

**VIDEO GAMES:
ETHICAL SPACES UNDER THE REGIME OF IMAGES**

by

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Abstract

The video game is a deeply misunderstood medium, one that is often blamed as a root cause of violence, anti-social behaviour and the laziness of youth. In addition to those who judge video games as corrupting, there are those who note the complexity and instructive power of video games and hope to harness the technology for educational use. This thesis occupies a middle ground between these two poles. I set out to interrogate the potential of video games and to explore the troubling aspects of some contemporary commercial examples. I submit this work as a theoretical investigation of video games and “learning”. I argue that as a distinct textual form, video games are prime sites for encountering power and difference, as well as productive sites through which gamers come to know themselves. Video games are semiotic playing fields that, when theorized as such, call for pedagogical interventions focused on how we produce identities and teach about the worlds we inhabit both virtual and actual. I end with an explanation of how video games can constructively be theorized as “ethical spaces” for learning about issues of social justice.

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Introduction

Undoubtedly, much of what we do and can do on a practical level is a consequence of our ability to break things down into manageable parts and rearrange them to solve a particular problem. There is a vast difference, however, between breaking these down into fragments and assuming that the field we are studying is composed of these separate entities. If our aim is to understand, rather than to achieve ways to do something, then reductive thinking may be inadequate, especially when our subject is human beings. Rather, it is essential to “dwell” in phenomena, to let our imaginations roam, to create an intuitive context for recognizing the patterns and relationships governing our subject beyond the confines of what we perceive immediately.

Jeffery Kane (1999)¹

As a teacher and educational philosopher, I find myself acutely aware that new technologies continue to present challenges for “learning”. These challenges range from operating technology – to play a blu-ray disk, check a global positioning system or navigate the internet – to using technology to facilitate or enhance other activities, such as studying, editing multi-media, writing a document, or doing research. In addition to the complexities that are involved in achieving the level of technological literacy that is required to meet these challenges, there is also the matter of understanding the impact technology continues to have on people, communities and society at large. There are two kinds of academic investigations which can and should be undertaken in light of technological advancements which are not mutually exclusive yet each deserving of explicit focus: investigations of *technological literacy* and *technological awareness*. The former aims to achieve better ways of doing something, whilst the latter endeavors to create broader relational understanding and alternative ways of living as socially and technologically connected beings. Regarding various new technologies, both approaches ought to be adopted in concert rather than in opposition or isolation. That is to say, we should aim first to understand the social implications surrounding technology and then achieve ways of

¹Kane, Jeffrey (1999). *Education, Information, and Transformation: Essays on Learning and Thinking*. Ohio: Merrill, an imprint of Prentice Hall

using said technology that builds upon that knowledge. Technological phenomena do indeed present challenges, but they also open possibilities of which we will not benefit from using reductive or compartmentalizing frameworks. I invite the reader to “dwell” on one technological innovation in particular throughout this thesis – the video game – so that we might recognize patterns and relationships and also imagine or create something new for education.

Chapter 1 offers a review of the foremost scholars who have written on the subject of video games and learning and a critical reflection upon the insights that each scholar offers into video game features. Video games are a new medium on the scene within the learning landscape when contrasted with older multimedia, yet it has been suggested that the relatively new academic focus on video games is relatively old if taken as an extension of the work already done on traditional games dating as far back as John Dewey (Appelman p.1, 2007, Dewey p.156, 2004). Even the more recent work by theorists such as Henry Jenkins and James Paul Gee – scholars who insist that video games constitute a textual form that is distinct and ought to be theorized as such for a new generation – has been published and well distributed for many years, indicating that video game studies has for some time been a respected and popular field of interest (Jenkins 1998, 2006, Gee 2003, 2007, 2009). As the opening quote for this introduction suggests, however, it is important to proceed carefully when dealing with phenomena that are closely connected to human beings. Video games are fundamentally social not only as they have evolved on multiplayer platforms but also as spaces where players encounter socio-political contexts loaded with ‘intertextual’ meanings. This makes video games prime sites for encountering power and difference, producing identity and circulating mainstream ideology – aspects which come together to form the category of ‘the social’ that has gone somewhat overlooked by the scholars who are reviewed.

Chapter 2 builds on the video games and learning literature by aiming to bring the social aspects of video game play into focus. In this chapter, I begin from the premise that the video game community as a general collective body constitutes a growing branch of ‘consumer media culture’ and that this culture of games no longer properly belongs to children alone; rather, it is culture which produces and engages subjectivities in adults and children alike. Fundamental to this framing of video games, therefore, is the understanding that video games are already quite conducive to certain kinds of “learning”. Learning in these cases refers to activities that produce us as social subjects, each differentiated in important ways and also linked as peripheral beings living in a larger societal organism. Video games teach us about the world and its inhabitants through cultural representations or signifiers, but they also teach us in alarming ways how to know ourselves. I identify a “regime of images” that imposes dominant representations onto video game players subsequently engaging three intersecting types of learning – “differentiated”, “pleasurable” and “uncritical”. We learn troubling lessons under the regime of images not the least of which is that video games are much more than simple entertainment for the masses. Video games are semiotic playing fields that, when theorized and analysed as such, call for pedagogical intervention that is focused on ‘the social’.

Chapter 3 answers the call from both previous chapters to build something new in consideration of prior critical analysis and theory on video games and learning. This chapter explores in particular how we might disrupt the regime of images and begin to put an end to the circulation of destructive social pedagogies. Moving towards that goal, I suggest that video games might serve as a medium through which gamers can achieve similar learning outcomes regarding social justice as do students who learn with the aid of other multimedia, for example film and books. What is unique about video games, however, is that they can provide a feature

which I call the “morality system”. Teachers from a multitude of educational institutions, not only from graduate or undergraduate schools, face a perennial problem; we ask, ‘how can I teach about any number of social justice issues whilst guarding against anger, pain and resignation in the classroom?’. Indeed, Mary Louise Pratt reminds us that classrooms are often best characterized as “contact zones” where cultures meet and negotiate asymmetrical relations of power (Pratt, 1991), so it should be no surprise that visceral feelings lead to critical failures in spaces where ideology and identity are fundamentally challenged. Video game spaces, by contrast, can offer morality systems – user generated ethical subroutines guided by the sub-features “character creation” and “conversations” – which offer the opportunity to encounter virtual ‘social difference’ and ‘power’. Chapter 3 concludes with one case example that assists in our perceiving video games as ‘ethical spaces’ or moral testing grounds. Video games will hopefully allow for new learning about social justice under the regime of images that will serve as an alternative to or supplement for more traditional classroom methods.

Chapter 1: Learning through Play

Introduction

Are video games good for learning? This question has become pervasive in the academy as scholars from numerous disciplines have decided that there is potential for learning in video games. In light of the voluminous body of literature on the subject, it is tempting to seek out rules and definitions, apply scientific logic and refine the ideas of video games to suit the constructive needs of society, but we must first ask what those needs are and why video games might be used to fulfill them. For those who are swayed by logic and science, one avenue is to identify the “truth” of video games such that it can be applied to the great machine of “progress”. Phrased less colourfully, this means to elucidate video game features and propose how the medium can be shaped to assist imperiled school systems. Conversely, for humanitarians, another direction is to ask what content players are learning in video games and how they are learning it (Kafai, 2006), or to explore how video games represent an epistemic shift in knowledge production (Jenson et al, 2009). Investigations such as these offer timely insights in our techno-driven society that may assist in teaching and learning about issues of social justice. Amidst the excitement and anticipation from many standpoints, I maintain that it is most important to be clear on how one conceives of learning as a part of how one theorizes video games – regardless of our approach – if we are to avoid obscurity and realize our respective visions.

This chapter offers a review of the leading scholars who have written on the topic of video games and learning, namely Robert L. Appelman, James P. Gee and Henry Jenkins, accompanied by some remarks in support of Jennifer Jenson, Suzanne de Castell and Mia Consalvo. In this review, I will comment on each scholar’s theoretical and critical contributions

to bringing video games to the fore for learning with the aim to examine their concept of learning as it applies to their ideas about video games. Jenkins asks us to consider how video games generate meaning for players rather than simply behavioural effects. Similarly, Gee approaches video game analysis from a socio-linguistic perspective. He begins from a new definition of video games and proceeds by challenging how gamers learn in meaningful ways akin to scientific practices. Appelman sees potential for video games to become integral to instructional design, though he finds “serious play” to be both promising and problematic as an educational tool. Finally, Jenson and de Castell explore how new games may enable gamers to produce forms of knowledge and ways of seeing/being. In particular, they are hopeful that video games may provide bridges across knowledge gaps thereby empowering previously marginalized groups. I call attention to these scholars because I understand their work to be of vital importance to my own ideas about learning through video games, but also because my critical reading of their work illuminates what has been overlooked and/or understated in the dominant discourse on video games and “learning”. From within the humanities recently and from sociology especially, the core concept of “the social construction of reality” posits that human relations are best understood as products formed by artificial mechanisms of power throughout history (Berger et al, 2011). Video game play as well as “learning” are fundamentally about human relations; thus, any theoretical work on the two ought to attend to related socially constructed phenomena – an analytical step that I argue is missing from the scholars reviewed in this chapter. In my concluding thoughts, I explore what we should expect to learn from video games in light of scholarly work done thus far.

Gamers

It is perhaps best to begin with an answer that I most often hear from gamers themselves when I ask them what they expect to learn from video games. Their answer is most frequently

one word: “nothing”. Other responses I often hear during my time spent in various video game social networks include: “Video games are my hobby; I play them for my entertainment.” “It’s just a game, not a lesson.” “I play games because they are fun, not because I want to learn.”

These hearsay examples represent a common sentiment no doubt heard by many who have questioned a friend or family member about their entertainment preferences. People, especially people in developed countries like Canada, conceive of learning as formal or institutional and certainly not an outcome from leisure activities (barring a minority of inquiring minded individuals). In short, we might maintain that learning is conceived as sitting in a classroom with the smell of old textbooks and possibly anticipation of the bell. Alternatively, learning does *not* feel like completing a mission in the video game *Guild Wars* or winning a race in *Mario Kart* or leading a death match in *Counter-strike*.

It is both interesting and revealing that when the terminology of a conversation about video games shifts from education to politics, suddenly gamers and non-gamers alike have a plethora of expectations and opinions which they fervently defend. Take for example the recent video game *Medal of Honor* developed by Danger Close and Digital Illusions. In early October 2010, publisher Electronic Arts decided to alter *Medal of Honor* by renaming the opposing side from “Taliban” to “Opposing Force” (Crecente, 2010). *Medal of Honor* is one video game title among many war first person shooters, but unlike those that were released prior to it, it is a story set in the ongoing warzone of Afghanistan and it caused what was widely referred to as a “media controversy” across several networks (Ashcraft, 2010). It is important to discuss *Medal of Honor* for reasons beyond the simple fact that a video game distributor decided to force its developer’s hand regarding creative freedom of expression. Significantly, it marked an occasion when a distributor made a narrative redesign choice in congruence with the ethical concerns of

various external interest groups. These groups were comprised of military personnel, media representatives and most notably video gamers themselves, and it appears that they were successful in overruling the planned final release of *Medal of Honor* though publisher *Electronic Arts* did not officially acknowledge any capitulation to outside pressure (Crecente, 2010B). Regardless of the underlying motivations behind the redesign, this story made it clear that gamers and many others *are* interested in the politics of video games.

Henry Jenkins: video game culture, complete freedom of movement and the meaning of play

Though gamers don't readily admit that they are learning through play while some do express expectations that are political, this reflects the nature of video game culture and the type of learning that occurs within it, evidencing how this mode of learning is distinct and requires careful study. Henry Jenkins took up the task of exploring video game culture and how gamers learn through play in his pioneering article "*Complete Freedom of Movement*": *Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces* (Jenkins, 1998). Though Jenkins' primary concern in this paper was to address the state of affairs for video game play spaces as gender-segregated virtualscapes, his foundational notion of 'complete freedom of movement' is central to any understanding of video game culture and the kind of learning that occurs through game play. It is a mistake to conceptualize video games as "children's play spaces" in an era when there is an aging population of first and second generation gamers. It is nevertheless helpful to return to our collective imagination of childhood in order to shed light on video game culture, as Jenkins writes:

Video games constitute virtual play spaces which allow home-bound children like my son to extend their reach, to explore, manipulate, and interact with a more diverse range of imaginary places than constitute the often drab, predictable, and overly-familiar spaces of their everyday lives... Perhaps my son finds in his video games what I found in the woods behind the school, on my bike whizzing down the hills of the suburban back

streets, or settled into my treehouse during a thunder storm with a good adventure novel – intensity of experience, escape from adult regulation; in short, “complete freedom of movement.” (Jenkins p.262, 1998)

Jenkins’ comparison of two different childhoods is an apt illustration of the joyfulness, sense of adventure, imagination and emotional experience which often constitute video game exchanges. Though video games are not necessarily comprised of all these categories simultaneously and in some instances none of them at all (e.g., when a game is difficult and frustrating), freedom of movement is a universal feature that enables meaningful play. Freedom of movement has been an integral concept in video game design since its inception and this is evident in both hardware and game environment design. For example, human computer interaction teams are constantly searching for better game control devices and in some instances controller-less devices² to enable freedom of movement, and significant collaborative efforts are invested in designing game worlds where players (I emphasise the plural) can explore, uncover secrets, complete objectives and, for better or worse, live their second lives. “Complete freedom of movement” was Jenkins’ quintessential distinction and a relatively new concept on the scene when he used it in 1998. His term referred to the three dimensional play spaces where gamers traverse “across lakes of fire, through cities in the clouds, along dark and gloomy back streets, and into dazzling neon-lit Asian marketplaces” (Jenkins p.263, 1998). Today, more than a decade later, people continue to enjoy this movement. Gamers move across multiplayer teams in the game *Uncharted*; they journey together with guilds and vast alliances in *Guild Wars* and *World of Warcraft*; they even transcend human form altogether in *Okami*. Though this movement can sometimes be problematic (as in the case of *Medal of Honor*) and should be subject to careful ethical scrutiny,

² See Power Glove™ Kinect™ and i-dong™ for examples an early and more recent innovations.

it is nevertheless characteristic of an alternative epistemology and culture – one that does not easily map onto traditional ways of knowing, being and learning in areas of formal education.

Henry Jenkins hoped that his writing on complete freedom of movement might help clarify video game play culture and open it up for girls and women. This was important because he foresaw possibilities for gamers to learn about inhabiting gender, but in addition games could disrupt gender stereotypes and limitations by helping to prevent the (re)creation of “blue and pink ghettos” (Jenkins p.294, 1998). Not everyone shares Jenkins’ optimism. Complete freedom of movement has become a particularly troubling facet of video games because of what it entails for classical notions of play and educational development. The areas of formal education as institutional settings comprised of teachers, classrooms, desks and books continue to be dominated by psychological theories of cognitive development despite progressive inroads from the fields of sociology and philosophy (Pitt, 1990). Since the turn of the twentieth century, ‘play’ has been conceptualized as an important part of said development expanding to cover subject areas such as ethics, social etiquette and even politics (Gagen, 1999). It is significant that the notion of play which fits for formal education does not bear the slightest resemblance to the complete freedom of movement Jenkins identified in video games. On the contrary, institutionalized play was first and foremost about establishing control over children and restraining their movement in post-industrial urban contexts (Gagen, 1999). “Playgrounds” originated as reform spaces designed to keep children off city streets. These were spaces that were quite literally built to contain delinquents in a fenced off area and to protect them from undesirable alternative upbringings³; moreover, the ‘play’ which took place within these confines had to correspond to the codes of conduct established by developmental psychologists (Gagen,

³ Gagen makes a very compelling argument that the perceived undesirable alternatives **were** in point of fact the various new immigrant cultures entering large city centers (Gagen, 1999).

1999). Indeed, formal education was and is chiefly about control that is part of a western concept of childhood which has been centuries in the making (Aries, 1962). Henry Jenkins' vision of video games as free exploratory spaces where gamers may learn to form identities and even historical and socio-cultural understandings might seem attractive to some, but others may find these activities distressing as they threaten long established social controls and challenge foundational systems of building knowledge and understanding (Reigeluth et al., 1989).

As an analogue to Jenkins' vision for video games, philosophers of education by occupation have been challenging the confines of formal education since the early modern era. Jean Jacques Rousseau proposed several radical alternatives for child-rearing and education in his book *Emile*; chief among these were his ideas on free development for children (Rousseau, 1762). While there are numerous aspects of Rousseau's alternative education that we might find problematic today – such as the chapters where he argued for a hierarchical gender divide between boys and girls and where he articulated a subservient role for women in the family for example – his primary message to disrupt institutions and establish a balance between freedom of movement and controlled development remains quite pertinent: "Our didactic and pedantic craze is always to teach children what they would learn much better by themselves and to forget what we alone could teach them" (Rousseau p. 78, 1762). Little changed as the centuries passed. Similar arguments in favour of freedom in education surfaced in other critically acclaimed works though there was substantial disagreement on the depth and scope of 'freedom' and the particulars of 'education' in principle and practice (Hemmings, 1973). Diverging from Rousseau for example, John Dewey acknowledged the necessity of schools in modern societies characterizing them as "steading" and "integrating" offices (Dewey p.26, 1930), but he later acknowledged the counterbalancing notion of 'play' in school: "Education has no more serious

responsibility than making adequate provision for enjoyment of recreative leisure (Dewey p.241, 1930).” Freedom to play was arguably equally as important as achieving cognitive results through formal study.

Other educational theorists and progressive practitioners founded open classrooms designed to encourage freedom of movement and break from traditional educational constraints; notably among these were Montessori schools and the Summerhill School, as the following excerpts by founders A.S. Neil and Gloria Montessori express:

It is not enough, then, to train the scientific teacher; we must prepare the school for him. The school must allow freedom for the development of the activity of the child, if scientific education is to come into being; this is the essential reform. (Montessori p.8, 2004)

I FORCE no bairn to learn in my school. The few who dislike books and lessons sit up when I talk to the class. The slackers are not always the most ignorant. (Hemmings QTD Neil p.18, 1963)

These teachers offered alternative ideas for schooling with a common strain of autonomy for participants. In each case, however, they were met with scepticism and resistance from an overall mistrusting peer community (Graves 1914, Stott, 1984). Consider an apprehensive reflection from Frank Pierrepont Graves and an intellectually hostile response by Laurence Stott:

The conception of "autoeducation" is admirable, but it is difficult to see how **genuine** activities are to be carried on, except within a very narrow scope, unless the material of the Montessorian schools be expanded considerably beyond the confines of the "didactic apparatus." (Graves p.610, 1914, emphasis added)

The evils of forced learning have been overplayed. If interest is spontaneous than it can happen anywhere, including a school classroom. The belief that children will develop to their fullest potential without adult suggestion of any kind is not **demonstrable** and seems particularly foolish. (Stott, p.61, 1984, emphasis added)

Whereas Graves showed collegial respect and acknowledgment in addition to counterbalancing scepticism for Montessori's unconventional ideas, Stott offered no affirmations choosing instead to dismiss freedom of movement in education as invalid on strict analytic grounds. Once we see past the difference in tone, however, there is a subtle yet pervasive epistemology which Graves and Stott have in common. Both offer critiques which call for a rationalist spirit by appealing to the "genuine" and the "demonstrable". "Genuine" activities in education are of course highly contestable and the concept has been used to justify and discredit a multitude of tasks, but for Graves and Stott the meaning was simple; Genuine activities are "useful" ones that will help prepare students for life in society, for example reading, writing and arithmetic, and it was difficult for them to see or "demonstrate" (within reason) how a student could achieve these independently or automatically.

Proponents of video games would suffer similar scepticism and resistance as did the pioneers of free and open classrooms. What began as discomfort and mistrust for video games from dissenting groups soon evolved into widespread legal warfare – a conflict which Jenkins described in *The War between Effects and Meanings* (Jenkins, 2006): On the plaintiff side, there were reformers who took aim at violent video game titles out of fear that they were corrupting youth by inculcating unwholesome values and conditioning abhorrent behaviour. These groups lobbied for special government controls in the United States to bar the sale of some video games to minors (Jenkins, 2006). On the defense side, there were academics and civil libertarians who argued that a dangerous precedent would be set if all video games should be legally conceptualized as meaningless entertainment. Regardless of whether a few titles have the potential to harm children, these defenders argue that video games just as books should be

considered meaningful mediums which ought to be protected by freedom of expression under the law (Jenkins, 2006).

Jenkins' primary objective here was not to attempt a final argument that would win the violence in video games debate or to defend the violent video game titles which were taken as examples; rather, his intention was to clarify that the two sides were operating with very different concepts of video games and what counts as learning. Jenkins argued that the reformers relied heavily on what he called the "the effects model" which closely resembles early behaviourist models of education and psychological conditioning (Jenkins, 2006). On this view, video games teach players to be violent through repetitive conditioning and virtual reward. Just as soldiers learn to perform deadly acts on the battlefield, "every time a child plays an interactive point-and-shoot video game, he is learning to exact the same conditioned reflex and motor skills" (Jenkins QTD: Grossman p.211, 2006). As Jenkins rightly notes, aside from the fact that this model appears to liken an "educated" child to a trained Pavlovian dog, it ignores the multi-layered and cognitively complex reasons why gamers choose to play from the onset (Jenkins p. 211, 2006). He suggests that another model for learning through video games is his "meanings model". In line with more recent socio-cultural concepts of education (Gee 2007, Wenger, 1998), Jenkins observes that learning can also be a process of meaning making that occurs in groups, involves value laden problem solving, political critiques and sometimes critical self-reflection:

Games do represent powerful tools for learning – if we understand learning in a more active, meaning-driven sense. The problem comes when we make too easy an assumption about what is being learned just by looking at the surface features of the games. As Gerard Jones notes..., "young people who reject violence, guns, and bigotry in every form can sift through the literal contents of a movie, game, or song and still embrace the emotional power at its heart." (Jenkins 215, 2006)

Despite Jenkins' categorical clarification, the war on violent video games is far from over, as was made clear by recent American Supreme Court hearings on California video game regulations (Totilo, 2010). In moving forward it seems reasonable to insist that advocates seriously consider which model for learning is most appropriate. At the very least groups on both sides should be clear on what theoretical foundations they stand and consider what is accounted for as well as what is missed by any given learning model.

Jenkins: On learning

So, what counts as learning in video games for Henry Jenkins? In both his early and more recent work on video games, Jenkins intended to emphasize the complex nature of video game culture as well as ways we might open the medium for players to learn in the future. Jenkins never completely discounts the effects model for learning through video games; however, he expresses that his chief interest is in the meanings model:

Rethinking the debates about media violence in terms of meanings rather than effects has pushed us in two important directions: on the one hand it has helped us to see the ways that game designers and players are rethinking the consequences of violence within existing commercial games...On the other hand, a focus on meaning rather than effects has helped us to identify some pedagogical interventions that can help our students develop the skills and vocabulary needed to think more deeply about the violence they encounter in the culture around them (Jenkins 222, 2006).

He observes that many important positive lessons are currently being learned through popular commercial titles like *Morrowind* – a role play adventure which emphasizes social values of family and friendship, *Civilization 3* – a strategy game that teaches politics and history, and *Black & White* – a world building game infused with moral dilemmas as the player takes up the role of a god (Jenkins, 2006). Upon closer investigation of these video game titles we might find that game designers and players are indeed “rethinking the consequences of violence.” Should

we find otherwise, on the other hand, we can create “pedagogical interventions” which Jenkins later characterizes as “media literacy efforts” in his closing example:

Through media literacy efforts like OnRamp Arts’ *Tropical America* project, teachers, students, and local artists are working together to envision alternative ways of representing violence in games and in the process, to critique the limitations of current commercial games (Jenkins p.221, 2006).

As a principle investigator for *The Education Arcade* – an organization dedicated to reflective video game design and fostering games literacy – Jenkins is currently working towards the initiative’s goal to explore the pedagogical implication of commercial video game play, study the outcomes of educational video games and expound the relevance of video game play and design for a multitude of subject areas relevant to formal education, namely mathematics, science, history, literacy, and language learning. He is successfully acting on his intentions to bring video games into focus for meaningful learning.

The Education Arcade is an important research and design initiative and Henry Jenkins’ contributions are commendable. *Revolution*, for example, is one video game project from *The Education Arcade* that aligns quite well with Jenkins’ meanings model. Designed using the already popular *Neverwinter Nights* video game engine, *Revolution* is a multiplayer action role-play game set in the middle 18th century that introduces players to the history of the American Revolution including some important events and socio-political underpinnings of human affairs during the period⁴. In addition to its effective use of commercial grade visual effects, which ensure a play experience that is both polished and familiar to gamers, *Revolution* was also designed to prepare students for follow up classroom discussions and curriculum mandated units

⁴ For more on *Revolution* and other titles by the *Education Arcade* see URL: <http://www.educationarcade.org/projects>

in history classes. Although the project was completed in 2004, 2 years before Jenkins published *The War between Effects and Meanings*, it clearly aims to provide game play experiences that generate historical awareness as well as a critical consciousness akin to learning on Jenkins' meanings model. That said, *Revolution* was designed as a supplement for regular classroom discussion and as such it is not problem-free. A considerable drawback, for example, is that *Revolution* requires a great deal of technical expertise and expensive computer hardware for successful implementation. We can hope, however, that the developers at *The Education Arcade* working in tandem with Henry Jenkins and other theorists might continue to refine and produce meaningful video games for future classes.

Jenkins' examples of video games from the commercial and academic sectors do represent positive potential for certain kinds of social and technical learning and they succeed in encouraging us to revisit and re-evaluate our pre-conceptions about video games and learning (in particular regarding video game violence). But is it enough to assert that video games are meaningful without fully interrogating whether they have counterbalancing negative meanings? Although Jenkins acknowledges that there are harmful titles that are being produced for mass consumption (Jenkins, 2006), he exhibits a somewhat overly optimistic stance on developer responsibility:

As game designers have grappled with their own ethical responsibilities, they have increasingly struggled to find ways to introduce some moral framework or some notion of consequence into their work (Jenkins, p.217 2006).

I agree that some game designers have taken up an ethical stance to design. As was discussed at the start of this paper, there is perhaps no other genre that is more heatedly debated than current war video games, yet even within this realm game designers are actively working to keep their

creations on a moral high ground. Sion Lenton is the creative director of *Red River*, a new title in the *Flashpoint* series of shooter games which will be released in 2011. He made his ethical views known when commenting on *Medal of Honor*:

I, personally, don't want to focus on live conflict. I don't think it's appropriate and I don't think it's tasteful... We are deliberately setting out not to court that controversy, we don't want to go there and it's not a conversation we ever wanted to get into... We're still making a war game, and showing soldiers dying, but I guess [the fiction] is us playing safe. But I don't have a problem with playing safe when it comes to this kind of thing. (Brown QTD Sion Lenton, 2010).

Lenton attempted to differentiate his team project from *Medal of Honor* because of what he perceived to be an inappropriate focus on “live” conflict, that is to say the contemporary conflict in Afghanistan. He used the pronouns “I” and “we” interchangeably and downplayed his comments with the phrases “I personally...”, “I don't think...”, and “I guess...” indicating that, while he would have liked to speak for the team as a collective, he felt some ambivalence in taking a group stance. We should note that this was far from a strong ethical response. Lenton's comment is lacking in both form and content. I nevertheless congratulate him for speaking out on the inappropriateness of basing a video game on the current war in Afghanistan and for excluding such representations in his team's creations, but I question whether he or the many others in his industry have carefully considered what “showing soldiers dying” fully entails. If one fictionalizes the names and locations of a first person shooter while maintaining depictions of soldiers killing men dressed as Muslims, does one not reproduce the same meanings as though they were the “real” thing? Questions such as these lead to conversations that I anticipate Lenton would also avoid since they threaten the essence of his work and the bottom line of a multi-billion dollar industry which owed 20.4% of its video game top 10 sales to modern warfare games in the year 2010 (VGChartz Ltd, 2011). Ethical game design is emerging in the

commercial industry, but it is in need of support from those who would defend moral (political) standards more firmly. Jenkins' succeeds in generating positive interest in the meaning of video games play, but we have due cause for concern about those video game developers who 'mean well' but who ultimately re-inscribe harmful meanings.

Jenkins' view of gamer responses also seems overly positive:

Some of what happens is outrageous and offensive, but this open-ended structure puts the burden on the user to make choices and explore their consequences...most players find it hard to be purely good or purely evil; most enter into ethical gray areas, and in so doing, start to ask some core philosophical and theological questions (Jenkins p. 218-19, 2006).

Unfortunately, on the rare occasions when game designers try to imbue philosophical or political messages into their games, players do not always react in the desired ways. One such occasion was with the release of the 2010 video game of the year nominee *Assassin's Creed 2: Brotherhood*:

The writer for this game, Jeffrey Yohalem, claimed that he intended to tell a story set in Italy's Renaissance while concurrently conveying a message about American power politics under the Obama administration (Totilo, 2010). Yohalem was not specific about the details of his message or his motivations for embedding it. This may have been his attempt to safeguard himself from his employers and the publishers of *Assassin's Creed 2: Brotherhood*. In any case, most gamers were not cognizant of his sub-commentary, and one gamer in particular had an adverse reaction: "I was really looking forward to getting this game but...take your prick writers with their self-entitled political bullshit out of my games" (Totilo Comment atch: Vindibudd, 2010). To be fair, Henry Jenkins did not claim that all or even most gamers engage in critical reflection, nor did he claim that all or most game designers adhere to good ethical standards – in fact he explicitly stated otherwise: "Not every gamer thinks deeply about their play experiences, nor does every designer reflect upon the meanings...in their work" (Jenkins

p.215, 2006) – however, the *Assassin's Creed 2* gamer reaction clearly does not reflect a willingness or interest in asking “philosophical or theological questions”. It would have been prudent to acknowledge negative backlashes and resistance to teaching and learning through play as they arise from both gamers and game designers. We might learn how to design more effectively for meaningful learning in the future by accounting for cases where gamers express hostility towards pedagogical agendas.

Robert L. Appelman: ‘serious games’

Instructional design in education is one field in particular that has had a long history of scholars interested in games design. In addition to video games there has been research on board games and simulation which yielded favourable results for design in many areas – language learning, politics and economics to highlight a few (Peterson 2009, Lawson et al. 2009, Reilly 2003). These innovations began flourishing in the 1970s with publications such as *Serious Games* and *Gaming-Simulation: Rationale, Design and Application* where the notion ‘serious game’ was explored, critiqued and finally defined for future use (Abt 1970, Greenblat, 1975). By the 21st century, ‘serious games’ became popular options for study in North America as school curricula initiatives saw increased funding from government agencies⁵. This continued as more recent academic research on video games expanded the scope of ‘serious games’ to digital interaction and online community-based learning. Researchers have on several occasions attempted to design video games as educational tools for the purpose of explicit instruction or more subtle persuasion leading one to conclude that video games present similar cause for excitement as classic games have offered in the past (Ciavarro et al. 2007, Lavender 2007, Jenson et al. 2009). Nonetheless, a sober evaluation of the success and failures of the design

⁵ See the Canadian International Development Agency’s *Global Classroom Initiative* and the American *National STEM Video Game Challenge*

work done thus far is urgently needed. In his concluding thoughts on the future of ‘serious games’, Abt predicted in 1971 that “games will be used because they make learning more efficient, active, and relevant” (Abt p.122, 1971). Have we come to realize a true ‘serious game’? If such a game does or can exist in the form of a video game, what is the extent of its practical application? What are the learning outcomes?

A good first step, as philosophers from the British analytic tradition have asserted for decades, is to begin by defining a concept or exploring the implications of conflicting definitions in order to achieve greater understanding. What is a ‘serious game’? Robert L. Appelman, author of *Serious Game Design: Balancing Cognitive and Affective Engagement*, defined ‘Serious Games’ as consisting of three primary categories, each of equal importance to being “effective” for “learning”. Serious Games entail ‘Serious Outcomes’, ‘Serious Players’, and ‘Serious Content’ (Appelman, 2007). Using this working definition, Appelman sought to establish his own instructional design framework to assist others in bridging the knowledge gap between educators who wish to implement video game technology and designers who have already been successful in creating commercial video games. His final aim was to create design ‘tools’ for Serious Games that are “equally strong in game play as they are in manipulation of learning variables” (Appelman p.1, 2007). This is a worthy goal given that collaboration between academia and the video game industry has historically been difficult to establish (Ficocelli, 2006); however, the variables involved in Appelman’s Serious Games may require refinement following a closer review.

‘Serious Outcomes’, on Appelman’s definition, is a criterion which simply states that players will emerge from their gameplay experience with some kind of measurable change to their conceptual understanding, skills, attitudes, or beliefs (Appelman, 2007): “In a Serious

Game there is an expectation that people will be different after the game play experience” (Appelman p.3, 2007). While arguably becoming “different” is broad and vague enough to measure essentially nothing, I would argue that this definition of Serious Outcomes is not overly controversial. The majority of educational theorists would agree that change is fundamental to an educational outcome. If a student has not changed, than learning has clearly not occurred; however, the scenario becomes significantly more debatable when one considers the value of new understandings in relation to the instructional designer, the learner and a myriad of externalities. I submit as a point of observation that learning is often political or ethical in nature, and this bears significance on how we evaluate outcomes. Scholars have invoked distressing questions in this regard: When does teaching ‘cross the line’ and become indoctrination (Lang p.247, 2007)? How can we leave behind habits of evaluating outcomes in terms of “good” and “bad” or “innocence” and “guilt” in circumstances that are uncomfortable or harmful (Boler p.187, 1999)? What can be done to guard against resignation and resentment on issues of race, class or gender in the classroom (Levinson p.446, 1997)? Setting these considerations aside for the moment, I believe Appelman intended to highlight that mere fun and enjoyment may be bonus results of play but not endemic to Serious Outcomes. His omission of any consideration for the socio-political value of game-play outcomes, though alarming, was not meant to affect the validity of his intentionally “neutral” framework.

To achieve Serious Outcomes, Appelman defines a “Serious Player” as a person who is motivated by curiosity and a desire to play and is inclined to understand, learn and acquire new skills. The player seeks to learn through play:

The context for why the player is playing the game or sim is motivated by curiosity, a desire to understand, and/or a desire to learn and acquire new skills. The player entry level with the content and target skill acquisition must be quantified to assure appropriate

match with the specific learning goals of the game/sim. Pre-game player motivation to achieve personal, social, contextual, and entertainment goals must match the learning environment's ability to meet these goals (Appelman p.3, 2007).

In accordance with this, Serious Games must match the skill level and learning goals of the target users. Serious Players play to learn – not simply for fun – though they may have fun in the process. Herein lays a fundamental problem with this definition and perhaps for instructional design generally. Who is a Serious Player and who determines this? Although the words “social” and “contextual” are mentioned, they are never addressed in terms of specific examples. Even if instructional designers and teachers were to accept what constitutes Serious Content and Serious Outcomes in a given case, as we saw in the previous section, gamers may not have the same intentions (Vorderer et al. 2009). The content will have been useless and the target outcomes not met if users choose to resign from the start. Worse still, consider the possibility that there is no such individual who resembles a Serious Player (Yee, 2006). Instructional design for Serious Games would be futile in this case and preparation time may be better spent writing a lecture or planning a student-centred discussion. The Serious Player for Appelman is just like the “learner” for other instructional designers. They will always be the unfixed figure that threatens to unbalance the equation. Put somewhat more humanistically, so long as we continue to theorize instructional design regardless of student context, there will be people who get pushed to the margins⁶. The gravity of adopting a Serious Outcomes and Serious Player framework, as Appelman describes them, will be felt by instructors who must salvage failed lessons but also by students who are alienated.

⁶ See: Jenson, J., & de Castell, S. (2008). “Theorizing Gender and Digital Gameplay: Oversights, Accidents and Surprises”. In *Eludamos Journal for Computer Game Culture*: 2.1: 15-25

We have strong reasons, in fact, to view some gamers as individuals quite apart from Appelman's Serious Player. It is true that a central tenant of playing video games is to follow certain rules that are delineated by video game designers in order to achieve success and "beat the game" – a point which Appelman himself rightly points out (Appelman, 2005) – but gamers often perplexingly create gaming experiences for themselves in commercial video games that are not only in violation of the rules but sometimes bypasses established structures altogether. Mia Consalvo, author of *Cheating: gaining advantage in videogames*, speaks volumes to this phenomenon offering important insights into actual gamers. Building on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital", Consalvo claims that "gaming capital" – a dynamic concept of cultural currency that gamers use to identify themselves differentially – is a way "to understand how individuals interact with games, information about games and the game industry, and other game players" in addition to "a central element to serious gameplay" (Consalvo p.xvi 2007). In this view, to refer to video game culture in the singular is eventually meaningless since there are numerous virtualscapes in which millions of gamers interact. In tandem with their play, gamers establish themselves, their reputations, alliances and status in and through gaming capital which includes, but is not limited to, accumulation of knowledge, gaming skill, virtual wealth and cheating behaviours: "In addition to having fun, saving time, or solving problems that are too difficult, players also can cheat as a way of gaining gaming capital...a subculture of cheaters can subscribe to its own beliefs about skilled gameplay and the clever exploitation of game resources" (Consalvo p.107, 2007). On the most basic level, there are 'singleplayer' games, 'multiplayer' games and even 'massive multiplayer online' games; There are 'shooters', 'role-playing games' and 'action adventures' – to name a few – each differing in form, content as well as gamers who play (honestly or otherwise). Indeed, we reinvent ourselves in vastly different

ways through different gameplay⁷ and in some cases by cheating. Importantly as a result of gaming capital, we gamers already have numerous understandings of serious gameplay and what it means to be a “serious player”, as Consalvo highlights.

Next on Appelman’s definition is “Serious Content”. “Serious Content” must have sufficient content density which may be integrated into the game world or accompany it on the outside in the form of a more traditional lesson. Content density is taken literally to mean “more content” than a game designed “just for play”, i.e., the content includes a complex series of principles or procedures, and not simply hand eye co-ordination and finger dexterity puzzles. Finally, the content must be interactive and the primary focus of the player’s manipulation should be for learning that is “authentic” or learning that leads to “real-world” action (Appelman p.5, 2007). Consider how Appelman conceives of this interplay:

At the heart of the play/learning debate is achieving the appropriate balance between the affective and content components of the game. Appelman posits that to adequately manage this balance, one must quantify both the degree of content density in the game environment as well as the content understanding of the player (Appelman p.6, 2007).

If one is committed to a broad range of studies in the humanities with a special emphasis on issues of social justice, it is understandable how one might be perplexed by this reading of what is “at the heart of the play/learning debate”. Attention to specific content, namely “violent” content, was the explicit focus in the debate that was discussed previously on Jenkins’ view, and it is most inappropriate for Appelman to remain ambiguous on this – his final – criterion for Serious Games. He does not offer answers to some very basic questions, again, no doubt, as a result of his desire to establish a neutral framework: What is “authentic learning” and “real-

⁷ For more on this topic see Chapter 3.

world action”? How will we quantify “content density” or “content understanding”? On the other hand, if one is interested in vocational training, these exclusions may be implied and thus more understandable. Appelman proclaimed elsewhere in another publication that flight simulators and medical simulators are good indicators of authentic learning that lead to real-world action:

Authenticity of content describes how congruent the content is with reality...Authenticity has come into focus as a variable for instructional experiences with the advent of realistic virtual simulations for both the airline industry and the medical field, where authenticity combines with another attribute – concreteness – to take on an additional component of realism (Appelman, p.69, 2005).

In these cases it is conceivable that both content density and content understanding can be defined and measured as test variables. Though video games are different from simulators – a distinction which Appelman also rightly acknowledges (Appelman, 2007) – we can deduce that Serious Content may be the same in both technologies. For lack of a better explanation, perhaps Serious Content is simply procedural content that will assist in training for occupations like flying a plane, running a business, or examining a patient, not political content meant to analyse violence, oppression or any other social aspect.

We may challenge this rendition of “Serious Content” based on the premise that even medicine, one of Appelman’s chief examples, is not devoid of social context and that a complete training will require some degree of socio-political or critical content. This is a point that others have argued for the medical field. Both the American and Canadian oversight commissions – the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada and the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education – have determined that special training paradigms are required to ensure cultural sensitivity (MacDonald et.al, 2007). While it might seem obvious for those of us outside

of the medical profession that culture is an important variable at the point of patient/doctor contact, there is considerable question within the field about what culture means, how it is to be understood and what bearing it has on procedure. Mary Ellen MacDonald, Franco A. Carnevale and Saleem Razack, authors of *Understanding what Residents want and what Residents Need: The Challenge of Cultural Training in Pediatrics*, point out that there is fundamentally a ‘clash of epistemologies’ in medical teaching which “resulted when a theoretical model of cultural understanding and reflection met a pedagogical model built upon assumptions of medical reductionism, core competencies and mastery of clinical skills” (MacDonald et.al p.464, 2007). As they explain, there is a tension between the ‘professional’ role and the ‘communicator’ role which doctors are trained to assume when dealing with patients across difference. Years of medical training produces subjects who view “mastery” of medical practice as consisting of a number of ‘competencies’ including “cultural competency”; however, this itself generates a medical culture ill-suited for the task of healing the sick and suggests that an even stronger medical program should foster cultural awareness and ongoing critical self-awareness in residents (MacDonald p.465, 2007). This example shows that the medical profession, which Appelman holds in high regard as an ideal for authentic learning, has a vital and ongoing interest in social content. It follows that “Serious Content” likely also requires a similar focus or at the very least clear attention to social relations.

Appelman: On Learning

Indeed, Appelman gives us no indication that he is concerned with accounting for ‘the social’. As the co-ordinator of Technology and Education at Indiana University, a leading instructional design theorist in the field of technology and education, and a former graphic designer, Appelman’s professional and pedagogical interests converge on the question ‘how can we design video games for effective instruction?’. This question falls in tandem with the field of

instructional design generally, which is concerned with providing solutions to current educational problems, primarily addressing efficiency or cost effectiveness as schools become over-crowded and their resources strained. For example, early instructional designers predicted that computer-based simulations much like video games would provide solutions for teachers in highly populated classrooms (Reigeluth et al., 1989). Similarly, Appelman suggests through his papers that video game design may have applications for improving individual learning experiences for the current disengaged generation. Drawing from psychology, he theorized how instructional design may be integrated into educational video games through an “Experiential Mode Framework”:

An Experiential Mode Framework

Serious game design involves the quantification of key operant categories of both the player experience and the game or simulation structures. The following framework is offered as a starting point for the design of Serious Games, and may be extended to the design of any learning environment.

The Player Experience:	Game Structure:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cognition – changes in cognitive and affective domains 2. Metacognition – all that the player is aware of including: vision, audio, olfactory, kinesthetic, and haptic senses, plus an awareness of time, objects, & content 3. Choice – perception of: degree of control, and access to variables and information during game play 4. Action – perception that they can do things such as: interact with objects and elements within the game, have control of objects, elements, and own 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Content – the story, the context, the amount of information available, the degree of concreteness or abstraction of the content, the authenticity, and its variability 2. Environment – the virtual spaces and boundaries, the objects within these spaces and their functionality capabilities, plus any time limits imposed by the game 3. Affordances – the abilities made for the player to change, manipulate, the objects, information, environment, their

identity, have mobility to move through the environment, manipulate control interface to effect change.	identity & capabilities, and/or to seek alternative information
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(Adapted from: Appelman, 2007)

I present Appelman’s Experiential Mode framework here with limited interpretation for two reasons. Firstly, I am not qualified to elucidate the finer points of cognitive science or psychology, thus I cannot adequately discuss such aspects as the cognitive or affective domains of the human brain nor the biology of sense perception. I can say, however, with limited confidence that Appelman’s inclusion of such bio-categories indicates an indirect commitment to behavioural and cognitive learning instead of attentiveness to critical or de-constructive learning models – distinctions which other instructional design theorists have well described (Lebow, 1993, Ertmer, 1993). My second reason is that I simply wish to draw attention to what, or more specifically who, is disregarded or overlooked by this framework and to express reservations on this point given that Appelman claimed that his framework may be “extended to the design of *any* learning environment”. Nowhere, in either the player experience or game structure sections, is there an account for different learners and how they might or might not fit the framework. This is troubling because we are meant to use the Experiential Mode Framework as a starting point for any learner environment.

Although I strongly believe that neither macro nor micro problems in school institutions can be solved solely through instructional design, I think Appelman’s Serious Game and Experiential Mode framework may be important for directing projects in the future if modified to account for individual learners and their diverse social circumstances. Appelman made his intentions for video games and learning clear:

Game design, especially that type of game that involves learning as an outcome, are as a whole very undefined in terms of the sequence of decisions that need to be made, who makes these decisions, as well as what development tools are used to make and execute these decisions (Appelman p.1, 2009).

Building on this assertion, he sought to redefine the instructional design process to assist in first creating more immersion and second more entertainment: “The focus needs to be on

engagement with the serious game and not just how fun it is to play” (Appelman p.4, 2007).

This is quite right. Working definitions will be crucial in moving forward on any video game designed for learning and framework tools will also serve as a guide, but we will most certainly require specificity on our intended outcomes, content and players. We will find that striking a balance between cognitive and affective engagement is an extremely complex endeavour when dealing with any learning environment – one that will almost certainly require “serious” amendments to Appelman’s definition of a Serious Game and Experiential Mode Framework.

James Paul Gee: Embodied Empathy

James Paul Gee, author of “*Are Video Games Good for Learning?*”, offers his own definitions for video games in order to assist in theorizing about current learning applications, but he does so by building on linguistic examples, or “worked examples” as he calls them, rather than an instructional design framework (Gee, 2007). He proposes that there are two different types of video games, “problem games” which are video games like digital board games, digital card games and digital skill-based games where the objective is to solve a problem or a puzzle; and “world games” which simulate virtual worlds that are interactive, adaptive to players and contain problems or puzzles that are quite different from problem games (Gee, 2007). This distinction is for Gee admittedly not “air tight”, but he rightly maintained that world games have game features that at least indicate promise for learning environments (Gee, 2007). His goal is to

expound the qualities of those features in order to suggest research questions for video games and learning: “The features of video games that hold out promise for good learning lead to key questions for research in the emerging field of games and learning. I will sketch some of these features and the accompanying research questions to which they lead (Gee p.323, 2007).”

The qualities of world games, according to Gee’s definition, become clear when one considers how players interact within them. It is important to emphasize that players are indeed within world games when they play, though they are not physically connected to them. This is evinced by the reactions players sometimes demonstrate, for example jumping out of a seat when a character suddenly appears in the popular game *Half-Life* or laughing when a character makes a joke in the game *Portal*. These reactions denote mental connections with the medium which lead to responses similar to daily physical world behaviour. We may interject and claim that these reactions also often occur when reading books, watching movies or listening to audio, but video games differ due to the fact that players (unlike audiences) can “push back”. Video games may cause a reaction in a player which will in turn prompt that player to interact with the virtual world differently. Gee posited that this aspect of world games presents unique opportunities for complex feelings and thoughts towards characters in game narratives (Gee, 2007).

Gee’s first linguistic example was to show that there are some important interactive similarities between world games and other more traditional educational settings. Emotional responses are not all that world games can invoke, he claimed. World games may also create an “attitude” or “stance” towards complex systems that can generate understanding and ways of seeing or thinking similar to scientific simulations. Gee identified a key aspect of this stance as ‘embodied empathy’:

[A scientific] stance involves a sort of embodied empathy for a complex system where a person seeks to participate in and within a system, all the while seeing and thinking of it as

a system and not just local or random events. This does, indeed, seem similar to the stance players take when they play as Garrett in a game like *Thief* and seek to figure out the rule system that underlies the virtual world through which Garrett (and they) moves (Gee p.324, 2007).

Embodied empathy for a complex system is described with reference to the use of imagination and language in science and then compared to similar instances in the game *Thief*. When scientists must describe phenomena to their colleagues or students, they sometimes personify objects to encourage audiences to enter into an imaginary world. In addition to personification, scientists also make use of body movement as if they were physically exploring the complex systems they describe. Gee asked his readers to consider the following dialogue between two physicists who were describing a graph on a chalk board to illustrate:

Physicist A: But as you go below the first order transition you're [leans upper body to right] still in the domain structure and you're still trying to get [sweeps right arm to left] out of it.

Physicist B: Well you also said [moves to board; points to diagram] the same thing must happen here [points to the right side of the diagram]. When [moves finger to left] I come down [moves finger to right], I'm in [moves finger to left] the domain state.
(Gee QTD, Ochs E.P, p.324, 2007)

The scientists were talking and acting as if their minds and notably bodies were inside the graph, and this created a unique attitude towards their subject matter. Without a doubt, this dialogue clearly illustrates that both scientists imagined themselves to be inside the graph. Their language signified their mental connection and their body movement indicated a physical interaction with the “graph world”.

To carry Gee's worked example further, the dialogue between the scientists seems particularly reminiscent of the way players interact in world games such as *World of Warcraft*:

Player A: What we'll do is this [moves game character into middle of a circle of other game characters]. I'll run in first and gather up all the eggs. I'll use 'intimidating shout' to scatter them.

Player B: Alright, let's do this.

Player C: Okay let's go. Stick to the plan.
(Transcribed from: pj007101, YouTube
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkCNJRfSZBU>)

The players in this dialogue were preparing themselves to engage in a task. Interestingly, their use of language and *virtual* body movements denote a stance of embodied empathy for the game system similar to the physicists. The experience of learning in a world game can be likened to the experience of learning in scientific simulations. In both cases, participants interact with virtual worlds and make use of their imaginations in order to generate understanding and ways of seeing or thinking. Although a chalk board with a graph is quite different from a massive multiplayer online world game, both mediums enable participants to reach specific outcomes by creating a space for the adoption of an embodied attitude or stance.

Gee: On Learning

Though thrilling and rewarding for some, the experience of learning in a world game may differ drastically between players. Just as the settings and procedures that are required to execute a scientific experiment might be accessible and encouraging for a few star pupils while others feel restricted or alienated, game rules and objectives are also far from all-inclusive. As game designers, teachers, or educational theorists, we must ask difficult questions. We can start from the basics: What is the content? What are my aims? What does the curriculum require? We must follow with more: Who are the students? Where are they from? How will they interact as a group, with their instructor and with the content? Good pedagogy should always remain situated to the various contexts, histories and people who are involved. Relevant to Gee's

worked example, we should include as part of our research questions an attentiveness to *who* is ready, willing and/or able to inhabit the kind of embodied attitude or stance. In fact, we might gain more by asking who is *not* ready to play video games, and why?

In their paper *Theorizing gender and digital gameplay: Oversights, accidents and surprises*, Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell argued quite convincingly that gender research in video game studies has failed to bring equity concerns for girl gamers to the fore (Jenson et al, 2008). Their assessment of the problem lies in a reoccurring inability on the part of most gender-based researchers in both the academic and commercial realms to theorize gender and carry out empirical research that avoids inducing “a perception of the constructed and artificial as ‘natural’ and essential” (Jenson et al p.15, 2008). In other words, the majority of research on gender design practice, gender game play, and gender game preference that has been carried out thus far has failed to offer anything “progressive” on gender and video games and succeeded only in reifying stereotyped gendered conceptions about girls and boys, namely that girls are cooperative and non-violent whereas boys are competitive and aggressive (Jenson et al p.16, 2008). When taking this history of flawed research practice into account, Jenson et al “found” through their own research that girl gamers have “mistakenly” been relegated to the margins as a result of said reification (Jenson, et al, 2009). Returning to Gee’s defined video game features, girls are not normally given the chance to succeed in video games, educational or otherwise, because they are barred from engaging in embodied empathy as a consequence of being excluded from play. This occurs either overtly, as in the case of a brother snatching a game controller away, or systemically, as in parents, teachers and peers offering no choice other than “girl friendly” activities, and it has resulted in a great number of girls (and arguably women) who may never enjoy learning through video game play in the same ways as boys and men.

Gee was aware of problematic questions surrounding gender and video games. He is a co-advisor for the *Education Arcade* along with principle investigator Henry Jenkins, whose commitment to gender and video gaming is evident in the expansive book *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (Jenkins, 1998). Their organization has collaborated on seven major projects, thus it stands to reason that they are closely familiar with each other's work. Nevertheless, the opportunity to acknowledge gender problems seems to have escaped Gee on at least one other occasion. The following is a passage from Gee's *Affinity Spaces: From Age of Mythology to Today's Schools*:

What is wonderful about computer and video games is that **people can** interact so directly with the content of the game. In a real-time strategy game, a virtual "citizen" goes out and farms or collects wood. But the human player manipulates the virtual citizen – i.e., moves him or her to the farm or the forest. Here content and interaction come directly together, because the virtual character is part of the content of the game, but the manipulation of the character is an interaction made by the human player. Of course, interaction goes much further than this, however, since **people can** interact with the game and each other in regard to the game in a myriad of different ways (Gee p.12, 2009, emphasis added).

Although this example resembles embodied empathy for game systems due to the focus on interaction and manipulation, it was intended as evidence in support of another world game feature which Gee defined as an "affinity space." Like embodied empathy, players may also exhibit special "affinity" for the virtual spaces that video games provide – feelings which they may not have about classroom spaces. Unfortunately the subjects 'people' and modals 'can' which occur in this passage never get interrogated in terms of consequences for gender. This becomes an important oversight if we wish to ask the question 'who can gain access to video games and feel that they are wonderful?'

James Paul Gee has expressed that his intention was to explicate video games features through examples so that his accompanying research questions may lead to future projects for

learning (Gee 2007, 2009). With regard to embodied empathy and affinity spaces, Gee has surpassed other theoretical work on video games and education by virtue of his use of worked examples in support of concepts. It is regrettable, however, that he did not attach some relevant research questions on gender in addition to (not in spite of) the more technical learning queries. These are important for game features and game outcomes which likely involve gendered and gendering performances. The same attachments can and should be made for other social concerns such as class and race wherever they are relevant, as others have argued (Margolis et al, 2008, Dyer-Witford et al, 2009).

Concluding Thoughts

The scholars who were discussed in this chapter each made their own bold entries into a nascent field of study. Jenkins gave us an important conceptual window through which to view video games. He clarified that video games can be meaningful as gamers enjoy a virtual form of complete freedom of movement which is not easily found in other more traditional settings. Given what seems to have been centuries of outmoded and needlessly restrictive educational practices, meaningful learning through video games is certainly an intoxicating concept; nevertheless, gamer and developer actualities seem to warrant some restraint in our optimism. Appelman also approached video games with the hope of clarifying concepts, but his attempt to define Serious Games for an instructional design framework, though it was a constructive move forward, resulted in a limited definition due to its absence of specific examples and lack of attention to individual learners. Gee, on the other hand, developed his conceptual understanding through video game examples. The concepts of Embodied Empathy and Affinity Space illuminate interesting connections between accepted scientific practice and video game play. Gee's work presents important questions for future research on video games and learning, though

such investigations arguably ought to be grounded by interrelated socio-political concerns such as gender inequity.

Looking beyond their differences, there is a surprising amount of overlap between the scholars who were reviewed in this chapter. All of them challenge us to conceive of video game play as an activity where “learning” already occurs, but they also promote video games as spaces which might be repurposed for a more “serious” formal type of educational aim. Whether we choose to answer Gee’s call to conduct further research on video games for scientific or literacy education, to develop Appelman’s Serious Games concept to assist in training and professional development, or to design video games purposed for moral and historical reflection⁸ as Jenkins suggested, we now have established groundwork to proceed in these directions. I have also endeavored to show that, while these are constructive new visions for video games and learning, there are important oversights and exaggerations which call for due pause. Together these indicate another more troubling commonality that is visible in the literature; namely, that neither video game play nor “learning” in the gaming context have been adequately theorized or analysed in terms of social consequences. We find the necessary account of full social context completely lacking in Appelman’s work and somewhat absent in terms of negative backlashes and exclusions on Jenkins’ and Gee’s views. Video games are fundamentally social not only as they have evolved on multiplayer platforms but also as spaces where players encounter socio-political contexts loaded with ‘intertextual meanings’. This makes them prime sites for encountering power and difference, producing identity and circulating mainstream ideology.

Megan Boler argued with reference to new media and computer-mediated communication that it is easy to be led astray amongst the “hypes” and “hopes” of technological enthusiasts (Boler, 2007). I maintain that the same is true for video games and “learning”. What should we

⁸ This is how I choose to take up video games for learning. See Chapter 3.

expect to learn from video games? At this point, the answer to this question is still unclear. It is clear, however, that a balanced case for video games and learning will require attention to the strengths and weaknesses of past theorists. Video games are certainly pedagogical, but before we can decide how to make use of them in existing form or for future design, it is important to investigate precisely what gamers are learning through play. This will require close attention to the kinds of subjects video games produce. The following chapter begins to explore this question.

Chapter 2: Semiotic Playing Fields

It is so hard to be a teacher these days. Kids are so different. They are more easily bored, restless and hard to control...They are apathetic and disengaged when in class, 'turn on' mainly with their peers and seem to get their pleasures, find their identities and, indeed, live the 'important' parts of their lives elsewhere – out of class, out of school. (Kenway, 2003)

Introduction

The perception that children have somehow 'gone out of control' surfaces as part of a wider discourse concerning the troubles of modern childhood and consumer media culture (Pugh 2009, Kenway 2003, Jenkins 1998B). Childhood is romanticized as a pure time which adults nostalgically remember as fundamentally different from the 'childhoods' we witness today (Kenway 2003), and as a form of play, video games are often specifically singled out for blame (Pugh, 2009). Drawing a connection between video games, out of control children, and a lost golden era when 'kids could be kids' obscures the adult video gamer almost entirely. By placing the focus on children alone, we effectively disregard adult gaming as an issue that is worthy of our attention. In this chapter, I aim to understand 'consumer media culture' in order to investigate how video games in particular produce gamer subjectivities in both adults and children. Importantly, I situate myself as an adult video gamer and I use the pronoun 'we' or 'us' to refer to myself and those whom I perceive to be a part of the video game community generally. Although I wish to move past strict age association by considering gamer groups of adults and children together, I will argue that we learn very specific lessons about social difference through play and we do so in differentiated ways. Rejecting approaches commonly taken by psychologists and cognitive scientists who argue for universal media effects, I suggest that we employ the tools of semiotics to reveal how video games produce differentiated social knowledge. I build on Stuart Hall's notion of 'intertextuality', Baudrillard's articulation of the 'linguistic turn' and Foucault's notion of 'power' as both repressive and productive to expose

consumer media culture as a ‘regime of images’. Video games teach some gamers to normalize harmful values and socio-political structures. In addition and perhaps more distressingly, they teach some of us to be uncritical consumers. They invite us into affective worlds where representations continue to go largely unchallenged in the form of dominant discourses. We have a crucial opportunity and a responsibility to engage issues of social justice in video games no matter how difficult that may be. The integration of social justice issues into game design is required in order to help build a critical consciousness in gamers and also to expand how we think about video games and “learning” beyond the approaches and frameworks discussed in Chapter 1.

The Regime of Images

There are many lenses through which to investigate consumer media culture and as many definitions to describe it. I use the term ‘consumer media culture’ in place of ‘popular culture’ or ‘mass culture’ (though these terms may sometimes be used interchangeably) because it more accurately places emphasis on the contemporary issue of mass media *consumption*, i.e., we can focus on who is consuming and what is being consumed. This consumer culture is sold through mediums such as music, movies and video games, and it is profound because producers have the most direct control over the textual representations which millions of people consume. I frame consumer media culture as a contemporary social system of control which is maintained through a ‘regime of images’. Building on Stuart Hall’s analysis of popular culture, consumer media culture carries within itself certain texts which exercise ‘symbolic violence’ (Hall, 1997). That is to say, images from these texts are imbued with highly stereotypical characters and other signifiers that impart dominant meanings which do harm to marginalized groups. Hall’s sociological and theoretical contributions to media studies include critiques of “representations” of cultural artefacts from a wide range of historical contexts. His critical interpretations are

arguably crucial to a complete understanding of how “representations” come to produce social effects much like those I observe in video games. Importantly, these representations are not simply communicated one way from producers to consumers; rather, they are displayed and viewed in a complex processes of encoding and decoding which can end in multiple interpretations. Hall described the mechanics of this process as ‘inter-textuality’ or ‘reading in context’:

Images do not carry meaning or ‘signify’ on their own. They accumulate meanings, or play off their meanings against one another, across a variety of texts and media... This accumulation of meanings across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being ‘read’ in the context of other images, is called inter-textuality (Hall p.232, 1997).

The messages we interpret from representations of consumer media culture work in different ways depending on our unique relation to the image; moreover, our readings depend as much on signifiers that are absent as well as those which are visibly present. While our interpretations *do vary*, they always intersect with established power relations. I argue that consumer media culture is an order or a regime that teaches the dominant ideology of those who control it. In point of fact, the study of consumer media culture is a close cousin of the study of meta-ideology – both operate to understand and challenge the politicized meanings one finds embedded in discourses (Storey, 1993). As I proceed to examine video games as a subset of consumer media culture, it will be important to recognize and to question the regime of images in order to discern what it means for “learning”, a concept which I define in this case as an activity which results in the social production of subjects.

Hall’s use of inter-textuality stems from what is sometimes referred to as the ‘linguistic turn’ in the humanities and social sciences (Hall p.19, 1997) which marks a transition in

phenomenology from a time when empirical “objects” were taken to be paramount to the present era of linguistic signification. Baudrillard remarked on this in 1969:

The empirical “object,” given in its contingency of form, color, material, function and discourse (or, if it is a cultural object, in its aesthetic finality) is a myth. How often it has been wished away! But the object is *nothing*. It is nothing but the different types of relations and significations that converge, contradict themselves, and twist around it, as such – the hidden logic that not only arranges this bundle of relations, but directs the manifest discourse that overlays and occludes it (Baudrillard p.57, 1969).

The linguistic turn has been highly influential within the academy, though not without stern opposition (Vernon 1994, Mayfield et al. 1993). It has appeared across several decades in scholarship, for example feminist interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ‘language game’ (Wittgenstein 1953, Scheman et al, 2002) and the evolution of Ferdinand de Saussure’s work on ‘signification’ to post-structural scholarship that links language and power by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault (Saussure 1960, Derrida 1978, Foucault 1980). In spite of its wide adoption, the semiotic logic on which the linguistic turn relies remains quite obscure for many. As Baudrillard suggests, the empirical “object” is nothing. This draws attention to the premise that objects are not “forms”, “material”, nor “spirit” (see: Plato 1968, Marx et al, 2004, Hegel 1977); rather, they are relations of and between ‘signs’. We gain nothing to speak of objects as decontextualized and as discrete; instead, we should discuss ‘things’ in terms of ‘signs’ which are a part of a fluid discourse of differential representation. For example, when I look at something familiar, say the tea cup on my desk, it immediately appears to me as *my* tea cup, but what has occurred to make it apparent as such? I only recognize my tea cup because I process and decode my image of it. Through this process I recognize my concept ‘tea cup’ and my historical relationship (over the numerous months writing this thesis) to the ‘thing’ I’m

observing. This is how I make meaning, but what about the reader? Perhaps the reader also has a tea cup, or maybe it is a coffee cup. In any event, however, it is not my tea cup. In fact, my tea cup is not a tea cup at all for the reader, *materially speaking*. For the reader, my tea cup is merely two words in a linguistic philosophical exercise, but those words are signs which represent a meaningful thing. Herein is the key moment of understanding. Our ‘thing’ – the tea cup which I am writing about and you are reading about – is a representation, not an “object”; moreover, through shared conceptual understanding we perceive its ‘sign’ or image as meaningful, though not meaningful in precisely the same way. If we were to engage in further correspondence on other more complex ‘things’ or even issues such as revolutions, earthquakes, or weddings, we would surely discover more representations and shared meanings. These representations through a situated semiotic logic are the new “objects” for study.

Representation is understood as the process which links images or ‘signs’ to ‘things’ or concepts in order to produce situated meaning (Barthes 2002, Saussure 1960). Meaning is also re-produced when it is codified through language and communicated through more representations for exchange, e.g. during conversation. In addition to the example of the tea cup, I suggested that other representations could (re)produce meaning. Revolutions in the Middle East, earthquakes in Japan and royal weddings in the United Kingdom, for example, are quite different from my tea cup since they engage significantly more intertextuality, but they are representations nevertheless open for discussion. Representations in these cases are meaningful, but they are also notably political, even though they may not invoke action and can actually operate to dull our willingness or capacity to engage politically⁹.

⁹ a point that was argued as a result of the popularization of television as entertainment (see: Tannenbaum et al. (1983) *Turned-on tv, turned-off voters : policy options for election projections*. California: Sage Publications)

Considering these more complex types of representation, Hall encouraged us to unpack what he called the ‘politics of the image’ when examining artifacts from popular culture (Hall, 1997). He identified a relationship between representation, difference and power in the images of black men and women in advertisements and news programs. On Hall’s view, “representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language” (Hall p.17, 1997), but it can also be an “exercise of ‘symbolic power’” (Hall p.259, 1997). In *The Spectacle of the ‘Other’*, Hall notes that representations of black men and women continue to signify the abnormal, unacceptable and sometimes supernatural ‘other’ in popular media (Hall, 1997). Stereotyping, which he described as “a strategy of splitting”, is the semiotic tool used to ensure the “maintenance of social and symbolic order” through media controlled hegemonic power” (Hall, 1997). Hall’s contribution was to illuminate how representations ultimately operate across vast media networks of ‘signs’ or discourses producing ‘social knowledge’. Representations of this kind serve the interests of a particular ‘regime of representation’, which I rephrase as a ‘regime of images’ to better suit my analysis of the highly visual consumer media culture. This regime imposes ‘symbolic violence’ onto marginalized groups by negatively marking difference (Hall, p.233, 1997). After Hall, representations are understood as producing knowledge *and* meaning through dominant discourses.

By shifting the focus from language to discourse on the topic of representations, we proceed similar to Michel Foucault’s project which was generally to expose how power and knowledge operate to produce the subject (Foucault, 1980). Representations are not simply language forms that are communicated verbally or inscribed in text. Representations are fundamentally connected to relations and questions of power within society, or the “social organism” as Foucault aptly termed it (Foucault p. 96, 1980). By the same token, the regime of

images is not simply a collection of harmful texts by one author or even a specific group of authors; instead, it is a complex network of representations that is maintained by a multiplicity of individuals, or “peripheral subjects”, again, as Foucault articulated well (Foucault p.98, 1980).

This is not to say that there is no possibility to take responsibility for representations. As we will see, people do in fact create artifacts for popular consumption that are clearly harmful, and they should be held to account for their actions; however, the power in harmful representations, as the symbolic weapons used to reproduce discourses, is not something that one possesses or manifests independently; It is something which circulates:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application (Foucault p.98, 1980).

Power is a dynamic force, almost an entity, which passes in an incorporeal state into and between people, and representations are the conduits which make that circulation possible. The effects of power are that “certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals” (Foucault p.98, 1980), that is to say power produces individuals via its circulation as social knowledge. The terrible detriment of the regime of images is that we continue to simultaneously undergo and exercise power through representations that negatively split/divide us. The regime of images adversely shapes who we are.

Major questions arise given the post-structural frame that I have described thus far, where representations take on a semiotic logic differentially reproducing knowledge and subjectivities

in us through discourse. If representations produce knowledge and meaning, how do images come to produce different responses in people? How can we reconcile the fact that what appears to be the same consumer media content produces different effects (e.g. in the white gamer compared to the black gamer who plays the same urban gangster video game *Grand Theft Auto* discussed below)? Those who mourn the fall of “objects” from their place of ideological dominance in cultural studies – those who are still wedded to positivist frameworks (see: Appelman 2007) – those who have not taken the ‘linguistic turn’ – will seek to establish a universal explanation of media effects, which will likely result in them renouncing the regime of images or at best finding it suspect.

The challengers I have in mind here are, for the most part, psychologists and cognitive scientists. From within the psychology and cognitive science disciplines there has been significant and longstanding work on ‘mass communication’, another term in place of ‘consumer media culture’. Richard Jackson Harris, author of *A Cognitive Psychology of Mass Communication*, claims that “probably the most common general perspective in studying the media is a search for the ‘effects’ of exposure to mass communication... These effects can be direct, conditional, or cumulative” (Harris, p.21, 2004). He explicates that the ‘direct effects’ model arose in line with early propaganda and later subliminal message research that was conducted following the World Wars and the Cold War. This model essentially posits that the viewing public is uniformly and “deeply” affected by mass communication of a certain sophisticated kind, therefore one need only embed a message to achieve a desired result (Harris, 2004). Next, there is the ‘conditional effects’ model. This model is more widely accepted by recent psychologists since it can better explain anomalies (where a uniform response cannot be observed) by studying the conditions and variables involved in the context of viewership (Harris,

2004). Closely related to conditional effects is the ‘cumulative effects’ model which extends to measure long term exposure to media with particular focus on how such activity stimulates self-identity (Harris, 2004).

Although these divisions looking at ‘effects’ in mass communication or consumer media culture appear to be conceptually different (at least on the level of analysis), they all reduce social phenomena to an individual’s psyche. How is an individual affected by subliminal messages? How do interactive variables and characteristic differences mediate or moderate effects? How will long term exposure affect behaviour, attitudes and beliefs? While these questions might encourage an investigation into the historical mechanisms of social power in a community, they are constructed under the psychologist’s lens to explore the “normal” or “abnormal” individual. In the case of video games, they are chiefly concerned with discovering definitive “knowledge” about the effects of mass communication in order to alleviate public malaise. Kwan Min Lee and Wei Peng, authors of *What Do We Know About Social and Psychological Effects of Computer Games? A Comprehensive Review of the Current Literature*, articulate this goal well concluding that “if we want to have a fuller understanding of the nature of game experience, we need to know what users actually experience while they are playing games” (Min Lee et al. p.340, 2006). Maintaining a steadfast commitment to universal knowledge or “findings” about the gamer experience has ironically amounted to lost opportunities to achieve greater understanding of mercurial gamer actualities. A series of studies and meta-analyses carried out from within the psychological discipline have “found” (quite conveniently) that there are causal links between certain kinds of video game play and adverse effects, in particular physiological arousal and minor forms of aggression (Anderson & Ford 1986, Anderson & Dill 2000, Anderson & Bushman 2001, Abel-Cooper 2001), but making the

link from video games to “violence” – a term used in psychology to mean extreme aggression, i.e. murder or rape (Anderson 2001) – has continued to prove difficult. Studying a gamer’s psyche might be necessary on some level, but not sufficient to understanding the broader effects of mass communication.

Ultimately, psychological answers to questions of ‘difference’ do not allow for a full account of ‘the social’ due to the unit of analysis being the psyche of the individual divorced from social context. Thus in this account, it is impossible to address such notions as intertextuality or the regime of images, since a broader examination of social construction outside of that which is immediately apparent to a person’s mind is disregarded. Most significantly, there is no emphasis on discourse analysis, which arguably provides for a more complete account of consumer media culture. Once we move past the limitations of psychology and explore representations in light of semiotic differences we shall be better equipped to recognize the regime of images and understand its social effects.

My argument for the social construction of consumer media culture should not be interpreted as a complete abandonment of the value and merits of psychological analysis and the cognitive scientific approaches for *all* matters. Instead, I offer it to persuade those who are interested in studying consumer media culture and its effects to de-emphasize the scientific study of the “individual” in favour of a study of ‘the social’. Indeed, arguments in favour of taking a post-structural approach are often presented as an ‘either or choice’ resulting in some who seek disassociation. Ian Hacking, author of *The Social Construction of What?*, for example:

I have seldom found it helpful to use the phrase “social construction” in my own work. When I have mentioned it I have done so in order to distance myself from it. It seems to be both obscure and overused. Social construction has in many contexts been a truly liberating idea, but that which on first hearing has liberated some has made all too many others smug, comfortable, and trendy in ways that have become merely orthodox. The phrase has become code. If you use it favourably, you deem yourself rather radical. If you

trash the phrase, you declare that you are rational, reasonable and respectable (Hacking p.1 1999).

Although I do not fault others for writing about ‘social construction’ as though it were the only helpful lens – often we must make strong claims in order to overturn dominant discourses – it is time to work on building inter-disciplinary bridges. We cannot be certain that such a project will succeed; however, I am confident that continuing to dismiss representation as a function of discourse will bring about dire consequences.

In his *Two Lectures* (Foucault, 1980), Foucault provided several methodological cautions for studies on power, knowledge and the subject. He was quite clear that mechanisms of power ought not to be analyzed in furtherance of existing generalizations, for example the socio-economic dominance of the bourgeoisie; alternatively, we should aim to understand how the infinitesimal branches of power operate and more importantly continue to operate for political reasons: “We need to see how these mechanisms of power, at a given moment, in a precise conjuncture and by means of a certain number of transformations, have begun to become economically advantageous and politically useful (Foucault p.101, 1980).” Returning momentarily to Stuart Hall, the political utility of representations of black men and women in the media is clear; they exist for the maintenance of the social and symbolic order by the differential marking of black bodies which is in turn required for the (re)production of a number of subjects including both marginalized and dominant groups (Hall, 1997). Indeed, we are all marked as peripheral subjects under the regime of images, though unequally so. Through symbolic violence, we establish our self-understandings in a differential relationship to the ‘other’. Thus, I argue finally that representation is best understood not only as meaningful, political and powerful, but chiefly as educational, i.e we **learn** to become subjects in line with the regime of

images. I will now explore video game images under the categories of race, gender and politics to better understand the force of the regime of images.

Race and Differentiated Learning

Some video games are excellent sites to witness the regime of images ‘at play’. Among sociological video game scholars there is an emerging critique of the racialized representations in action role-play video games (Chan, 2005, Leonard, 2003, Michael, 2004). Dean Chan, for example, calls attention to game design practices in his article *Playing with Race: The Ethics of Racialized Representations in E-Games*. He argues that game developers ought to maintain a critical attentiveness to the kinds of representations they choose to include in game narratives (Chan, 2005). His critique takes aim at some of the most “violent” and hyper-masculine titles available on the market, namely *Modern Warfare*, *Grand Theft Auto* and *True Crime*. Although the game developers of these titles have been vilified for their overtly militaristic and criminally violent design choices, they have rarely been called to account for their racist representations (Chan, 2005). This is quite right. The video games that Chan cites are racist, each in differing ways and one of which I will explore later. We do require more critical discourse to expose racism in video games. Unfortunately, deconstructing racialized representations in video games and consumer media culture at large is not a popular intellectual exercise, and I would suggest that this is in part due to the fact that such critical analyses shatter the hegemonic “colour-blindness” worldview. ‘Colour-blindness’ is a worldview where racial differences and positionalities have been conveniently eliminated in order to mask real inequalities (Eduardo, 2006). In a colour blind approach, it is not that video games reproduce racialized violence; instead, it is that video games universally reproduce aggression (much like the popular psychological stance). For example, newscasts in North America would prefer to air a story on how video games negatively reinforce violent tendencies in *all* gamers irrespective of race

instead of airing a story about how video games inform black male gamers that their only means of success in the world is through a life of crime or military service. Even more unlikely would be a news story that exposes how those *same* video games are implicated in the continuance of negative racial stereotypes in a predominantly white middle class gaming market thereby ensuring the re-enforcement of white supremacy. The regime of images draws the news media gaze (and large portions of public) away from perceiving race as an area of concern and toward narratives of youth corruption, all the while allowing for the unchallenged circulation of racist images through video games (Whittier S 1999, Lowry et al. 2003, Olson 2004).

In Canada, we have seen the media turn to psychological discourses on violence and video games. For example, an alarming social phenomenon resurfaced during the G20 riots in Toronto in 2010 and the Stanley Cup playoffs riots in Vancouver in 2011. While it is important to recognize that these riots were in different contexts and the actions that were taken on both sides are not completely analogous, they were reported as symptoms of a single problem, namely ‘the culture of violence’. The culture of violence was most recently explained as an effect of overtly violent entertainment of which video games were especially blamed:

If your 11-year-old spends six or seven hours a week in focused concentration on violent action in a video game, will it make him a rampaging killer? No. Will it mean that when someone accidentally bumps into him at the cafeteria, he’s more likely to interpret it as a threat and respond aggressively? Yes. And what if his favourite hockey team loses the Stanley Cup (Toronto Star, Jun 20, 2011 PA11)?

We might find that an effect of video game violence can be the reproduction of violent subjectivities, but this effect is surely not experienced universally. Most of the images capturing the most heinous vandalism and destruction during both riots were committed by young white men (see: Figure 1).



(Figure 1)

Adapted From:

<http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorialopinion/article/1011065--rioting-and-the-culture-of-violence>

<http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/article/1011879--backlash-hits-vancouver-riot-s-shaming-websites>

These images stand as evidence of particular white subjects who have learned through video games among other sources from consumer media culture that they are authorized to destroy. Black male gamers with similar gaming experience, for example, may well opt out of rioting in this instance bearing in mind the dire consequences that await them at the hands of law enforcement¹⁰. While it may be the case that video games contribute to the production of violent subjectivities – especially in terms of promoting violence within the larger culture, if not being directly responsible for an individual’s actions – we cannot assume that any media has the same exact effects on identities.

¹⁰ This example is not intended to argue that black men never riot or commit acts of destruction. It is meant to show that attention to sociological factors is required in each case.

More than a distraction, the regime of images ensures that some video games are needed in support of hegemony, and this is achieved through production of both powerful/privileged subjects as well as the racially marginalized. What are gamers¹¹ learning about race from current video games? Perhaps as Chan suggested, the video game franchise *Grand Theft Auto* is one of the most appropriate places to decipher the racial politics of video games under the regime of images. Look, for example, at a screenshot from the game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Figure 2).



(Figure 2)

There are many different readings one could take away from this image. At first glance, we can see the mainstream colour-blindness worldview being represented in the three police officers

¹¹ I continue to refer to adults and children gamers together.

who are making the arrest. The unit is made up of two men of colour and a white man in order to give us the impression that police forces in America have transcended racist discrimination by embracing a diversified and tolerant workforce¹². Interestingly, no female officer is included in this scene which might indicate that our focus is meant to be on race relations and not gender equity. If we look closer, however, there is a more troubling interplay between the images that are represented and what is absent or left out for the gamer to interpret. We see a young black man being arrested in an inner city urban setting. There are bars on the windows of the corner shop and the faded architecture invokes feelings of being in an older partially dilapidated neighborhood. The officers are using undue force bordering on police brutality as is illustrated by the man's body position and the officer's firearm. These features are connected to a history of images from consumer media culture, which tell a particular story about young black men living in urban centers. Young black men are marked as violent and on the wrong side of the law; moreover police officers are excused for their behaviour because it is taught that their actions are acceptable (and even required) to contain the threat (Walcott, 2003). Among a number of lessons about race, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is a site where the white male gamer learns to affirm his power over the 'other' and where the black male gamer learns of his choice to either become a gangster or live in fear of law enforcement.

Gender and Pleasurable Learning

Regarding character representations in video games, race is not the only category we can deconstruct. In *Genderplay: Successes and Failures in Character Designs for Videogames*, Jane Pickard is a gamer and a video game scholar who offered her interpretation of gender

¹² For an extensive critique of how tolerance works to reinforce racism see: Brown, Wendy (2006). *Regulating aversion: tolerance in the age of identity and empire*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press Inc.

representation in video games. She critiques video game character designs as failing to evolve video game culture beyond a traditionally male experience. While the “genderspaces” of video games have certainly become more flexible with the advent of three dimensional character design, complex character interactions and human multiplayer environments, video game identities remain spaces that males can more comfortably inhabit (Pickard, 2003). She notes: “As a woman who plays video games, I’ve had to think about gender in videogames, because it’s so obvious that I’m playing in a boys’ world (Pickard, 2003).” It is noteworthy that all gamers experience a certain degree of alienation and identification when they enter into game character roles. This occurs because gamers wish to preserve their daily identities while experimenting with those they inhabit in virtual worlds. In fact, Pickard discussed how one player liked to subvert the norms of his life by engaging in gender play at a safe distance and in secret (Pickard, 2003). This example resonates with bell hook’s notion that “there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference” (hooks, 1992). Gender differences, like racial differences, have indeed been commodified in games and packaged for consumption. This of course begs the question ‘who is doing the consuming?’ Who is afforded the opportunity to ‘try on’, to ‘taste test’ or sample gender? Pickard and a number of others would answer that they are mostly boys and men (Pickard 2003, Ivory 2006, Jenson et al. 2009).

We would do well to inquire about who is permitted to play video games both on the level of ideology and in practice. Boys and men have certainly dominated video game play since long before it became a mainstream multi-billion dollar industry – this reminds us that the activity of video game play is a historically male dominated enterprise – but beyond numbers there is a masculine identity which is required for participation. Girls and women are excluded because they are quite literally disqualified from the onset due to a male-supremacist ideology

that is equally ancient as it is pervasive. How often do cultures re-inscribe gender norms through such sexist rhetoric as “she can’t play – she’s just a girl”, “wouldn’t you rather a toy doll”, or “those are for boys”. Andrea Dworkin illuminates how these kinds of thoughts and actions are fundamentally about male ‘power’ and exclusivity: “The first tenet of male-supremacist ideology is that men have this self and that women must, by definition, lack it” (Dworkin p.13, 1981). Dworkin explicates how the male-supremacist ideology is built on a particular male identity that reifies women as something fundamentally other and thus naturally excluded. Indeed, the “she” is not a “self”, not “one of the guys”, and certainly *not* a “gamer”.

What Pickard perceived as a failure in character design for video games was not simply a marketing mistake. The game *Tomb Raider*, for example, is an excellent indicator of where the video game industry was headed at the turn of the 20th century. Video games at the time were becoming highly sexualized in line with many other branches of consumer media culture, for example music videos. This was not, however, the result of inadvertent design decisions that caused widespread alienation among girls and women. This was an ideological move that reified a particular female image in consumer media culture for over a decade (see figure 3).



(Figure 3: Adapted from tombraders.net)

The character Lara Croft, depicted above in her evolving form, from the video game *Tomb Raider* was designed as a textual representation of a specific body type – an image that would teach gamers about expectations and obligations for the bodies of women in society. Instead of critically exposing Lara, Pickard chose to highlight her as a lost opportunity to invite more females into video game culture. If we were to fully interrogate *Tomb Raider* as a site of gender norm reproduction, we would surely find that girls and women have lost out in a far more significant way on this semiotic playing field.

Pickard is not alone in taking the stance that video games have failed to include girls and women. Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell make a similar claim:

Access to and actual use of digital games is far from ubiquitous: girls and women, for example, continue to be under-represented as players and are woefully few in the industry (latest figures from the number of women working in the commercial games industry at 11.5% (Jenson et al p.2, 2009)

Unlike Pickard, however, Jenson and de Castell focus mainly on music rhythm games and digital skill based games like racing games for the bulk of their work concerning gender, not avatar based games like role-play games or action adventure games. They make the strong case that an epistemological shift has occurred for some gamers as a result of the popularization of the video game franchises *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* in the West. Their claims rest on the premise that rhythm games have transformed gaming into an imitative activity rather than a simulated one. “Whereas simulation is “as if” real...imitation is “just like” it” (Jenson et al p.4, 2009). Since the act of imitation is so often associated with people having “learned” something in the “real” world, rhythm games which make such good use of imitation are applauded as successfully producing knowledge that might at least plausibly be transferable to other sorts of activities.

Rhythm games, by virtue of being played on instrument-like plastic devices, serve to bring ‘the virtual’ into the ‘the material’ ‘just like’ with real music playing (Jenson et al, 2009). Indeed, Jenson and de Castell’s argument resonates powerfully today now that the latest iteration in rhythm games, *Rock Band 3*, is actually played on a functioning electric guitar, piano keyboard and an 8 piece drum set. What is noteworthy given all this regarding gender, for Jenson and de Castell, is that imitation games represent a new and gender-level playing field where girls and women can and do play alongside male gamers at an increasing rate.

As we have hopefully learned from the review of video game theorists in Chapter 1, it is important to guard against overly optimistic attitudes towards new technology. While it is certainly exciting that rhythm games are offering female gamers a chance to play and that this could ultimately lead to useful knowledge acquisition for all gamers, it is surprising that such enthusiasm would drive Jenson and de Castell to make the following remark elsewhere in their account of gendered differences:

So we came to see games less as a site for the production of “contemporary masculinity” than as a leisure site in which, given time and permission, girls were as eager to spend time as boys (Jenson et al p.19, 2008).

Part of their goal in *Theorizing gender and digital gameplay: Oversights, accidents and surprises*, where this remark is written, was to bring about changes in the way we analyze and interpret gender research so as to avoid reproducing “natural” or “essential” concepts of girls and gaming (Jenson et al, 2008). This is particularly useful, I argued in Chapter 1, for pointing out instances where gender has been under-theorized or not theorized at all in the video games and learning literature. To say, however, that “games” are any less about the production of detrimental subjectivities (contemporary masculinity being one) and to claim that games are

increasingly simply leisure sites or entertainment suggests an uncritical stance toward the role of pleasure. It is significant that it is not rhythm games but in fact Lara Croft and other similarly sexualized characters who represent by far the most popular games. There are only a handful of rhythm game franchises remaining in North America and they have all now entered into the late stages of their product cycles (*Guitar Hero* having been discontinued entirely at the time of writing). Personally, I hope that rhythm games will survive as a genre by continuing to offer innovations which challenge our approach to learning music, but there is little evidence that any rhythm game will ever fundamentally change the gendered and gendering 'virtualscape'. In fact, we can look forward to yet another *Tomb Raider* game scheduled for launch in 2012 from developer *Crystal Dynamics* which will add yet another Lara representation (see again figure 3).

It is hardly a secret to anyone who has actually observed video game play why Pickard, Jenson and de Castell might want to find new ways to invite girls and women to play. Simply put, many video games are extremely fun and deeply pleasurable. What is less obvious is the question of why and for whom some of the most highly sexualized video games are pleasurable. Lara Croft is actually only mildly troubling when we consider some of the latest images from video games. *Duke Nukem: Forever*, a second quarter 2011 video game, features what has fondly been referred to in the community as the 'two girls, one duke' sequence depicting the ill-mannered hyper-masculine protagonist receiving fellatio from twin catholic high school girls before heading off to shoot up monstrous aliens. Similarly appalling, *Saints Row: The third* was announced via web video broadcast featuring the ability to beat random citizens to death (in game) using a four foot long purple dildo, all the while accompanied by the commentary of a game developer who proudly commended the game's limitless freedom. We should expect *Saints Row: The third* to be published in late 2012. Though nauseating to many and clearly the

most extreme cases of video game sexualisation, these examples should serve to expose how pleasure operates to invite and exclude certain gamers as well as engage and produce a particular masculinity.

Returning to Andrea Dworkin's work in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, we discover the convincing position that "the nature of the male self is that it takes, so that, by definition, the absolute self is expressed in the absolute right to take what it needs to sustain itself" (Dworkin p.13, 1981). As a point of clarification, Dworkin's "male self" is a social production; it is only made manifest as "natural" by the male-supremacist ideology on which it relies. Characteristic to the male self is the need to take pleasure in possessing the "female self". In particular, Dworkin elucidates elsewhere in *Intercourse* that sex in pornography is about men taking pleasure in violating women, rendering women "powerless" and "inert", and finally producing a male subject who is defined by this pleasure (Dworkin p.77, 1987). Similarly, video games invite male gamers who play *Duke Nukem: Forever* and who are looking forward to playing *Saints Row: The third* to take pleasure in women's violation in order to sure up a male fantasy and sense of self.

As a result of the regime of images, questions about sexism in video games require differentiated semiotic analysis which splits players in similar ways as with race. Although I am undecided whether to agree with Anthony Paul Farley that "race is the preeminent pleasure of our time" (Farley p.458, 1997), thanks to his work *The Black Body as Fetish Object*, I now see 'critical race thinking' as an excellent approach to understanding pleasure as a mechanism of learning 'social difference' and producing subjects (Farley, 1997). For this reason and despite the controversy, I suggest that race thinking is also quite appropriate as a foundation for working through some of the more troubling concerns about gender and taking pleasure in video game

play as an alternative to the work that has been done on male-supremacy and sexual possession from Dworkin and others (Dworkin 1981, 1987, McClintock 1999, Collins et al. 2009). Farley writes about “race-pleasure”:

Whiteness is not a color; it is a way of feeling pleasure in and about one's body. The black body is needed to fulfill this desire for race-pleasure. In our colorlined world, the white body is a form of desire and the black body is a form of pleasure (Farley p.458, 1997)

By moving us beyond the perception of race as simply a question of skin colour, Farley reminds us that the world is “colorlined”. That is, racial hierarchies are persuasive. Whiteness is fundamentally about power dominance, and white identity is established in and through the black body as ‘sign’. Farley’s important insight is that the power of whiteness is feeling pleasure in one’s own superiority, a pleasure that is achieved through the humiliation of black bodies. Whites require the negative portrayal of black bodies to derive their own sense of self and self-worth: “Whites return and return and return again to this fetish in order to satisfy a self-created urge to be white” (Farley, p.463 1997). This is what I call “pleasurable learning” under the regime of images, and it applies equally well to race as to gender. Male gamers return to video games like the franchises *Duke Nukem* and *Saints Row* to take pleasure in the objectification of the super-sexualized female. This gender-pleasure is required to create and take pleasure in a particular masculine identity.

Politics and Uncritical Learning

Video games are fundamentally an industry of desire and “pleasure learning”. Differing from James Paul Gee, who identifies pleasure as a general motivator (Gee, 2007B), I use ‘pleasure learning’ to identify a highly vulgar and violent ‘othering’ practice – one that should be

of clear concern to anyone who studies video games and social categories like race, gender or sexuality. Let us recall the opening example of the previous section where Pickard argued for the inclusion of female gamers in the gaming market. She lamented the fact that the commercial video game industry had failed to design games that invite female gamers to play, but failed to acknowledge the sexist representations which primarily exclude girls and women. Why was it so easy for her to overlook power and social norms reproduction in game play as more troubling causes for concern? Jean Baudrillard may help begin to answer this question. He also wrote about the consumer operation of culture as a mass network of 'signs' like the regime of images though he framed it as 'the ecstasy of communication':

The public stage, the public place have been replaced by a gigantic circulation, ventilation, and ephemeral connecting space. The private space undergoes the same fate. Its disappearance parallels the diminishing of the public space. Both have ceased to be either spectacle or secret. (Baudrillard, 1987)

According to Baudrillard, consumer media culture is no longer a culture industry operating to deceive the masses; rather, it is an ecstasy of communication in which the masses knowingly/willingly participate. There is no truth, no stage, and no space, about culture which has somehow been distorted from the top down. There is only communication and pleasure which people perceive as transparent and partake in without resistance. It is important to note that this analysis was not offered in opposition to early critiques of consumerism. For example, Adorno and Horkheimer were among the first to critique consumer media culture or mass culture as they described it in *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (1944). They exposed the monopoly over mass culture that was being maintained by powerful production companies in the early 1940s describing a top down power dynamic where masses of people

were being monetarily and ideologically controlled by commodities which came to define the very foundations of “culture” (Adorno, 1944). Baudrillard, on the other hand, offers an updated viewpoint whereas the old logic of fetishized commodities is taken to a new psychological extreme: “Our private sphere has ceased to be the stage where the drama of the subject at odds with his objects and with his image is played out: we no longer exist as playwrights or actors but as terminals of multiple networks” (Baudrillard p.16, 1987). “We no longer partake in the drama of alienation, but are in the ecstasy of communication” (Baudrillard p.22, 1987). This suggests that we have entered into mental states akin to schizophrenics; i.e., our thought processes are interrupted and we reflect the communication that is happening around us like terminals in a high speed network. On this view, it is no wonder why Picard, Jensen et al. or any one of us should find it difficult to focus on decoding power being pulled as we are by the currents of consumer media culture.

We should find it unsettling to consider the full consequence of Baudrillard’s analysis. Popular enlightenment thought that posits the rational-self-actualized agent as a paragon gets reversed in Baudrillard’s post-modern turn. If we accept that we are all schizophrenics, it becomes perfectly reasonable to act unreasonably, that is to say it is no longer a logical impossibility to think one position and subsequently act contrary to it. The peculiar result seems to be that we can continue living contradictory lives to a greater or lesser degree, or, in my case, I can go on deconstructing video games while occasionally taking sanctuary in the same game worlds that I critique. Is this position acceptable? To what extent are video gamers ‘victims’ to the ‘unlogic’ or ‘ecstasy of communication’? Have we lost all critical sense of the worlds we inhabit due to the continuous and unrelenting flow of signs and images? More to the point, is there evidence that complicates the ensuing conclusion that gamers are learning to be uncritical

consumers as a result of their entrapment in the ecstasy of communication? We might fittingly ask if the regime images has locked us in an eternal cycle of mindless consumption.

With the advent of graphic accelerator computer chips capable of generating such photo realistic scenes that they sometimes heat up to well over 100 degree Celsius, the politics of video game images have never been so circuitously laden with meaning. That said, it does not always take beautiful and realistic graphics to achieve an ecstasy of communication through a video game. An Austrian made video game titled *Moschee Baba*, precisely translated as “Bye-bye Mosque”, was one right-wing party’s attempt to mobilize support through a simple flash based game that stoked outrage among their political opponents (Good, 2010). Although the video game website was closed to the public at the time of writing due to the end of the party’s unsuccessful campaign, the damage was done by the extensive exposure it received online. *Moschee Baba* was not what some might call an overtly violent video game because it did not involve gun play, gore or any of the characteristics that are controlled by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). The objective in the game was to post stop signs as quickly as possible whenever a flash depiction of a minaret, mosque, or muezzin appeared on the screen (Figure 4).



(Figure 4) Image from Kotaku.com URL: <http://kotaku.com/5628025/austrian-anti+muslim-game-stokes-outrage>.

In an unusual twist, if the player was not speedy enough to post signs and end the spread of mosques in the city, there was no “game over” message indicating failure. Players were instead directed to the party website and encouraged to enter a poll regarding the prevention of mosques from being constructed and accepting Austrian law over the Koran.

The response from various political parties as well as the Muslim community in Austria was clear and resolute: *Moschee Baba* was a hateful game that spread a long list of unacceptable messages which harm Muslims (Neman, 2010); however, respondents from one gamer community offered a mix of opinions indicating that some were in favour of the game, some were against it and others claimed to have “neutral” feelings about it. The following are records from gamers who are members of a prominent video game and popular culture news website

Kotaku.com. This particular community holds regular online discussions in response to video game news, and their political news section from September 1st 2010 is particularly telling about what gamers may be learning from *Moschee Baba*:

The ‘neutral’ response:

No one is killed, and no violence against Muslims is encouraged. It's not really to my taste, but I really don't see what the huge problem is.” (Good, response kovitlac, 2010, emphasis added)

I don't see a problem with this game. Funny how most other people here do, though. Because if this was a game where you are stopping the construction of churches and clicking on stop signs to make Christians and priests go away, no one would be saying it's outrageous or disgusting. People would be praising it. So why the change here? Are you afraid of offending someone who might actually do something violent?” (Good, response xsbs, 2010, emphasis added)

I labeled the above responses as ‘neutral’ because they are worded using language of a nonaligned or at least ambivalent stance, though I do not take them to be “neutral” nor do I believe that such a stance is possible or even desirable. Respondent 1, kovitlac, claimed not to understand those who took issue with *Moschee Baba*, yet he communicated no reservations about his judgment that the game should be treated as a legitimate form of entertainment. Since this respondent did not recognize violence of any kind, the video game should be permissible and playable to those who find it in good taste, he implied. We can assume that the definition of violence that is being used here refers strictly to physical violence. The racialized representations of Muslims and Muslim artifacts seem to have escaped the respondent’s critical lens as a form of violence. Although there are no options in the game for physical attacks or verbal assaults, these aspects of violence are parts of a definition which is far too narrow to be

applicable in this case. Those who had overwhelmingly visceral reactions to *Moschee Baba* were no doubt recognizing the structural and historic violence which is part of a larger problem with racism in Austrian society.

Similarly, the second respondent claimed to be perplexed by the negative game reviews. In what was undoubtedly taken to be an intelligent reversal, respondent 2, xsbs, offered a counter hypothetical example of a game involving Christians and the closure of churches. He claimed that we would find this context acceptable thus gamers who wish to act virtually in the same way against Muslims should be free from criticism. I am, for the most part, fundamentally opposed to this view. If a video game developer were to create *bye bye church*, I agree, there would most likely be a marked difference in the video game community response. Some gamers might even find it acceptable to stop the construction of churches; however, comparing the religion of the dominant socio-political group to Islam – a religion which is uniquely persecuted globally at this point in time – and arguing that they should be regarded as equals in a video game environment is hardly “objective”. Respondent 2’s steadfast commitment to the liberal democratic values of equality and free speech amount to an argument that is thinly disguised as impartial. His true position comes to the fore with his final insinuation that Muslims are dangerous ‘others’ who are more prone to violently attack.

There are instances of symbolic violence in *Moschee Baba* that do serious harm to Muslims in a manner that would not easily be replicated by a hypothetical *bye bye church*. For example, gamers learn to identify and target Muslim men who are wearing traditional clothing. The following respondent illustrates how easily this translates into the hateful exclusion of all Muslims:

It's really not a very good game, in fact, it's terrible. That said, I agree with stopping religious buildings (from) being constructed. They are places where somehow it's just fine to be a homophobic, sexist, science denying crazy person who believes in fairy tales. Maybe that was fine 5000 years ago, but now... shouldn't we have moved on from such rubbish? (Good, response CalebAcheron, 2010)

Violence and hatred are at the core of *Moschee Baba* and in this response to it. We find that this gamer has learned through play how to target Muslims as both the 'bad guys' in the game and the "crazy people" outside it. We should recall how this lesson displays a troubling resemblance to the aforementioned example of *Grand Theft Auto* where black men come to signify a life of crime.

Despite our current lived reality that resembles Baudrillard's ecstasy of communication, I would argue that there is reason for hope. It seems that gamers have retained some degree of critical consciousness despite the power of the regime of images. I am inclined to fundamentally disagree with the example respondents above. My conclusion is that *Moschee Baba* is a violent, racist and xenophobic game, and I am not alone. Other comments from the very same discussion within the gaming community match; for example, Aeonzero responded with "I totally agree, this is racist and xenophobic and (an) insult to civilization" (Good, response aeonzero, 2010), and Konna reacted with "That's ... Pretty xenophobic right there. I'm not going to stand up for this using that whole 'oh people make fun of Christianity all the time line'" (Good, response konna, 2010). While I am hopeful that many others who encountered the game answered in a similar way, unfortunately being hopeful that people will judge *Moschee Baba* to be detestable is not an adequate response. It is apparent that some gamers are learning to be complacent in the systematic erasure of Islam while they continue to act as agents of the liberalist rhetoric of 'equality at all costs'. This attitude is an outcome of what I call 'uncritical learning', which is in

this case a video game activity that re-enforces dominant ideology so completely that some gamers become blind to the semiotic mechanism of the regime of images. Without stronger legislative action on behalf of the Austrian government I fear that more video games like *Moschee Baba* will surface and the cycle of uncritical learning will continue as well as expand.

Concluding Thoughts

The video games which were discussed in this chapter demonstrate the power of culture industries yet they also show how we as players contribute to the complex and troubling mechanisms of social knowledge production. Accepting Baudrillard's diagnosis that we are lost in 'ecstasy of communication' is especially difficult because we can see in the example *Moschee Baba* that harmful norms continue to go unacknowledged and re-inscribed under the regime of images. This chapter also shows that some gamers and video game scholars continue to find it acceptable to consume video games as simply about entertainment while remaining silent about or ignorant of the social consequences of game play and how games operate at the level of pleasure. Despite all of this, there is reason for hope. Some gamers myself included have learned to speak out against the social injustices that are represented in games on the video game discussion forums, but I suggest that our numbers will soon count for little without external intervention. As scholars, gamers and consumers, we have a responsibility to build better game play learning experiences together, disrupt the circulation of representations, and shape the regime of images. I believe that we can achieve a critical consciousness amongst gamers by paying attention to the semiotic playing fields under the regime of images. In chapter 3 I offer an affirmative theoretical account of one video feature which might help realize these goals.

Chapter 3: Risking Play

Introduction

In chapter 2 I argued that there is a pervasive consumer media culture that is preserved and continues to operate through the circulation of a distressing regime of images. Some gamers learn under this regime to internalize dangerous race and gender-based pedagogies as they display a lack of ability to critically engage and/or disrupt oppressive stereotypes. In light of this analysis, video games are apparently both meaningful and highly effective at reproducing hegemonic ideology (see Jenkins, 2006); moreover, the particular meanings and actual effects seem to indicate that they are also (and already) quite “serious” – an interesting contrast to Appelman’s definition of ‘Serious Games’ (see Appelman, 2007). I claimed in this regard that we have a responsibility to confront video games in whatever capacity we can in order to build better game play experiences together. This chapter explores the experiential spaces of video games in relation to classroom space with the goal of exposing how game play might be repurposed for learning on social justice. The chapter ends with a paradigm example from the video game *Mass Effect* to illustrate the design potential of video games.

Classroom Spaces

One way to disrupt the social injustices that are perpetuated through consumer media culture (of which video games ‘play’ primary roles) is to engage a critical pedagogy in classrooms. Some hope that this can be achieved to a greater or lesser degree in any grade level and for any target group regardless of socio-economic status. Ontario policy makers, for example, maintain that race equity concerns may be solved through inclusion practices in education, that is to say that racial “barriers” and racial “biases” (what others might simply call racism) can be corrected using “transparency”, “leadership”, and “policy” to ensure equality for all students (Ontario Government, 2009). Critical race scholars and teachers might staunchly

disagree claiming instead that issues of race and racism are historical, institutional and systemic – sometimes a product of the policies designed to ‘treat’ them – thus they require continuous and unrelenting critical discussions on power relations in the educational process. A far more beneficial pedagogical pursuit, on this view, would be to establish communities of practice that promote social justice through ongoing strategic development and dialogue¹³. Regardless of our approach, the struggle to educate on race and racism among other social injustices has proven one thing above all else, which is that practicing critical pedagogy is not simply a matter of building “critical thinkers”, despite arguments which allude to the contrary (P. Norris, 1992, E. McPeck, 1981); rather, it is about creating space that is dedicated to encountering subjectivities. Race and racism are deeply entrenched historically and personally similar to other social signifiers. Addressing them in classrooms, though absolutely necessary, is always dangerous and unpredictable (Pratt 1991, Levinson 1997, Boler 1999, 2004).

Increasingly in North America, we see classroom spaces being established as forums for building critical consciousness of race, gender and sexuality with emphasis on how these social signifiers are maintained through mechanisms of power (Sears et al. 2004). Though these classrooms were first created for graduate university students, they have expanded to include undergraduates and secondary school students in what has broadly been termed ‘social studies’ (Sears et al. 2004). Has this trend translated into action and/or change for issues of racism, sexism or homophobia? Is it enough that more people are discussing systemic oppression and violence or that they are momentarily questioning the politics of social identity? Some may answer that the increasing number of classrooms dedicated to engaging issues of social justice is a positive trend which should be heralded as a victory for ongoing struggles. Others might find

¹³ see: <http://www.freireproject.org/>

that while academic institutions have acquiesced to requests (or demands) for more critical attentiveness to said issues, this is merely a deliberate response as a part of a larger strategy of encirclement. In any case, those of us who have been in attendance will undoubtedly remember that sometimes students (and even instructors) learn to see and think in terms which ultimately lead to personal and/or group action, but we will also recall that other times – perhaps more often than we would have liked – students are filled with anger and incomprehension which lead to a great deal of pain and finally resignation.

The reality is that whenever we are in a classroom, or any space for that matter, where confrontations across difference are integral to generating critical dialogue we are located in what Mary Louise Pratt calls a “contact zone” (Pratt, 1991):

Contact zones “refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today (Pratt, 1991, p.34).

The socially fraught tensions inside classrooms in particular reflect similar tensions at many other cultural crossroads in a given society. Some readers may be reminded here of another famous concept regarding cultural differences and relations of power, namely Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1996), but we should quickly set aside this first impression. The ‘contact zone’ is not intended as an essentializing concept designed to reify cultures as forces interlocked in predestined conflict; rather, it is a notion designed to dispel the centuries

old myth of community¹⁴ within the academy which operates to conceal hierarchical power domination, socio-economic disadvantage and historical violence:

The idea of the contact zone is intended in part to contrast with ideas of community that underlie much of the thinking about language, communication, and culture that gets done in the academy (Pratt, 1991, p.37).

Pratt rightly points out by using the contrasting notion ‘contact zone’ that there is a predominant liberal democratic ideology holding sway deep within our institutions and notably inside classrooms which decrees that, despite any conflict that may be taking place elsewhere outside our schools or even across our borders, persons in classrooms are all equal players with equal rights and equal voice in discussion. We ought not to be fooled by this logic any longer since it should be clear that a great many factors exist both to impose and preserve a social and symbolic order in class (Boler 2004, Li 2004, Houston 2004).

So, how do we guard against anger, pain and resignation in classrooms? How can we stay committed to our educational goals amidst the siege where ideas and identities are at stake? Another educational philosopher, Natasha Levinson, argues that this is not an easy task in the slightest and this is largely due to what she terms the “paradox of natality”. Building on Hannah Arendt’s scholarship where ‘natality’ “refers to the fact that humans are constantly born into the world, and are continually in need of introduction to the world and to one another (Levinson, 1997, p.436)”, Levinson argues that students are faced with the troubling double responsibility as subjects who are “new” on the scene (that is to say young and relatively sheltered from macro level politics) and as inheritors of a social history which also constitutes who they are:

¹⁴ See also: Ellsworth, Elizabeth (2010). “Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy”. In *Harvard Educational Review*. 59.3. pp.297-325

The resulting social identities position us in relation to one another, to the past and to the future in particular ways, putting us in the difficult position of being simultaneously heirs to a specific history and new to it. As a result, we experience ourselves as “belated” even though we are newcomers (Levinson, 1997, p.437)

The paradox of natality, in short, is an encounter with positionality as subjects in relation to others and the past; it is a struggle to come to terms with identity and a sense of agency in our factional world of asymmetrical power relations; finally, it is experienced as a feeling of belatedness. The paradox in operation can result in a number of outcomes in the classroom, but perhaps most visible in recent years are outcomes on issues of race and racism. Take for example this student’s testimony:

Every year we have a bunch of forums to discuss racism and yet we never seem to make any progress in race relations on this campus. Every time the subject of racism comes up in class, I have to listen to the same white voice protesting their innocence. I’m sick of it (Levinson QTD Anzaldua, 1997, p.435).

Indeed, it is easy to understand this student’s frustration. The nature of a classroom is that each year (or perhaps semester) new students will walk through the door and each time bringing with them the same feelings of belatedness. This would appear to ensure the continuation of the paradox of natality as students continue to ask ‘how can I take responsibility for the past before I was born while also being responsible for my actions in the present?’ It is difficult to see what pedagogical strategies might help alleviate the tension and begin to answer this difficult question, but this is the primary challenge which all teachers must meet.

Since classroom discussions on issues of social justice and especially issues of race remain challenging and even harmful for students (in particular for those who are all too familiar

with their positionality or for those who are unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge it), teacher aid resources such as pictures, videos and books continue to provide the foundations for learning – *The Color of Fear* directed by Lee Mun Wah stands out, for example¹⁵. Alternatively, what if video games were to provide this kind of support? When might video games be an appropriate medium for learning about race and racism, or for encountering power, or for challenging essentialist epistemologies? I suggest that video games which appropriately use the feature I call the “morality system” may yet prove useful in this regard.

Morality Systems

I am cognizant of the fact that some readers may never have seen a video game that utilizes a “morality system” nor perhaps played one; therefore, I strongly recommend either browsing an online demonstration¹⁶, or following the screenshot “playthrough” that is provided below.

A morality system for video games is a user-generated ethical subroutine which determines how non-player characters will interact with human player characters or avatars. The system continually takes shape according to gamer inputs which include the personal history, actions and interactions of a chosen avatar. Although it is the gamer who makes the final input choice, it is the software designer who offers a myriad of “paths” that combine to constitute the morality system in which the player plays. For instance, at the start of the role-play game *Mass Effect* the player is prompted to input details about his chosen avatar’s history, physical appearance, name and profession (see screenshots 2-6). As the player brings his avatar to “life” by adventuring and completing segments of the main narrative, more details are accumulated by

¹⁵ I refer to *The Color of Fear* here to provide one of the most popular and well known examples, however, I do not necessarily believe that it, nor any of the many other resources created, can serve as a “catch-all” solution. Videos like this are also often problematic on both a fundamental and practical level.

¹⁶ URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OL1Gnoob8ck>

the morality system, which in turn generates a unique story – one which even the video game developers cannot fully anticipate. The player makes conversation choices which in turn establish the avatar’s unique personality, moral integrity, and relationship with known characters (see screenshot 17-19). In screenshot 17, I decided to instruct my avatar to be firm with the non-player characters by choosing to put an end to their idle banter. My choice was recorded in video game memory and I was given 2 “renegade points” towards my personality (see screenshot 20). Although the display interface where the gamer can track his or her avatar’s evolving character only displays points on a spectrum of “renegade” or “paragon” (see screenshot 21), a number of hidden consequences for making choices are recorded by the morality system. That is to say, the non-player characters with whom the gamer engages remember conversation choices leading to greater or lesser willingness on their behalf to communicate in the future, unlocked side stories, or even alternative video game endings. These make for diverse simulated social possibilities of friendship, romance, rivalries and even bitter feuds that all depend on the dynamics of the morality system, which takes shape according conversation *choices*. In order to elaborate further on how this particular game feature provides affordances for education on issues of social justice, I will outline in more detail the two sub-features that are combined to make a morality system like that in *Mass Effect*: character creation and conversations.

The Playthrough:

Screenshot 1:



Screenshot 2:



Screenshot 3:



Screenshot 4:



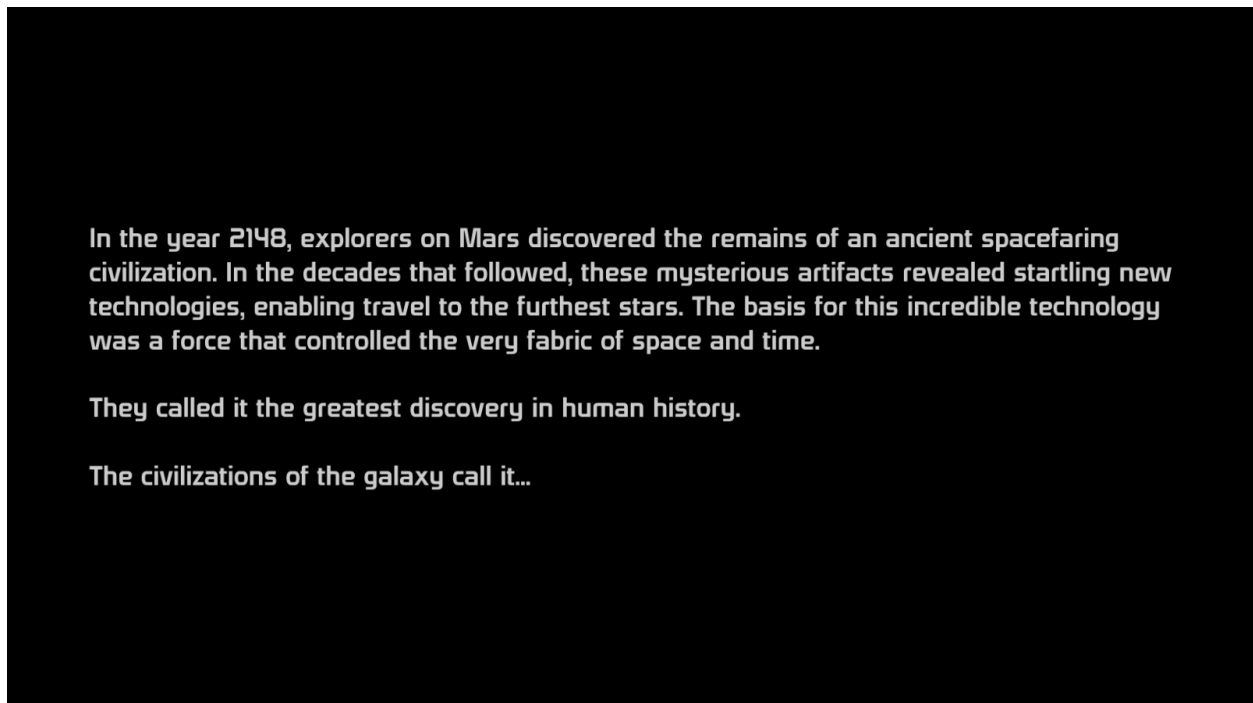
Screenshot 5:



Screenshot 6:



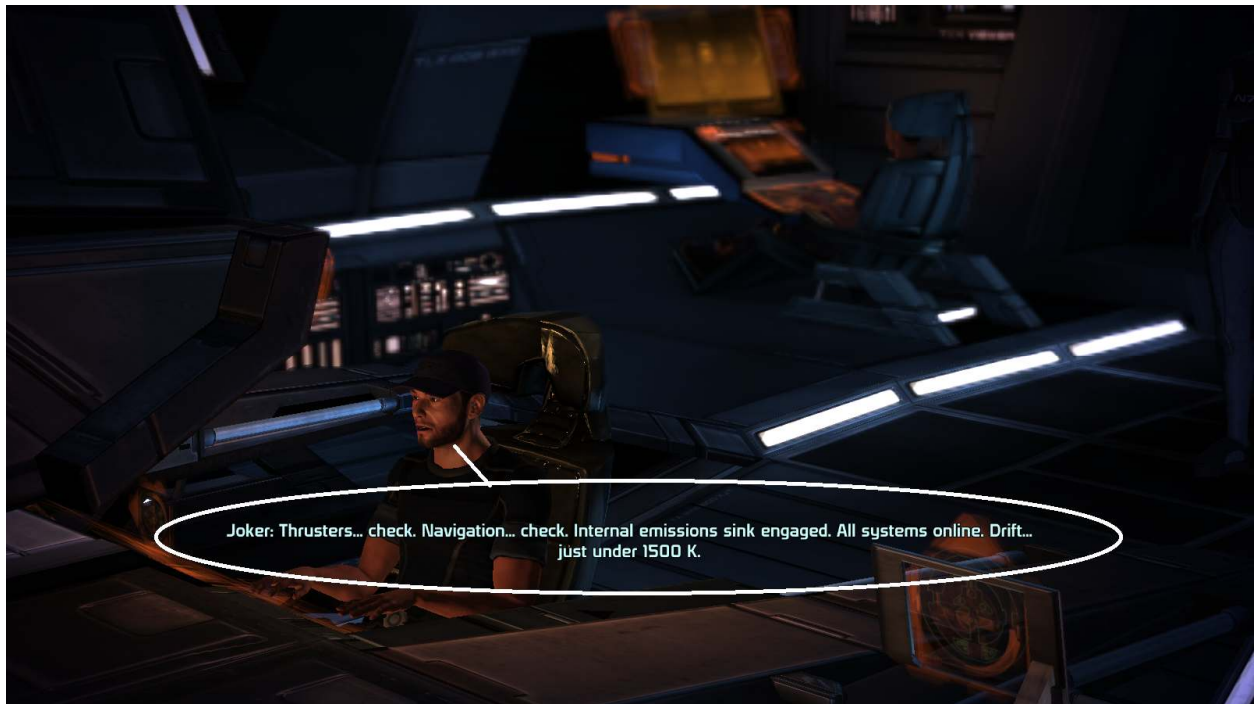
Screenshot 7:



Screenshot 8:



Screenshot 9:



Screenshot 10:



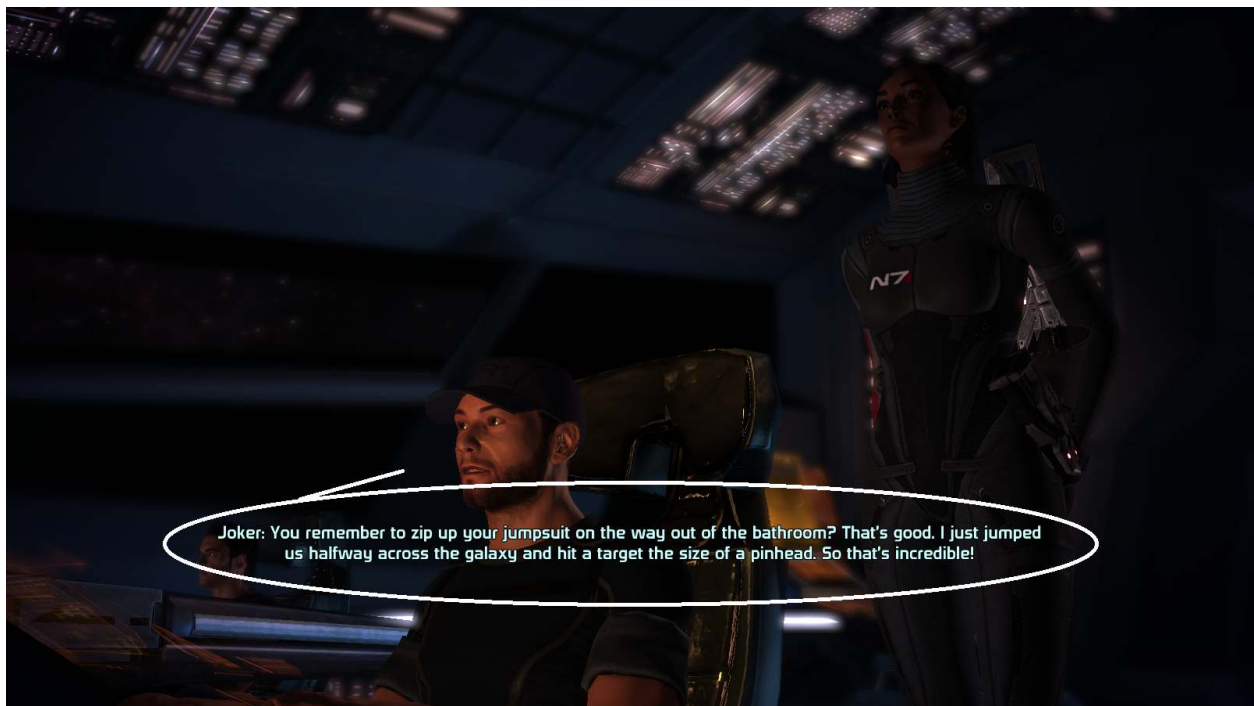
Screenshot 11:



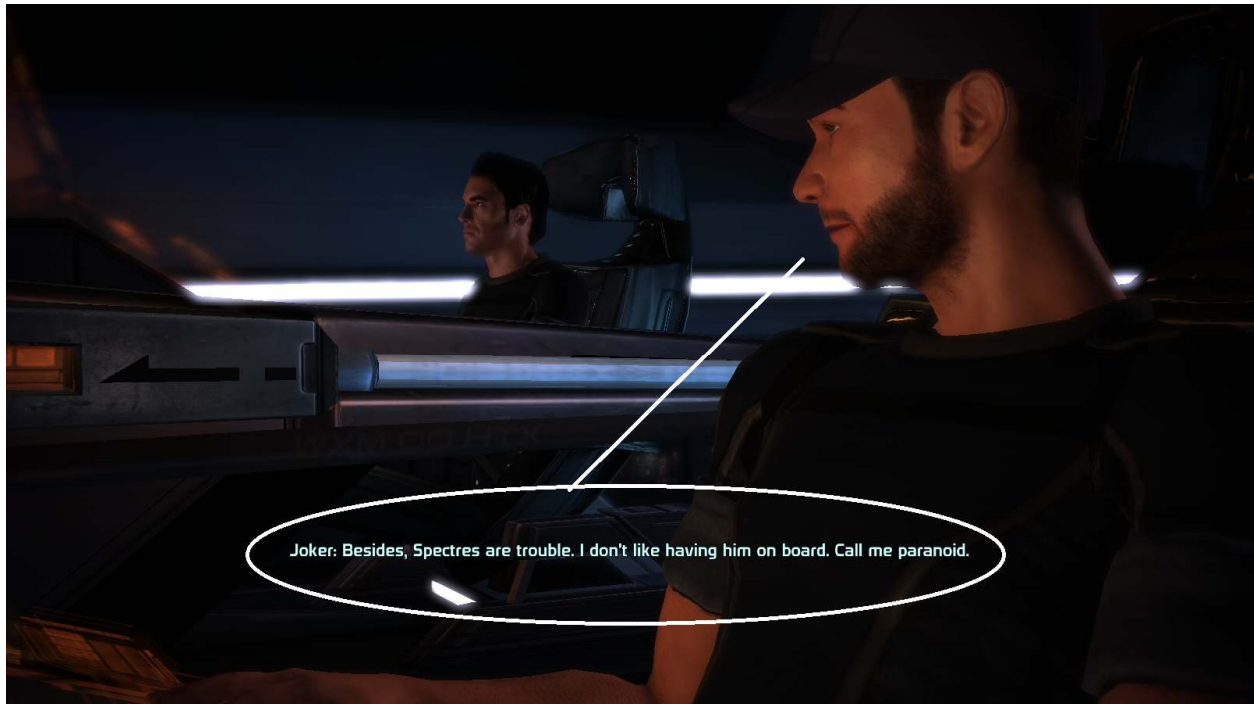
Screenshot 12:



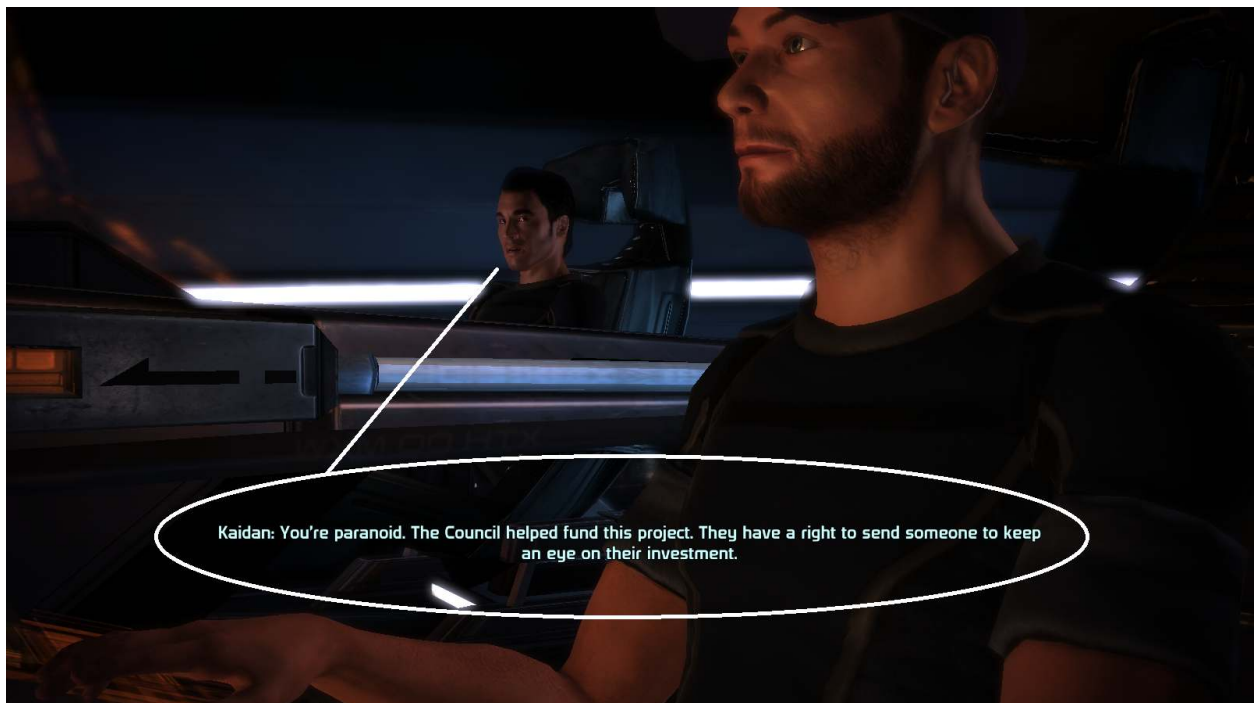
Screenshot 13:



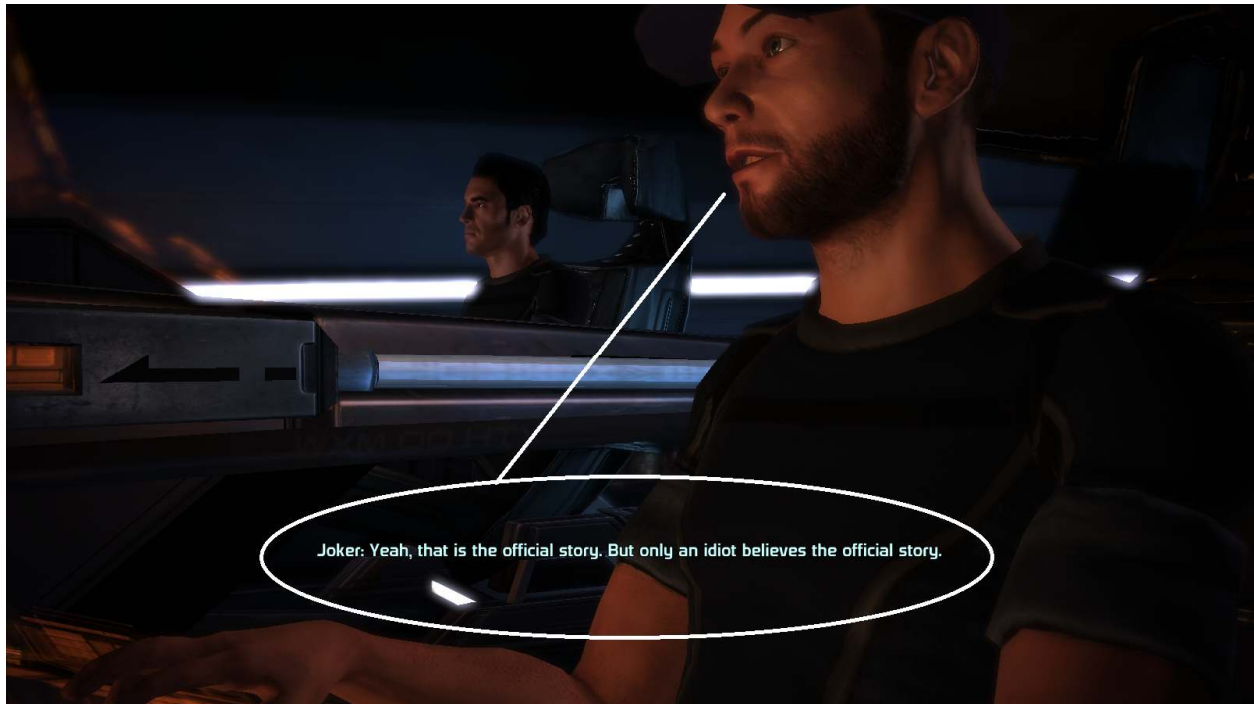
Screenshot 14:



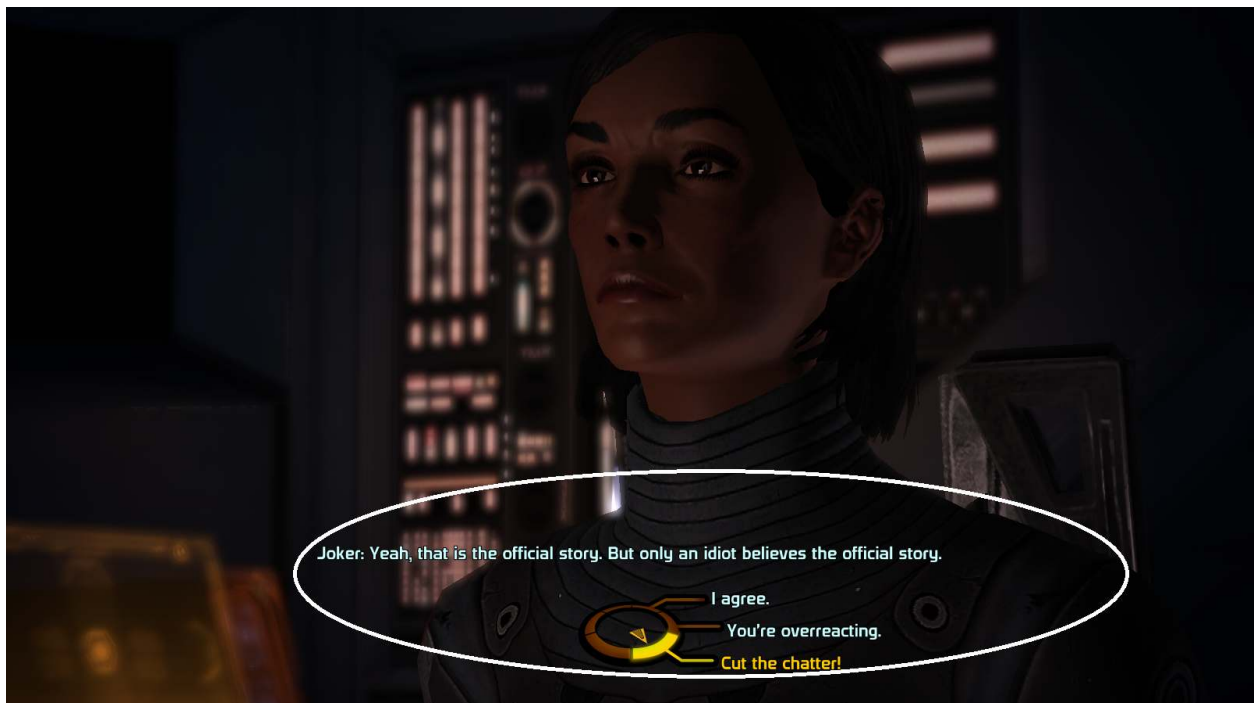
Screenshot 15:



Screenshot 16:



Screenshot 17:



Screenshot 18:



Screenshot 19:



Screenshot 20:



Screenshot 21:



Character Creation

Character creation has evolved significantly over the past decade, but some core stages within the process have remained the same for video games that depend on morality systems. When a gamer first enters a new game she is asked to identify her avatar by providing a name. Following this there are usually choices for gender, body dimensions and clothing style/colours. In more recent video games new options for race and historical background have been made available and in some cases gamers can even choose to play *virtually* as themselves (see figure1).

Figure 1.



Adapted from:

http://thenewgamer.com/content/archives/mass_effect:_playing_through_ugly

<http://tiagocabaco.com/tigerwoods10/pgf.html>

The boundaries between self and avatar have become blurred to the extent that critical interpretations of gameplay as transformative learning experiences are difficult to compile. Perhaps our avatars will act virtuously, but will we model our own behaviour likewise? Conversely, our avatars might carry out the most atrocious acts imaginable. Will we become copy-cat criminals, mass murders or rapists as a result of media effects (see Chapter 2 “the regime of images”)? The outcomes of any given gameplay experience, either cognitive or affective, likely vary just as broadly as do avatars. This makes pronouncements about gender-exclusivity (Pickard, 2003), gender injustice (Jenson et al, 2008), racialization (Chan, 2003), or politicization (Dyer-Witford et al, 2009) problematic and should invoke at the least some renewed scepticism or critical inquiry in readers (my own chapter 2 of this thesis included). That being the case, scholars from the multi-faceted postmodern tradition have convincingly argued that there are sometimes important benefits to adopting an “ambiguous self” or embodying “fractured identities” as these ways of being rightly reject the fiction of essences and allow for a more responsible epistemology (Boler 1999, Bryson et al. 1998, Code 1989). Character creation produces avatars that are much more than anti-aliased high textured pixels on a screen. They are signs and signifiers and expressions of our invisible cyborg consciousness (Haraway 1991, Saussure, 1960); moreover, their performances for morality systems often go more than “skin-deep”.

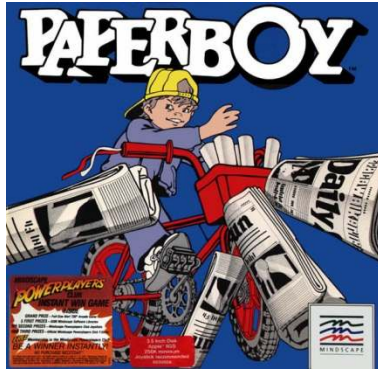
Like “cyborgs”, our avatars have enabled contestations of meaning, power and pleasure during times of political and ideological turmoil in the self. Donna Haraway wrote in the 1980s about her “cyborg”: “So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work” (Haraway p.154, 1991). It was precisely because Haraway articulated her cyborg as a

myth that so many readers either abandoned all hope of comprehension or misinterpreted it as a literal description. Importantly, Haraway's cyborg is and was constructed as a rhetorical device for political change though she plays with language in such a way that indicates something both artificial and natural, a product of human evolution, or the "illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism" (Haraway p.152, 1991). The 'cyborg' for Haraway is much like the 'sign' for Baudrillard; both are stories about post-modern existence and the blending of epistemology with ontology. I wish to highlight, however, that cyborgs are also essentially (and ironically) about identity from a time when essence qua essence was rendered virtually meaningless and "identity" was in crisis. It is telling that Haraway stated "who cyborgs will be is a radical question; the answers are a matter of survival" (Haraway p.153, 1991). We¹⁷ all possess cyborg consciousness that is structured by techno-material reality and transformed by imagination in times of distress. Current day avatars have advanced in design in recent years but their manifestation in video games recalls the much older need for the cyborg to aid us in challenging the limits of our existence and find meaning in our troubled worlds.

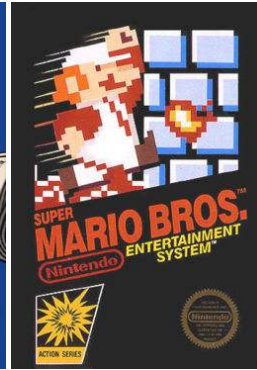
For example, avatars were introduced in video games to satisfy a need to play with identity in first world urban centers where affluent but physically limited (in terms of leisure space) youth were increasingly feeling disenchanted by their urban lifestyles (Jenkins, 1998). Video game studios and their marketing teams knew the state of affairs well and sought to channel social unhappiness into digital fulfillment and desire to play. This is evinced by some of the early advertisements in the 1980s for video games where young people could find virtual power, pleasure and identity, sometimes through extensions of the "normal", as in playing the

¹⁷ I wish to re-emphasize that my use of 'we' refers to the gamer community generally and in this case people from the vastly privileged and mostly West (Japan is the notable exception).

role of a paperboy (see figure 2), or in adventures among the supernatural, as in playing as a fireball throwing super-hero (see figure 3).



(Figure 2)



(Figure 3)

It was here that the meaning of play took on an emancipatory role according to some game scholars – providing “Complete Freedom of Movement”, a “never tiring playmate”, or “magic circle” to play with (Jenkins 1997, Jenkins QTD Feinstein p.263 1997, Harvey 2006). Whether gamers were playing their avatars as a means for fulfilment or escape, their ranks quickly grew as did their age demographic. Today, adults and children alike find solace not only in playing their avatars, but also in creating them. We should question the socio-cultural and political lessons that our avatars teach, as I suggest in chapter 2, but we must also decide who our avatars will become in order live ethically and justly in our worlds both virtual and actual.

Conversations

One key method we use to decide who our avatars will become is the video game conversation. A conversation normally consists of two or more interlocutors, one of which is an avatar and the rest are non-player characters. To be clear, all video game conversations which are relevant to morality systems are between avatars and non-player characters and consist of optional responses for gamers to choose. Sometimes these are conveyed verbatim in the form of

a list resembling the earlier “choose your own adventure” style books (see figure 4), or they are represented in the form of thoughts on a conversation wheel as was illustrated in the example from *Mass Effect* (see screenshot 17). It is increasingly possible to engage in conversations with other gamers during multiplayer online, and these have yielded a wide variety of socially unexpected phenomena that are deeply unsettling, as in cases of verbal abuse, and intriguing, as in cases of video game festivals, dating and marriages, but avatar interactions where gamers communicate online with other gamers much as they would over the phone or in a web chat are unpredictable and notoriously difficult to trace for analysis (T. Bullen et al. 2007). More importantly, gamer on gamer interactions are not components of the morality system; i.e., they have no bearing on the unfolding video game narratives or virtual relationships in the game world.



(Figure 4)

The morality system logs player conversation choices in video game memory (saved files), and the outcomes determine the shape and depth of relationships. In figure 4 above (see figure 4), I

might decide to be kind to young Bryan by breaking the unfortunate news of his father's death softly and perhaps offering subsequent words of comfort. Contrarily, I could be terribly cruel and adopt a more lackadaisical stance by mocking his father's demise. As it would happen, I elected to be the former during my 'playthrough'. This choice proved very useful since the boy later volunteered important information and helped me/my avatar to obtain key items for the remainder of my video game mission. All this was possible because the morality system recorded my conversation choice and awarded me points in the boy's favour. I find that my conversation choices often lead my avatars to forge strong alliances among a diverse population of non-player characters, since I most often prefer to be a paragon rather than a renegade; however, it is sometimes possible to achieve success through co-operation and consolidation or treachery and deceit, and I have explored the less noble options on occasion. In fact, some more successful video game titles are so engrossing that gamers decide to play a second or third time simply to experience the consequences of different exchanges. My avatar Syra from the *Mass Effect* 'playthrough', for example, found negative social consequences because of my conversation choice to shut down the crew chatter (see screenshot 17); however, the video game designers for *Mass Effect* provided two alternatives which I felt compelled to explore on a second and third 'playthrough', both of which led to scripts where I could build friendships where none had previously been available. Regardless of the conversation outcomes, we may reload and reshape our avatars differently through dialogue.

Video Game Spaces

The morality system is certainly distinct from literary and audio visual devices used in more traditional mediums. Classroom discussions along with other live and unscripted exchanges stand in sharp contrast to video game conversations. Although gamers may have a variety of conversation choices to choose from for their avatars, and these may even align

seamlessly with their thoughts as human beings behind game controllers, game dialogue is always scripted. I can never make my avatar sing with excitement when I find a virtual item of great value nor weep in sadness at the loss of a virtual friend, **unless these responses are provided for me by the game designer**. Actualities within the classroom are quite different. No amount of lesson planning will ever decide the outcome of a discussion on any topic, especially not on issues of race, gender, class or sexuality. Overlooking the somewhat opportunistic play on words, I would suggest that “game over” is a far greater risk in a classroom than it is in a video game during instances of conversations. Unlike video games, we will definitely find that classroom discussions cannot be so easily reset.

Mine is not the first work to suggest that classroom spaces differ from video game spaces, nor is it the first to point out that classroom discussion can lead to critical failure whereas video games may not. James Paul Gee characterized some video game spaces as “affinity spaces” in order to comment on classroom shortcomings for new generations who find themselves deeply affiliated with social media:

If we compare the eleven features of an affinity group to most classrooms today, we usually find that the classroom either does not have a given feature or has it much more weakly than a prototypical affinity space. In classrooms, the common endeavour (that which they are supposed to have affinity with) is often unclear (e.g., “science”, “doing school”, “school-science”, etc) to the students, and race, class gender and disability are often much more foregrounded than they are in an affinity space. Furthermore, race, class, gender and disability are often much less flexible in classrooms and serve much less as resources students can use strategically for their own purposes (Gee p.27, 2009B).

It is not primarily important to provide an interpretation of all eleven features which Gee conceived as definitive of “affinity spaces”. Suffice it to say that an affinity space is first and foremost a space where those who interact within it are committed to certain practices and goals,

or where a number of people can “affiliate around their common cause”, as Gee explicated (Gee p.26, 2009B). Affinity spaces are thus fundamentally and, perhaps, totally about feelings of belonging that are generated through a positive sense of agency and epistemological self-importance. In a video game, our goals and how we are equipped to achieve them are clear; moreover, other gamers feel the same way – we have a “common endeavour”. Simply put, in video games I feel that my knowledge is valuable and my actions are useful towards accomplishing what I perceive to be clear and worthy objectives, and I can share those feelings with other gamers. Classroom spaces, Gee argues, may be organized in similar ways; however, they are usually not, partly due to no common endeavour and individual difference as shaped by race, class, gender or disability (Gee p.27 2009B). We may choose to argue Gee’s point further by asserting that it is never “simply” a lack of interest or “simply” a problem of social categorization which bar classrooms from qualifying as affinity spaces; rather, it is a complex problem of asymmetrical power, racism, classism, sexism and/or ableism – points of clarification which we might excuse Gee for overlooking due to lack of ‘space’ in his paper. We should not, on the other hand, fail to notice that Gee did not acknowledge that video game spaces as well can be inflexible for some players, notably for girls and women (see Chapter 2). Ultimately I am in favour of Gee’s comparison. As I myself and many other gamers will attest, video games can do a much better job at making *some of us* ‘feel at home’ than classrooms. Some of us continue to learn much more from our virtual lives than we do in school, though the positive value of these lessons is not always clear (see Chapter 2). Gee’s work on video games as affinity spaces does succeed in drawing attention to video game spaces as different from classrooms and conducive to a kind of learning (see Chapter 1).

In contrast to Gee, I argue that some video games offer more than an affinity spaces where gamers can build personally relevant knowledge. Some video games certainly make us feel good about our virtual agency, but we are also afforded the chance to feel responsible when playing under morality systems. These games show us the way things could be, the way things should be, or optimistically the way things will be, but most crucial is that they allow us to experiment with taking virtual moral action. In this regard, they are somewhat akin to ‘contact zones’ since they allow us to inhabit ambiguous selves through our avatars in order to negotiate relations of power. Importantly, playing is not going to make us forget who we are or where we came from; however, it will offer affordances by freeing us from our limitations and opening us to dialogue that we might not otherwise have. We play because we feel affinity for our video games but also responsibility for our video game actions. This is, of course, a limited double responsibility since video game developers control the possible outcomes for our choosing, but this limitation may prove to be a hidden strength for social transformation outside the game world if we seize the pedagogical opportunity and become game designers for social change. Considering this, I would encourage future investigations on video games to conceptualise video game space as “ethical space”, where ‘ethical’ refers to the morality system and its sub-features character creation and conversations. The video game *Mass Effect 2* will serve as a paradigmatic example of an ethical space in the following.

Ethical Spaces

Meet Tali (see figure 6):



(Figure 6)

In the video game *Mass Effect 2* she is a non-player character and one of many members on my squad which I command in an effort to save the galaxy from impending doom by the Reapers – an ancient race of ultra-powerful space creatures. Setting aside the grandiose plot for the moment, I met Tali while she was on her pilgrimage to prove her worth to her family and her people. Tali is from an alien race known as the Quarians. The Quarians are a people who were cast out from their home planet and forced to live aboard a “migrant fleet” of space ships drifting between planetary systems. Once their young reach the age of maturity, it is their custom to leave their mobile spaceship homes to explore or serve in one of the many alien societies amidst distant stars. The attentive gamer will recognize Tali as an allegory of migrant workers and immigrants who try to build a life for themselves outside of the video game world. Indeed, Tali speaks with a distinct Middle Eastern accent and she wears a full body suit which resembles the head scarf hijab, niqab or burka signifying a link to the growing Muslim migrant and immigrant work force in Western countries.

Tali's story was not a creative design accident. *Mass Effect 2* game designers included several alien side narratives integrated specifically to test the player's moral character, **in line with their concept of morality**, on social issues resembling those which exist in the "real" world. Although the Quarians are offered employment on several planets within the human alliance, they never receive full citizenship and are often subjected to harsh prejudice, discrimination and bigotry by the local population. They live on borrowed time awaiting their turn to be evicted, cast out or worse – incarcerated; furthermore, what little community they have exists outside the rule law and all the rights and privileges assured therein¹⁸. Evidence of the moral test which gamers take in light of all this comes to the fore through video game conversations. Take the following conversation between my avatar named Sheppard and a crew member named Kelly for example (*In the brackets are the conversation choices which I selected to respond to Kelly's comments):

Kelly: I had a wonderful chat with your friend Tali. She's not what I expected from her psych report. I like her.

Sheppard: (I do to.) Tali's a good friend. We've been through a lot together.

Kelly: Quarians are so fascinating to me. They also make me a little sad.

Sheppard: (How so?) Why do they make you sad?

Kelly: Their environment suits are so beautiful, but with their immune systems they're trapped inside. I wonder what they look like under those helmets or what their skin feels like under those suits.

By the time I initiated this speech event with Kelly, I was already several hours into the game's master narrative and I already considered Tali to be a friend, therefore I was inclined to expose

¹⁸ We should notice here strong parallels to the "state of exception" which Sherene Razack documents for Muslims living in the West (see: Razack, S. (2008). *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims From Western Law & Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press)

my feelings and speak well of her. I could have, for example, chosen one of the two other conversation choices that were available, namely ‘she’s not my friend’ or ‘she’s okay’, but these would have led to a very different conversation that I wanted to avoid. In fact, I knew that Quarians had suffered a great deal doing the bidding of other races and that Kelly along with some other non-player characters on my crew felt uneasy with, threatened by and even hateful toward Tali’s presence. I made my ethical choice because I thought that Tali deserved my support.

Concluding Thoughts

I do not offer this example as an ideal conversation that will somehow always translate into moral action in favour of helping Tali in game and later Muslims outside it for other circumstances. The dialogue itself only begins to grapple with a reoccurring preoccupation that many people in Western societies and in particular as of late French societies have had, namely the disapproval of and discomfort around Muslim women who wear the veil. Indeed, Kelly’s comment that Tali seems trapped within her environmental suit carries with it a familiar tone carried over from criticisms of burkas, niqabs and hijabs as being “ambulatory prisons” (O’Mahony, 2011). Sherene Razack, author of *Casting Out: the eviction of muslims from western law and politics*, rightly asks what this image of Muslim woman as confined achieves, or more accurately, what does it serve to reinforce and to justify (Razack p.107, 2008)? These questions and more can be worked into conversation choices like those between Sheppard and Kelly for a deeper ethical choice if we adopt a video game design for social change approach and begin by building more video games as **ethical spaces**. Though we might find that the *Mass Effect 2* example is incomplete, that gamers will not always make the same choices, or that the experience will not encourage gamers to question the similar plight of Muslims in Western society, we can come to understand video games as ethical spaces where gamers can find a

“controlled contact zone” as well as opportunities to build affinity unlike the classroom. Finally, we can come to understand video games as ethical spaces that are useful for designing new learning experiences. Given the power of the regime of images as described in Chapter 2, we may find that we have no choice but to intervene. Risking play might not be an option, rather a necessity for social change.

Conclusion

Are video games good for learning? I began this thesis by meditating deeply on this question hoping in vain to reach some kind of definitive answer. Instead, as is often the case for philosophers, I am left with still more questions. At the conclusion of Chapter 1, the question that most fittingly represents the body of literature on video games and “learning”, by my interpretation, seems to be ‘why not play?’. Henry Jenkins, Robert L. Appelman, and James Paul Gee each sought to justify the use of video games for “learning” by defending the medium using their own unique theoretical approaches. Games are meaningful in Jenkin’s view, they can be serious for Appelman, and they can be endearing according to Gee, so why not play? At first, we might be moved by such arguments since it appears that video games are indeed quite cognitively complex in some cases and certainly pleasurable spaces. Nonetheless, I warned that we ought to restrain our optimism and keep a critical eye on the social effects of existing games. Before we can decide on a responsible answer to the question ‘why not play?’, we need to first ask ‘what are gamers learning through play?’ regardless of our future designs for the video game medium.

Chapter 2 stands as an example of such caution. There, I explored more precisely what gamers are learning through play and how we are learning. My findings, though they were limited by the theoretical scope of my investigation, showed how beholden we gamers can be to the regime of images. ‘Differentiated learning’, ‘pleasurable learning’ and ‘uncritical learning’ together ensure the reproduction of harmful gamer subjectivities, from which it seems that not even video game scholars are completely safe. Though we might recognize the regime of images and its epistemological effects on gamers more clearly after Chapter 2, we are left with the even more troubling question ‘how can we achieve a critical consciousness in gamers in order to

disrupt and shape the regime of images?’ or ‘how can we change the current trends of learning through video games?’. Perhaps the optimism on the part of some video games scholars from Chapter 1 can be partially explained as a consequence of the regime of images. Scholars in both Chapters 1 and 2 hold great expectations for the video game medium, but none of them adequately interrogate the reasons why video games are so pleasurable for gamers to begin with. This oversight allows for the continued and unchallenged circulation of video game images. Alternatively, I argue that pleasure plays a deep role in the most popular video games as a mechanism for building self-identity through sexual and racial ‘othering’. Can we remain hopeful for video games and learning when some of the most popular titles in the industry are driven by sexism and racism? My inclination is to answer with a qualified ‘yes’ since some gamers retain their critical eye on video games in discussions on internet forums, but we have clear evidence that others do not, or cannot, engage critically under the regime of images.

Having recognized certain patterns and relationships that constitute some of the more popular video games and which govern video game play experiences, Chapter 3 reflects my endeavour to create a new approach to learning in spite of the powerful regime of images. By virtue of morality systems, video games can offer us ‘ethical spaces’ within which we explore and learn about issues of social justice. The sub-features ‘character creation’ and ‘conversations’ offer affordances to encounter ‘power’ and ‘difference’ in virtual form. *Mass Effect 2*, a game I presented in closing Chapter 3, is a paradigmatic example. In this game, it is remarkable and cause for hope that gamers can take the ethical test and choose to defend a friend’s personal integrity from racist attacks. During a conversation with the non-player character named Kelly, gamers can choose to instruct their main protagonist named Sheppard to defend her friend Tali (a

member of an alien race) from disapproval of or uneasiness toward her appearance as a veiled woman.

While I praise the *Mass Effect* franchise for helping us break free from dominant representations, it is not flawless. As I noted, Sheppard's conversation only begins to engage with the racist oppression that Tali had to face as a Quarian. Moreover, we have no guarantee that this game experience with an extra-terrestrial character that merely resembles a Muslim woman will transfer into action towards improving the similar plight of actual Muslim women outside of the game. The uncertainty of morality systems, far from being a fatal flaw, however, is a demonstration of the kind of learning that I ultimately envision for video games. With each pedagogical intervention that we integrate into our video game narratives, we add another voice that disrupts the regime of images using ethical space. Rather than ask 'how can we make use of video games to generate moral behaviour in our virtual worlds and socially just actions outside of them?', I ask, finally, 'what can we do to work towards a future where learning through play no longer means learning to be racist, sexist and uncritical to the worlds we inhabit?'. Committing to the Design of video games that make better use of ethical space is one promising answer.

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