashmdesign.de/?page_id=2062) last accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2013.

(i.e., each audience member does not have to solve each puzzle). Both the fictional setting of the pieces and the recognition of the audience as a group rather than individuals imposes a second-person narrative mode on the individual's otherwise first-person experience. The second-person narrative voice can no longer be directly heard (or read) by the players of MachinaEx's games, but instead is embodied by the responses of objects and the performers to the audience's actions. After all, if the audience can see that a particular action has had no effect, then there is no reason to directly state that to them. In many ways this work holds much in common with the performative installation and post-modern works which challenged issues of audience perspective and experience in the second half of the twentieth century. Audience members are provided with a structured theatrical experience, which invites exploration on the physical level, thus engaging with multiple senses beyond just sight and sound.

Conversely, Sneaky Snake's *BrainExplode!* can be understood as a theatrical remediation of those adventure games which utilised a third-person dominant narrative mode. Through its presentation of a distinct 'other' in the form of the character Ray and the actor portraying him, who is instinctively independent and 'other' due to his status as 'real',<sup>23</sup> *BrainExplode!* provides its audience/players with a fully developed character who's actions they can control but who's journey they experience vicariously through observation and consideration of the

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion on relationships between the real and the animated, see McCloud, Scott, *Understanding Comics*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994).

narrative fiction portrayed. These positions of experience for the audience are reinforced by the presence of the live body on stage. Denied the flexibility and transience of a digitally rendered body, the actor's body is unavoidably distinct from that of the audience and, despite being voluntary subject to directions from the audience, is exclusively uninhabitable by any other audience member's consciousness. While the digital rendering of in-game characters, coupled with cinema-inspired sequences, can potentially locate players within the body of the digital subject, the live 'real' body actively denies this by its attachment to the laws of nature and the refusal to be digitally mediated (the character of Ray is always live on stage, never mediated through other methods). Additionally, the arrangement of the performance space (in a traditional end-on or proscenium-arch configuration) alongside the socially codified theatrical conventions of audience behaviour, further reinforces this division between actor and audience member. However, these seemingly robust binary positions are challenged and subverted by the control and narrative structure of *BrainExplode!*, and through the introduction of meaningful player choice when interacting with the performative hypertext that is *BrainExplode!*

### **Control in *BrainExplode!*: Audience Division**

Through the remediation of the adventure game, *BrainExplode!* appropriates both game mechanics (puzzle solving, etc.) and control systems. Control in *BrainExplode!* is achieved rather simply, by means of a microphone given to audience members who become players. In its



initial production, the number of players was limited to 6, and each was given a short explanation prior to the performance. The players were allowed to confer with one another but only one player at a time (the one holding the microphone) was allowed to issue commands. The microphone was passed from player to player every five minutes (or less). This created a clear demarcation within the audience, creating several interlinking 'tiers' to the performance, all linked via the microphone, which becomes, as the traditional computer game controller, a liminal artefact being simultaneously of both the audience and the performance, residing both within the 'real world' of audience experience and in the fictional world of represented action. The limitation of the system also serves to divide the audience into players and non-players. Each of the groups occupy a liminal space within the performance. By virtue of their positions they move between creative narrative experience and a position of detached observer. Players of the game become performers themselves as the non-player audience observe both the action represented on stage, and the actions of those playing the game. Even without the presence of additional non-player audience members, the players of *BrainExplode!* occupy a dual space of audience and performer for themselves, as Schafer notes: 'digital gameplayers both produce and consume their own experience',<sup>24</sup> as player decisions impact the visual spectacle they observe. The microphone as control system extends its liminal qualities to

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<sup>24</sup> Schäfer, Fabian, 'Ludic Philosophy: Subjectivity, Choice, and Virtual Death in Digital Media' *Digital Culture and Education*, Vol 1, Issue 2, (2009) 116 – 128.

envelope those who interact with it, pulling them into a performative position and imbedding them into the narrative experience of the non-player audience. The character Ray himself also occupies a liminal space through his connection to the audience via the microphone in the audience members' hands. While not an avatar for players to embody (as in the second-person adventure game narrative structure), Ray functions as both 'in-game' through his narrative position and 'out-of game' through his functional position as rule interpreter.

Similar systems of interactivity exist in theatre practice, such as Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of The Oppressed'.<sup>25</sup> Boal's theatre practice grew from social-activist performance roots in the Arena Theatre in Brazil. Boal aimed to redefine the role of the audience as 'spect-actor' (i.e., a spectator who is also active in the performance). Through a series of performance experiments, Boal eventually reached a system whereby audience members could influence the performance by substituting themselves into a scene. In Boal's work, the audience is typically presented with a series of scenes depicting some form of social or political imbalance. With each scene the audience is invited to suggest solutions or act out alternative behaviours for specific characters within the scene in order to find an acceptable resolution. A designated performer who takes the title of 'The Joker' mediates these interactions. The Joker introduces the scenes,

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<sup>25</sup> Boal, Augusto, *Theatre of The Oppressed*, trans. A. Charles et al. (London: Pluto, 2000) and <http://www.theatreoftheoppressed.org/en/index.php?nodeID=1> last accessed 31<sup>st</sup> Jan 2013.

explains the process to the audience, and oversees the performance, taking audience suggestions and pausing the action where appropriate. Hence the performers maintain a level of control over the performance, while allowing a structure for audience feedback and interaction to exist. Much like the Joker character of Boal's Theatre of The Oppressed, the character of Ray becomes part of a bridging structure between the audience and the action represented on stage, providing opportunity for an audience to influence the action on stage through him. However, unlike Boal's system, the audience does not replace any performer on stage, but instead acts solely through the character of Ray. Furthermore, these interactions are codified by the adventure-game framing, providing those familiar with the genre a strong reference point from which to begin their explorations.

Additionally, the non-player audience members themselves have influence on the performance through their responses to the actions completed or not completed. They themselves occupy a space of aware participation<sup>26</sup> in a live game. There were instances of some audience members even being taken in by the game-players for consultation as to how to proceed. Markus Montola<sup>27</sup> provides a useful way of considering these relationships within a live game context by referring to all who come in contact with a game as 'participants' and devising a series of layered participation ranging from unaware observers to fully aware conscious players. In

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<sup>26</sup> Montola, Marcus, et al. *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design*, (Amsterdam; London: Elsevier/Morgan Kaufmann, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Montola's model it is possible to freely pass through the various layers of participation, though transcending modes of awareness is difficult.

The codification of the performance as 'adventure game' situates the performance as intermedial, and those audience members with an understanding of the adventure game genre are more likely to engage with the performance on a deeper level. The adventure game framework redefines the stage and the 'patterns of seeing and hearing', which the audience relies on when engaging with the work. Just as SITI company's *Radio Macbeth* redefines a steel sheet on stage as a vital piece of radio-effect production (serving a function otherwise alien to a theatre production), or LePage's *PolyGraph* redefines a stage tableau as the film 'shot', *BrainExplode!* redefines each object on stage as an interactive puzzle piece, serving as part of a game structure rather than that of a theatre structure. As such the audience's reception of the action on stage is modified; the performance is no-longer observed and interpreted as a performance, but also as an adventure game, with each dialogue fragment and stage prop assuming a new primary function as part of a rule system and process. Unlike Rimini Protokoll's *Best Before*, the game and performance elements of *BrainExplode!* are rendered as densely interdependent through the performance's state of intermediality.

### **Control in *BrainExplode!*: Game Design Elements**

The opening scene of the play serves as a tutorial for the participants, illustrating mechanics for both players and non-player audience members.

The audience is introduced to the main character Ray under the premise that the audience is a group of games-and-technology investors, to which Ray is giving a presentation regarding his new game, *Big Death*. The premise is that Ray is in the process of devising a text-based adventure game which is fully responsive to any commands the player enters (essentially removing the 'parsing' issue entirely). To demonstrate this, Ray enlists the help of his girlfriend, Ginny. At this point, control is given to the audience/players and they are instructed through a process of interaction with a number of objects. As with the initial text-based adventure games, players can 'input' any command they wish, with some commands being more effective than others. Commands are responded to one at a time, with the actress performing a simple gesture to indicate that she is ready for another command. Once this sequence is complete Ray suddenly 'blacks out', and the scene changes to the first of a series of rooms from which players must help Ray escape. The use of the established control system is maintained and Ray performs the same simple gesture to indicate that he is ready to receive a new command. Actors who were performing player-controlled roles were free to improvise within a given set of rules. In practice, this allows the performance to overcome the 'parsing' issue of player input entirely, in much the same way as Ray's proposed game *Big Death*. Additionally, this allows actors to offer hints, or remind players of the rules of the game, if needed. This also creates performative space for actors to respond to unpredicted, trivial, or non-progressive player commands.

While text or graphic adventure games do occasionally offer some player actions that impact the game in trivial ways, these are usually quite limited, short, closed-loop moments, and can generally be simply dismissed as 'Easter eggs' (small inconsequential in-game events, which are humorous in nature and designed to remain hidden under normal circumstances). 'Short, closed-loop' moments refers to events that run to completion in a short time-frame and do not impact any further gameplay. The most common example in a point-and-click adventure game would be the exchange of trivial dialogue that offers the player no further puzzle-solving clues. These moments of trivial action within adventure games are usually predetermined by the game designer; however, in *BrainExplode!* performers can adapt to commands made by players in order to generate humorous trivial actions that are unique to every performance. In those cases in which game action is delayed, or players are struggling, actors may adapt trivial actions (to more progress driven moments) by adding suggestions or adapting dialogue to try and guide players toward a puzzle solution.

Owing to the practical restraints of the theatre, the performance was unable to provide players with multiple simultaneously accessible areas for them to explore, and so instead was structured around a design principle common to adventure games, referred to by Ron Gilbert as 'player

caging'.<sup>28</sup> This is a tactic whereby a player is confined in a small area of the game until a sequence of puzzles is solved, then moved onto yet another small area where they must solve yet another small series of puzzles, like being moved from cage to cage. This tactic is taken quite literally by *BrainExplode!*, as Ray is first trapped in a pool of light, then in a large room, then on a boat, then finally on a table. In each case he is confined to a small area, which can be compared to a single 'screen' in a graphical adventure game. The majority of puzzles to be solved are dialogue-based, requiring players to explore the relationships and back story of various characters to find solutions, as well as driving action forward through dialogue. While there are both environmental and object-oriented puzzles for players to address, the majority of game progress is made through dialogue. These dialogue moments exist as a mix of scripted and improvisational performances depending on the commands issued. A large volume of character 'back story' text and rehearsal resources centred on the game's progression heavily support improvisational elements of the performance. This serves to create a highly player-responsive game mechanic that gave the audience/player a huge degree of freedom in their exploration of *BrainExplode!*.

One of the most responsive sequences in the performance takes place in room/scene 2. Having escaped the initial room, we are presented with Ray and a hooded figure standing on a chalk drawing of a boat. In this scene

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<sup>28</sup> Gilbert, Ron *Why Adventure Games Suck, and what we can do about it*, May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2004, <http://grumpygamer.com/2152210> last accessed 21st Nov 2011.

the chalk drawings are iconic representations of the fictional world Ray is now in. Through exploration of the scene, players find that he is trapped on a boat steered by a hooded figure, sailing down a river (it is suggested that this river is the river Styx, which features as the boundary between Earth and the Underworld in Greek mythology). Through conversation with the figure sailing the boat, Ray acquires a piece of chalk. Players can generate objects by commanding Ray to draw something using this piece of chalk. These objects are then treated by the in-game characters as real, usable items (for example players may command Ray to draw a small bridge, which he can then walk across to exit the scene). Additionally, these chalk objects can be interacted with as simple chalk drawings, yet the effects considered as real within the fictional realm of the performance (e.g., if players command Ray to 'rub out' the chains holding the sailor to the boat, the sailor will act as if he has been freed of his chains). This mechanic depends heavily on the performers' ability to interpret the objects created within the rule structure of the game, recognising any object created and categorising it in terms of game progress. This reaches its most pivotal moment when Ray is presented with a challenge to solve a theoretical puzzle by only drawing objects to use as solutions. In this case, while the puzzle and resulting success/failure dialogue is pre-determined, the possible solutions are limited only by the players' imagination and the actors' ability to interpret the solutions generated within the game context. This creates a highly flexible instance of game action in which each narrative conclusion remains limited to win/lose but each experience of



that narrative and each path to that conclusion is unique from performance to performance. Though the sequence could be considered to be 'closed-loop', in that the actions leading to the end result are not taken into account by the rest of the performance, the narrative experience of the non-player audience watching the performance is profoundly influenced. Hence, players take on a more authorial role within the performance creating and redefining meaning for themselves independent of the author, yet the authority of the production itself is maintained through the defined system of interlacing actions. The theatrical 'liveness'<sup>29</sup> of the on-stage performers allows a fluidity of response beyond that which can be offered by software. The game format and control structure of *BrainExplode!* allow this fluidity to be explored using a familiar methodology (the act of playing an adventure game), while the influence of the genre's structure for narrative delivery allows the author to maintain a coherent narrative for the performance.

### ***BrainExplode!* as Performed Hypertext**

George Landow<sup>30</sup> defines hypertext as a structure of interlinked data, drawing comparisons to Vannevar Bush's idea of associative indexing on a vast scale as expressed in his theoretical machine, 'The Memex'. Landow's work provides an overview of hypertext structure including

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<sup>29</sup> i.e., their simultaneous, unmediated, and independent existence within the same space as the audience.

<sup>30</sup> Landow, George P, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory & New Media in an Era of Globalization*, (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

useful categorisation of hypertext 'links' into various types.<sup>31</sup> However, Landow's discussion is limited primarily to discussions of digital hypertexts, and particularly to the World Wide Web, and with almost no consideration of live performance.

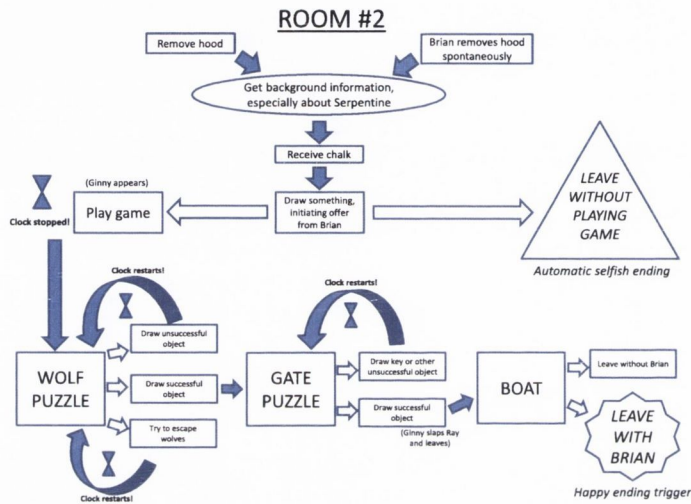
Ray's progression from room to room (or scene to scene to use a theatrical equivalent) in *BrainExplode!* was mapped in rehearsal by means of a graphical 'flow chart' illustrating the required actions for player progression. This chart illustrates key moments of action, which players must complete in order to progress the game, as well as key moments that dictate the behaviour of the game's internal clock: the countdown timer attached to the explosives in Ray's head. This flow chart also illustrates the conditions that need to be satisfied for each of the game's multiple endings to take place. This is an illustration of six different 'trigger' combinations resulting in the performance of one of four pre-determined 'endgame' texts. This flow-chart (see example below) can be seen as representative of the performance's position of live-hypertext. This position of hypertext is derived from, and secured by, drawing on the branching nature of texts and gameplay in the point-and-click adventure game genre. In contradiction to Landow's assertion that games '...do not seem closely enough related to hypertext to tell us much about it',<sup>32</sup> it is possible to view the performance of *BrainExplode!* as using a game structure to create a

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, Chapter 3: "Computer Games, Hypertext, and Narrative", 250 – 254.

hypertext performance which maintains a narrative drive.



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This hypertext format takes two forms, firstly through the branching structure of the game's central narrative, and secondly in the narrative exploration of character on stage through the creation of 'on-demand' (via player direction) links to previous rehearsal texts and additional character information not contained in the central playtext.

<sup>33</sup> Map outlining the sequence of events and action 'triggers' for Room 2 of *BrainExplode!*, courtesy of Richard Lovejoy.

A central theme in *BrainExplode!* is that of character, most importantly that of Ray's character: how he relates as a person to others, his work, and indeed to himself. The performance emphasises to players that the exploration of character relationships and preceding narrative (back-story) is central to experience. This is emphasised to the audience in both direct address in the tutorial and the overall puzzle design itself (as majority dialogue-based). In the final scenes of the performance it is revealed that the preceding puzzle rooms were in fact creations of Ray's inner psyche and that in the reality of this fictional world Ray has suffered a stroke and blacked out. The impact of this event on Ray's life is dependant on player action within the game. The choices made by the players result in one of four scripted endings, two endings which concern Ray's death, and two endings which concern Ray's survival. Which ending is performed is determined by a number of variables. The determination between death and survival endings hinges upon two factors. The first deciding factor is if players can be successful in completing the challenges before the countdown timer in Ray's brain reaches zero. The second, is if players can successfully help the character Ginny escape from the final room. If players fail to achieve either of these goals, a 'death ending' is triggered. Within the death ending there are two subcategories dependant on player action throughout the game, these are 'selfish' and 'unselfish' versions of each ending, and are determined by certain key player-directed character interactions within the game. Likewise for the survival endings, they too are divided into 'selfish' and 'unselfish' and are dependant on the same

triggers. These branching triggers, though hidden from the player, ensure that player action produces a profound impact on the narrative development of the piece. As the pieces are scripted there is potential for any ending to be 'unlocked' by the players, yet their choices determine a path and thus a single reading of the narrative. Much like hypertext fictions the branching moments create a narrative fiction that is responsive to reader/player action and will differ from reader to reader. These texts are subsequently performed by the actors on stage, in much the same way as an imbedded video might play out before a hypertext reader who has just clicked a link containing the video file.

However these links are much simplified in terms of a hypertext criticism, and the performance is limited by temporality and its linear structure, unlike the act of reading the performance, has a set beginning and end that is based in temporal, not textual, space. As there is no opportunity for player recursion (the re-reading of certain texts) when experiencing these endings, the branching nature of the performance narrative becomes limited in its usefulness as hypertext comparison.

Where *BrainExplode!* can be considered to be at its most 'hypertextual' is in the ability of the players to further investigate the personal lives of each of the characters. Associated with each character is a dense network of inter-relationships and past character history. While the author predetermines this information, it is not contained in the main body of the performance script. In some cases, the exploration of these additional

pieces of information is necessary for the solution of puzzles in *BrainExplode!* However this is not always the case. Owing to the flexibility of the control system within the performance, players are able to explore these additional texts by asking direct questions to the characters: 'Ray, How do you know Brian?' and so forth. These direct questions create 'on-demand' links to these additional texts, which players can revisit at any time during the performance, should they wish to hear them again. Through the provision of these ancillary texts and the integration of a robust system of audience interaction based on adventure game principles, *BrainExplode!* becomes a continuously shifting web of interrelated texts, which combine to create the fictional world experienced by the players. With the interrogation of each additional character-related text, new character relationships and micro-narratives within the performance can be investigated, and subsequently acted upon by players. This allows a wide range of 'readings' of *BrainExplode!* to take place, each unique to the pattern of links created by players when exploring these texts through the performance.

This dense interlinking of texts within the performance coupled with the player's ability to direct the outcome of the performance allows the audience to occupy a shifting series of perspectives on the characters. Decisions made by players will impact on the demeanour of the character Ray, while further enquiry into the history of other characters may illustrate new contexts for their actions, changing player/audience prospective sympathies as the show develops. The functioning of these shifts of

perspective creates a wide number of 'versions' of *BrainExplode!* from performance to performance, creating fertile grounds for comparison of individual instances between attendees.

## **Conclusion**

Sneaky Snake Productions' *BrainExplode!*, performed as part of the *Game Play* festival NY 2011, aims to combine both live theatre practice and gameplay mechanics of the adventure-game genre. In doing, so it creates a robust framework for the exploration of hypertext as performance, while interrogating the limitations of both the theatrical mode and the adventure-game genre. By providing a methodology whereby the audience could participate in the creation of the performance, without sacrificing the authority of the writer, *BrainExplode!* creates a format in which shifting perspectives and multiple narratives can be navigated in a live setting. The responsiveness of the performers within this structure allowed players to question and challenge the morality of the characters, as well as instructing their behaviour towards a given goal. Again the comparison to Boal's work comes to mind as his presentation of the personal/political as actionable moments of live performance share much similarity with *BrainExplode!*'s presentation of Ray's personal relationships and work ethic. Unlike Boal's work, however, *BrainExplode!* does not simply present moments of live performance with an invitation to interact, but instead demands audience action for the performance to take place. As Alexander Galloway notes, videogames are an action based medium, and without the

player their stories remain untold, 'the operator and the machine play the videogame *together*.<sup>34</sup> By borrowing structural elements from digital gaming, *BrainExplode!* maintains this drive to action. Through its interrogation of the adventure-game form, *BrainExplode!* challenges the previous theatrical modes of audience interaction, while the provision of live human response within an adventure-game setting suggests new potential configurations for the genre, which similarly challenge the limits of previous iterations. Through this process the experience of gameplay is not only represented for the audience but also recreated as the audience both create and consume their own play experience. Through the performance's challenges to previous theatrical modes, the experience of playing digital adventure-games is regrounded as a potential site for performed hypertext and political reimaginings.

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<sup>34</sup> Galloway, Alexander, *Gaming: Essays On Algorithmic Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) 2, [my emphasis].



## Conclusion

With little over 40 years of history, the medium of the videogame is still relatively young. Though complex systems of interaction, representation, and operation are developing within the games industry, the study and criticism of these systems is still at an emergent stage. Though both hardware and software have undergone massive advancements in technology since the days of *Spacewar!*,<sup>1</sup> serious academic study of videogames as a unique mode of artistic expression and interaction has only truly begun to develop in the last decade. These explorations draw primarily from anthropological and performance and media-studies works, and frequently define themselves against other works in these fields.<sup>2</sup>

As the wide variety of articles and studies on the topic of games grows, those issues that are central to the understanding of the medium begin to become apparent. With scholars such as Juul,<sup>3</sup> Mateas,<sup>4</sup> and Newman<sup>5</sup> providing useful discussion on the operation and definition of games,

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<sup>1</sup> *Spacewar!* (Steve Russell, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> Mateas' article 'A Preliminary Poetics for Games...' for example, is with heavy reference to Aristotle's works regarding drama.

<sup>3</sup> Juul, Jesper, *Half-Real: Videogames between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Mateas, Michael, 'A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games' in *FirstPerson: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, (London: MIT Press, 2004), 19 – 34.

<sup>5</sup> Newman, James, "The Myth of The Ergodic Videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames" *Game Studies*, Vol 2, Issue 1, (July 2002), <http://gamestudies.org/0102/newman/>.

theoretical frameworks exist which can be used to consider how games, and videogames in particular, might be combined with other media and what this might mean for the understanding of the medium of the videogame. These frameworks and some of the history of the medium are outlined in Chapter I, as preparation for the discussions that follow.

In this thesis I have considered the combination of videogames with live performance in a theatre setting. Rather than focus on the nature of performativity inherent in play itself, or the process of performance in digital online engagement, I have instead attempted to consider performances which draw from videogames as a medium to inform their operation. These combinations have been broadly categorised into three distinct 'modes' based on their individual engagement with videogames.

The first of these 'modes' considers three performances that have used videogame worlds as a setting for live performance. These are performances which have, in some way, represented the internal world of a videogame as the setting for their performance without actually taking part in a digital environment – they are 'Plays Set in a Videogame.' This setting of performances in a videogame world or narrative create a juxtaposition of the real and the virtual which can be used to interrogate the processes at work in videogames themselves. All three performances borrow almost solely from aesthetic and narrative form to construct hypermediacy in the performance, and can be considered reimaginings of the nature of game fiction.

In Chapters II and III, I discussed those performances that used the juxtaposition of the real and the virtual to expose the mechanics of game operations by drawing on the logic of hypermediacy as put forward by Bolter and Grusin.<sup>6</sup> In Chapter II, the performance *Adventure Quest* is shown to use this logic of hypermediacy to problematise the issue of agency and the nature of authorship within virtual environments, while using existing theatrical strategies to create a representation of this conflict. In Chapter III, *Adventure Quest's* treatment of death in videogames is considered alongside the performance *Doom Raider*. In both cases, the performance uses a logic of hypermediacy to illustrate the operation of 'savegame' and checkpoint mechanics in videogames and highlight how these mechanics reframe the process of death in videogames as a learning event. This process of death is considered in purely operational terms with reference to ludic action, as to provide a substantial metaphysical discussion of the nature of death would require much deviation from the aims of this thesis.

In Chapter IV, I have considered those cases whereby the combination of art forms can be used to raise questions regarding the ideological operation of videogames. By considering *Theater of the Arcade's* treatment of videogames in live performance, the ideological operation of the videogame *Asteroids* can be explored using the works of theatre writer David Mammet as a framework for reference. Again, *Theater of the*

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<sup>6</sup> Bolter, J, and Grusin, R, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, (London: MIT Press, 2000).

*Arcade* uses a logic of hypermediacy through the juxtaposition of theatrical strategies and references to popular theatre writers to illustrate the operation of the videogame on an ideological level. These operations can be considered not only at the level of player and game as binary unit, but also within the game's positioning in a wider social context of arcade and game culture.

While challenging the nature of videogame operations, these performances also illustrate the potential of videogame aesthetic and narrative to provide rich and varied material for generating performances. They provide new challenges to methods of representation on stage as the performances strive to adapt fictional worlds originally created in digital hardware to the live environment. Additionally, by borrowing from aesthetic and narrative form, theatre is given the opportunity to explore the videogame as cultural artefact.

In the second category of 'The Player on Stage', I have considered two performances that have attempted to represent the subjective experience of the individual player when engaging with a videogame. In each of these cases, performers attempt to give the player direct representation on the stage, and as such, I term these forms of engagement as 'The Player on Stage.'

In Chapter V, the performance *Man Of Valour* is shown to use existing theatrical techniques of mime and *Commedia Dell' Arte* to develop a system of representation that draws heavily on popular film culture. The

performance borrows in particular from films that are dependent on spectacle rather than narrative as their primary mode of audience engagement. These films are considered to be part of the 'Cinema of Attraction' as outlined by Tom Gunning.<sup>7</sup> Through the combination of borrowing from the 'Cinema of Attraction' and the utilisation of mime and *commedia* techniques Corn Exchange's *Man Of Valour* creates a complex system of relations which redefine the position of the performer into a structure which is closely aligned with Vivian Sobchack's theories of cinematic presence<sup>8</sup> and provides a robust system of staging the subjective experience of an individual. This chapter discusses how this system of representation is then applied to the subjective experience of gameplay in *Man of Valour*, and illustrates the difficulties that arise as the process of videogameplay becomes classed as a subset of the process of film engagement. These conflicts are seen to be reflected in game criticism that seeks to define the process of player engagement in seemingly exclusive and irreconcilable ludic or narrative terms.

Chapter VI further explores this conflict between the ludic and the narrative forms of player engagement with gameplay through its consideration of the performance *Connected*. Through a comparison with the modes of representation used by both *Connected* and *Man of Valour*, the chapter

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<sup>7</sup> Gunning, Tom: "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the avant-garde" in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed Wanda Strauven, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Universtiy Press, 2006) 381 – 388.

<sup>8</sup> Sobchack, Vivian: "The Scene of The Screen: Enivisioning Cinematic and Electronic 'Presence'" from <http://studio.berkeley.edu/niemeyer/stories/seminal-essays.htm#sobchack> last acceseed 16<sup>th</sup> Jan 2011.

highlights those additional elements of game experience (such as the HUD, in game-goals, and improvisational behaviour) that are neglected by *Man of Valour's* representation. Additionally *Connected's* system of representation also raises questions of the status of the player's body while engaging in a play session. By drawing from Graeme Kirkpatrick's essay 'Controller, Hand, Screen: Aesthetic Form in the Computer Game,'<sup>9</sup> this chapter proposes a framework for understanding the process whereby the real body is repressed by the demands of the game, thus placing the body in a 'contested' position between the demands of the body and embodied experience of the real versus the player's virtual in-game existence and the demands of the ludic action. Through this framework of the contested body the seeming conflict between narrative and ludic engagement is described as a process of oscillation rather than a binary conflict.

These two performances, taken together, illustrate a mode of representing the subjective experience of gameplay in live performance. By representing the player on stage, both performances give rise to questions regarding the position of the body in both live performance and digital engagement. They highlight issues of duality and telepresence, while both creating a clear performance methodology for utilising cinematic remediation to represent gameplay on stage.

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<sup>9</sup> Kirkpatrick, Graeme, "Controller, Hand, Screen: Aesthetic Form in the Computer Game" *Games and Culture*, Vol 4, No. 2, SAGE Publications, (2009)127 – 143.

In the final category of theatrical engagement with the medium of the videogame I have considered those performances that, rather than represent the player experience, have attempted instead to recreate that experience for the audience within the performance space. Within this category of 'Playing the Game Live' I have examined two performances that have used videogame structures as the central framework for informing interactivity between the audience and the performers within the performance.

In Chapter VII, Rimini Protokoll's performance *Best Before* is discussed with reference to its own stated goal as to bring 'the multi-player video game out of the virtual realm'<sup>10</sup> and into a theatre setting. By drawing comparisons to Nessim Watson's<sup>11</sup> considerations on the nature of online society, the operation of players in persistent multi-player virtual environments is outlined. Through these definitions, a framework is constructed, which attempts to define some of the key processes of identification and agency within the Massively Multi-player Online Game. This framework is then used to consider how *Best Before* attempted to cultivate these elements within their performance, with particular reference to the development of the player avatar and the process of identification within the virtual space. The shifting rule structure of the performance's

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<sup>10</sup> From Rimini Protokoll website, [http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project\\_4397.html](http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project_4397.html) last accessed 20th June 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Watson, Nessim "Why we argue about virtual community: A case study of the Phish.net fan community" in Jones, Steven Ed. *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, Sage Publications, London, 1997 102 – 132.

internal videogame, 'BestLand', is discussed with reference to the operation of death and political space within the game itself, while some of the barriers to player engagement within the performance are highlighted through these discussions. These barriers raise questions of player agency and authorship within a live performance, which integrates interactive elements, and this question is further explored in Chapter VIII.

Chapter VIII discussed the performance *BrainExplode!* and its attempt to use the genre of 'point-and-click' adventure gaming to inform its interactive framework. The initial history of the adventure game is discussed through its origins in text-based interactive software towards its more recent iterations, which utilise animations for representation of the virtual environment and characters. This outline of development serves to highlight both key elements of interaction within the adventure game genre (action-based commands, object combination, etc.) and the presence of at least two distinct narrative 'voices' within the genre, each with particular influence on the interaction between rule structures and narrative within the respective games. These narrative voices are discussed with reference to both *BrainExplode!* and German performance group MachinaEx's works. Particular attention is paid to the third-person dominant narrative mode, as it is this narrative mode that allows both the writers and performers of *BrainExplode!* to retain authorial power, while allowing players to interact with the performance. This process of player interaction with the performance, and the nature of authorial power within



the performance, is examined with reference to Landow's<sup>12</sup> work on hypertexts, outlining *BrainExplode!* as a performed hypertext that allows an audience to create 'on demand' links to various texts within the performance. This process results in performances that retain the narrative drive set out by the creators, yet each performance is unique in its exposition due to the interaction of the audience.

The combination of videogames and live theatre draws focus to the unique and interactive nature of the medium, and while theatre may not redefine the nature of videogames beyond existing theoretical frameworks, the medium of the videogame provides theatre with structures for both form and aesthetic operation within performance. These structures provide theatre with a means of exploring aesthetics, subjectivity, digital engagement, and authorship in a live context and the appropriation of these structures has a profound impact on the nature of the live performance.

By drawing on the aesthetic form of the videogame, the performances are transformed into intermedial pieces that explore the tension between the digital and the real through a logic of hypermediality. These explorations can be created using the body and acts of repetition to remediate the specific aesthetics of digitally constructed characters (as in *Adventure Quest*, *Doom Raider* and *Connected*), through the use of colour pallet and costume (as in *Adventure Quest* and *Doom Raider*), or even in the

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<sup>12</sup> Landow, George P, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory & New Media in an Era of Globalization*, (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

appropriation of narrative setting (as in *Theater of the Arcade*). In each case, the presence of videogames on stage always draws attention to the presence (or absence) of an external 'other' to the action, namely that of the videogame player, who is necessary in all cases for the videogame to exist. As Galloway iterates, videogames are an 'action based medium',<sup>13</sup> and always require action on the part of a player to operate. In each case, the live performance is drawn into a relationship with the nature of player identity and presence. This relationship can be used to problematise the nature of digital gameplay by exploring socio-ideological issues (as in *Theater of the Arcade*), notions of learning and the nature of virtual death (as in *Doom Raider* and *Adventure Quest*), or to explore notions of self, identity, and free will through existing theatrical methodologies (as in *Adventure Quest's* use of modernist strategies of challenging formal authority).

This engagement with the position of the player also allows theatre to use videogames to explore the nature of subjectivity. By presenting the player on stage, live performance can attempt to represent the subjective experience of an individual playing games, and provide audiences with a framework through which the subjectivity of an individual can be explored beyond the game experience. These explorations can be problematic, as the position of the player is as an oscillation between both the ludic and the narrative operations of videogames. This becomes particularly evident

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<sup>13</sup> Galloway, Alexander, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) 3.

when the performance vocabulary used to first present the videogame 'screen' draws heavily on the cinematic as its primary language (as in *Man of Valour* and *Connected*). This cinematic focus favours a framework of purely narrative engagement within digital gameplay over representing the ludic elements of videogames and the role of the player in authoring the gameplay experience. By centring these representations in the body of the performer, the player's body is positioned as a contested object during gameplay experience and the telepresence of the player is given representation on stage. Through this framework of the 'contested body' the oscillation of the player between narrative and ludic engagement can be understood.

In all cases, by combining videogames and theatre, performances give rise to the question of authorship of experience by the player. Performances can appropriate the interactive frameworks and rule structures of videogames so as to directly explore the nature of this authorship in a live performance context (as in *Best Before* and *BrainExplode!*). By appropriating these rule structures, performances can not only allow audiences the opportunity to interact with a performance, but also provide contextualisation and structure through which this interaction can become meaningful. In those cases whereby the aesthetics and interactivity of the medium of the videogame are appropriated without consistent consideration of the central rule structures, the authorship of the player and the authorship of the theatre-maker can enter into conflict (as in *Best Before*). However, in those cases whereby the in rule

structures are fully integrated into the performance (as in *BrainExplode!*), audiences are provided with an opportunity to participate in a theatrical experience of joint-authorship, in which both the performers and the audience collaborate to produce a unique narrative, and in which both parties are assured equality through the rule structures appropriated.

I have attempted here to outline frameworks for understanding these operations by discussing contemporary performances that are drawing on the strategies of videogames and videogame systems. Through the interaction between theatre and videogames the position of player as central to the operation of videogames is reinforced, and the effects of the player's position on both player and game are explored. The demands on audience reception and interaction in performance are expanded by these explorations and the perceptions of both media are influenced. While I believe the performances considered here illustrate a wide range of approaches to theatre engaging with the medium of the videogame in a purely live context, I have no doubt that as both media continue to grow an exciting future full of discovery lies ahead.

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