Cultural experience 'begins with creative living first manifested as play'.[38] While D. W. Winicott's words describe children's play, they also capture the creative energy of jaromil's elegant forkbombs and I/O/D's Web Stalker. Clearly, the kind of polymorphous perversity described in Chapter 01 requires sustained and engaged play with the tools, memes, and structures of digital technology. If this perversity is equivalent to the immune system's production of antibodies, then gameplay at its most profound mirrors the immunological moment when one of those antibodies latches onto a virus. In the physical body, this 'match' revs up the immune system and unleashes its power. In the social body, this match between artistic play and unarticulated cultural memes revs up the creative process and produces the kind of art we'll explore in this chapter.

But when does gameplay approach artistic expression? Some of the computer games we'll look at are clearly marketed as entertainment, yet the astute player can often discern a match between gameplay and deeper cultural dissonances. Avid players of *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, for example, might begin to sense that the over-the-top street crime in Liberty City, 'the worst place in America', is just a popular and playable version of the kind of corporate crime at the core of their own society.

Perhaps the measure of a game's relevance isn't any particular plot twist, theme, or game dynamic, however, but the extent to which it provides or reveals meaning for the player. Clifford Geertz's anthropological analysis of Balinese cockfighting sees in this violent sport an allegory of the entire social system of Bali, a kind of behavioral mirror of social power and stratification. Taking his cue from Jeremy Bentham's notion of 'deep play' as 'play in which the stakes are so high that it is…irrational for men to engage in it at all', Geertz describes the significance of the bloody fights and the irrational betting practices they engender:

> [[extract]] …[the cockfight] provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience; a story they tell themselves about themselves…. Every people, the proverb has it, loves its own form of violence. The cockfight is the Balinese reflection on theirs: on its look, its uses, its force, its fascination.[39]

A similar statement might be made about the vast majority of violent computer games. Whether the enemies are aliens, monsters, dragons, or evil wizards, players clearly derive great pleasure from taking responsibility for defending themselves, a behavior not only taboo in Western culture but also very difficult to actualize given the elusiveness of threats to our survival. Whom do we blame for global warming? Toxic dumping? Decimation of species? Deforestation? Migration of jobs? Political marginalization? How can we articulate the ways in which we feel disempowered when the latest advertisements celebrate our infinite choices of car models, shampoos, or miracle drugs?

In games, we can enact our id rages on polygon prostitutes and mutant monsters. Or we can hone our skills in car-racing or skateboarding and become champions in a realm with easily defined rules and clear rewards and punishments. Either way, we regain some momentary, and virtual, control over our destinies. But can we exercise our newly acquired skills outside the box? Can we get the gamers out of the game long enough to

discern the behaviors they are assuming rather than just being immersed in them? Such a moment of realization might be the difference between trivial and deep play, between killing time and working out social and cultural issues.

The moment of contact between art and technological or social memes is likely to occur in this kind of deep play, whether players become street versions of corporate butchers and robber barons (GTA: *Vice City*) or bickering schoolgirls trying to tear each other's hair out (*Sissyfight*). If something startles the player out of immersion and into reality, out of illusion and into insight, then we have a moment of arrest remarkably similar to the instant when an antibody latches onto a virus. Suddenly, a shift in the system (immunological or ideological) occurs, and nothing remains the same. Focusing on moments of arrest may seem counterintuitive to those who believe, like Henry Jenkins, that gameplay is about movement:

> [[extract]] …those memorable moments don't simply depend on spectacle. After all, spectacle refers to something that stops you dead in your tracks, forces you to stand and look. Gameplay becomes memorable when it creates the opposite effect — when it makes you want to move, when it convinces you that you really are in charge of what's happening in the game, when the computer seems to be totally responsive.[40]

While this visceral immersion may be intoxicating, it's in fact the moments of arrest that can constitute game art as opposed to mere entertainment.

Although he didn't use the term, the German playwright Bertold Brecht championed the political value of arrest. Brecht felt that catharsis — the driving force behind most forms of entertainment from Aristotle to Paul Auster — would defeat any lasting social effect that art might have. In place of enthralling emotions like fear and terror, Brecht advocated a self-aware art form that would enlighten rather than engross. Arrest is the Brechtian moment when we become aware of the magic of the genre and cast a critical eye over what is happening.

If code is the magic of our time, then games are the magic shows that enthrall the masses, recently topping Hollywood in gross revenue. But in gameplay, the magical sense of control and movement Jenkins describes is illusory. While your avatar may be flying through cloud banks or smashing through police barricades, your bottom is still on your chair, your bladder is filling, your stomach is grumbling, and only your thumbs are twitching. Furthermore, while the game may give you the illusion that you are in charge, in fact that role is largely reserved for the game designer. In moments of arrest, the illusion is shattered and the Wizard found to be an ordinary man behind a technological curtain.

[[subA1]] **Arrest**

Immersion may be the hook by which C-Level grip their viewers, but — unlike most of their commercial counterparts — their games don't have the desired effect until that hook is set and the gamer is caught off guard, not by one of the game's monsters or Mafiosi but by one of its ontological or ethical dilemmas. While moments of arrest occasionally crop up in commercial games, even in such mainstream titles as *GTA*, the kind of work done by C-level and their contemporaries offers hope for a more self-critical future for games. Games-focused art exhibitions like 'Cracking the Maze' (http://switch.sjsu.edu/CrackingtheMaze/, 1999), 'Game Show' (Mass MoCA, Boston, 2002), 'Game On' (Barbican, London, 2002), 'Art Games and Breakout' (Siggraph, 2002), and '// Killer Instinct //' (New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 2003) remind us that the power of games can be harnessed for more than just juvenile power fantasies and feudal political scenarios. Currently, most games mirror the dominant cultural values of their mostly privileged, usually American, male producers and designers. Geared to a generation of boys assumed to be the heirs of influence and power, they rarely reflect the experiences, values, or dreams of girls, women, or non-Western players, assuming the technology is even available to them. Most still re-inscribe conservative assumptions about gender, self-governance, cultural hegemony, and fantasy. Such games serve as catharsis for tensions in the culture rather than providing the arresting moments that would allow us to reflect on these tensions and begin to address them.

As long as the game industry remains concentrated in the hands of an even smaller group than Hollywood's film business, with even larger production costs and cycles, game values and designs are bound to remain conservative rather than genuinely creative. Some designers are attempting to shift some of the momentum from the hands of technicians to those of creators. And savvy players have begun tweaking **open-code game engines** to represent the kinds of worlds that correspond to their own fantasies, desires, fears, and values. Here we find the wellsprings of games as art.

A true transformation into art of the Internet age — the shifting of creative control from corporate to popular forms of self-representation — has yet to occur. The real question is whether gaming is a technology for centralizing or distributing cultural power and creative energy. As long as it continues to be centralizing, no matter how technologically sophisticated, it will remain firmly entrenched in the paradigm of old broadcast media rather than exploring the emerging one of distributed creativity launched by the Internet revolution. It remains to be seen if immersive technology can free us from corporate-defined culture or if it will merely deepen the cathartic trance. Part of the answer depends on how many creaive hands have access to the tools and tropes of game design, and if those hands can place us under a different kind of arrest.

[[prompt head]] **Rockstar Games, *Grand Theft Auto Series***
[[subAprompt]] **THE EQUATION OF LIBERTY AND GRAND THEFT**

For pure, wanton, unmotivated violence, *Grand Theft Auto* reigns supreme among blockbuster games. Gameplay consists largely of beating prostitutes, pumping police and innocent pedestrians with bullets, and jacking cars to complete gangster missions. With each new release of the game, the weapons proliferate, the targets multiply, the sound effects get more realistic, and the music on the car stereo is modernized. In *Grand Theft Auto 3*, a revenge narrative supplements the free-for-all and helps drive the action. The premise is that you, the player, have been betrayed, then shot and left for dead at a heist. Now you are returning to reclaim your turf. Unfortunately, you return as a street thug and must work your way back up the crime ladder by completing missions — killing rivals, stealing cars, delivering packages. If you survive and evade enemies and arrest, you may regain some of your lost power in Liberty City.

When gamers describe *GTA*, they use terms like *freedom*, *depravity*, *variety*, *satisfaction*, *excessive violence*, *black comedy*, and *innovation*. The freedom comes not only from the easy violence but from the ability to ignore missions and roam the city creating your own adventures — stealing a taxi and pilfering fares, gunning down innocent bystanders, killing rivals and stockpiling their weapons, triggering a killing frenzy or gang war, and ramming busses through police blockades to your favorite soundtrack. (*GTA 3* has nine radio stations featuring popular tunes and original music as well as 'hilarious' talk radio and commercials.)

Liberty City is a fully rendered, fully destructible city. You can leave skid marks on the pavement, dents in your car, blood and mashed bodies on the sidewalk. And apart from competition from rivals or tracking by police, you are lord over this environment with nine lives to use up and millions of dollars to make. Arrest for multiple felonies and a string of murders only gets you a mild slap on the wrist: you lose weapons and points, and end up back on the street.

Given all this, it's not hard to understand why many countries have banned the game outright while others have decried it in their media. In Miami, Florida, a hundred-million-dollar lawsuit was filed by the family of a victim killed by two boys mimicking the game. Lawyers claim that the drive for profit, or 'blood money', from *GTA* endangers human lives. But the real danger of this horrific game may have less to do with the frenzied violence and underworld scheming portrayed in it than the critique it makes of the very institutions and bodies that seek to ban it. 'Every people…loves its own form of violence,' Clifford Geertz reminded us. If Balinese men love the cockfight, American males love violent computer games. If we follow Geertz's analogy, these games provide a reflection of America's violence, 'its look, its uses, its force, its fascination'. The violence Geertz was writing about was not murder and war but the abstract and arbitrary social arrangements that lead to profit and triumph for a tiny minority and to tragedy and loss for the great majority. Both cockfight and violent game produce a cathartic experience that helps players return to their lives purged of rage, fear, anger, and feelings of injustice. But neither is meant to draw attention to the problems with the structures it both represents and re-enacts; to look in a mirror is not necessarily to question what we see there. This is the conservative effect of catharsis criticized by Bertold Brecht.

Substitute 'corporate ladder' for 'crime ladder', however, and you get a shocking but revealing portrait of the typical American city: corporate bosses competing for 'blood money' in ways which endanger human lives, an ineffectual criminal-justice system, citizens with pent-up rage, and enough jazzy cars, missions (jobs, romances, vacation adventures), and music to keep us all playing the game. Mafia-like organizations often appear in neighborhoods for which the local

[[counterprompt head]]
C-Level, Games
[[subAprompt]]
ENDGAMES: THE REAL CONSEQUENCES OF FANTASY

Despite the numerous clues that *GTA* provides both mirror and critique, most players interact with it on a behavioral level, acting out what they can't discern or articulate. But once game artists come onto the scene and start to mess with mainstream games, it becomes harder to ignore their implications.

One of these implications is the media's role in producing desensitized viewers. Many of us who saw the World Trade Center towers collapse or footage of the Madrid railway bombing had a hard time matching images to feelings. We see so much mediated violence, in ways that alienate us from the victims, that we can't reconcile what we see with what we feel or what we think we're supposed to feel. Three games produced by various members of the artist group C-Level[41] address this issue of disconnection.

Game enthusiasts often rate games by their ability to produce deeply immersive experiences, experiences so enthralling that they produce physiological reactions beyond the adrenaline rush — falling back from your chair when the tyrant in *Resident Evil II* crashes through the wall, or breaking into a sweat when you hear the invisible zombies in *Nocturne* shuffle by. So when art games like *Cockfight Arena* disrupt that video trance, we begin to get a glimpse of how games affect us.

Cockfight Arena invites players to dress up like chickens, their game avatars. While they play, they also hold winged controllers and wear feathered headgear. 'We saw this as a novel way to articulate the relationship between the person who plays the game, the avatar that stands in for them and the complex process of identification that occurs when you play a video game,' C-Level have written.[42] C-Level compare the complex identification in gaming to that of fans watching a sports event or gamblers betting on a racehorse. By helping us to visualize this relationship, such games enable us to see the ways we identify, and yet maintain distance between, ourselves and our avatars. We don't mind expressing rage and inflicting pain, but we'd rather not have to feel guilty or suffer any consequences. After all, even if the emotion is real, it's being exercised in a fantasy world.

An even more visceral intervention is *Tekken Torture Tournament*, a PlayStation **mod** for *Tekken III*, a multi-player fighting game. In *Tekken Torture Tournament*, Players strap electrodes to their right arms that emit shocks when on-screen avatars are injured during a fight. The shocks have a dual purpose: first, they provide a real-world visceral consequence for game events; second, they cause the player's arm to 'flex involuntarily', making it more difficult for him to fight his game opponent. The shocks are supposedly too mild to be dangerous, and some players reportedly get used to them and apparently enjoy pushing the game to its limits in the presence of excited spectators.

This game disrupts a number of expectations about consumer games. First is the obvious visceral consequence for actions engaged in during

economies and governments don't work. They arise as ways for local tribes to take care of their own. One poster advertising *GTA3* enunciates this clear disenchantment with current systems when it describes the game as 'A new way of getting things done'. Another poster features an FBI agent seen from the back with the following prompt: 'Now get this punk outta here.'

The sheer glee that gamers feel when unleashing their pent-up feelings of violence is also telling. In a genre dominated by violence and missions to kill 'bosses', the frustration of players (read: workers) ought to speak beyond the confines of the game. They include postal workers and soccer fans, gang leaders and drug dealers, gun-toting high-school kids and splinter-group fundamentalists. There is room for all of the disenchanted, and the disenchanted have invested enough cash in *GTA 3* to make it a runaway best-seller. As if that wasn't enough, the equation of Liberty and Grand Theft, of freedom and violence, ought to give us pause. Violence is often a strategy of self-defense, a way to protect ourselves. Games seem to give us a way to defend ourselves, but the real theft may be occurring under our noses rather than in virtual worlds. As long as *GTA* works as catharsis, it merely purges our emotions and then allows us to return, unchanged, to an unchanged society.

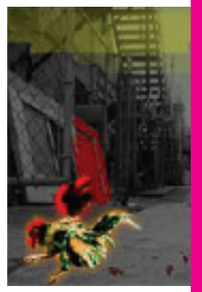
gameplay. The body is now responsible and vulnerable. For once, a genre that claims to be immersive and interactive, really does engage the body with physical consequences. Second, the complex identity formation of avatar/player adds a third persona in the performance: the spectator. While watching other people play games may be common in **LAN parties** and college dorm rooms, it's an often-overlooked aspect of the complete spectacle of gaming. The levels of identification and/or distance are complex, as complex as the 'realities' brought to us by our news media. It's no wonder we feel a schism between what we see and what we feel.

Game critic Dyske Suematsu has described this schism as a 'disconnect', explaining that [[extract]] while novels and films also produce feelings in us, those feelings are usually active. This is the difference between art and entertainment; the former is an opportunity to find our genuine, active emotions, whereas the latter manipulates our sensory perceptions to artificially induce emotions in us. This is why true art makes consumers work hard, whereas a piece of entertainment is served on a silver platter for easy consumption, essentially telling consumers how to feel. The reason why video games tend to invite criticism of disconnect is because most of them provide no opportunity for our active emotions to manifest themselves.[43]

According to Suematsu, *Waco Resurrection* is one art game that attempts to short-circuit that disconnect. It provides players with the opportunity to review the 1993 storming of the Branch Davidian compound in Texas that resulted in the fiery deaths of eighty people. C-Level see a connection between the Waco tragedy and the political situation in the US and Europe during the weapons inspections and war in Iraq: '[David] Koresh is both the besieged religious other and the logical extension of the neoconservative millennial vision. Our primary focus is the hypocrisy and contradiction that permeate the Waco showdown.'[44]

Waco Resurrection is a cross between a **first-person shooter** and an interactive documentary. Assuming the role of Koresh, players must battle US agents, respond to skeptics and upstarts (each player assumes the role of another Koresh), cultivate followers, and carve out a peaceful sanctuary in the midst of confrontation and crisis. To reinforce the documentary focus, the game incorporates audio samples of Koresh's voice and music, as well as footage from media coverage of the event.

It's important to note that none of the C-Level games presents a solution, or even claims to clearly identify social problems. Rather, the games provide spaces in which to engage in deep play around a structured experience. They work by disrupting the usual patterns of behavior and scripted interactions that limit mainstream games, thus forcing players – and, hopefully, the games industry — to become more reflective. These games work at the level of individual experience as it meets social crisis, and they do this by providing a safe place in which to engage in behavioral fantasy — perhaps the most powerful effect of immersive, interactive games. Part of *Endgames*, a series of works based on 'alternative utopias' and 'apocalyptic moments', these game mods and hacks 'incorporate elements of subjective documentary and experimental fantasy with game development technology to create a visceral gaming experience focused on extreme psycho-social phenomena'.



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COMPARISON STUDIES

[[divider]] City (E)scapes

Like Carnival, Mardi Gras, and gladiator sports, gaming has the ability to channel emotions triggered by conditions in the real world into a controlled space outside of quotidian experience, a kind of cultural, in this case technological, black box. While this may prevent disgruntled employees from slashing their bosses' tires, it may also prevent them from joining and participating in their local union. If only we paid attention to the behaviors and fantasies we enact in game space, we might learn something about the tensions and contradictions in our real lives.

One complex experience we might be able to elucidate is that of living in large cities, where we frequently interact with total strangers and encounter novel experiences. Gameplay might teach us how to cope with the complex physical and social navigation required to survive in such places. Besides GTA3, a number of games present different ways of conceiving or coping with city life.

[[head2]] **RockStar Games, Midnight Club 2; Neversoft Entertainment, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater**

[[subA2]]

VICE CITY: JUST CRIME (FOR AN UNJUST SOCIETY)

Midnight Club 2 follows the no-rules premise of other RockStar games but turns Los Angeles, Paris, and Tokyo into illegal street-racing scenes. The key game experience is driving souped-up vehicles, race cars, or motorbikes in an attempt to defeat your adversaries. Your goal is to hit as many checkpoints as you can on your way to the finish line by whatever means you choose — shortcuts, back alleys, direct routes — all the while ducking the authorities.

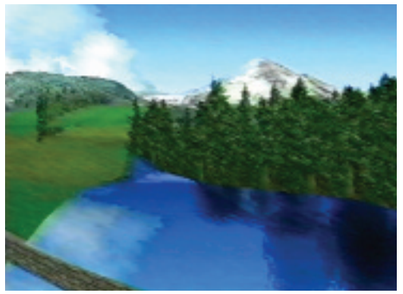
Another take on the city streets is *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4*, the most recent in a popular series of skateboarding games. Most of the levels take place in quasi-realistic recreations of actual locations such as San Francisco, Alcatraz, and Chicago, but there's also the huge Kona skate-park and such places as a shipyard, a zoo, and a carnival. In these settings you can seek out targets and terrains to practice your 'double kickflip indy', 'bs nosegrind', 'fingerflip', or 'fakie pivot grind'. Like other city-based games, freedom of play is important. The objective is to interact with the environment in such a way that you can master the terrain. The player explores, learns, discovers goals, and completes them, all in a way that gives a feeling of freedom and control.

What may not be evident in these virtual urban worlds is the extent to which gameplay is actually quite limited. This is of course a technical issue; more freedom means more complex and more intelligent rendering. What these games manage to do so well is to tailor gameplay to the virtual environment in such a way that the player only imagines a certain range of behaviors — drug dealing or car-racing or skateboarding. When a player tries to stray from these activities, the constraints of the game — both physical and ideological — become more apparent. As game critic Benjamin Johnson has explained,

> [[extract]] Good interactivity does not require that I be able to do literally anything at any time…. A good level designer provides clues as to how I should interact with the environment. If the clues are subtle and well done enough, I shouldn't even realize that I am effectively being lead around by the nose. When we notice a particular game isn't letting us do whatever we want, we say the game is putting us 'on a rail.' Reflexively, we seem to long for a game that grants us the ability to do anything we want. However, even the briefest study of the art of interactivity reveals that this is not what we want at all. We don't want to do everything; we want to do the right thing, or perhaps occasionally the cool thing.[46]

In sum, 'cool' or 'right' are values deeply embedded in game design.

[[head2]]
Martin Honegger, Margin Walker; Jim Monroe, Liberty City
[[subA2]]
WALKING ON THE EDGE



A few art games challenge the illusion of freedom produced by good game design by trying to perform actions outside the scripted plot lines. Martin Honegger's *Margin Walker*, for example, exploits a glitch in a PlayStation golf game to allow the player to explore the margins of the terrain, which features mountains and lake vistas not normally seen by golfing players.

Similarly, Jim Monroe's movie of his trip through *GTA3*'s Liberty City makes the declarations of 'freedom' in this game seem naïve at best. First, he constructs different 'skins' which allow him to play characters of his own design. He dons a 'Canadian tourist' skin complete with camera, eschews the temptation of driving around in cars, and attempts to 'tour' the city on foot: 'If you really want to see it you should walk around…' What he discovers, beyond confused or incommunicative pedestrians, are secret rooftop vistas and a green park or forest on the city's outskirts. 'Another thing I love about the city was the lack of advertising,' the 'Canadian tourist' says, wondering if it was difficult to find companies 'to get behind such an extreme game'. Given typical game scenarios, some moments in the movie are hilarious: 'Yeah, it was just great to get away from the city hustle and bustle and just hang out in the trees.' Of course, this player 'tourist', unwilling to jack a taxi and kill the driver, can't get one to stop for him in the pouring rain and so ends up running all the way home. The next morning finds him walking a different margin, this time in 'street priest' skin, attending a homicide and snatching up stray dollars from the street like all the other pedestrians who've spied a stash of lost goods.

[[head2]] **Matthew Lee, Dope Wars; Martin Honegger, Donuts**
[[subA2]]
BOTTOM LINE

get a video game

Dope Wars takes an opposite tack to reflect on the *GTA* series. It's a drug-trading game whose sole objective is to get as rich as possible in thirty days. 'Buy drugs low and sell them high — but watch out for the cops.'[47] Not only does this game reduce *GTA* to a single, rather boring action, but it equates drug dealing with stock trading, reinforcing the parallel between the underworld and the corporate world hinted at in *GTA*.

Some game mods, rather than challenging game illusions, exaggerate the primary action or play,

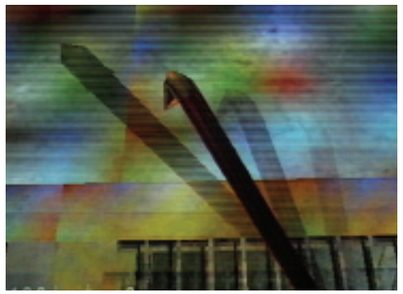
distilling a game to its essential gestures. Honegger's *Three Hour Donut* is PlayStation's *Driver* executing one repeated 360-degree spin for the entire 180 minutes of a VHS tape. Monotonous, repetitive driving. Going in circles. Take that and dress it up with points, contests, and levels, and you

[[head2]]
Alex Galloway, Prepared Playstation 2 and Time-To-Live
[[subA2]] ## CRITICAL GESTURE

Two game hacks produced by Alex Galloway also distill mainstream games to an emblematic moment. Though their immediate effect is humorous, these hacks also stake out a virtual no-man's-land where gamers and game designers alike seem to have lost control. *Prepared Playstation 2*, Galloway's hack of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*, traps a skater in a particular physical loop, for example getting caught in a pit or wedged between a corner and a bench.[48] The skater almost escapes the loops but not quite, so there's a kind of snare which is hilarious at first but which, after a while, begins to feel like an existential trap, a kind of skater's 'eternal return'. Another hack creates a pit carved and studded with so many obstacles that it would be impossible to skate it in any meaningful way. The skater always crashes and falls.

Such unintended 'traps' exist in other games as well. In the 1990s flight simulator *Hornet F-18A Classic*, setting 'crash disabled' in the game preferences may seem like a good idea for a novice pilot, but this setting can force the plane to skid along the ground, bouncing and smashing everything in sight but unable to either take off or come to a stop. When game physics take over, you get an experience of who (or what) is really in control. Equations deep in the code that engender game physics may create the illusion of freedom, but when these laws take over, they feel as inevitable and constraining as gravity.

Galloway's *Halflife* hack, *Time-To-Live*, takes another twist on the wildly popular first-person-shooter game by playing with the laws of game physics, in this case producing smoke and earthquake effects from the simple swing of a crowbar. In the original *Halflife*, Gordon Freeman's mission is to combat aliens released by an experiment gone awry and also escape the Federal agents sent in to 'erase' the entire incident. His only strategy is deception and aggression. He must strike



before he is struck. Galloway's video loop of a player triggering virtual pyrotechnics with the smack of a crowbar distills the complex motives behind the aggression to a single repetitive gesture, one that accurately captures the behavioral experience of many first-person shooters. Shoot an alien, swing a crowbar, toss a grenade: that is the behavioral limit of game interactivity. Of course, Galloway's additional feat — to code the smoke and fire — is both another level of agency and a reminder that the real power in games lies in the hands of players not designers – and of the hackers and modders who mess with the rules rather than playing by them.

[[divider]] **Violence Comes Home**

All effective immersion experiences in games are based on a willing suspension of disbelief. But there is a difference between those games that create believable but clearly fictional worlds and those that attempt to simulate real experience. Simulation games depend on the extent to which they can approximate their real counterparts. Tony Hawk's Pro Skater, for example, attempts to reproduce the exhilaration of skateboarding, albeit with a game control. Sid Meier's Civilization tries to reproduce the experience of empire-building. Car-driving and military-aircraft games challenge your driving and piloting skills. The Sims challenges you to build a virtual family or city that works. But the 'realism' of these genres pales beside that of war games produced either for entertainment or for official training.

At one extreme are the simulation games used by the US military to recruit soldiers or train troops and commanders. When a game scenario overwhelms the player's sense of the real, however, lives can be lost. Critics have argued that it was exactly such a 'simulation mindset' that led the commander of the USS Vincennes to order missile fire that mistakenly shot down an Iranian passenger plane in 1988, killing 290 civilians.[49] To these critics, such events raise serious issues about the extent to which game scenarios should be used to train military personnel.

Since effective gameplay relies on the player's willingness to simultaneously conflate and distinguish the virtual and the real, the question of ontological slippage is important. In the case of child's play, this slippage is common and necessary, though the negotiations between the made-up and the real are far from simple, as we can see in this 'war game' between a five-year-old boy and his three-year-old sister:

[[extract]] Boy: I'm going to kill you.
Girl: He's going to kill me.
Boy: I'm going to kill you.
Girl (to parents): He said, he is playing a killing game.
Parent: Do you want to play a killing game?
Girl: I want him to play a killing game.
Boy whacks girl on the head with a plastic plane.
Girl (crying and howling): He hit me!!
Boy: Ok! Ok! I'll give myself a timeout. (He sits in the chair.) 50

This scene reminds us that while it is critical to keep reality and play distinguished at one moment (the boy doesn't really want to kill his sister; he must be 'playing' a 'killing game'), for the game to 'count' it is equally important that the players conflate them at another (the boy knocks the girl on the head to show this is no mere verbal tease but a real engagement). When both players see that the conflation of game and reality has gone too far, they stop and the offender is reprimanded.

Both critics and game designers have argued that even with simulation games, players are easily able to distinguish game and reality. First-person shooters don't result in mass murders at high schools, they argue. But as the children's interaction just described suggests, the fall from games into reality can be precipitous — broken only by an arresting moment, like getting hit on the head by your brother. A look at some war games will help us ponder this more deeply.

[[head2]]
US Army, *America's Army*
[[subA2]]
BACK DOOR DRAFT: AN ALL-VOLUNTEER ARMY

Inspired by the number-one online action game *Counterstrike*, an anti-terrorist game based on the *HalfLife* **engine**, *America's Army* promises players authentic state-of-the-art military experience while training for and combating terrorism in simulated missions. A free, downloadable online game, it attracts its share of Army recruits. *America's Army* boasts two kinds of gameplay: 'Operations', a first-person action game, and 'Soldiers', a goal-based role-playing simulation. 'Operations' allows multiple players — up to thirty-two — to join the same 'virtual' unit. Training missions teach recruits by subjecting them to the Army's obstacle course at Fort Benning, Georgia, and to parachute training, and to familiarizing them with authentic military equipment. Communication and teamwork are crucial to success.

The updated *America's Army: Special Forces* continues the recruitment **adver-gaming** with an additional challenge: the opportunity to earn Green Beret status by completing special missions. The website boasts a slew of realistic features, including 'Authentic U.S. Army experience — Realistic depiction of the values, units, equipment and career opportunities that make the Army the world's premier land force — continually updated to incorporate new occupations, units, technologies and adventures'. But the line between realism and doctrine becomes blurred with the final feature, which guarantees 'Accurate Soldier behavior — Players are bound by the laws of land warfare, Army values (honor, duty and integrity) and realistic rules of engagement'. This claim, while a good recruiting tool, ought to raise an eyebrow about the 'authenticity' of the game, especially its ideological position supporting the use of force by the world's superpower against small groups of resistance fighters. Whose freedom is being defended? Why? At what cost? Against whom? And why spend over $6.3 million turning this message into an interactive experience?

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Institute for Creative Technologies, Full Spectrum Warrior/Command

[[subA2]]

TOUGH, BRAVE, OBEDIENT, AND IN THE DIRT

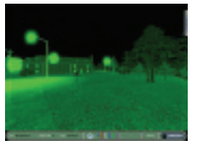
'Only one type of soldier is prepared for battle,' the trailer for another military-tactics game barks. 'He is a Full Spectrum Warrior.' *Full Spectrum Warrior* trains soldiers for command and control of a US Army light infantry squad, while its counterpart, *Full Spectrum Command*, trains company commanders.

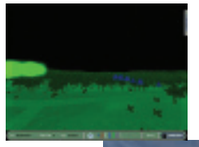
Gameplay is set in Eastern Europe as part of an urban peacekeeping mission and involves squad-based tactical action. Players move between two fire teams attempting to accomplish their missions while protecting their troops. The designers claim a number of features that make this military tactical-action game authentic: 1. it's based on actual US Army infantry doctrine; 2. its advanced **AI** simulates the behavior of soldiers in intense combat conditions; 3. rules of engagement simulate real-world conditions; 4. weapons reflect those currently in use by the US Army; 5. soldier animation is based on live footage of combat veterans.

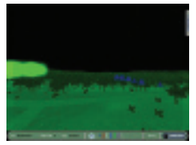
Developed by the Institute for Creative Technologies in consultation with experts at the Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, and based on a game commissioned by the Army for similar purposes, *Full Spectrum Warrior* attempts to create 'training simulations that are intended to have the same holding power and repeat value as mainstream entertainment software'. Why the designers felt that war training would be readily consumed as entertainment is unclear, though Western media have conspired to reduce war to entertainment for some time now. But the difference between passively conflating the two on TV and actively engaging in war as immersive experience ought to concern us. Given the accurate replication of actual battle drills and small-unit tactics used to train soldiers, should we expect to see a new generation of trained troops strutting through American high schools, right past the gun checkpoints? If these games are effective as training, what's their effect as entertainment?

Of course, training soldiers is not just about developing combat skills; it's also about 'indoctrination'. Army doctrine in this game is quite clear: The real heroes are infantrymen (*not* -women) standing side by side, representing the most powerful nation on earth, and fighting for a just cause. 'The U.S. Army is the most powerful ground force in the entire world. The backbone of a ground invasion is the U.S. Army Infantry'; '*Full Spectrum Warrior* puts you in the dirt with your men, where danger lurks around every corner'; 'We've got a job to do, folks. Move out!'[51] Tough, brave, obedient, male soldiers dedicated to their 'job' embody the values of the military in this game and also make up the superpower strength of the US. What force could challenge such might? Only the likes of Mohammad Jabbour Al Afad, leader of the Zekistan rebellion against the Soviet Union, and suspected world terrorist. Game history explains that he hails from wealthy, neglectful Lebanese parents, was educated in the UK and US, led rebels in the Afghan uprising against Soviet Russia (having benefitted from CIA training), and – having avoided capture by the Soviets — ended up in Zekistan among a small group of guerillas. Such is the face of the enemy. Ironically, an enemy the US helped to create. What, then, are sixteen– and seventeen-year-old gamers learning here?

Whatever it is, it has the opposition worried. In a global scene dominated by powerful media, wars are often won by headlines and rumors. The Palestinians, for one, are responding in kind to *Full Spectrum Warrior*'s ideological missile.







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Hezbollah, Special Force

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COUNTER-COUNTER STRIKE

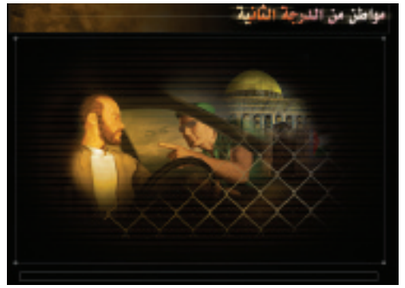
Hezbollah's *Special Force* responds to *America's Army* and *Full Spectrum Warrior* with a military first-person shooter that attempts to represent the history of the Muslim resistance to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1978 and 1982, and their withdrawal in 2000. Players begin with a training simulation, practicing their shooting and grenade-launching skills against pictures of Israeli political and military figures such as Ariel Sharon. They replay the conditions that faced the original Hezbollah fighters breaking through Israeli positions in southern Lebanon, honoring pictures of real-life 'martyrs' killed at the same spots and eventually fighting Israeli troops and obstinate settlers. Arab game designers, concerned with the messages being conveyed to young Arabs via Western games that portrayed them as terrorists and victims, felt they needed an alternative, a game to show Arabs how to defend their homelands and defeat their enemies.[52] *Special Force* went on sale in early 2003 in Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates and sold out its initial run of a hundred thousand copies in its first week.

[[head2]]
Dar al-Fikr, Under Ash
[[subA2]]
THE HOME FRONT: A NEW HERO

Like *Special Force*, the Syrian game *Under Ash* attempts to reclaim a space in which to recount its own history and thus to educate Syria's youth. *Under Ash* tells the story of Ahmad, a young Palestinian who confronts the Israeli occupation of Palestine during the first Intifada. Ahmad begins his resistance by throwing stones at invading soldiers and ends up by shooting at Israeli settlers. The game charts this escalation of violence on both sides. Like *America's Army*, it is a free download. The urgency of adding an Arab voice to the historical record as well as to media representations of their story comes through in its Web-site description:

[[extract]] A nation in Palestine is being uprooted: their houses are being devastated, their establishments are being destroyed, their lands are being occupied, their trees are being pulled out, their property is being confiscated, their cities are being besieged, their schools are being closed, their sanctuaries are being violated, their sacred structures are being made permitted, their children are being beaten, their hands are being broken, their bones are being crushed and they are imprisoned, tortured and slain. They are even prevented from crying and moaning. The whole world is plotting to ignore them. None hears them moan. None sees the trains of their martyrs. None says a word of support to their rights.[53]

In all of these war games, the target audience is clear: young males, either potential inheritors of structures of power and oppression, or warriors of resistance. There are children here but no weeping girls, no protesting women, no negotiating elders. The implicit assumption that history belongs to the struggles of young men, and that the future lies in the hands of boys twitching their figures on game consoles — an assumption shared by all sides — is far more devastating than the violence or local conflicts portrayed. The writing out of girls and women from power — from history – underlines the depth and pervasiveness of the games' violence. While *Special Force* and *Under Ash* bring necessary balance to a gaming world dominated by American viewpoints, the real innovations may come from those game designers who can imagine a future in which all humans can contribute to our memories of the past and to a vision of our possible futures.



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Eddo Stern, Sheik Attack
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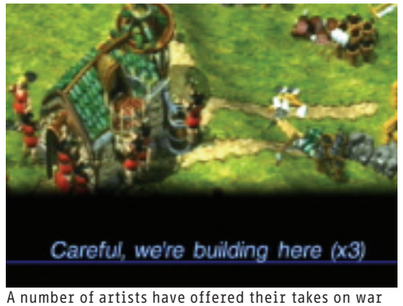
MISREMEMBERING ZION



A number of artists have offered their takes on war gaming. Eddo Stern's *Sheik Attack*, a '**machinima** documentary', weaves 'capture' scenes from gameplay (*Settlers III, SimCity, Command and Conquer, Nuclear Strike*, and *Delta Force*) and Israeli pop songs to produce a nostalgic and horrifying account of 'the blood of sheiks and a mis-rememberance of long lost Zionist utopia'.[54] The film, which captures the feel of both games and live news events (and thus indexes the uneasy conflation of entertainment and news reporting), charts the development of the State of Israel from its settlement in the 1960s, through the emergence of cities, to the escalation of conflict into war, and, finally, to the current political stalemate in the Near East. *Sheik Attack* disrupts the ideologically constructed nostalgia for an ideal Israeli state by juxtaposing scenes of stunning beauty – the aesthetically rendered landing of an assault helicopter — with scenes of stunning violence — cold-blooded shootings in civilian and domestic spaces. The contrast of an idealized vision of a homeland, lulling nostalgic music, and aestheticized violence raises questions about the uses of the media and nostalgia in the formation of ideologies taken as 'natural' or 'historical' truths. More current works by Stern such as *Vietnam, Mon Amour* and *Redball* use the technologies of computer and pinball games to explore ideological issues surrounding

both the Vietnam War and the demise of the USSR.

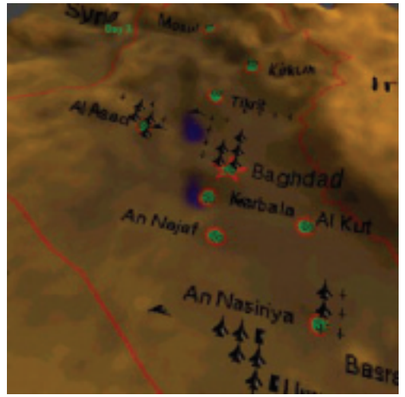
Reflecting both his stint as a soldier in the Israeli Army and his experience as a game designer and player, Stern's works suggest that the structures and content of gaming can be harnessed for more complex cultural purposes than just raking in mega-profits by catering to the fantasies of adolescent boys or the ideologies of superpowers. In 'The Cultural Study of Games: More than Just Games', Matthew Southern comments on the need for games to mature in precisely the way they have in Stern's hands:

> [[extract]] Whereas a flight game might…fly over exactly the contours of the ground and buildings as in reality, like the Western news, it won't often dwell on the atrocities caused by warfare… These video games based on genuine contemporary conflict, where the point of view is always a military one…play a part in the obfuscation of the real conditions…. If games are to mature, then the themes explored must address the lack of any serious political enquiry.[55]

[[head2]]
John Klima, The Great Game
[[subA2]]
RAW DATA AND REAL VIOLENCE

John Klima has produced a different take on military gaming with *The Great Game*, 'A War Game (Sort of), but You Can't Control the Action'.[56] An avid gamer since his youth, Klima marshaled his coding abilities to produce a game interface for the post-9/11 war in Afghanistan. *The Great Game* relies on daily US Defense Department briefings to produce a 3D game-like map of the conflict. Over bumpy brown terrain, Taliban holdings emerge as green icons — bases, cities — while US bases and weapons appear as bright blue. In this non-interactive game, movement forward occurs as time passes: each day's data produces new visual configurations, and viewers can see one day after another as they watch the game load and progress.

The Iraq expansion pack – 'Now Anyone Can Be a "Blow-dried Armchair General"' — picks up the trope of game mods and applies it to the escalating violence of a follow-up war in Iraq. The effect is eerie and chilling. Given the early media blackout Americans experienced during these wars — as opposed to the made-for-TV-drama of the Gulf War — this reduction of conflict and carnage to a game board only reinforces the terrible distortion imposed by the media on 'reality'. The intelligence data collected by Klima as raw numbers fails to give us a sense of the stakes, the suffering, and the cost of this war. When conflict can so easily be turned into information, downloaded as data, and coded as entertainment, we know that the Information Age harbors serious threats to our sense of ourselves and our experience. Klima's war games are a wake-up call. If the medium is the message, this is one message worth listening to.



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Orson Scott Card, Ender's Game
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THE ENDS OF WAR

If *The Great Game* forces us to rethink the effect of the media on reality (and vice versa), *Ender's Game*, a novel about the effects of war games on a young boy, pushes the point even further. In Klima's game, it's the disjuncture between real war and war games that feels so queer and destructive — a disjuncture invisible in the military games currently on the market. *Ender's Game* erases that disjuncture completely so that war gaming becomes a method of waging war using the gaming skills of a reluctant six-year-old genius named Andrew 'Ender' Wiggin. After two near fatal attacks by aliens, called 'Buggers' for their resemblance to insects both in their appearance and in their 'hive' mentality, Earth faces a third attack. To defend itself, it trains young boys in a series of war games. Though Ender tries to resist the militarization of his psyche, the suppression of his compassion, and the tapping of his aggression, in the end he is deftly manipulated into become the very thing he abhors: a killer. What Ender doesn't realize is that as he progresses through ever more complex games, he shifts out of virtual reality and into real war: his games turn out to be command sequences for the actual Earth Starfleet. And when he wins the final game, it turns out that his game-violence has wiped out an actual alien species. Ender understands in the end that the defensive war to save humanity was a lie told by the power élite in order to stage a pre-emptive war on a species it could not understand.

In addition to the moral complexity of the story, *Ender's Game* suggests a complex reading of the effects of game technology on our young.[57] On the one hand, they develop confidence in their skills in the virtual world; on the other, they are oblivious to the ways in which adults use this technology to manipulate and enslave them. This manipulation of children for warfare is no mere sci-fi fantasy, as Amy Harmon's research has revealed:

> [[exerpt]] The possibilities of networked computers, combined with an increasingly remote-controlled military like the one Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld has vowed to build, has spurred interest in adapting the architecture of multiplayer games like Everquest and Ultima to create a 'persistent world' for training and perhaps more. One notion involves a scenario quite literally torn from the pages of a science fiction novel, in which a virtual training system becomes the actual means of waging war. 'Ender's Game,' a cult classic by Orson Scott Card, tells the story of a group of young soldiers battling aliens in a video game. In the end, they emerge to find that their victory has saved humankind, and that it was not a game. '"Ender's Game" has had a lot of influence on our thinking,' said Michael Macedonia, director [*sic*] of the Army's simulation technology center in Orlando, Fl, which plans to build a virtual Afghanistan that could host hundreds of thousands of networked computers. 'The intent is to build a simulation that allows people to play in that world for months or years, participate in different types of roles and see consequences of their decisions.' [58]

What Rumsfeld ignores is that in *Ender's Game*, war games not only wipe out an entire alien species but also destroy the children lured into playing them. The parallel to both Bush's war in Iraq and resistance movements is chilling.But when a people are so desperate to survive that they must sacrifice their own children, then what are they defending? The message that war always destroys — if not outright, then by forcing you to turn into your enemies — links this ominous tale to the efforts of both the US military and 'terrorists' or 'resistance fighters' to use children as cannon fodder for political ends.

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Ruth Catlow, Rethinking Wargames
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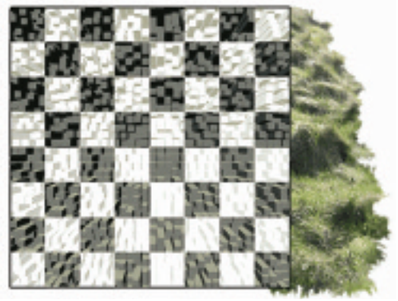
PAWNS OF THE WORLD: UNITE!



While the artists' games and narratives we've just described are critiques of war gaming, other projects offer alternatives. *Rethinking Wargames*, Ruth Catlow's online Net-art project, 'calls upon "pawns to join forces to defend world peace", using the game of chess to find strategies that challenge existing power structures and their concomitant war machineries'.[59] The inspiration for this project was the growing global peace movement that became visible during the 2003 protests against the impending war in Iraq. At that time, Catlow posted a reconfigured chessboard on which all of the pawns united, along with a simple question: 'Under what conditions could the pawns in this game win?' Catlow's rationale was that conventional chess describes a political hierarchy in which the goal is

for one tribe/color to dominate the other. Members of the hierarchy include royalty, nobility, clergy, and military who deploy pawns in their quests to achieve supremacy. *Rethinking Wargames* seeks to challenge the ideology implicit in this despotic structure and to invite democratic constructions of power.

A number of alternate strategies have been proposed, including *Activate: 3 Player Chess* and *Carol's Chess*. In *3 Player Chess*

. the square board is re placed by a circular one of concentric rings that looks like a dart board. All players begin in the inner rings, and the goal is to move to the outer ones in such a way that each player has one of the opposing colors beside it by game's end. No players are captured or defeated; all movement is from center to periphery. Diversity and peace are the final outcomes.

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Natalie Bookchin, agoraXchange

[[subA2]]

BRAVE NEW WORLD GAME

A more radical rethinking of war gaming can be found in Natalie Bookchin's *agoraXchange* project. If war emerges as politically and economically motivated conflict between nation-states, what happens when you eliminate the power and support of nations? This is the question behind Bookchin's project. Launched at London's Tate Gallery in March 2004, *agoraXchange* is an online forum for culling ideas, rules, designs, code, and gameplay for the formation of a multiplayer game designed to challenge the current world system. Participants are asked to reflect on the four decrees that form the new political order. They include: 1. Citizenship by choice not birth; 2. No inheritance; wealth is redistributed at death; 3. No marriage, or no State jurisdiction over kinship relations; 4. No private land rights but lifelong leases for non-harmful uses of land to individuals and organizations. Selections from the manifesto describe the premises behind this collaborative effort to recreate the State using game technology:

> [[extract]] We put forward agoraXchange to elicit collaboration for challenging a world in which myths about birthright result in violence and suffering within and among nations and families. We urge eliminating the laws responsible for nation and marriage because we believe that these institutions misshape our material and psychic lives and constrain the imagination in ways that stunt us all.

We are disturbed by the familiarity and even acceptance of war among much of the world's population, where each day on average hundreds will die from bombs, guns, machetes: over six million dead in wars since 1989…. We also believe human beings deserve an earth that has air that is not toxic, water that is uncontaminated, and an infrastructure that affords everyone basic education and health care.

Finally, we see the travails of war, hunger, restrictions of movement, environmental degradation, the lack of compassion in our political institutions and in our families, as largely rooted in laws that use birth for assigning us our place in life…. It is the laws giving us inheritance and kinship that determine whether one will have access to the hundreds of trillions of dollars in wealth from estates or whether one will grow up in poverty. It is marriage law that produces the family tree, whose roots are always national.

Our present political institutions are not natural or inevitable, but an experiment gone awry, a utopia for the paranoid.[60]

While *agoraXchange* differs dramatically from the other politically motivated structures that have produced the war-game genre, it embodies a similar belief in gaming as a technology well adapted for producing specific values and behavior. *agoraXchange*'s slogan, 'Make the Game, Change the World,' echoes the objective of Buckminster Fuller's 1969 *World Game*:

> [[extract]] To make the World work
> For 100% of humanity
> In the shortest possible time
> Through spontaneous cooperation
> Without ecological offense
> Or the disadvantage of anyone.[61]

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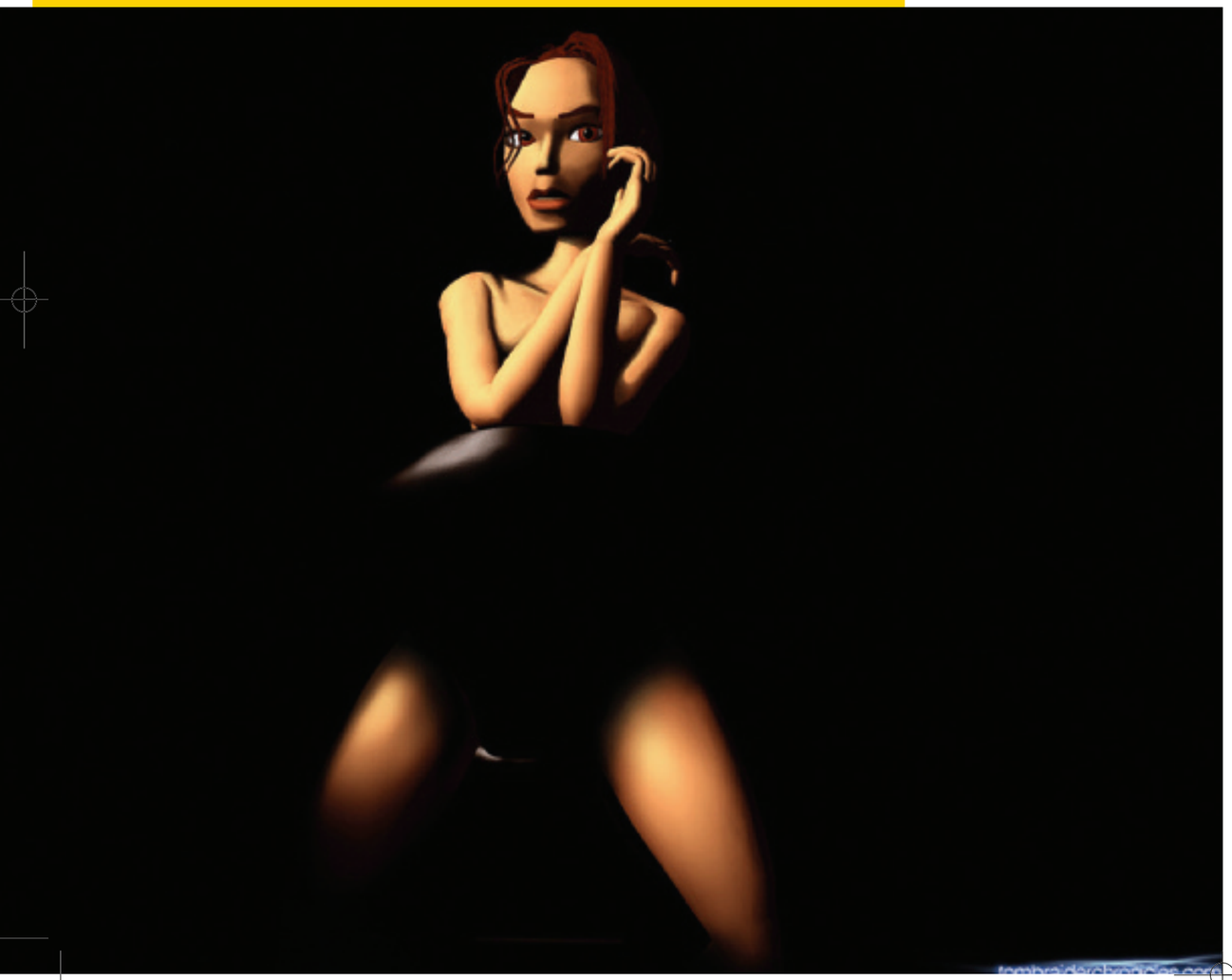
[[divider]] **Gender Bending**

In its raw form, gender can be arresting, as the hit counts of porn sites readily attest. In the context of gaming, however, gender more often serves as a character embellishment meant to drive rather than halt the story. Yet without moments of arrest, games that invoke or rely on gender as a plot device usually fail to transcend stereotypical roles for male or female characters.



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Eidos Interactive, Tomb Raider

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FEMME/BUTCH FATALE

In 1996, Eidos Interactive released an adventure game that would alter the course of gameplay and design: an adventure game/**third-person shooter** with a powerful, athletic, gun-toting, *female* protagonist. *Tomb Raider* placed Lara Croft front and center on screen and off. Object of fascination and desire for both male and female gamers, hailed as gaming woman of the year, and derided as the latest celebrity bimbo, Lara Croft aroused gamers and critics alike. Between 1996 and the end of 2000, Eidos Interactive released five versions of Lara Croft adventures games. During this time, Lara herself went on to become a multi-genre heroine, breaking out of the confines of an enclosed game industry with moves as varied as those of her character: exploding onto magazine covers, leaping into concert with U2, charging into a Hollywood hit movie with Angelina Jolie in the starring role. How did the introduction of a female protagonist inaugurate a blockbuster game series and launch a game-publishing empire? Why was this particular spin on gender so popular?

A bored aristocrat bent on adventure, gun-toting, acrobatic, sexually alluring Lara exudes power.. With seemingly infinite resources, cunning, and curiosity, she ventures into the most forbidding territory, from ancient Egyptian ruins to Atlantean caverns, from the wilds of Antarctica to the Great Wall of China. Her quest for lost treasure produces gameplay which is an innovative mix of adventure, puzzle-solving, and weapon-firing. Success depends on the player's ability to make Lara leap, swim, roll, grab, crawl, sprint, somersault, dodge, and run at just the right moments, all while firing her endless supply of weapons.

Lara is clearly a 'non-consensual fantasy engine,'[62] but whose fantasies is she enabling? Scantily clad and well-endowed, she may satisfy male sexual fantasies, but that appeal also spells a certain kind of power for female players, especially if it remains a taunt rather than an offering. Of course, male players can control Lara's body through the game, but what they do with that body is pretty much limited to feats of athletic prowess or aggressive triumph over enemies. For players of either gender to experience a sexualized female as agile, mobile, and powerful is to recode the meaning of the feminine body, perhaps even to expand the arena of erotic sensibility from the genital to the muscular.

If such freedom of movement, such agility, such power were to translate into real-world expectation and activity for women, it might do a good deal to counteract the advertising industry's imagery of women as childish, anorexic waifs. Lara Croft owns weapons and uses them freely, not merely to defend herself but to satisfy her desires. She travels alone and confronts her enemies with cunning and equanimity. She has a vast fortune and hired help to do her bidding. Given such an array of resources and the mission to 'find your lost treasures', it's hard to see how any woman could resist this enactment of fantasy. Perhaps most important is the fact that a female character and player can pursue her own adventure, that a female gamer can begin to identify with this fantasy agent. Another iteration of soft porn? Perhaps. But this sexy bitch is available to men only to the extent that they complete her adventure. And, unlike most porn narratives, Lara's adventure has nothing to do with submission. Play her if you like, but it's her game, and her treasures, that matter.

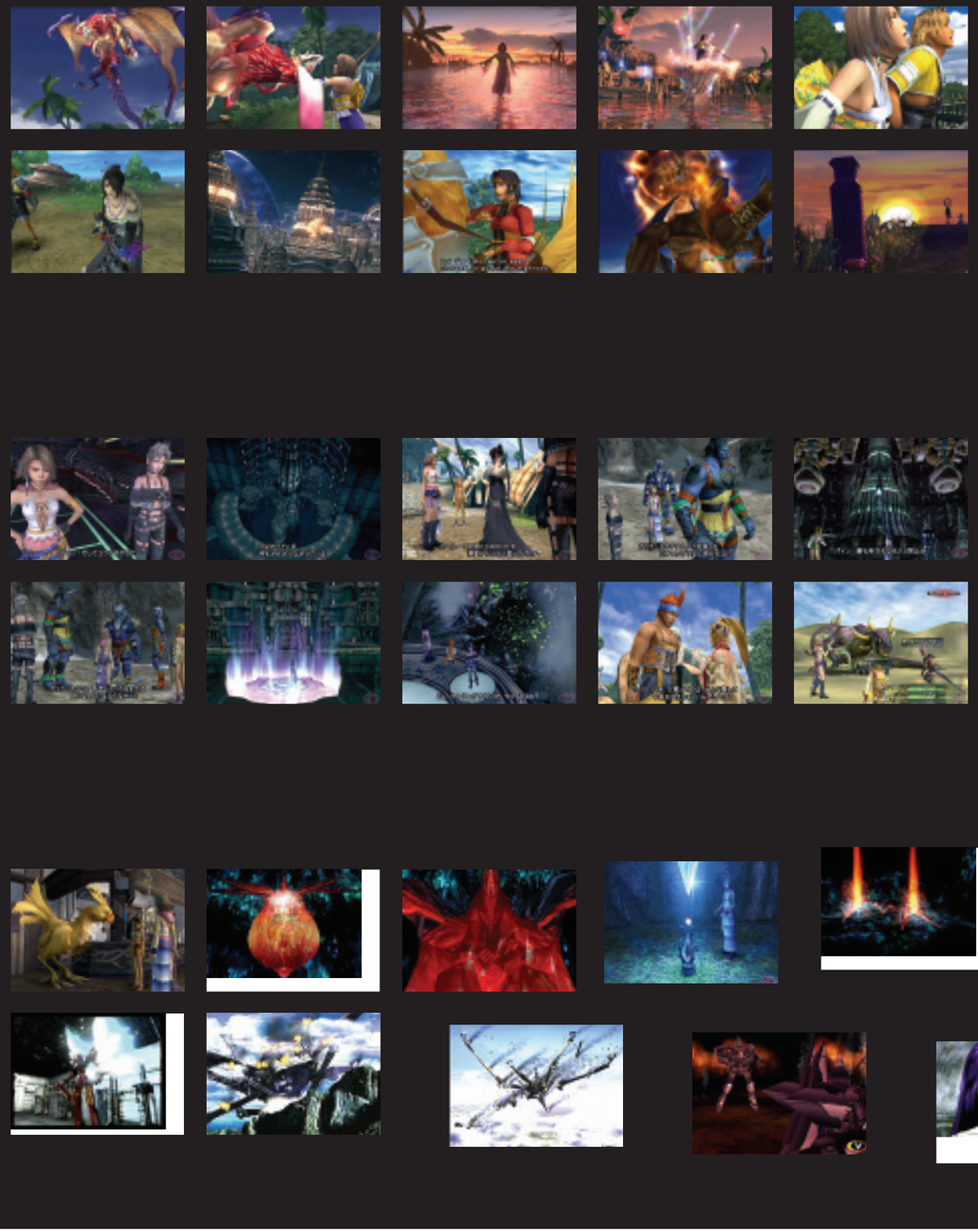
The *Nude Raider* game mod that produces a nude 'skin' for Lara throws one more pebble into the gender pool. Does this naked Lara foreground the power of the game's scopophilic attraction? Or is *Nude Raider* an attack based on discomfort with Lara's perceived power? Why, in any case, do we insist on undressing our heroines?

Like Xena, warrior-princess, her scantily clad TV counterpart, Lara troubles the clear edge between masculine and feminine. Xena turns out to be a mother, a condition suggested by Lara's breasts, unrealistic on any body except a nursing mother's — but in the world of *Tomb Raider*, there is no child because there is no reproductive sex. Perhaps the presence of a child would provoke too great a gender

clash with the hero narrative of adventure and destruction. It may be easy to play the adventurer without children, but liberating mothers is a goal that decades of feminist research have failed to accomplish. Xena may literally be able to juggle an infant in the air as she slashes her enemies' limbs, but most feminists-turned-mothers find themselves in a completely new cultural battlefield once the care of children interrupts their battles for gender equality. Xena also has a female side-kick, male lovers, and friends of both genders to help her in her quests. Finally, her quests are not self-serving but responses to oppressed or downtrodden neighbors. Despite the immersive experience, Lara's quests pale by comparison.

Perhaps a more liberating strategy would be to enable men to play roles often reserved for women, for men to care for, nurture, or educate the young, or heal others' injuries, or encourage other people's quests at the cost of their own. Perhaps narratives of sex and reproduction can be cast as powerful and exhilarating adventures — as they are in real life.

There are emerging hints of these kinds of behaviors in many quest-based adventures or **Role-playing Game**s (RPGs). Games like *Final Fantasy* and *Xenogears* require cooperation, support, and healing powers to advance their respective quests, as do the more battle-minded *Everquest* and *Warcraft*. But healing almost always occurs in the context of battle as one more weapon to wield against the enemy. Moving beyond a Manichean mindset, one that imagines the world in terms of embattled binaries, whether self/other, friend/foe, or male/female, may be more important structurally than any modifications we make to the terms that populate those binaries.



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Square Soft, Parasite Eve

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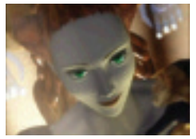
MOTHER OF ALL EVIL

In 1998, a few years after the first release of *Tomb Raider*, Square Soft released *Parasite Eve*, another hybrid genre with a female protagonist. A blend of action, horror, and RPG, *Parasite Eve* combines the creepiness of *Resident Evil* with the earnestness of a *Final Fantasy* quest. Dubbed a 'cinematic RPG' by its makers, *Parasite Eve* follows its heroine as she battles a foe able to incinerate humans by cranking up their mitochondrial energy. Immune to the weapon, a young New York cop, Aya Brea, must find a way to save her fellow humans. This heroine is tough and realistic with an occasional sense of humor, especially in the sequel, *Parasite Eve 2*. Perhaps the most important development with this release is the lack of surprise or attention to gender triggered by the female protagonist. Is this because Lara Croft's novelty has worn off, leaving females to play in the terrain of male fantasy?

Aya Brea's nemesis, Eve, host to the mutated mitochondria, is also a woman. She joins other perversely populating female monsters like the mother-creature in Ridley Scott's film *Aliens*. A mother figure as destructive force, an Eve who ends life rather than originating it, may say more about another set of male fantasies — those driven by fear — than it does about women. Sexual reproduction and the cultural role females have played in that arena haunt these game environments, whether as devaluations of sex or as the demonizing of reproductive power. Furthermore, the fact that this Eve was a dead woman whose resuscitation by her mourning lover triggered the virus couples fear of sex with the Frankenstein fear of technology gone wrong. The issue is less whether females have lead roles (one wonders if two females battling it out is any less a male fantasy than two lesbians getting it on) than whether these are the kinds of roles that women would choose to play in their own fantasies. It may well be that those who control the spaces of cultural fantasy are those who end up with political control as well. If women are interested in political power, they may need to reject fantasies that cater merely to men and demand the space and technology to enact their own.



[[head2]]
Nintendo, Metroid Prime
[[subA2]]
DRAG QUEEN, FRAG QUEEN

If Lara bursts onto the game scene to satisfy the voyeuristic player, and Aya Brea slips into a *noir* horror game to reassure the paranoid one, then Samus of the highly acclaimed *Metroid Prime* sneaks in the back door to startle the sexist player. Essentially a biogenetically engineered bounty hunter, Samus searches the planet Tallon IV for ancient Chozo artifacts. To survive, and to defeat her many and varied enemies, she must be as proficient an explorer as a warrior. This means that gameplay has as much to do with deciphering complex and convincing terrain as it does with blasting jellyfish-like enemies or Zebesian space pirates. Covered by impressive red and gold armor, Samus plays like a man — so much so that players who take her for one are often shocked at the end when a scantily clad Samus is revealed as 'reward' for the male player. To have to confront feelings of identification with this tough female character without being able to demote her to the role of sexual prey could have elicited a deeper and more powerful effect on both male and female players. Instead, as many reviewers have hinted, male players who know the secret often rush through gameplay to catch a glimpse of the woman beneath the armor.

Still, two unusual features in *Metroid Prime* break the typical masculine shoot-'em-up pattern: the inclusion of text critical to solving the mystery and the use of visual perspectives or points of view. Like *Myst*, *Metroid Prime* stuns with spectacular scenery rather than strict storyline, but freedom of movement is tied to the solving of a mystery that requires a significant amount of reading, some more scientific than narrative — a rather unusual demand for what at first appears to be a first-person shooter. For example, upon finding the journals of the space pirates, Samus can read about their creepy genetic experiments as well as witness the damage she's inflicted on them. Another way to gain intelligence is the clever use of three different 'visors', or heads-up displays, each of which gives her a different kind of information or view of her environment. The 'default' combat visor provides a clear view of her surroundings as well as easy targeting of enemies, while the scan visor allows her to gather data about alien creatures, space anomalies, or environmental details. Information acquired via scan is automatically recorded in Samus's log in clear, coherent language that can be accessed at any point during gameplay.

These innovations in 'intelligence' and 'point of view' signal a more complex, less stereotypically gendered game space. They may be even more important innovations than the revelation of a female protagonist at game's end, for they remind us that reality is complex and multivalent, requiring as much brain as brawn, and, most importantly, that survival may be a result of being able to recognize and respect more than one perspective.

[[head2]]
Funatics, Zanzarah
[[subA2]]
SAVING A LOST WORLD

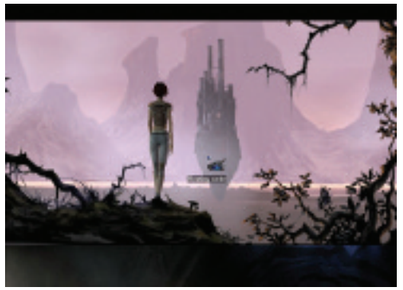
With *Zanzarah,* released at the end of 2002, the heroine stepped out of the closet of game culture and sex stereotypes and into her own adventure. Unlike *Tomb Raider*, there's no sense of being ogled by the player despite the similar third-person perspective, and unlike *Metroid Prime*, all the heroism accrues to a female from the outset rather than to a woman who must hide her gender to the end to be effective. The official website promotion speaks in clear defiance of the heroic tradition: 'The legends speak of a long forgotten prophecy...of a gleaming hero, and of perilous adventures...of sinister powers, strange worlds and hosts of fairies...but they say nothing of a girl with more heart than muscle...but then, even legends can sometimes be wrong.'[63] To reinforce the departure from the ego-inflating heroes of traditional gameplay, the protagonist, Amy, is an ordinary young woman living in London. After a disastrous eighteenth birthday and a fight with her parents, she flees to her room with a sense that there's something horribly wrong with the world. Her fears are well founded. Finding a rune in a box, she is transported to Zanzarah, an alternate world of fairies, elves, dwarves, and other strange creatures, where she learns that past persecution of these magical creatures by rampaging humans drove them to another realm. But some fairies are beginning to fight among themselves, and there are signs of impending ruin unless Amy can find a way to fulfill the prophecy and help them. Her task is to heal the breach between the two worlds by collecting, training, and battling with fairies.

However, what begins as a quest involving puzzle-solving, learning about other beings, and deciphering mysteries quickly evolves into a skill-building, fairy-collecting battle system more reminiscent of *Quake III* than a legend-busting adventure. Perhaps this is merely an atavistic return to the adrenaline-pumping scene of game battles, though clearly in a different kind of drag — one that substitutes stunning scenery and pretty elves for blood-letting and gore. Clearly, women experience rage, aggression, and fight impulses just as men do. What isn't clear is whether these different forms of battle extend the range of possible human response or are merely the same Manichean binary dressed up in fancier clothes. That Amy is trying to save the world puts her in the same moral realm as the Bushes and bin Ladens who demonize their enemies in order to justify the high moral ground they occupy.

If both women and men need to exorcise rage in their chosen forms of entertainment, perhaps our own world is in as much danger as that of *Zanzarah*, and perhaps Amy's (and the player's) feeling that all is not right ought to be taken a bit more seriously. Despite the high production values, intriguing Enya-like soundtrack, and stereotype-busting storyline, *Zanzarah* lacks the commitment to complex character development, coherent and rich narrative, and psychological depth that marked its model and predecessor, *The Longest Journey*.

[[head2]]
Funcom, The Longest Journey
[[subA2]]
HERSTORY HEALS HISTORY

Produced in 2000, two years before *Zanzarah* and *Metroid Prime*, by the Norwegian developer Funcom, *The Longest Journey* staked out completely new ground, earning superlative reviews from adventure gamers around the globe. 'It makes every other game you've ever played seem unimportant and trite,' one reviewer noted;[64] '...it's an interactive epic legend with a story that rivals anything Hollywood could do. It is probably THE best game (and story) I've ever come across, not just in the adventure genre, but in all genres of PC gaming.'[65]



The Longest Journey features a fully fledged, fully believable heroine who turns the paradigm of the war hero on its head. Like *Zanzarah*'s Amy, April Ryan is an ordinary eighteen-year-old, in this case an art student struggling to make a life for herself in the industrial wasteland of a 23rd-century metropolis. She lives alone in a boarding house, having escaped a domineering father and passive mother only to encounter a brutish neighbor. During the day, she waitresses in a café to support herself and pay for art school, but at night she's a victim of disturbing dreams. When dream events begin to infiltrate waking life, April realizes that something is terribly wrong. She discovers a world of science and technology called Stark, and another of magic and enchantment called Arcadia, as well as a force called Balance that keeps the two worlds in harmony. Apparently, the guardian of Balance has vanished, disrupting the harmony and plunging both worlds into Chaos. As a 'shifter', April has rare access to the two worlds, and while she does not control the timing or nature of the shifting, she can use it to try to heal the breach between them and restore Balance.

As she travels to exotic lands, April meets a host of unusual characters, including Abnaxus, a Vener who lives across time rather than space; the crazy Burns Flipper, a curmudgeonly hacker who's lost his legs and thus speeds around in a hover car; and a talking bird called That Damned Bird. April has the ability to interact with these other characters in convincing and appropriate dialogue. From Acadia's Vestrum Tobias, she can learn religious philosophy, from the Bandu she can learn about digging and shaping the earth using her will, from the librarian Minstrum Yerin she can get access to essential books. Most non-playing characters have something to offer April in her quest. These encounters teach her about the foreign worlds and also about herself, since her quest is at once a personal and a political journey. She uses a conversation log to keep track of her encounters, and of video replay to revisit scenes relevant to the plot. Throughout the story, she also carries a diary filled with details garnered in her travels.

While its graphics, sound, and adventure gameplay all score at the top of the charts, what distinguishes *The Longest Journey* is narrative sophistication. April begins her quest as a naïve country girl and undergoes a transformation. She has meaningful, spoken interactions with other characters that are linked to the complex plot. There

are Brechtian hints that she's aware that she's a game character, and also aware of your presence as a player, thus stimulating critical analysis during gameplay. Despite the fantasy worlds through which she travels, there's an attempt to present a realistic future world, including lesbian colleagues, domineering fathers, and helpful children. All of these are details of storytelling underdeveloped in most computer games, and they transform a tale of a simple young woman into an epic adventure. This model of heroism is one earned not by blasting enemies but by confronting struggles which teach wisdom, by encounters which require listening and learning, by moral dilemmas which require elucidation. This is the heroism of an ordinary life transformed by service to others. In many ways, April recalls *HalfLife's* Dr Gordon Freeman without the lethal weapons, just an ordinary citizen whose acts of courage help to heal and save her corner of the world.

Computer games can't be reduced to print storytelling. Their immersive effect depends on graphics, sound, and gameplay as much as on story. But game designers can learn from the power of narrative adapted to game environments. Good storytelling in any medium is immersive and transformative. It has the power to create, critique, and alter worlds, and this power provides us with a space in which to engage in deep play. Why should we settle for gender stereotypes and Hollywood heroes when the full range of human experience, and the full scope of play, are so much more complex and powerful?

[[head2]]
John Klima, Jack & Jill
[[subA2]]
GENDERED CODES

A number of digital artists have attempted to trouble notions of gender in gaming as well as to reveal the narrow range represented by many games. One example is John Klima's *Jack & Jill*. Commissioned for the Whitney Museum of American Art's 'CODeDOC' exhibition (see Chapter 01), *Jack & Jill* is a simple game based on the 'Jack and Jill' nursery rhyme. In the rhyme, both children go up the hill to 'fetch a pail of water', but once the water is in the bucket, their roles change: Jack falls down and breaks his crown while Jill comes tumbling after. In Klima's game version, written in **Visual Basic**, the roles become interchangeable depending on variables in the code. Since the 'CODeDoc' project was commissioned specifically to foreground the code that creates an artwork, we can see the technology that leads to the gendered game roles. We can also see how easy it is to slightly alter the code so that the stereotypical roles can be reversed. Klima's do-while loop contains the following code, which also serves as cultural commentary:

```
[[list]] If YourAttitude = CHAUVINIST Then
If Fetch(pail, jack, jill) Then GoUpHill jack, jill
If FellDown(jack) And BrokeCrown(jack) Then
TumblingAfter jill, jack
ElseIf YourAttitude = FEMINIST Then
If Fetch(pail, jill, jack) Then GoUpHill jill, jack
If FellDown(jill) And BrokeCrown(jill) Then
TumblingAfter jack, jill
```

In other words, if you're a chauvinist, then Jack will lead and Jill will follow, while if you're a feminist, Jill will lead and Jack will follow. Of course a while loop will repeat a statement until the original condition, or 'test', proves false. But Klima includes variables which can affect the original conditions and make the original test false, as we can see in this **if-then statement**:

```
[[list]] If ChangeItIf(SlimChance) Then
If (Leader.EmotionalState = INDECISIVE Or
```

```
Leader.EmotionalState = RELUCTANT) And
ChangeItIf(Leader.Desire) Then
Leader.EmotionalState = WILLING
ElseIf (Leader.EmotionalState = INDECISIVE Or
Leader.EmotionalState = WILLING) And ChangeItIf(1
– Leader.Desire) Then
Leader.EmotionalState = RELUCTANT
ElseIf (Leader.EmotionalState = RELUCTANT Or
Leader.EmotionalState = WILLING) And ChangeItIf(1
– follower.Desire) Then
Leader.EmotionalState = INDECISIVE
```

The decision about who leads can change on the 'SlimChance' that the leader's emotional state — 'indecisive' or 'reluctant' or 'willing' — changes. In a humorous and direct way, Klima has represented the way in which simple yet hidden codes influence behavior, and the fact that changes in the programming code are easy to make. His program also suggests that to a large extent changes in behavior appear to be dependent on who the current leader is. Since Klima begins with a gender binary (Jack/Jill), his options remain caught in dualistic thinking. But a quick perusal of the code suggests that narratives with three or more alternatives are equally possible by simply adding functions, variables, or 'if' and **'else if' clause**s. If coding computer games has largely been in the hands of men, then the code behind both gender stereotypes and game design is likely to be caught in outdated while loops until someone is willing to alter it.

Blaming the market for failures in coding — both cultural and computer coding — seems hopelessly naïve given Klima's easy exposure of the structures behind the Jack-and-Jill tale. Talented novelists and filmmakers can produce stories and scripts which appeal to both genders. When game designers can't code games which appeal to women, they might want to look to the gaps in their cultural training or acumen rather than projecting their failures onto an abstract 'market'.

[[head2]]

Josephine Starrs and Leon Cmielewski, Bio-Tek Kitchen

[[subA2]]

MUTINY IN THE KITCHEN

Bio-Tek Kitchen patches the *Marathon Infinity* game engine so that instead of blowing up aliens to a spooky soundtrack with 'awesome killing sounds', the players 'clean up the filthy kitchen laboratory of a home biotech enthusiast using weapons such as dish cloths and egg flippers'.[66] Mutant vegetables like giant corn and flying tomatoes, supposedly produced by genetic nouvelle cuisine, attack the player, who must defend him– or herself with a limited arsenal of kitchen tools. During the course of the game, the player learns about a 'world wide corporate conspiracy to take over the entire food chain'.

While the transformation of a game described as an 'enjoyable mixture of raw carnage and intelligent puzzle-solving' to a battle between egg flippers and tomatoes is at first hilarious, it doesn't take long to realize that the gameplay for both the best-selling game and the ridiculous **patch** are very similar. Once the veneer of macho bloodletting and high stakes is removed, the gameplay is exposed as being rather trivial.

[[head2]]

Eric Zimmerman, Sissyfight

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BRINGING VIOLENCE HOME

Eric Zimmerman's *Sissyfight*[67] troubles gender by moving aggression from the battlefield to the schoolyard. Described as an 'intense war between a bunch of girls', *Sissyfight* combines the live strategy game with virtual community. The goal is to attack other players' popularity and damage their self-esteem until they are humiliated enough to cower in a corner and cry. You begin by creating and naming your character in the 'dressing room', then choose a school, enter the 'homeroom' to scout the action, and finally pick a 'schoolyard' fight. Your 'weapons' include grabbing, scratching, or teasing — all of which erode the ten self-esteem points with which each player begins — while your defense is limited to cowering, licking a lollipop, or tattling on others. Since actions are more powerful if performed by more than one player, and since up to two players can win, there's a clear advantage to forming alliances and making friends. Once all players except two have lost all self-esteem points, the round ends with clear winners and losers whose scores are permanently recorded and available anytime during play

Players call the game fun, addictive, and intensely social, and many claim they have formed real relationships through gameplay. Unlike the fantastic or futuristic settings of many shooters or military-strategy games, *Sissyfight* is based on experiences familiar to most players. Its humor and playfulness allow players enough distance to engage in painful social relationships of competition and cooperation. *Sissyfight* clearly demonstrates that aggression, competition, and triumph are common across gender, and that the aggression we see on the battlefield is no stranger to the backyard.

Indeed, *Sissyfight* offers us a reading for the current state of gameplay. If we can connect the difficult real-world battles that trouble our children to their fascination with computer games, perhaps we can learn something about how we are failing them, and how they are trying to cope with these failures in the fantasy realm of games. If we read their play as deep, and we read it deeply enough, we will see a dark reflection in this particular technological mirror — one that reflects a struggle for safety, agency, and respect that goes beyond the gender divide, and certainly beyond the boundary of the game box.