

SONIA FIZEK



PLAYING AT
A DISTANCE

Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic

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Sonia Fizek

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Prelude: Play at a Distance

“There is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura in scientific accounts of bodies and machines; there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds.”

Donna Haraway¹

In 1935, Albert Einstein coined the famous phrase “spooky action at a distance”² to dismiss a controversial theory of quantum entanglement, according to which particles separated by great distances could influence one another without the need for direct physical interaction. In other words, despite occupying remote locations, the particles were perceived as intimately linked. At the center of this puzzle lies the materiality behind a medium of communication. For this distant entanglement to be true, the information exchanged between the two particles would need to move faster than light—an occurrence baffling, if not outright impossible, to the Newtonian interpretation of the natural world. How can two objects communicate over such great distances so instantaneously that the information traveling at the speed of light is unable to arrive before the entanglement takes place? Since this book is neither about quantum physics nor about natural philosophy, I will let this question rest as a playful cliffhanger. What I want us to take from this example, though, is the concept of *mediated distance*, which I argue is central to how we experience and make sense of games and play in computerized forms.

Distance is deeply engraved in the media landscape. Without literal distance, there would be no need for medium-aided communication or a theory of communication at all. Think of telephone infrastructures, digital networks, or such mundane devices as remote controls, which have become

almost invisible daily companions of many TV-equipped households in the last several decades. It stands to reason that one of the most frequently used prefixes to describe diverse communication media is *tele*, the Greek root word for “distant.” Telegraph, telegram, telephone, or television—all are media of telecommunication.

Distance lies at the very heart of games, too, especially in their computerized and mechanized realization. But contrary to the intuitive association the term may awaken, my aim here is not to study physical distances at play. I will not show how multiplayer online games bring together players from remote parts of the globe. Neither do I want to look into physical distances simulated in game worlds, however fascinating those manifestations of ludic distance may be. What I want to do instead is to present distance as a media aesthetic framework in order to challenge the common understanding of how we interact with technology in general and video games in particular. My goal is to analyze different forms of engagement with video games that require surprisingly little direct or close action from the human players. I want to propose a theoretical position that invites readers to rethink the human agent as a central player in the gaming performance. In this perspective, human players are not self-governing subjects but rather are subject to processes and procedures of technical media.³ In other words, I question modes of analysis based solely on human players’ agency and choices.

This proposition may sound a bit counterintuitive, so let me illustrate it with an example from decades before the emergence of the first video game. Imagine a self-playing piano, its keys moving automatically in a rhythmic dance as if pressed by a ghostly human virtuoso from another space and time. Until the 1920s, when the phonograph completely changed the musical landscape, self-playing pianos (also called player pianos) had been the only instruments able to mechanically store and replay recorded musical pieces.⁴ Musical performances were literally punched onto a perforated paper roll, which enabled a faithful recreation of a concrete performance, played out at the listener’s own convenience—a truly “spooky” mediated action. Since the era of player pianos, many other media (phonograph, radio, film, etc.) have decoupled space-time dimensions of otherwise synchronous human performances. Digital electronic computers, as the “newest” of all media, have also developed a special relation to the question of action at a distance, this time mediated not by perforated paper rolls but by encoded silicon circuits and digital displays.

Video games have been primarily understood as objects to be actively engaged with, conflicts to be resolved, and meaningful actions to be taken.⁵ Games are supposed to be ergodic, requiring a non-trivial effort from their participants.⁶ They have been often described as inherently interactive, by theorists, developers and gamers alike.⁷ In other words, most digital games, staged in the medium of a computer, could be described as “explicitly participational.”⁸

Concepts such as participation, interaction, ergodicity, and human agency, all reflect in different ways the diminishing of mediated distance between the player and the game. Video games are supposed to immerse their players so that they “lose” themselves in the game worlds. The game’s interface is usually seen as a barrier between the real and the simulated world, preventing the feeling of full immersion. Kinetic interfaces and VR are luring us with a promise to shorten this physical, cognitive, and semantic distance further, removing the symbolic interface in favor of the embodied one. This *suspension of disbelief*⁹ (especially noticeable in VR technology) is founded on an imaginary of the subject merging with their aesthetic object. In video games, it is a combination of storytelling, illusion (whether optical, algorithmic, or embodied), and agency that reduces the distance between the real and the imagined.

But contrary to the popular imaginary of gaming, it is not solely defined by immersion via direct and close action. Play emerges out of a delicate balance between action and inaction. With each agential act comes a moment of pause, if not a stop. Vertigo is as much about losing balance as keeping it. Chance is a simultaneous acceptance of randomness and a firm belief in luck. Competition is the drive to win and the risk of losing. Mimicry is an act of imitation, close to its referent and yet distant enough to remain its parody. More importantly, to play is not only to engage but also to let go; to accept the agentiality of matter and to see oneself not as a player *in* the game world but a player *of* the game world, to paraphrase the feminist theorist Karen Barad.¹⁰

Play relies on those tensions and seemingly contradictory moments of passivity and activity, distraction and attraction, distance and closeness. This dynamic is very well reflected in the German adjective *spannend*, which is used to describe the fun property of games. The related noun *Spannung* points toward the concept of tension, suspense, or—to be even more precise in terms of media theory—the difference between the “plus” and

the “minus” in voltage. *Spannung* is that which spans the gap between two states; in the case of video games, the active state and the inactive state.

To think in terms of distance, then, is to acknowledge those two states and that which spans them. Play, although defined primarily through the concept of focused activity, needs moments of inactivity. By bringing distance into the conversation, I want to shed some critical light on the inactive side of this ludic joint venture, which has not been given much attention in the study of play and video games. I see action and inaction as complementary and necessary critical dimensions—the yin and the yang of play.

The action-based, interactive, and participatory understanding of digital play and video games should not be regarded as an objective statement of the configurable and procedural capacity of the computational medium. Play and games are always “placed in context within broader value systems.”¹¹ Therefore, understanding play and games is always filtered through underlying ideological values at play. The mainstream rhetoric of video games is an example of a modern Western rhetoric of play as progress, power, and the self. The forms of play that this book scrutinizes are often called “not-games.” Consequently, the modes of play that are central to this project have little to do with individual optimization and empowerment through mastery and choice. My goal is to understand video games and play, looking beyond the modern rhetoric of the empowered progressing self.

Mediated Distance across Disciplines

As a concept rooted in media theory, digital humanities, and play theory, distance carries with it diverse interpretational perspectives; some problematizing the spatial and physical aspects of interaction, others employing distance as a semiotic gesture.

Distance takes a central spot in a recent media historical intervention by Florian Sprenger, Christina Vagt, and John Durham Peters titled *Action at a Distance* (2020).¹² In three intertwined essays, the authors problematize media as necessary material connectors in the context of spatial separation. They explore the materiality of communication and mediality of transmission, provoking new questions about human interaction within material and immaterial entangled infrastructures. They do this by reviving one of the most prominent conundrums in the history of physics (to which

I alluded in the introductory paragraph of this prelude): the impossibility of interaction at a distance without physical touch or any other measurably mediating force.

Media are often seen as intervening forces able to shorten the distance, but they may also coproduce methods of analysis, which introduce distance into the cognitive process of analysis. Literary theory, for instance, contemplates the interplay between closeness and distance by juxtaposing the traditional interpretational method of close reading with so-called distant reading. The latter describes a computer-aided approach to reading proposed by Franco Moretti.¹³ Unlike close reading, which requires in-depth study of texts, distant reading is about analyzing large amounts of metadata about literary texts. In other words, the method of distant reading distances the reader from the text and advocates for the analysis of metatextual data about a large sample of texts closely read by the machine instead.

Distance, then, lays bare a certain medial paradox. On the one hand, digital electronic media shorten the physical communication distance among its users; on the other, analytical methods based on big data may add distance between the theorist and the object of analysis. It gets even more complicated. In the formative years of game studies, many scholars wrote about the importance of “close playing” as a means of ludic analysis. Here lies yet another paradox: to “close play” a game, we need to introduce a *critical distance* toward the very object of play. The usually immersive act of play thus becomes a self-reflective act of distant play, in which the disbelief in the fictional game world is not suspended.¹⁴

Within the context of play, the importance of mediated distance was stressed by Brian Sutton-Smith, one of the most prominent play theorists of the twentieth century. At the first annual conference of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) in 2003, Sutton-Smith’s keynote speech encouraged the game studies community to look into symbolic dimensions of distance in video games. He argued that many video games are *distanced forms* of contest, as opposed to a sport like football, which requires bodily contact and therefore raises the chance of venting unmediated anger. In his view, a computer acts as a layer that symbolically distances the player from the direct bodily moment of play—“You are looking at a screen or you are manipulating the computer, which puts you at great distance.”¹⁵ Sutton-Smith understood the unique role of the computer as a machine for facilitating play and emphasized the highly mediated character of computer

play. In it, he saw hope for providing child players with “defenses” against unmediated and direct forms of anger.

The French philosopher Jacques Henriot, in his treatises *Le jeu* (1969) and *Sous couleur de jouer: la métaphore ludique* (1989), reflected play through the key symbolic figure of distance. He founded his theory of play on a semantic core derived from a mechanical understanding of play. The latter points towards *distance* as a necessary condition for play to occur. Play denotes a space or a gap, which literally leaves room for play in mechanical machinery (e.g., gears, hinges, joints). Distance, then, is a symbolic interval that makes it possible for a game to take place at all. In other words, any game requires distance to be created and maintained between the player and the said game. Playing is a dialectical operation that relies on the player’s internal interpretation of play. It belongs to the order of the signifier; play is only a matter of meaning. In other words, the sense of the game is produced by the player thanks to their playful attitude, but this sense is enabled only by the player’s distance towards the game, as interpreted by Maude Bonenfant, a Canadian semiotician and play scholar.¹⁶

For me, distance at play is, above all, a medium- and matter-centric perspective that sheds light on a diversity of delegated, automated, and otherwise distant experiences of play, all of which tend to be pushed to the edges of gameness. To understand the diversity and ambiguity of digital play and the role of the human player within, we need to rethink time and again what it means to play.

Media Aesthetic of Play

My understanding of video game aesthetic stems from a medium-centered approach to play. One of my primary inspirations is the work of Walter Benjamin, who wrote on the then-new media of photography and film in the early decades of the twentieth century. Many of his works shed light on how technical media and their means of production change the aesthetic experience thereof. In his famous essay “The Work of Art in Times of Technical Reproducibility,” Benjamin investigates the effects of technical reproducibility of images on their audience and on the perception of visual art in general.¹⁷ I would like to draw a similar parallel between computational processes and the way they shape the aesthetic experiences of digital games. In that sense, the aesthetic of play I aim to engage with could be regarded

as a media aesthetic, since it is embedded within specific medial processes. I want to explore these processes and show how they, in turn, shape what we perceive as gameplay or playful practices.

Let me illustrate the above point with an example. It is not exactly the same aesthetic experience to play ping-pong and *Pong* (1972). Even the most realistic, modern sport video games (e.g., the FIFA and NBA 2K series) provide an experience much different to that of football or basketball on a physical court; although the fundamental rules of the game remain unchanged. In other words, computers mediate play. And the process of ludic mediation is shaped by the processes and infrastructure of the computing machine. The medium changes the ludic message. As Jussi Parikka once wrote, “the way we see, think and memorise, dream and hallucinate, are conditioned mediatically.”¹⁸ This applies to play as well.

What I want to argue in this book is the following: to theorize the experience of (game)play within the digital, we need a medium specific or medium-centric aesthetic perspective—one that is able to think with and within the digital medium. We need a digital aesthetic that would be able to address the “discrepancy between continuity of sensation and the discreteness of digital technology.”¹⁹ The aesthetic of digital games leaning on analog concepts misses the point, or, at best, provides for a preliminary point of departure. Analyzing digital gaming through analog media such as literature, theater, film, or photography surely yields crucial insights. Nevertheless, these fail to address the specificity of the computational medium. This book is an attempt to theorize the experience of playing video games by putting the digital medium at the forefront, sometimes at the expense of the human player. Ultimately, it asks what it means to experience a digital game aesthetically through the computational medium and how to understand play if we are not involved as close agents and direct controllers of technology—or, to put it in other words still, how the computer influences aesthetic practices of play.

It should come as no surprise that to understand how we play in the twenty-first century, we need to take into account the computer medium. Early on in the history of game studies, the German media theorist Claus Pias presented an insightful media theoretical analysis in *Computer Game Worlds* (2017).²⁰ Alexander Galloway’s *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* is another example of how to “do” media aesthetic of video games.²¹ Ian Bogost’s *Unit Operations* and the concept of procedural rhetoric exposes

the inner workings of the computational medium in how we make sense of video games.²² Miguel Sicart devotes the final chapter of his book, *Play Matters*, to play in the computerized medium.²³ *Playing at a Distance* wants to build on this tradition by rethinking how the computer medium molds the aesthetic experience of play.

Indirectly, if not by title association, this book addresses Brian Upton's work on the aesthetic of play.²⁴ As much as I agree that play is something that reaches beyond video games, and that many novelties of the digital gaming medium can be found in earlier playful forms, I do not share Upton's media-unspecific conviction that the gameplay experience of a first-person shooter is comparable to reading lines of Homer. Digital media are fundamentally different from their analog precedents, and the difference does not necessarily lie in their interactivity, nonlinearity, or multimodality—features that “sell” the new medium rather than critically look into its core. It is the discreteness as opposed to continuity that differentiates digital and analog media. It is their divisible and modular structures that have fundamentally changed the experience of play. And although the urge to play is predigital and reaches far beyond video games—or, for that matter, any games (defined as structured systems with rules)—a given medium molds the experience of play in the rhythm and shape of that particular medium. This, in turn, influences the aesthetic reception of play. After Claus Pias's media-historical investigation of play, Upton's comparison of the first-person shooter to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* seems a medium-agnostic rhetorical trick at best.²⁵ The human stories of war, loss, and love we tell might share some ahistorical similarities, but the question is how those stories are experienced situationally and locally in a given medium. Oral storytelling, stage performance, and narratives written on a scroll or in a codex (a book form consisting of separate sheets of paper bound together) create diverse, if not fundamentally different, aesthetic experiences.

But the story of the media aesthetic of distant play does not end with the medium. To end with the medium is to simply flip the coin; to take agency away from the human and to attribute it to “dead” matter instead; to claim that things, too, have agency.²⁶ Instead of offering a symmetrical story of agency in video games, I want to show how matter comes to matter, how it is configured, and how it reconfigures.²⁷ In such a light, the player is part of the gaming situation; they are not *in* but *of* the game world, configured and co-constituted by it. Play, then, is neither a human nor a nonhuman act.

Play emerges out of complex material, human and nonhuman ludic entanglements. It is a relation that forms the relata, not the other way around. To put forward such an understanding of play, I reach out to agential realism, a philosophy of posthuman performativity proposed by Karen Barad. In doing so, I also want to position my take on the media aesthetic of play in the new materialist and posthuman tradition while remaining in dialogue with other game scholars and colleagues such as Alenda Chang, Brendan Keogh, Darshana Jayemanne, Justin Keever, and Justyna Janik, among others, who have employed posthuman perspectives in their own explorations of play.

Dis-Playing Video Games

Out of the considerations on distance, media aesthetic, and posthuman performativity emerges my reinterpretation of computer mediated play as *play at a distance* or *dis-play*. And so, to dis-play is to be at a distance from an active and direct moment of play (from the Latin *dis-*, away, apart), to delegate the immediate action towards the machine, participating in the (algorithmic) spectacle (display) instead. To dis-play is also to unfold, to become, and to emerge by gradually opening up in its entirety (from the Latin *displiacare*, unfold). And finally, to dis-play is to participate as one of the other possible agents in a distributed algorithmic entanglement. Playing at a distance is a medium-centric, posthumanist, and performative perspective, challenging the notion of the player and the played. Its aim is to decenter the human player and display other agents at play. The manifestation of play on the screen, in the case of digital games—that which is displayed—is a representational image of multiple agencies: the instantiation of rules, the execution of code, the cognitive and physical actions of the player, and the material possibility of play (raw materials used in manufacturing hardware components, the labor involved in assembling console hardware, shipping vessels carrying gaming consoles overseas for sale, access to electricity, etc.).

I see dis-play as a theoretical perspective grounded in its time, one that helps to understand the current computer gaming moment. It encourages thinking outside of the primacy of the thumb, questioning agency and direct control—qualities that have been almost synonymous with video games and technology. But it is not only games that exemplify the act of dis-playing; other digital practices unfold at a distance, too. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram require only relatively

short moments or bursts of activity. Collectively we produce a “living” space that acts 24/7, changing every time we leave it and further feeding off of our intermittent moments of action whenever we come back to it. Live-streaming services such as Twitch are more persistent than ever, allowing us to pop in and out at our leisure and in our own available space with no commitment or effort required; rather than being put on the spot or having to play the game themselves, viewers simply watch others play it instead. Watching, spectating, or lurking have become recognizable play forms in their own rights. This form of spectatorship surpasses the merely aesthetic level of the interface or the perceived image. What we are dealing with here is an algorithmic spectacle where images become “functions in the mathematical realm.”²⁸ Perhaps the most illustrative example of such a spectacle, stripped to its bare ludic bones, is *Number* (2013) by Tyler Glaiel, a self-playing idle game depicting numbers going up. Consider also the more recent *Universal Paperclips* (2017) by Frank Lantz, about an AI that makes paperclips: “It’s free to play, it lives in your browser, and all you have to look at is numbers.”²⁹

It is no coincidence that distance playing comes to mind at a time when automation, algorithmic agency, bots of all kind, and deep learning occupy news headlines worldwide. It is also not entirely coincidental that self-playing and idle games have appeared in the wider consciousness in recent years, or that a self-playing video game has been displayed in one of the world’s major art galleries.³⁰ Such automated experiments may be the new ludic frontier or a whimsical temporary experiment in the larger history of digital games and media. Whichever turns out to be true, this book is about to capture them in the moment and offer a compass to navigate through those barely explored distant worlds.

The problem of defining or claiming the true aesthetic experience of video gaming has appeared under many names—casual gaming, walking simulations, or cozy gaming—all standing in opposition to the “real” gaming experience, which is supposed to be hard-core, difficult, attentive, and connected with the investment of considerable amounts of time. In their latest book *Real Games* Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul examine this question by asking what happens when a game’s gameness is called into question.³¹ They explore dominant culture discourses about legitimate games from a rhetorical perspective, reaching out to popular press, essays, and blog posts. My book, by contrast, approaches the question of gameness

by trying to develop a new language for the media aesthetic experience of digital play, which may in the end contribute to a wider understanding of what digital games and gaming are in all their diversity of experiences and forms.

Finally, I would like to look at games not only as the epitome of participatory culture or the most iconic digital examples of the “interactive turn” but also as the experiments and outcomes of the “material turn” and the “automatic turn.”³² The latter has led not only to the automation of drudgery but also, subversively, pleasure. Automated digital play has also followed in the footsteps of high-end programming languages, which tend to delegate and automate many parts of the code; distance, then, is hard-coded into the infrastructure of the digital machine. Distant play allows me to revisit crucial concepts, such as interactivity, control, hands-on participation, and human agency, among many others. In doing so, I hope to capture emerging digital practices and carve out new ways to describe them.

Chapter Overview

My interpretation of distance in and at play reaches out to a variety of interdisciplinary theories, building on such concepts as interpassivity, ambience, automation, and intra-activity, among others. Each chapter presents a different aspect of playing at a distance, putting a specific game, play format, genre, or ludic phenomenon under the magnifying glass. In the words of the historian Sigfried Giedion, “The sun is mirrored even in a coffee spoon.”³³ It is, after all, the modest objects of everyday life, “usually not granted earnest consideration,” that have a great power to shape our modes of living, and illustrate the changing world around us.³⁴ Many of the games I mention in this book are modest objects (and sometimes subjects) of play—minor games, niche genres, or experimental modes within bigger games or play practices—that complicate rather than explicate gaming.³⁵

Chapter 1, “Beyond Interactivity,” brings together thinkers and theories that challenge interactivity as the pivotal concept necessary to understand digital media and video games. Alongside many other scholars, I show that interactivity as a leading conceptual axis of video games fails to account for a diversity of play forms. The chapter lays analytical ground for the rest of the book and is filled with examples of computer-mediated play that are otherwise difficult to classify or, in the worst case, dismissed as “notgames.”

Chapter 2, “Interpassive Play,” opens up a discussion on the emerging practice of playful involvement with self-playing systems, and the sort of play that is characterized by distance and delegation rather than close and focused engagement. It explores the peculiar phenomenon of delegated pleasure and extends it to that of delegated play. The chapter also unpacks the theory of interpassivity, developed by the contemporary Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller, to demonstrate how it applies to video games, with a specific focus on the genre of “idle” games.³⁶

In Chapter 3, “Ambient Play,” I explore the concepts of ambience and background aesthetic. To understand the enveloping capacity of video games, I propose a twofold interpretation of ambience as either *operational* or *affective*. The first perspective points toward background processes of the computer as well as games and gameplay forms seamlessly embedded within the daily rhythms of their players, and the latter discusses ambience in relation to a slow and flaneur-like experience of play.

Chapter 4, “Automated Play,” sits at the crossroads between human agency and computer automation. It is an attempt to sketch a media archaeology and history of automated play, bringing player pianos, playful automata from the Enlightenment era, and current artificial intelligence (AI)-driven agents into the game. The chapter begins with a short history of the automatization of mind, juxtaposing the twenty-first-century computer program AlphaGo against the eighteenth-century chess-playing automaton. It then looks into the mechanization of physical skill, drawing parallels between contemporary mods used to automate tedious gameplay and late nineteenth-century instruments such as pianolas, which turned a highly skilled human act of musical play into a relatively uncomplicated semiautomatic activity. Ultimately, the chapter aims to offer possible directions for critical inquiry into automation in and around play.

Chapter 5, “Intra-active Play,” repositions the categories of players and games as subjects and objects, arguing that a different story of play needs to be put in place. Games change us as much as we change them (most of the time, literally). Out of this observation emerges a pledge for a posthuman and performative media aesthetic of play, drawing heavily from the philosophy of Karen Barad.

Chapter 6, “Spectated Play,” is a contemplation of the visual and computational aspects of digital play, offering a reconciliation between the analog and the digital. The image, or that which is displayed, plays a central role in

video games. The recent turn toward spectacle in gaming culture (exemplified by Twitch streamers and professional e-sports) has brought the element of displaying play to a new dimension.

The book culminates in a conclusion called “Postlude: Distance at Play,” in which I try to bring together all the diverse perspectives on play under the banner of *distance*, doing away with binarism and reviving the ambiguity of and at play. Play at a distance privileges neither the visual nor the procedural, neither the active nor the passive, neither the performed nor the spectated, neither the player nor the played. It strives to offer a situated, performative, and, most crucially, a mediated reading of play—one in which agency is not a property possessed by a human player but a force distributed within and across the ludic entanglement.

1 Beyond Interactivity

“You’re not in control.”

Black Mirror: Bandersnatch (2018)¹

Interactivity has occupied a comfortable central spot in popular discourse around video games and has often appeared as the driving paradigm in scholarly work, repeated like a cybernetic mantra every time the uniqueness of the new digital medium was called into question. It has become a marker differentiating digital media and their flagship entertainment form, video games, from older media such as film, television, photography, and print. And since video games belong to computational rather than optical media, they seem to have been in need of such a unique differentiation marker. Perhaps the study of video games needed a starting point that would not only favor computation and action over representation but also, crucially, develop a theory of action that would be based on the reduction of its significance in older media.²

Positing interactivity as the leading conceptual axis of computational media, however, fails to account for a myriad of playful forms and play situations. Only by looking beyond both its paradigm—and thus human control and agency—can we become receptive toward other aesthetic modes of engagement with playful technologies. Putting interactivity under scrutiny will lay ground for numerous concepts rooted in media theory, feminist theory, and philosophy. This chapter is an attempt to situate this book and its theoretical toolbox in the context of a diverse body of scientific perspectives—both long-standing and contemporary—that directly or indirectly problematize the interaction paradigm. The drive to do so has been ignited by years of didactic experience as a media and game studies theorist,

and by teaching in international game design programs, where I was all too often exposed to students' firm belief in the unique interactive capacity of the video game. This chapter, therefore, is perhaps the most urgent read for novice students and designers who would like to critically reread the history of interaction in video games. Media and game theorists may find this chapter a rather familiar (but hopefully refreshing) read, preparing some ground for what is about to come in the chapters that follow, which propose concrete lenses going beyond the interactive paradigm. Ultimately, I want to argue for a media aesthetic of digital play that embraces a variety of ludic experiences mediated by computation. In any case, this chapter, which I have often called into question myself, has allowed me to carve out my own position on the complex question of video game aesthetic.

Critical Confusion

Interactivity gained particular momentum in the late 1980s through the 1990s. It emerged as a demarcating line between the so-called new media and old media such as print, photography, and, most of all, film. Video games became the most recognizable examples used to illustrate the cultural shift from mass media of spectacle or representation to mass media of simulation and computation.³ Computational media, the *coolest* of all, are characterized by high levels of participation and responsiveness.⁴ And interactivity is supposed to be the primary sociotechnical marker of participatory culture.

Drawing on the work of Margaret Morse, the Chicago School of Media Theory took up this configurable potential of the computational medium, defining interactivity as "the ability of the user to participate in the creation or modification of the medium."⁵ In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet H. Murray locates the primary representational property of the computer in its capacity to render responsive behaviors; in other words, to facilitate interactivity.⁶ In game design, it is often seen as "a cyclical process in which two actors alternately listen, think, and speak to each other."⁷ In all the above examples, the assumption is that there exist two independent *relata*: the user and the medium, the game and the player, or the human and technology. Interaction may be seen as a unilateral process, a reflex reinforced by a cause-and-effect chain: I press the space key, and the figure on the screen jumps in response to my input.

Interactivity has even inspired the rise of a whole new discipline. The field of human–computer interaction rests firmly on activity theory, the idea that a human is an intentional subject acting on dead matter. It is the human engagement with digital technology that is of paramount importance.⁸ Activity theory looks at how people act with technology, failing to account for how technology influences and acts with people. To a large degree, this framework has shaped the popular discourse around what it means to interact with a video game. The simple concept of a feedback loop—I act on something and receive immediate response to my act—has rarely been questioned outside of academia. A problem arises, however, once interactivity is coupled with such terms as freedom, control, and choice—all of paramount importance in the grand fantasy of mastery over a video game. It does not account for the power technology has over humans and the infrastructures and machines that guide our daily rhythms, make decisions on soon-to-be automated battlefields, and affect the political scene, albeit with no direct human-like intentionality. Action theorists would have us believe that computers are simply tools that mediate between people and the world, but in reality they are media that “determine our situation.”⁹ By extension, computer games determine our play or “define what it means to play in computerised societies.”¹⁰ In much of his early work, Seth Giddings emphasizes this need to shift the attention away from established notions and toward a more nuanced understanding of the gaming “event” as one brought into being by complex human and nonhuman agencies.¹¹

Interaction is also a foundation for many other concepts resting on the shoulders of the human player’s action and the computer’s response to it, such as choice in nonlinear storytelling (decision trees), agency, control, player effort, and many others; some belonging to the realm of theory, others reflecting a more applied and design-oriented angle. In many cases, interaction (or the lack thereof) has placed some genres at the edge of the heart of gameness; for example, Conway’s automated *Game of Life*, hyper-text fiction, and *Dear Esther*, which gave rise to the genre of walking simulators.¹² For many gamers and game designers, games that prioritize such practices as walking, exploring, contemplating, and reflecting are not interactive enough to be classified as “real” games.¹³ The more often buttons are pressed, choices are made, and challenging actions are executed, the more “gamey” and hence interactive the video game seems to its players.

Despite the early allure of interactivity, many media and art theorists have expressed skepticism toward the concept. Espen Aarseth, for instance, views interactivity as “a purely ideological term, projecting an unfocused fantasy rather than a concept of any analytical significance.”¹⁴ To alleviate that murkiness, he introduced the notion of *ergodicity*, which describes the degree of nontrivial effort that is required in order to traverse the text (in a broad sense). Similarly, Lev Manovich finds interactivity too broad a concept to be truly useful, if not entirely redundant.¹⁵ Instead of thinking about new media as interactive, he defines them in terms of five principles: *numerical representation*, *modularity*, *automation*, *variability*, and *transcoding*. Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron argue that the players do not act so much as react to the game and, in turn, the game reacts to them. And since it is the game that begins the “conversation” with the player, they do not interact with it but *inter(re)act* instead.¹⁶ In that sense, video games may be described as inter(re)active media. More recently, Brendan Keogh made an even bolder statement, undermining the special status granted to video games entirely: “I reject the notion that a *pure uniqueness* of the videogame form ever truly existed beyond the rhetorical strategies of a new media industry (and subsequently scholarly discipline trying to demarcate a discursive space for itself).”¹⁷

Interactivity seems to have earned a prominent spot in the long line of confusing buzzwords and rhetorically empty terms that have nevertheless powerfully shaped the popular understanding of digital media and video games. It is as illusory as that of *technology*, the meaning of which evolved over the course of the twentieth century from a very specific one denoting practical art to a highly vague one used to talk about “an unbelievably diverse collection of phenomena—tools, instruments, machines, organizations, methods, techniques, systems, and the totality of all of these [. . .].”¹⁸ Currently, media theory faces a similar challenge with the term *artificial intelligence*, which has been “cobbled together from a grab bag of disparate tools and techniques.”¹⁹ By taking interactivity yet again on board, I do not aim to add up to the general narrative of confusion; however, I do believe that it is important to understand the changes the concept has undergone in order to provide some orientation markers in the midst of this terminological maze. Only then can we propose alternatives to the mainstream view of video games as explicitly participatory and interactive and, furthermore, account for all the other examples of computer-mediated

playful experiences that are otherwise difficult to classify and are, at best, typically labeled as “notgames.”²⁰

Infrastructures of Freedom and Control

Computer games often require their players to choose a path or utilize an object, perhaps two of the most common performative acts in adventure games. Activity (and thus interactivity), however, should not be conflated with freedom of choice, although it very often is. In an early piece on the ideology of interactivity presented at the first international DiGRA conference in 2003, Matt Garite observed that “video games grant players an unprecedented degree of freedom and control, while simultaneously bombarding them with a relentless series of limits and demands.”²¹ What these games actually offer is an *illusion* of freedom. After all, “the program administers only that which is possible under specific conditions.”²² The computer simulates only a fraction of what we could refer to as the player control; it is the read-only memory (ROM) that remains the real controller.²³ Let us take a look at two brief examples.

The conflated choice structure is well represented by the Blueprint Visual Scripting system available in Unreal Engine 4, developed by Epic Games (figure 1.1). Instead of writing code line by line, the designer or developer may represent choices and all functional relationships within the game in a visual manner, combining the nodes with “wires” and determining the relationships between them. This kind of ludic infrastructure underlies the logics of the game, the behavior of the entities within the physical game world, and the structure of choice for the player (closed and open doors, dialogue options available, loops and blind alleys, win conditions, etc.). In other words, Blueprint systems define object-oriented classes and objects of the game, providing an operational and logical framework for the interactive practice of playful communication mediated in and by a digital machine.

Digital play mediated by information technologies remains highly susceptible to the core infrastructures of those technologies; in this case, object-oriented scripting logics and if/then conditional statements characteristic of programming languages. Depending on the interpretation, they may be seen as those of freedom, choice, and diversity, or those of control, confinement, and only nominal variety. In the early 1990s, many regarded

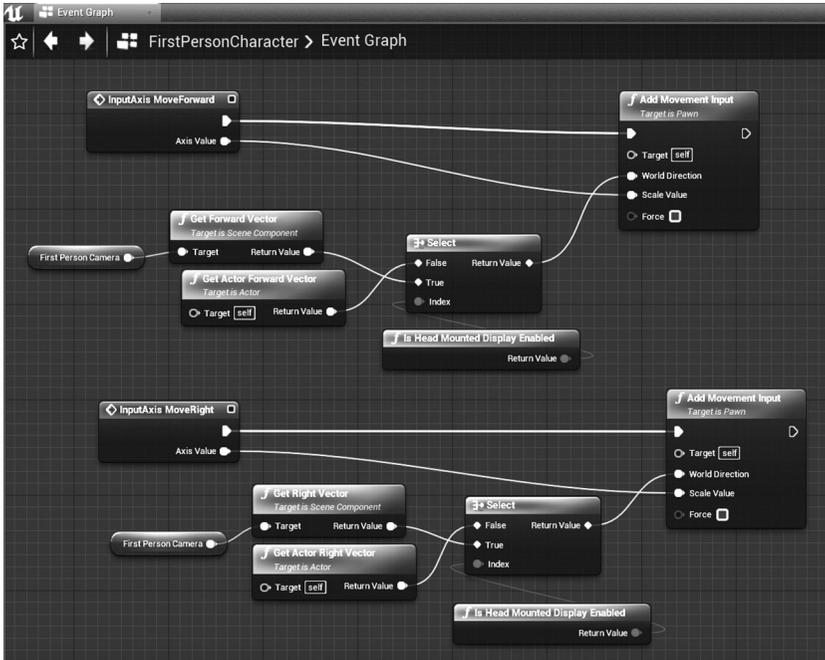


Figure 1.1

A first-person character blueprint in the Unreal Engine. Courtesy of Epic Games.

the internet in general and the structure of choice-rich hyperlinks or forking paths in particular as a marker of democratization. This belief in the emancipatory character of media is not necessarily unique: “telephone, radio, television [. . .] have all at one time or another been described as democratizing, liberating forces,” although the freedom was assigned to quite different structural capacities of the medium.²⁴

There were other, more skeptical voices, too. Manovich, for instance, believed that interactive digital media represent potential infrastructures of manipulation and control. Inspired by the criticism of the avant-garde digital art scene, he shared his opinion in a short article provocatively titled “On Totalitarian Interactivity.” He began his evaluation of interactivity with a quote by Alexei Shulglin:

Looking at very popular media art form such as interactive installation, I always wonder how people (viewers) are excited about this new way of manipulation on them . . . They are happily following very few options given to them by artists: press left or right button, jump or sit . . . Future now!²⁵

As a post-Communist subject, Manovich saw interactive media as highly problematic. Instead of viewing them as vehicles for free exchange, democracy, and choice, he saw in them the potential of surveillance and oppression. (Little did Manovich know that digital media of choice would eventually be used to sway the democratic elections of 2016 in the United States and stir unrest in post-truth societies.)

A similar point was raised almost a decade later in Alexander R. Galloway's *Allegories of Control* trilogy, in which he argued that distributed digital networks, although historically developed as alternatives to hierarchical and centralized systems, indeed turned into "the most highly controlled mass media hitherto known."²⁶ Similarly, in *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun developed her argument from the problematic tension between freedom and control, which led to a polarized understanding of digital technologies and the internet as tools that either promise freedom or control their users.²⁷ Societies structure technologies, which in turn influence how people work, communicate, and, without a doubt, play. To lean on Langdon Winner again: "Many technical devices and systems important in everyday life contain possibilities for many different ways of ordering human activity."²⁸ This notion can be seen as either empowering or restrictive, depending on the ideological perspective or the context of its use. In other words, technology can obfuscate a choice or seem to offer it. Video games are no different in this respect.

Such examples externalize what some media critics have known for quite a while: that interactivity, choice, and freedom constitute a Western technocratic myth of individual empowerment within and through the digital—all signs of social and technological utopianism. But it is power, not empowerment, which is inscribed into the technological dispositif, argues Dieter Mersch in the provocative essay "A Critique of 'Algorithmic' Reason."²⁹ Drawing on Fred Turner's book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, he goes on to highlight how the countercultural movements of the 1970s and, later, the 1990s misunderstood a computer as a tool of emancipation and counteroffensive against state control.³⁰

As complicated and choice-rich as they are, video games may be also seen as infrastructures of predetermined choice actualized by the player. The richer the choice, the stronger the illusion of control and mastery over the system.³¹ We may develop a feeling of control over the game and its

outcomes, when in fact all we can do is perhaps join the “totalitarian” ludic structure—that is, a structure that exercises control over the unconstrained freedom of our imagination and association and maps it onto a neatly carved-out, rule-based cybernetic system.³²

Another way to think about the controlling and measuring dimension of the computer is to look at its core—say, an Intel core. The central processing unit (CPU) is more or less a very precise clock generator, repetitively synchronizing its circuits’ operations and oscillating a set number of times per second. For example, a 1 GHz CPU is processing at the speed of one billion cycles per second. A computer is a highly rhythimized machine. Likewise, digital play is a highly synchronic experience. Thinking media archaeologically, computer games are rhythms of human–machine communications. In other words, a cybernetic infrastructure of video games is a perfect example of a chrono system regulating our rhythms.³³

We can rarely do everything that pleases us within game worlds, despite the marketing promises of the game developers and their belief in the god-like abilities of the programmers and game designers to summon virtual worlds into being. Adventure games offer their users incomparably less freedom than what was planned for the operators of Memex.³⁴ The closest approximations to that dream of freedom are sandbox or simulation games, whose rules are so derivative and emergent that they indeed simulate free choice or skillfully muddle the underlying rule set; and games such as *No Man’s Sky*, which rely on random, procedurally generated game worlds—the supposed variety and diversity of the system itself and not of our doing within it. Friedrich Kittler’s assertion that “media determine our situation” suggests that a game as a system determines gameplay or our capacity to control it.³⁵

Mind the Mind–Body Gap

Perhaps one of the most interesting critical remarks related to the widely accepted view of interactivity as something unique to digital media, hypertext, and video games is that of *ellipsis*. In the cognitive sense, all preceding media are interactive, asking readers, viewers, or listeners to fill in the missing information. As an opening example, let us consider literature, usually juxtaposed to video games as the noninteractive sparring partner in the

clichéd battle between narratology and ludology that never actually took place. Umberto Eco observes that

any narrative fiction is necessarily and fatally swift because, in building a world that comprises myriad events and characters, it cannot say everything about this world. It hints at it and then asks the reader to fill in a whole series of gaps. Every text, after all, is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work.³⁶

Other examples point toward “missing” parts of objects in modernist painting, or moving the eyes—or even the whole body, when viewing sculpture or architecture—according to visual and auditory cues in visual arts or film. When understood literally, Manovich notes, interaction is equated with

strictly physical interaction between a user and an artwork (pressing a button), at the sake of psychological interaction. . . . The psychological processes of filling-in, hypothesis forming, recall and identification—which are required for us to comprehend any text or image at all—are mistakenly identified strictly with an objectively existing structure of interactive links.³⁷

As provocative as Manovich’s remarks may have seemed in 1996, they are an echo of a much earlier theory of cognitive interactivity, one published eighty years prior on the cusp of a newly developing medium and the accompanying critical discipline that emerged alongside it. In *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916), the German psychologist and film theoretician Hugo Münsterberg developed an early conception of the relationship between film (photoplay) and its audience.³⁸ His was an interactive theory built around mental acts requiring a high degree of cognitive activity that occur while experiencing a photoplay: attending, remembering, and expecting. He also drew attention to the so-called play of association: “We may have associative ideas, which find their starting point in outer impressions.”³⁹ We see a landscape on stage or on screen, and a myriad of our own subjective associations follows. Münsterberg juxtaposed this free play of association with a suggestion that is forced on the audience in the case of the preceding medium that is theatrical play: “If two men begin to fight on the stage,” he remarks, “nothing remains to be suggested; we must simply witness the fight. And if two lovers embrace each other, we have to see their caresses.”⁴⁰ Münsterberg regarded such highly *suggestive witnessing* as a passive activity; we remain “passive to the wonders which are unveiled through the imagination of the person in the play” as opposed to the subjective and thus active imagination of the film viewer.⁴¹ For Münsterberg,

viewing a complex collage of cinematic images set in motion required not as much of a passive capacity to witness as an active ability to process, interpret, and associate—in other words, the ability to fill in the missing gaps.

I do not aim here to argue for or against the interactive capacity of film. I would like to simply draw our attention to a recurring pattern in the way newly occurring media are perceived. With the invention of every new medium, we seem to land in the possession of a *medium-in-plus*. To work with the metaphor of memory rather than anticipation, in every medium the previous medium resounds; the content of the medium is always another medium.⁴² According to this logic, *photo + play* builds on photography, and *video + game* builds on its immediate predecessor—the moving picture. Smitten by the uniqueness of newly arriving technologies, we seem to regard the “old” media as limited or less capable than the new, conditioned somewhat automatically by the uncontrollable speed of technological advancement and the belief in new technology’s unique powers to equip us with more control. To quote Paul Virilio, “A higher speed eliminates all the others in the end . . . there are no more horses in the streets of Paris, and there will never be more horses.”⁴³

A similar medium-progressive narrative has granted the concept of interaction the power to define a new digital medium after cinema. If film was able to offer the spectator a cognitive sort of agency, a video game was supposed to offer a physical one, giving the player the capacity to influence or change the perceptible form of the medium. And this ability came with the invention of a machine very different to a film camera, a procedural and “smart” machine that could respond to human input in a meaningful way and, more importantly, be configured. A video game required a very peculiar type of machine that was allegedly capable of engraving the stream of consciousness in code and externalizing it on the screen. The hyperlink has become the physical instantiation or representation of the nature of human mental processes. This externalized mental structure has been conflated with liberty; the grand freedom of choice enabled or determined by the complex decision trees that underlie the narrative navigation through vast commercial video game worlds. “The cultural technologies of an industrial society—cinema and fashion—asked us to identify with somebody’s bodily image. The interactive media ask us to identify with somebody else’s mental structure.”⁴⁴

Fantasies of Mastery

Technical things have political qualities; “they can embody specific forms of power and authority,” Winner noted as early as 1980.⁴⁵ Computers and video games as technical things are not free of politics. Furthermore, the aesthetic of digital play is not apolitical. We should always see play as a meaning-making practice rather than an activity predicated by technology and based on a mastery of a purely technical skill. Video games privilege certain forms of control, fantasies of highly challenging technical mastery, a virtuosity exercised feverishly in the “man cave” during long hours uninterrupted by sleep or female intervention.⁴⁶ And all this despite a highly female-dependent herstory of hardware production. A very fitting example is the famous ZX Spectrum computer, produced from 1982 to 1992 by the Timex Corporation in Dundee, Scotland, where I spent a few crucial years teaching video game theory and design. Spectrums were assembled by the women of Dundee in the now long-defunct Timex factory. Even the Wikipedia entry for the Spectrum fails to credit the work of thousands of women who contributed to the expansion of gaming culture. Their story was not considered crucial enough in the technological grand narrative of gaming of the United Kingdom. The empowering hardware for interactive flashy software carried in itself the all-but-empowering endgame of its production. Mona Bozdog, a performance designer and media scholar who gave the female ZX Spectrum workforce a voice in her mixed-reality project *Generation ZX(X)* (figure 1.2), writes: “The ZX Spectrum has been highly influential in the careers of many developers across the UK while the labor behind it has remained mostly invisible.”⁴⁷ To design the experience, Bozdog employed her own design practice of “storywalking,” centered around walking as an aesthetic, critical, and dramaturgical practice.

As we have observed by now, the concept of interactivity brings with it critical and ideological baggage of all kind. It also carries a critical weight founded on the opposing figures of the gamer and the nongamer, more often than not a highly gendered divide. Until recently, most playable characters—as opposed to accompanying nonplayer characters (NPCs), such as the princess companion in *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* or the sorceresses who provide assistance to Geralt of Rivia in the *Witcher* series—have been predominantly male, as has the archetypical figure of the gamer (recall the



Figure 1.2

A participant “storywalking” the playful performance *Generation ZX(X)*. Courtesy of Mona Bozdog; photo by Erika Stevenson.

#GamerGate controversy of 2014). The fantasies of ludic control and interactivity are thus fantasies that do not necessarily empower all human subjects. They predicate rules of access and privilege a certain set of actors over others—as playable characters, as gamers, even as game developers.

To paraphrase Vinzenz Hediger, a film theoretician who asked much the same of cinema, it seems impossible to describe modes of play without regard for issues of identity politics.⁴⁸ If the gaze in cinema is male, so too is the fantasy of mastery in digital technology and video games. Many contemporary writers have problematized interaction, pointing toward a diverse body of play forms that contest the mainstream male fantasies of mastery. Some lead a direct argument around interaction, whereas others problematize mainstream gaming through alternate play forms and formats. Brendan Keogh, for instance, emphasizes that interactivity as such has been built on a masculinist hacker mythos celebrating control, challenge, and high effort as the main modes of interaction with technology and computer games.⁴⁹ The fundamental question resounds: Are there modes of engagement with video games and computers—besides highly operational

rule-based performances within the game's system—that are partially dismissed due to their less interactive (or so-called feminine) nature?

Melissa Kagen sees wandering and walking as alternative and, at the same time, highly gendered modes of expression and experiencing of games. In her analysis of the game *Firewatch* and its playable protagonist, Henry, she emphasizes how “traditional games enable players to live out a fantasy of performing hypermasculine acts” while walking simulators rest on the ludological act of what may be called passive nonperformance.⁵⁰ In *Firewatch*, the player is left with little to do besides walking and communicating via walkie-talkie. The game's mechanic does not allow the player to fully control the game world through interacting with its objects, an expectation so common to most video games and one that Kagen frames as a “central tenet of hypermasculinity.”⁵¹ *Firewatch* is an example of a walking simulator, a game subgenre that exemplifies the so-called notgame or anti-game, one that subverts traditional video gaming tropes and offers alternative ways to play. Such alternative means of play, where interaction with the game relies not on manipulating endless numbers of interactive objects or shooting enemies to gather experience points but rather on the exploration of the character's inner state while traversing the game environment, has been often dismissed as less active and thus feminine. Wandering as a primary game mechanic, Kagen argues, has been framed as a gendered practice, one that strips the player of their agency and games of their seemingly essential attribute of interactivity.⁵² The emergence and greater acceptance of diverse forms of play coincides with the dissolution of the hard-core gamer identity.

Similarly, Bo Ruberg problematizes the mainstream video gaming narrative through their work at the intersection between games and queerness. They point to queer play as a mode of resistance toward traditionally male gaming paradigms. Throughout the years, they have developed a queer theoretical lens; one that goes beyond the issues of representation and sees the act of play as one that has always had a queer potential. The queerness of play practice is visible above all in its relationship to intention and time. In this reading, for instance, the well-known alternative play strategy of “speed-running” may be interpreted through a queer lens. Colloquially speaking, queer playing may be described as “playing the wrong way” or following one's own “logic of desire” while playing.⁵³

Beyond Operational Control

There are many diverse forms of play, including practices and designs, that do not necessarily foster action; on the contrary, they invite the player to watch, wait, and “feel the restlessness one feels while in a waiting room.”⁵⁴ The interactive paradigm prevalent in a theoretical understanding of digital media and video games is predicated on the fantasy of control over a cybernetic system. It is an extremely operational and thus hypermasculine perspective that conceals all those other forms of playful engagement with technology. To talk of interactivity as the main aesthetic denominator in video games is to fall back on the old paradigms of digital liberation and male control.

Interactivity, promising a clean understanding of our place vis-à-vis technology (i.e., as almighty controllers and operators), further disintegrates in the age of smart machines, algorithms, and automated work processes. Outside of the world of video games, fantasies of empowerment, control, and mastery are dissolving. Perhaps it is more important to look for other ways to frame our engagement with and within the (game)world in more diverse ways. A video game, as the most prevalent art form of the digital age, has the potential to grant its players more diverse and equally engaging ways to perform, beyond those of interactors trapped in a reward-based Skinner box. Brendan Keogh makes a similar statement in his analysis of embodied play:

It is no longer sufficient to evaluate video games on purely technological terms. It is not sufficient to differentiate video games from other screen media because of some unique possession of “interactivity” or ability to “immerse” the player. It is not sufficient to say that a videogame allows the player to choose what to do when a film does not.⁵⁵

In many ways, I pick up where Keogh and other theorists mentioned in this chapter left off. In the chapters to follow, I will propose possible theoretical lenses and concepts that will allow us to see what may lie beyond interactivity and gendered operational control. I will take a closer look at such concepts as interpassivity, delegation, automation, ambience, intra-activity, and spectacle, all of which contribute to the understanding of the media aesthetic dimension of digital play.

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