4 Automated Play

> "The achievements of the first technology might be said to culminate in the human sacrifice; those of the second, in the remote-controlled aircraft which needs no human crew. Whereas the former made the maximum possible use of human beings, the latter reduces their use to the minimum."
>
> Walter Benjamin[1]

Emissaries (2015–2017) is a trilogy of obscure art simulations about cognitive evolution.[2] It begins with *Emissary in the Squat of Gods* (figure 4.1), which depicts an ancient community living under the threat of a volcanic eruption that could lead to its extinction. The second part, *Emissary Forks at Perfection*, depicts an AI-driven world thousands of years after the explosion has taken place. And finally, in *Emissary Sunsets the Self*, the AI reaches its peak, attempting to shrug off its godlike agency by mutating in the hope of devising its own generative death. The visual and sonic layer of *Emissaries* is as surreal as the worlds it generates: "The landscape here is post-volcanic, its population shamanic, and the wildlife totemic, in the form of an owl and a snake. The scene teems with movement—as indecipherable and transfixing as if it were the work of a cyborgian Hieronymus Bosch."[3]

Emissaries was exhibited in 2017 in MoMA PS1 in New York and simultaneously streamed online on Twitch.tv. They are real-time simulations created using the popular game engine Unity. Ian Cheng describes his own work as a video game that plays itself. Various types of AI are assigned to the characters and entities of the world, competing with one another. As Cheng points out, the games learn how to play themselves based on the principle

Figure 4.1
Ian Cheng, *Emissary in the Squat of Gods* (2015). Video still © Ian Cheng. Courtesy of the artist, Pilar Corrias (London), Standard (Oslo), and Gladstone Gallery (New York).

of emergence, which allows for unexpected complexity to develop from a basic set of principles and behavioral laws:

> I write little individualized fragments in C# that describe a behavior or tendency of an object. I also write a set of laws that modify the overall physics of the virtual environment. The key production principle is that all these behavior writings are micro, never a whole, deterministic architecture or bird's eye view design. The simulation in the end is a virtual space with a huge accumulation of mini-behaviors and laws that act and react to each other with no master design, just tendencies, all playing out in parallel with each other.[4]

The virtual worlds devised by Cheng are somewhat bizarre manifestations of play. They redefine the role of the designer by decentralizing their authority over an artistic object. Instead of programming a coherent world for people to interact with, Cheng opens up spaces of possibility out of which an artificial world keeps emerging in a self-playing mode. By doing this, he introduces mediated distance between himself and his work of art as well as between his work and the audience. Physical interaction with *Emissaries* is nonexistent. The human player resides outside of the interaction loop. The only role they can fill is that of an observer and interpreter of an automated systemic spectacle.

In the past few decades, automation and AI have become flagship concerns of science, world politics, and the greater public. To a great extent, popular discourse around automation throughout the cybernetic era has been fueled by fear of machines, computers, or AI taking over activities performed by human hands and minds and thus depriving them of their most purposeful activity—work. The technical, economic, and sociocultural implications of work automation have been discussed with an unfading fervor.[5] Countless magazine headlines paint pictures of a fully automated future and ask questions about the social significance of automation driven by AI.

Experiments with automation and AI have also been affecting creative domains, although the tendency is not necessarily a characteristic of the last few years alone.[6] The first computer-generated art appeared in the 1960s, soon after the invention of computers.[7] Within the context of games, automation resides primarily in the mathematics, cybernetics, and, subsequently, computer science and game development circles.[8] Every few decades, public interest in automated play surges, usually when a machine is being pitted against a human opponent. In 1997, IBM's chess-playing AI Deep Blue defeated the Russian grandmaster Garry Kasparov in a highly publicized match, and DeepMind's AlphaGo took the spotlight in 2016 as the first AI to win a Go match against a professional human player, the European Go champion Fan Hui.

At the same time, surprisingly little is known or asked about the cultural or media aesthetic dimensions of play automation. The early days of game studies saw a few attempts critically addressing the question of human and nonhuman agency in video games, but it seems that the subject ended somewhat prematurely as other, more human player–focused points of scholarly interest took over.[9] My aim in this chapter is to bring one of the most crucial aspects of digitality back into the conversation and map out possible directions of critical inquiry about automation in play.[10] I want to investigate how automation has changed the meaning of play in the digital age and explore the missing links between automation and the aesthetic experience of playing video games.[11]

Many examples I will draw on in the later parts of this chapter tend to partially or entirely automate the parts of play that have, until now, been performed only by human players. Think about automatic players (for instance, the grinding bots in role-playing games), self-acting AI agents

exhibiting some form of perceived liveliness, or entire game genres based on a model of progression that eliminates the need for direct input from human players (such as the idle games discussed in chapter 2). All of those instances may seem like oddities and novelties; however, it is crucial to realize that automation is a phenomenon with a ludic past much older than the electronic digital computer. To emphasize the potential historical continuity between contemporary automated gaming and media technologies of the past, I will bring the eighteenth-century chess-playing automaton and the player piano of the late nineteenth century into the proverbial game.[12]

Automation, Algorithms, and Computer Gaming

The modern understanding of the term automation (from the Greek word *autómatos*, or self-moving) has a relatively modern sixteenth-century origin, denoting a machine with a self-contained principle of motion.[13] A digital electronic computer is, in many ways, just such a machine. Historically, it was developed as an automatic computing engine meant to replace "human computers," a term first used in the early seventeenth century to denote persons performing mathematical calculations and compiling mathematical tables. Since contemporary digital computers have become an integral part of our everyday lives, automation has become one of the defining principles of a computerized culture, and it has digital media to thank for that.[14] Automation is only possible due to the numerical and fragmentary or modular structure of digital media—that is, their ability to be divided into discrete parts that may be then recombined in diverse ways to generate new objects and behaviors.

Within the context of the contemporary digital electronic computers, automation relies on the use of algorithms and a broadly defined AI. This diverse set of techniques and practices united under one capacious term may refer to "pathfinding, neural-networks, models of emotion and social situations, finite-state machines, rule systems, [and] decision-tree learning," among many others.[15] Such a vague and all-encompassing definition of AI, "cobbled together from a grab bag of disparate tools and techniques," may be confusing.[16] For the purpose of this chapter, let us assume a general working understanding of AI within the context of gameplay automation as referring to autonomous agents and autonomous behaviors of the game itself.[17] A game's AI may create the impression of a "living" self-governing

game world, "the sense that there is an entity living within the computer that has its own life independently of the player and cares about how the player's actions impact this life."[18] As players suspending our own disbelief, we often convince ourselves that the game or in-game characters "think," "feel," or "play."[19] Sim Settlements (2017), a mod based on *Fallout 4* (2015), illustrates this perfectly. The mod enables NPCs to build their own housing, plant their own crops, and even work in shops they themselves construct. The human player is welcome to the city-building algorithmic spectacle as a bystander or a delegating agent rather than the primary active performer. The NPCs do not wait for the player to micromanage them; instead, they metaphorically and literally take matters into their own hands, similar to the delegated gameplay model seen in such simulation games as the franchise explicitly referenced in the mod's title—*The Sims*. The mod automatically assigns citizen NPCs to plots preselected by the player (e.g., farming, residential, or industrial plots). The game world seems to acquire a lifelike dimension. As one of the mod's users emphasizes:

> The buildings your settlers construct aren't cookie-cutter affairs: they're all a bit different, right down to the clutter that eventually appears inside them. This means just about every house and store your NPCs build will look unique. I was oddly pleased to see my companion Curie build herself a home out of a trailer rather than a wood or tin shack like everyone else had done.[20]

Players often seem to find automated gameplay quite an astounding experience, especially if it involves representations of humanlike figures who virtually embody the performing algorithms, producing the illusion of a living agent in a dynamically responding world. The fascination with lifelike capacities of virtual spaces also resounds in the following commentary: "I can't remember when I first saw AI picking fights with each other . . . [but] the first time it happened; it was a minor moment of joy. Not because the enemy of my enemy is my friend . . . but because it meant the game world wasn't all about me."[21] The last few words open a larger discussion on the role of automation on nonanthropocentric models of play. Despite the growing agential dimension or the simulated "liveliness" of ludic systems, the majority of media theoretical work on video gaming revolves around anthropocentric narratives, placing the human player at the center of the experience. The proverbial state of play in how digital games are perceived and defined reveals a binary worldview: an active human player versus an acted-on, nonhuman game. As this chapter argues, however, human

players in the digital age often step into indirect roles, witnessing the system's supposed agency and delegating repetitive tasks to the algorithms. In digital play, at the core of which lies the automated and ambient actions of the machine, this alleged subject–object boundary is transgressed.[22] Automation in play calls for a decentralized understanding of the human player, who is no longer the only or primary active agent.[23]

Automated Play and Mechanization of Mind

March 9, 2016, marked a pivotal moment in the history of automated play: Google held its DeepMind Challenge, the first human versus machine competition since the famed 1997 chess match between Deep Blue and Garry Kasparov. Lee Sedol, one of the world's best Go players, embarked on the emotionally draining quest of playing against the algorithm devised by a group of machine-learning scientists at Google's Deep Blue subsidiary. After seven days of play, the 9 dan–ranked South Korean Go champion was defeated 4–1 by AlphaGo.

The dreams of devising self-acting or self-playing machines are much older than AlphaGo and the digital electronic computer. Historians of science have noticed a certain continuity of thought connecting the robots of cybernetic modernity and the algorithms of postmodernity with the automata of the Enlightenment, the Middle Ages, or even antiquity.[24] Automata and autonomous or semiautonomous machines mimicking various actions—such as moving, singing, writing, or playing—have been the subject of human curiosity and artistry for thousands of years. Whether hydraulic, pneumatic, mechanical, electrical, or digital, they have lured viewers with the promise of emulating, challenging, and ultimately exceeding human physical and cognitive ability.

One of the most recognized experiments of this kind in Western tradition points toward one late eighteenth-century invention that was supposed to demonstrate the capacity to mechanize human reasoning. The Mechanical Turk, also known as the Automaton Chess Player, was an anthropomorphic life-sized figure of a player whose mechanical arms could move by means of a clockwork mechanism. To impress Maria Theresa, the empress of Austria-Hungary (among sundry other titles), the civil servant and imperial councilor Wolfgang von Kempelen took it upon himself to design the Turk in 1769. Other "magicians" also visited the court to present

their latest experiments on such phenomena as magnetism and mechanical writing.[25] He completed the Chess Player within six months, and the Turk played its inaugural game against a human opponent in 1770. The inventor allegedly refused to put on a public exhibition of his creation, an act that has since been ascribed to his indifference to public opinion (and thus his true genius). He even considered dismantling the Automaton altogether, not unlike the ingenious forger Trurl, a reoccurring figure in many of Stanisław Lem's short stories. In "The Great Spanking," Trurl devises an intelligent wish-fulfilling machine that is capable of producing an indistinguishable copy of himself. When the clone is nearly exposed as an imposter by Trurl's rival, Trurl disassembles his own creation, leaving no trace of it but the stories and extolments of its existence. Von Kempelen decided to keep the Chess Player, however, and continued to kindle the tales of its artificial genius. The Automaton Chess Player traveled around the globe for eighty-four years, outliving its inventor by a few decades and reportedly defeating such luminaries as Napoleon Bonaparte, Benjamin Franklin, and Charles Babbage.

By contrast, AlphaGo's "genius" was no secret at all, but the complexity of contemporary AI-driven emergent systems turns them into metaphorical "black boxes," the inner workings of which remain hidden from view. The algorithm had been learning from the behavioral patterns of 100,000 amateur human Go players, playing 30 million matches against itself and improving more and more with each one.[26] The algorithm was a big step in emergent AI, having won a game with a complexity far exceeding that of chess and with more potential game board configurations than there are known atoms in the universe. The version that outplayed Lee Sedol in 2016 was later challenged by an even stronger opponent: its successor algorithm, AlphaGo Zero, which was built without any initial human input and learned the game through random self-play alone. AlphaGo Zero beat its predecessor 100 to 0, causing Google to proclaim that its algorithm had achieved "superhuman performance." Taking into account the long history of automata, robots, and artificial life, such a bold statement—even when taken with a grain of salt—is particularly interesting. Google's latest Go experiments bring to mind John von Neumann's visions of self-replicating machines programmed to build themselves without the need of a human intervention.[27] AlphaGo and AlphaGo Zero also epitomize other cybernetic-era speculations that machines may one day eclipse the human brain.[28]

Once decoupled from learning based on human performance, AlphaGo Zero developed its own creative strategies, which differed from all the known moves played by humans in the last 2,500 years. This encouraged human players to see the Go board with new eyes and learn from the unusual repertoire of the AI's moves. "It actually may be kind of fun to explore the game with neural-network software," remarked President of the American Go Association Andy Okun, "since it's not winning by out-reading us but by seeing patterns and shapes more deeply."[29] AlphaGo Zero is no longer a "slavish type of machine,"[30] like IBM's chess AI Deep Blue (1997) or Arthur Lee Samuel's Checkers-Playing Program (1959), both of which outplayed their human opponents through sheer magnitude of calculations, relying on the Monte Carlo tree search algorithm; however, they still required the programmer to first provide a general strategy framework to the AI.[31] By contrast, AlphaGo and AlphaGo Zero did not need to calculate the moves; they learned how to play the game of Go based on the technique of reinforcement learning.[32] The experiments have marked a cybernetic rite of passage from modernist computation to what Sherry Turkle calls "postmodern simulation," the foundation of which lies not in calculation but in adaptive emergent behaviors of the system—similar to the ones used in the self-playing *Emissaries* games referred to at the beginning of this chapter.[33]

Von Kempelen's Mechanical Turk may be regarded as a simulation in the premodern sense that it was based on an illusion, which implies some sort of trickery or fakery.[34] In a thirty-two-page-long account of the encounter, an anonymous Oxford graduate observer who attended the 1819 exhibition of the Mechanical Turk in London's Spring Gardens described the figure's appearance and mechanism and questioned the possibility of it displaying the intelligence of a reasoning agent. Not being able to detect the true source of the simulation, he came to the conclusion that the seeming impossibility had indeed been achieved by the Automaton Chess Player:

> To construct an arm and hand capable of performing the ordinary functions of those parts, would be of itself sufficient to secure the reputation of an artist; but to make the same arm and hand almost counterparts of living members in a reasoning agent, displays a power of invention as bold and original, as any that has yet been exhibited to the world.[35]

In addition, the depiction of the Mechanical Turk as an Orientalist figure of a sorcerer placed at a robust wooden desk with a chessboard only

strengthened the audience's perception of it as an exoticized mystery utterly foreign to their own culture. From the medieval period on, "Latin Christians associated automata with Arab, Greek, and Mongol courts and saw them . . . as the products of foreign knowledge and exotic materials."[36] In the end, however, the Turk turned out to be no more than an elaborate hoax, an illusion that tricked generations of audiences and defeated chess players not by machinic means but by hiding a human inside the wooden desk to operate the mechanical arms. Despite being a disappointment to its viewers, the Turk nevertheless came to symbolize the dream of one day devising intelligent machines that were capable of automating human cognitive processes. The Mechanical Turk even became a source of literary inspiration, appearing, for instance, in the satirical-philosophical text "Humans Are Machines of the Angels" ("Menschen sind Maschinen der Engel," 1785) by the German writer Jean Paul (born as Johann Paul Friedrich Richter).[37] It reflected the desire to "imitate and expand the human mind, which has been the main project throughout the history of mechanization of the mind pursued by many notable figures including Pascal, Leibniz, Babbage, Wiener, and Turing."[38]

Automated Play and Mechanization of Physical Performance

A certain rhythm of acting lends itself particularly well to automation—the routine. Repetitive actions are quantifiable and procedural and thus easily expressed algorithmically. At first glimpse, repetition seems to be characteristic of primarily work-related processes. It is, however, equally present within the context of play, especially when the latter involves physical skill mastery. Repetitive play is to be found in diverse video game contexts. Perhaps the most characteristic example is grinding, the laborious and tedious set of actions performed to accumulate resources needed to advance in some games (see chapter 2). Many of us have experienced it firsthand, usually within the context of MMORPGs: slaying an endless mob of opponents to collect loot that can be exchanged for gear, in-game currency, or experience points. Sometimes players use mods or bots to partially automate gameplay and alleviate the repetitiveness of the tedious tasks required to level up in the game. For instance, the Progressive Automation mod written for *Minecraft* allows players to excavate the game's environment with the help of automatic miners, set up farms that automatically plant and

harvest crops, or use crafting machines that can automatically craft inventory components.[39]

Many developers regard the use of bots and mods as "cheating" and dismiss it as a practice that undermines fair play. Blizzard Entertainment, for instance, banned the unfair use of bots to automate gameplay within *World of Warcraft*:

> We've recently taken action against a large number of *World of Warcraft* accounts that were found to be using third-party programs that automate gameplay, known as "bots." We're committed to providing an equal and fair playing field for everyone in *World of Warcraft*, and will continue to take action against those found in violation of our Terms of Use. Cheating of any form will not be tolerated.[40]

A similar reaction affected gameplay automation enthusiasts in *Pokémon Go*, a multiplayer augmented reality game in which players move around the real world to locate and capture virtual Pokémon that the game populates on the screens of their mobile devices. Some players find this tedious and use bots and other third-party software to automate the collection process. In addition, several Pokémon species can only be found in certain parts of the world (Tauros in North America, for example), so instead of trading for those Pokémon, some players use virtual private network software to mask their location and trick their device's GPS into thinking that the player is in a different region when, in reality, the player hasn't moved an inch in the physical world. Niantic, the game's developer, has been actively trying to eliminate what they regard as subversive gameplay or cheating.[41]

By contrast, there are entire game genres that revolve around automating the repetitive and time-consuming core gameplay, allowing the players to devote their time and attention to the game's periphery instead. Idle games and auto battlers are relatively recent trends that exemplify the automatic turn in gaming. Although they differ in terms of game mechanics, both genres seem to share one important characteristic: they automate the manual actions of repetitive clicking, instead offering their players the aesthetic experience of macromanagement.

In the 2017 idle game *Universal Paperclips* (figure 4.2), after the first fifty-nine manual clicks, I gained access to AutoClippers, which continued to make paper clips automatically in set time intervals. Since the length of the wire out of which the paper clips are produced is not endless—you start with 1,000 inches—the game is rather fast-paced in its initial stages. Despite having the possibility to delegate the manufacturing to the automatic

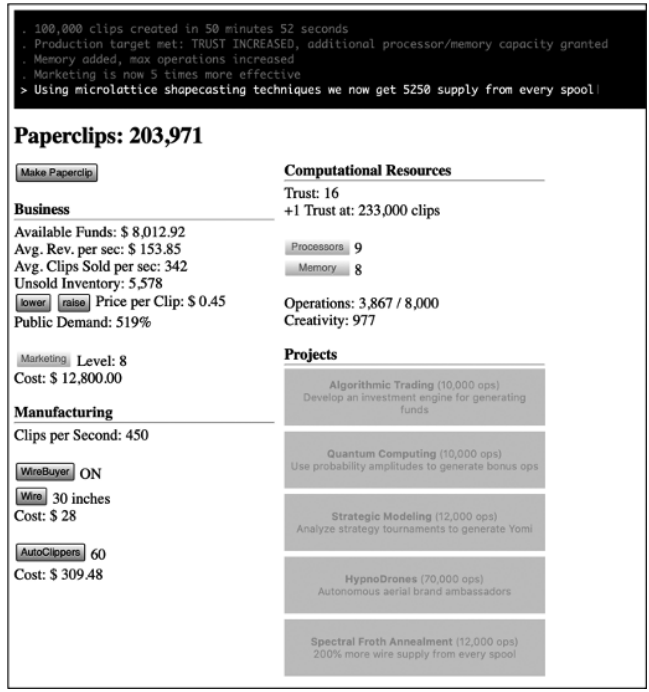

Figure 4.2
Universal Paperclips (2017). Courtesy of Frank Lantz, Hilary Lantz, and Bennett Foddy.

system and leave the game to its own devices, I decided to play along in order to accelerate the production of paper clips and to make sure there would always be plenty of wire available. In the following hours and days, I left the game playing itself in one of my browser tabs, coming back to it every now and then to further "grind" the gameplay mechanism and make a few rudimentary decisions (e.g., buying additional AutoClippers, unlocking computational resources, engaging in high-risk investments). After producing over 62,000 paperclips, I gained the ability to delegate wire purchasing to an algorithm. From that moment on, the game was able to run fully autonomously, leaving the higher-level decision making to me.

In auto battlers (sometimes called auto chess), after having set the parameters for the battle, the player simply sits back and watches the two parties automatically battle until the next round is set up. During the preparation phase, the players choose their initial battle units and place them on a grid-shaped battlefield (hence the association with chess). The players

are then randomly divided into two teams. During the battle itself, the units fight against each other without further player input. This moment of gameplay resembles watching a live-stream rather than focused hands-on gaming. The genre emerged in the wake of Dota Auto Chess (2019), a mod developed by the player community for *Dota 2* (2013), a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA). The mod became so popular, with reportedly more than 8 million players preferring to delegate battles over performing them manually, that *Dota*'s official developer decided to release their own "auto battler" under the title *Dota Underlords* (2020).

Those two game genres not only exemplify a specific trend in casual gaming but also (and more importantly) show how ingrained in our everyday digital culture the subject of autonomous technology has become and how it has changed the way we play, raising automation from the backstage of a game's operations to the surface of gameplay. Automation transforms play from an act of "utter absorption"[42] to one of "distracted habituation,"[43] and the human player from a focused agent or attentive watcher to a casually observant spectator, to expand on Walter Benjamin.[44] And barely challenging distractions have the capacity to fit into daily routines without requiring too much of the player's attention or physical skill.

Within the context of video games, skill has long been central to the identity of the hard-core gamer just as the ability to skillfully perform within the game has been at the heart of the definition of "gameness." In an early attempt to approach the essence of games, Jesper Juul identified player effort as a necessary component of gaming. With the rise of casual gaming, however, an increasing number of titles have become accessible and easy to play, and thus require less effort from their players. In other words, the massification of the medium has lowered the entry skill threshold. In social network, free-to-play, and mobile games, anybody and everybody can become a player. In fact, the boundaries of games have never been set in stone. The ontological status of games—or their "realness," as Mia Consalvo and Christopher Paul put it—is constantly being renegotiated as new genres, mechanics, and play practices emerge. Automation of gameplay opens up even more avenues for inclusion while simultaneously continuing to challenging the "core" identity of gaming as a practice reserved for a highly skilled human audience.[45] This problematic dynamic has been also approached from the perspective of "deskilling," a term originally denoting the process of transferring skills from humans to machines.

Stefano de Paoli identifies a similar relation between skill loss and skill gain in a field study of MMORPG players.[46] Automatic play achieved by means of mods, bots, and macros, he argues, deskills the players and "enskills" the gaming algorithms and, in doing so, universalizes the playing experience so that it no longer requires precise hand-eye coordination or a huge time investment.

Video games are not the first entertainment technology to use automation to lower the human skill requirement. For instance, street organs and automatic player pianos (also known as pianolas) turned the high-skill act of playing a musical instrument into the relatively uncomplicated, semiautomatic activity of organ grinding (i.e., continuously pushing the instrument's pedals). The player piano gained particular popularity at the end of the nineteenth century and thrived before it was superseded by more the efficient, portable, and affordable gramophone in the late 1920s. Similarly to other self-playing mechanical instruments such as barrel organs, cylindrichords, clockwork spinets, and harp-playing clocks, player pianos were set into motion by the turning of a pinned barrel. This technology was illustrated in the "Concert Room Anecdotes" referenced by Arthur W. J. G. Ord-Hume in his monograph *Player Piano. The History of the Mechanical Piano and How to Repair It*:

> In small or family parties, where dancing to the music of the pianoforte is practiced, a person totally unacquainted with music, a child or a servant, may perform, in the very best and most correct style, quadrilles, waltzes, minuets, country dances, marches, songs, overtures, sonatas, choruses, or indeed any piece of music, however difficult.[47]

Similar descriptions can be found in numerous advertisements praising the accessibility of player pianos; for instance, the Wilcox & White advertisement for the Angelus player piano from 1899 reads, "Anyone can play it . . . A child that has never before seen a piano can with the aid of Angelus Orchestral Piano Player render the most difficult compositions in a manner possible to only the most accomplished pianist."[48] The player piano, together with other technologies of its time, began the process of popularization of music listening and music making.

In many ways, the "massification" of computer gaming resembles the popularization of the player piano. I would risk a rough hypothesis that what pinned barrels were to the mechanization of playing music, digitally executed algorithms are to the automation of gameplay. In initial stages, an

automating mechanism seems to be depriving the human player from the actual skill of playing. As the technology matures, however, automation is no longer just a "deskilling" technology but one with which human players interact in new, complex ways. New forms of play keep emerging at the crossroads between automation and play; while repetitive tasks are computed, other parts of gameplay become the core of human players' engagement. It makes little sense, then, to try to define the essence of games and play based on fixed categories such as agency, interactivity, effort, or attachment to the outcome.[49] After all, the meaning behind those concepts is not ahistorical or media-agnostic.

Automation at the Heart of Gameness

Ian Cheng's self-playing worlds as well as all the other examples discussed in this chapter may seem surreal, exceptional, or removed from the typical interactive video gaming experience. In all their remoteness, however, they point toward the very core of computer-mediated play. Perhaps we have not yet fully grasped our new ludic situation. Otherwise, we would not regard automated play as a paradox or a borderline case of gameness—on the contrary, we would see it as the epitome of play in the digital age. After all, the self-playing game is the most "computer-compatible" of games, acting in accordance with the inner logic of the digital machine, which can take over the execution of simple tasks at an unrivaled speed and frequency.[50] In fact, all games staged within the medium of the computer involve some level of automation, such as calculating gathered props, lost lives, or the player's proximity to an enemy NPC. Unlike in board games, where all such computation needs to be done manually by the human player, those processes that occur in video games are automated and hidden from the player's view. This type of automation is well known to the average gamer and rarely raises any concern or draws any theoretical attention; what we continue to ponder is the sort of automation that problematizes the human "aesthetics of agency and control (or the loss of these)."[51]

In *Gamer Theory* (2007), McKenzie Wark makes an important ontological statement about video games, regarding them as "a key part of the shared culture from which one can begin—as laborious as it is playful—the process of creating a reflective and critical approach to the times."[52] Such a perspective presents games as more than a display of the latest interactive

technology. They rather become spaces of fiction and speculation, where cultural values and realities are at play. Just as the human–machine social debates and dreams were depicted in the fiction and technology of their times, the current fascinations with algorithms, automation, and nonhuman agency are literally replayed and displayed in video games, the most popular entertainment forms of the digital age. Automation, then, not only refers to design techniques, game mechanics, or new game genres but also, ontologically speaking, it is a phenomenon we play with. To play with automation is to play with a mode of being within the world. Automation opens new ways of understanding the human–machine relationship; not as a techno-colonial master–slave one or that of an operator and its operand but as an "entanglement of agential forces," to conclude somewhat enigmatically on the words of a feminist philosopher who will become the central figure of the next chapter.[53]

Playing at a Distance

Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic

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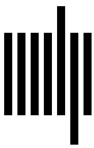

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