

## ARI GASS

### *The Counterfeit Coin: Videogames and Fantasies of Empowerment*, by Christopher Goetz



*The Counterfeit Coin*, by Christopher Goetz, uses psychoanalytic theory to explore how contemporary media forms, including action movies, anime, manga, and video games, offer audiences and players a shared set of empowerment fantasies. For Goetz, empowerment fantasies are “dynamic psychological process[es] in which wish-fulfilling

goals and the means to achieve them find a special correspondence that is based less on satisfaction than renewal, and that structures prolonged and repetitious interaction with media objects” (8). Goetz describes three fantasies: the fantasy of bodily transcendence, which relates to the desire to overcome obstacles and feelings of weakness with spectacular displays of physical strength and power; tether fantasies, which toggle between the pleasures of exposure and a subsequent retreat into safety; and accretion fantasies, in which improvement over time gives way to pleasurable feelings of power and control. In *The Counterfeit Coin*, Goetz does not critique these fantasies so much as track their repetition and operation across genres, media formats, and titles, as well as highlight how, at every turn, these fantasies appeal to subconscious and nonconscious psychological and biological needs.

The title of the book references art historian Ernst Gombrich’s essay “Meditations on a Hobby Horse,” which focuses on the human perception of representation and abstraction. In this essay, Gombrich asserts that the hobby horse represents a horse insofar as it offers a “functional substitute” for horse riding. The titular “counterfeit coin” is like the hobby horse—a functional substitute for the legal tender meant to activate the arcade machine. Goetz’s book sees fantasies of empowerment as the “counterfeit coin”: we play games and enjoy films because they act as functional substitutes for our biological and psychological needs. Fantasies, rather than specific titles, narrative tropes, or game mechanics, are the focus of the book because they “convey wishes between different strata of the psyche,” bridging story, play, and the gamut of conscious

and nonconscious drives, desires, affects, and emotions (22). For Goetz, video games are ideal case studies because video-game play involves so much repetition: repeated levels or encounters if players don’t succeed on a first try; repeated gestures related to game input, like pushing a button or pulling a trigger; and repeated play strategies—all of which contribute to prolonged engagement and bodily entrainment in relation to a specific fantasy.

The first chapter of the book focuses on the fantasy of bodily transcendence, the often-pleasurable feeling that responsive and kinetically interesting movement through a video-game world evokes in players. This fantasy draws upon what Goetz calls “collective body memories”—shared, repeated, or otherwise collective bits of bodily performance—and how they intermingle with individual daily life (19). Fantasies about the ability to adapt, respond, and take decisive and spectacular action in response to danger abound in video games, which points back to how this fantasy of bodily transcendence indulges our larger cultural desires to be recognized as powerful and special.

The second chapter connects most directly to film studies, tracking the fantasy of bodily transcendence as it appears in cinema. This study supports Goetz’s claim that fantasies are broader cultural phenomena and therefore operative across media. The chapter departs from Henry Jenkins’s definition of gamic cinema in *Convergence Culture* (2006), which focuses on films that formally remediate playfulness. Goetz’s revision emphasizes the ways that some films offer a highly legible set of rules about how objects, and particularly bodies, interact within the cinematic world. This definition turns away from game-to-film adaptations and films that reference the aesthetics of gaming and toward functional substitutes, asking how video games and films engage the same fantasies, even if by different means. Overall, the chapter extends the argument about the relevance of fantasies of bodily transcendence, highlighting how the psychoanalytic concept of fantasies offers needed flexibility when one is engaged in comparative study of shared tropes across media without flattening “media-specific formal systems” (65).

The third chapter of the book focuses on the tether fantasy, a fantasy of empowerment that plays on the “pleasure of dwelling on the transition between [being safe and being exposed], including the boundaries that allow those two states to remain separate but also related to one another” (74). The chapter details several types of tether fantasies and how they manifest themselves in video games, exploring how video-game genres, specific game mechanics, and play styles reiterate the fantasy of being safe in hostile worlds.

This chapter highlights the things that players bring to games in excess of the games themselves, and how play styles relate back to shared cultural fantasies. For example, a skilled player might “serve as their own secure base, tethered to their mastery of the game” rather than rely on any particular mechanic designed into the game (80).

The tether fantasy is closely related to the fantasy of accretion explored in chapter 4, the book’s final chapter, which addresses feelings of empowerment in video games where play consists of gathering abilities, items, and upgrades that gradually make the player character stronger and more capable in the game world. Goetz’s analysis refers to psychological research on variable reward structures, pointing back to the special power of video games to offer players fantasies and the opportunity to play them out again, and again, and again. Goetz sidesteps familiar Marxist critiques of games that feature accretion play, drawing attention to how the use of variable-ratio reinforcements (like slightly unpredictable leveling up in games) plays on human biology and psychology.

*The Counterfeit Coin* is ideal for scholars of film interested in learning more about video games and for video-game scholars interested in psychoanalysis and comparative media studies. It also intervenes into the ongoing debates within game studies about how games generate meaning, be that by virtue of mechanics, code and procedural elements, or narrative elements found in other media forms, like story and plot. Goetz’s approach takes a middle path: meaning in games happens in the relationship between “apparent” story—narrative as we might see in film or other nonludic media—and the game’s “underlying” fantasy structures, which drive player engagement and action at both an individual and cultural level.

My main critique of the book is that its thesis depends upon hegemonic cultural narratives (the existence of “boy culture,” for example) rather than focusing on the historical or contingent experiences of difference that are more often the focus of feminist science and technology studies and media studies (27). This critique is anticipated by the author in the introduction, where he notes the many complications and drawbacks that come with engaging Freudian psychoanalysis. The book makes a strong case for the utility of psychoanalysis as a framework for comparative media studies, but I found myself often on the outside looking in on these fantasies, both by virtue of the kinds of works chosen for analysis (predominantly mainstream, blockbuster movies and AAA titles, the latter term the gaming industry’s equivalent of the word *blockbuster*) and by virtue of the fantasies that Goetz describes. With these fantasies now described

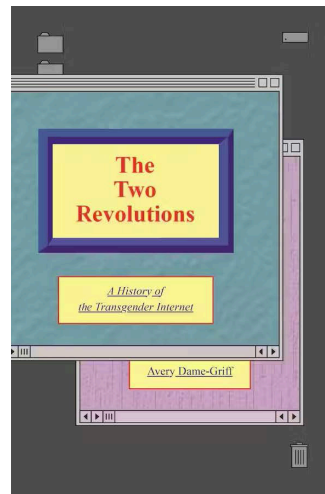
at length, there seems to be a generous opening for future scholarship that might more directly contest the violence implicit in many of these power fantasies.

ARI GASS is a scholar-practitioner with a focus on feminist and queer theoretical approaches to computational media. They look at the mechanics of representation within video games, exploring how the technologies that facilitate gameplay (and that, increasingly, appear onstage and in film) impact whose stories are told and how they are told. They are an assistant professor of digital media at Drexel University and a worker-owner of the Philadelphia-based interactive theater company Obvious Agency.

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## BASIL DABABNEH

### *The Two Revolutions: A History of the Transgender Internet*, by Avery Dame-Griff



As the Internet-connected computer grew in ubiquity across the United States throughout the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberal capitalism developed new ways of incorporating newly visible forms of difference into a profit-making apparatus, transforming identity into classifiable data. At the same time, the various and wide-reaching

representations of gender and sexuality made possible by digital-media technologies and distribution platforms also encouraged radically new forms of self-fashioning, online communication, and community building for marginalized users on the Internet. In *The Two Revolutions: A History of the Transgender Internet*, Avery Dame-Griff thoroughly explores this complex nexus of possibility and limitation across the history of the Internet and the history of the transgender user online, constructing a detailed media archeology at the overlooked intersections of these two contemporary histories.

Covering the period from the 1980s to the present, Dame-Griff’s book examines the influence of digital communication on the development of transgender identities and identifications. Dame-Griff’s rigorous archival research reconstructs the intricate digital networks that both displaced physical publications and periodicals and