

## Postlude: Distance at Play

“We cannot remove the ‘nonplay’ components of a videogame and hope to arrive at a pure, essential ‘gameness’ that in any way represents the experiences players have with that videogame.”

Brendan Keogh<sup>1</sup>

Our journey to the borderlands of video game aesthetic is coming to an end. I hope this exploration of the periphery of gameness has shown how central it is to the understanding of play in the computer age. The interpretation of the ludic frontier proposed in this book has reached beyond a human-centered approach to gaming. It has displayed other agents at play, human and machine alike. I was fascinated not only by how we play with computers but also by how they play with us, and I wanted to understand how computational logic engraves itself in the plasticity of play and how the computational medium interferes with and co-constitutes the aesthetic experiences of play.

But the word *frontier* does not merely signify what lies on the edge. It is also something that is facing forward. Perhaps somewhat immodestly, this work has striven to provide an outlook into play on the verge of its current cultural-technological moment. The human urge to play may seem a historical constant, but the forms of play emerging out of our intra-actions with digital technology remain highly time-and-medium specific. As digital technology transforms, our patterns and rhythms of play change, too. The early computers were, at their core, machines meant to be operated by humans, but today's computing is happening at an ever-greater distance from human action. Such a seismic shift only naturally manifests itself at play. The computer changes practices of play, changes us as players, and

facilitates specific aesthetic experiences characteristic of its own logic. It introduces layers of computational mediation between us and the games we play. Many processes, even in the most interactive games, run automatically in the background. This puts us at an aesthetic distance toward the object of play. Thus, at a fundamental level, media aesthetic of video games is a computational aesthetic. To ask about the aesthetic of video games is to look at how play “conjoins, contributes to or contrasts with computation,” in the words of the media theorists M. Beatrice Fazi and Matthew Fuller.<sup>2</sup> This project has been just such an attempt to understand the complexity that arises from the entanglement of play with computerized media.

The construction of media aesthetic of video games calls for a reworking of many of its conceptual categories and the vocabulary to carve out new theories able to grasp the changing aesthetic practices. In many ways, this work is a reply to Brian Sutton-Smith’s call to develop a “vocabulary of distance” within the context of play and games.<sup>3</sup> The framework of distance has allowed me to open space to think through a variety of peripheral play forms that are often labeled “nonplay” or “notgames,” despite their highly ludic character. Mediated distance also partially explains the erroneous but prevailing division between aesthetic and mechanics in video games. Computation is not only the technological core; it is also a method and a logical framework. That which is seen, touched, and experienced cannot be decoupled from the computational logic determining the aesthetic experience.

In the last five chapters I have introduced different facets of distance at play: delegation, automation, ambience, intra-action, and spectacle. To explore emergent forms of play and game genres and their relation to computation, I have presented a variety of ideas and concepts grounded in media theory, play theory, philosophy, and cultural and film studies, all the while engaging with past and current research streams in the rich field of game studies. Ultimately, however, this book was conceptualized as an interdisciplinary encounter between game studies and media theory, and it is primarily those two disciplines that I would like to dialogue with most vigorously.

With this project, I also hope to contribute to and inspire further research trajectories at the intersection between play, aesthetic, and computation. Topics that I only briefly discussed—and that I would like to devote more critical attention to in the future—include the role of encoded structures, game analytics, and metrics in molding (as opposed to measuring) aesthetic

experiences of play. Such a perspective sees code not as much as an intermediary and facilitator of ludic experiences but as a co-agent at play. In the words of Marc C. Marino, we must read code not only for what it does but also (and perhaps more importantly) for what it means.<sup>4</sup>

Critical interventions at the intersection between game studies and critical code studies could become a posthuman play theory in the making. I see posthumanism as a vital perspective in the study of computerized play. It allows us to reconceptualize agency and action as qualities distributed between humans, AI, and hardware. A closer critical reading of encoded play structures could yield some answers to such questions as: How does one judge the beauty of an automated game; or a new, algorithm-inspired move combination in the game of Go; or an incrementally growing semi-automated game system? Perhaps a posthuman aesthetic could involve a combination of the procedural artistry of the system and the human spectatorship of it. Posthumanism serves as a metaphorical angle, a framework of thought that makes visible all the multiplicities of play in digital environments. By focusing on play through posthumanism, we are able to open the video game category to different human–nonhuman constellations of play, human, and machine acts, and all of the experiments that may be described as posthuman or nonanthropocentric play.

With computation comes not only a certain way of playing but also a very particular sense of responsibility encoded into play. In one of his most recent publications, Miguel Sicart writes, “one needs to inquire about the moral foundation of *Homo ludens*: to understand the ethical challenges of a playful computational culture, and the ways in which we can intervene to analyze problems and effect change.”<sup>5</sup> In my project, the ethical aspects of playing at a distance have not been given much attention; however, the ethical stakes of delegated, automated, ambient, or otherwise distant play forms and practices remain high. Let me conclude with a short example that may perhaps serve here as a signpost for further study of mediated distance through the lens of ethics. In chapter 3, I concluded that ambient play introduces much-needed balance to the accelerating rhythms of the digital age: the bombardment with information, the ubiquity of data, and the fast pace of communication. However, it may also be read as an example of the strategy of self-care embedded in the contemporary neoliberal digital culture of optimization and nonstop connectivity. Ambience, then, is not only a fruitful aesthetic category but also one that has far-reaching

political and ethical implications. Ambience is sold as a product of self-optimization rather than a way out of the oppressive system. Seth Kim-Cohen's open critique of the ambient aesthetic illustrates the problem: "We deserve an art that is the equal of our information age. Not one that parrots the age's self-assertions or modes of dissemination, but an art that is hyper-aware, vigilant, active, engaged, and informed."<sup>6</sup>

A perspective grounded in ethics offers the necessary counterweight to the material and posthuman musings on computational aesthetic. Paradoxically, the biggest problem with an aesthetic perspective so deeply grounded in the materiality of the medium is its distance from the human experience. For instance, in "digging" deep into the digital constitution of the spectacle (chapter 6), one drifts further away from the human action of spectating. This is perhaps a general tendency of media-theoretical perspectives, which are more preoccupied with the technology itself than with the human experience of it. I too tend to be more fascinated by the operations of the medium than with the operations of the human in front of it. So, in an attempt to draft a more human-centered or human-friendly (a pun on "user-friendliness," if you will) end to this highly medium-driven book, let me conclude with a remark by M. Beatrice Fazi:

To address digital technologies in aesthetic terms, we need to revise its quantitative functions in terms of qualitative vectors of modulation and differentiation, or couple them with material and affective proprieties (such as for instance those of art, or of society and culture) that would negotiate the numerical operations of the digital machine.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, the media aesthetic of computational processes must eventually return to the human realm. Numerical operations are always entangled with human operations, so an analysis of operations and material infrastructures needs to loop back to the lived experience.

In the end, the question of video game aesthetic rests on the fluid relationship between the human and the technological—a dynamic that remains far from straightforward in times when both categories are being constantly contested. This project has been an attempt to rewrite the largely anthropocentric theory of interactive video games (metaphorically hard-coding the borderlines between the two) while, at the same time, trying not to remove the human aspect entirely from my material musings. I can only hope to have achieved this.

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# Playing at a Distance

## Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic

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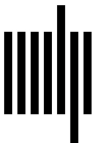
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