Winning and Losing in the Hall of Mirrors

A study into the structural psychoanalytic interfaces arising during the video game situation

A thesis submitted for the award of PhD Psychology

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Abstract

Who are we? Why do we do the things we do? These questions are constantly under scrutiny, forever unable to provide us with adequate answers, it seems. Yet, with the continuing rise in popularity of digital media, we are able to situate these questions in a different sphere and see aspects of the self that we were unable to perceive before. Digital media forms have provided us with the capacity to explore whole new worlds, as well as allowing for new and innovative methods of communication. These changes make a huge impact on the daily lives of individuals.

This thesis presents a theoretical contribution to both psychoanalytic thinking and to the rapidly expanding field of games studies, with especial reference to avatar-based games. It considers the status of the bond formed between the individual at play (known here as the 'user') and the game itself. Furthermore, it presents this as a model which identifies the user's relation to the game dynamic through an understanding of the key components of a video game, including aspects such as the control mechanism. Elements which cross the boundary between the user/game realities are also considered with relation to hyperreality, thus forming a more complete imagining of this framework. This also allows for an application of this dynamic to what we define as violent (and associated) acts within games.

In turn, this allows for a more complete understanding of the game situation, and can be applied to our understanding of the user as well. This thesis provides a standalone framework which can also be utilised in other types of investigation in future.

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Introduction

It has been stated that everything we do can be read as a performance. Furthermore, that performance should be acknowledged by others, even if it is known to be a performance by the individual conducting it. “They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the same consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be.” (Goffman 1959:28).

These are the words of sociologist Erving Goffman. Individuals put on social performances all the time, either knowingly or otherwise, and it is up to the spectator to interpret and react to said performance.

Play has many performative aspects to it, as do games in general. This includes video games. Much of childhood play centres around a child imagining a role and playing it. Performance is even essential in many more structured games, for example in poker, where convincing others of one’s confidence in the cards becomes a method of winning the game.

An individual at play will henceforth be known as a ‘user’. This differentiates the individual from other interpretations (‘player’, for example, is often utilised). I feel, however, that ‘player’ provides the individual at play with a sort of agency that I do not explore in this thesis. Here I address the individual at play as more of a structure fulfilling its purpose in a specific scenario: I do not address the individual’s specific requirements or thoughts with relation to said scenario. Therefore, the word ‘user’ is deemed a more appropriate term for the purpose of this research.

The question of what the user is doing and where they are when they are at play in the context of a video game is an important one. Psychologically, the user and the character in the game seem somewhat connected, and this can be regarded as performative as the user appears to take on something of the character they play as. Calling the link performative may be simplifying what is actually occurring, however.

In this thesis, I uncover this bond between the user and specific types of game. In doing so I present a clearer understanding of the level at which play takes place and where in relation to the play the user is actively situated.

This thesis expresses the importance of the link between the user and character

on-screen, as well as the environment that surrounds it. Whilst I acknowledge that there are other types of video games and virtual play spaces that do not place such a central focus on a specific character, I feel that the expression of the bond defined within this thesis would be quite different, and thus out of the range covered here. Whilst this thesis deals with the importance of this centrality to the user, the dynamic of the 'intermediate ego' introduced in Chapter Three should be considered a bond that can be characterised in a different way to deal with games that do not meet this default specification. The types of games dealt with in this thesis should be defined as 'avatar-based'. Because I deal with them specifically, I present a means of understanding video games in general but not the specifics of how this bond works in all available types. Therefore some aspects mentioned within the thesis could be considered to apply to games in general, although I focus predominantly on a specific type.

Furthermore, this thesis presents a means of understanding other active elements which surround the game situation. How do we understand familiar objects within the game situation? Should games be questioned in terms of their realism? Is there even anything approximating realism there? All of these questions situate the game in its own context and allow for a greater comprehension of both the user and the game itself.

This work is representative of the human desire to understand the self. In video games, when the user is at play they are not the same self that they present to others. This means that there is something occurring between the user and the game that changes the presentation of self to the point that a user will speak in the personal tense when reminiscing about the events of the game.

This is not to state that the user becomes the character they play on-screen, but it is a means of demonstrating the importance of the link between the two. Video games have surged in popularity in recent years, and have reached the point where what they are and what is occurring affects a much larger demographic. As we become increasingly reliant on machines in all aspects of our lives, it is going to become essential that we understand what manner of situation we are placing ourselves in when we interact with said machines.

There is a great deal of research interest in video games from many different

disciplines, meaning that it is both an enriching and contested area of study. Presenting a structural way of representing the user's relationship with the game adds another layer to this research and allows for a strong platform for other related research. This approach involves a multidisciplinary standpoint, which particularly marries theories from postmodernism and psychoanalysis together. The importance of doing so rests with the scope of the game, and the idea that we can gain an understanding of not just the game or the user, but the entire experience of interaction with a virtual world. This is further explored in the second section of Chapter Three.

Video games create a situation whereby this user is situated before a screen with a controller of some variety, which they use to direct the action on the screen. Control is often centred on a singular character, represented within the perspective that is being played in. For example, in first person one would see only arms and legs. This representation is known as an avatar and can take many forms, some of which bear little resemblance to the user, to the point that one might adopt a mouse cursor as the point of control (which then becomes almost representative of the avatar, the implication being that said representation is at the point of the user). Arguably, the latter might not be considered an 'avatar', for the representational value of what one is playing as is not so distinct. Equally, there are games which do not afford the user anything that might be considered an avatar (computer chess and sports games, for example, represent a fractured dynamic of the avatar where one switches between different playing pieces). This thesis looks predominantly at games which have a direct link between the user and avatar, and whilst I acknowledge that games which do not express the same type of connection exist, they are not covered in this study.

There is a huge diversity in terms of games, and what the user has in order to direct the action on-screen can vary from this tiny arrow to a veritable colossus of a character, making it virtually impossible to describe how the bond works in all scenarios, hence the focus on a popular form of play (avatar-based). Similarly, the environment surrounding the avatar is just as important for developing the atmosphere of the game and often elements of the character.

In horror game *Project Zero* (2001) (also known as *Fatal Frame*), the environment surrounding the protagonist tends to be overwhelming, which gives clarity to the character's grim situation.

In other media (such as cinema) involving the screen, the spectator (who must be convinced) should be considered as the audience. However, in video games, the user fits a different dynamic with relation to the screen. The question is, what impact does this dynamic have?

All forms of contemporary media seem to involve a performative aspect. Often it is the medium itself which performs. However, when at play the user is active. Furthermore, this activity has a direct relation to the medium itself. Where is this performance taking place? Does it take place in the game world, or in reality? Is there a singular performance, or even a performance at all? Where has this dynamic of action arisen from, and what does the user become? Has our desire for competitive play finally entered a virtual plane, and where are we to go from here?

Taking all of the elements to be covered in this study into account, I pose the following brief observations about avatar-based games. These are elements which are addressed further throughout the thesis.

We often find ourselves at play. However, when in the process of playing a video game, we are subject to something that has the potential to go on for far longer than a more casual form of play. I hypothesise here that there is something that

causes the individual to continue to play the game, either to the end or until this process of interest is lost. This is something that might begin at the point of sale, for example, and seems intrinsically connected with the user's association with the product or characters.

Following from this, the element of the avatar, which one takes on for the duration of the game, must have some effect on the individual at play. I propose that this is intrinsically tied with the above statement: identification with one's avatar propels one through the game's story. As Ewan Kirkland states, “The avatar represents the ‘I’ on the screen. It constitutes the means by which the gamespace is engaged with, and acts as the focal point for the player’s sense of embodiment.” (2009:1). The relationship between the user and the game is defined throughout the thesis, and this allows for an understanding of the avatar’s importance. Beyond the realms of this connection is the process of identifying both the virtual and reality. Realism within games thus becomes a central point, and the idea of games having reached a point that is already beyond this (hyperreality) is also explored.

A game that borders on reality loses much of what makes it a game, and might be considered more akin to a simulator. However, when one looks at titles which have adopted this name, they do not mimic in a direct way. Activities are separated from one another, given their own emphasis which in reality would be purely meaningless, but works in a gaming environment. This is related to the idea of the Magic Circle, a concept initially coined by Johan Huizinga to describe a separate play space (Huizinga 2008). Said term has been absorbed into games studies and is a familiar term to describe the barrier between the user and the game space. Gordon Calleja states that “The magic circle assumes a separation between games and the “real” world, imbuing games with a sense of artificiality that is often seen as one of their defining elements.” (2010:336). An example of how the game feeds back to the user to remind them of the game’s difference might be the HUD, or heads-up display, which is the method by which the game communicates certain statistics with the player, such as the amount of time they have to complete an aspect of a specific level.

Although the concept of the Magic Circle is commonly used in video games studies, it remains widely contested. Obviously Huizinga was not speaking of the

same worlds we utilise the term for now, but this layer of meaning afforded the experience appears to close the experience of playing a game into an interesting area. I do feel that such a separation between the worlds is problematic, and that any such notion might be better considered as a more fluid structure. Whilst I agree with the notion of mutual feedback between the user and the game, I feel that my construction which I term the 'intermediate ego' (introduced in Chapter Three) provides a more modernised route through this issue and allows the user and the external world a more dominant role in this feedback process.

Further to this (and to render the situation more problematic) despite the constant striving for more realistic graphics, reality is not the realm of play. However, as the character Baton suggests in the classic animated film *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), directed by Mamoru Oshii: "All data that exists is both reality and fantasy". So even though play exists on the fictional level, it has the ability to implement aspects of both one's personal and shared reality. In psychoanalytic terms, this phrase should be considered with relation to concepts such as false memories and the idea that the individual does not tell the difference between a 'real' memory and a false one. Thus when we look at games we must consider the idea that the user is comfortable with interchangeably speaking of reality and the virtual, for example where the user speaks of their experiences with the game in the first person.

Is our interest in games increasing with this continual desire to renew graphics and remain up-to-date with the latest technology? Are we spending more time at play, or are we simply playing differently? We are now in a situation whereby there are so many different types of game to satisfy our desire for play. Some games demand a steep learning curve, whilst others can easily be picked up for a short period of time. Does interest start to wane if one does not play a game for some time, or begins to play another game?

Finally, the idea of rules in games provides the player with a structured environment in which they are free to play. Rules which are implemented by the game should remain a mechanism for the most part, maintaining the illusion of space rather than referencing it and therefore breaking it. Rules are, as such, essential, but only in the background, and if made mention of, must hide themselves within the illusion or be an acceptable part of it.

These statements form the initial basis of my exploration of play in this context. There are particular elements within the relationship between the game and the player which must be maintained effectively to ensure the player continues to play. This is because there must be a balance between the external (user) dimension and the internal (game) world. If this fails to be maintained either by the user or game, problems could arise.

In the first chapter, I deal with some of the predominant research forms surrounding the video game. This serves to place a context around both a game in itself and also where my own research fits in. The second chapter refers to the location of the user and how we might understand the play state, with relation to contemporary play examples. The third chapter is split into two important sections. The first of these introduces the concept of the intermediate ego, a construct that helps to explain the user/game bond. The second part isolates the theories of both psychoanalysis and hyperreality, and shows how they might both be utilised in order to form a strong and coherent understanding of the game situation. Chapter Four deals with Baudrillard's theory regarding hyperreality. This is then used to explain how familiar objects are written into and explained within the text of the game. The fifth chapter deals with the basis of elements such as violence and sexuality within video games, how they are structured and how they might be understood from a play perspective. Finally, I highlight potential avenues for the future of gaming, including elements of contemporary technology (such as games which display in 3D), and how these might be understood in relation to the theories expanded upon in the previous chapters. These are shown in the appendix of the thesis.

These chapters focus on the game situation as a whole, beginning from a broad context of historical and contemporary examples, before focussing on the specifics within the game dynamic. The play environment and the game situation are both aspects that interact with the user in a specific way in order to produce the experience of the game as a whole. In this thesis, I present a method by which these dynamics might be considered to work, whilst also presenting what it is that maintains the bond between the user and game.

As this thesis emerges from a psychological basis, I would like to explain my intent to isolate myself from the question of whether or not video games can be

claimed to have an effect on individuals. This is of importance due to the quantity of recent psychological studies which investigate the perceived effects of games (Anderson, for example). Whilst Chapter Five deals with aspects of the 'extreme' within video games (including violence and sexuality), it makes no attempt to express whether or not said games encourage individuals into a state of mimicry. This is because, if we consider the notion of video games as powerful tools of expression that have revolutionised the idea of play, then the very question of their effect might be considered redundant. Whether or not a game has an effect on an individual seems to be secondary to how that game is structured with relation to that individual.

Furthermore, I am making statements with regards to the user's situation in relation to the game. This does not consider specific individual differences for said user. Instead this study observes the processes by which a user might be situated with relation to the game, whether their circumstances enable them to play for ten minutes or two hours. Abnormalities in the structure herein described are not dealt with. My predominant interest here is in terms of the avatar, the link between the individual and the game (structure), familiar objects and their role within the game scenario, hyperreality, and the notion of extreme acts within the game. Furthermore, I consider the future of video games and how this might affect the important structures outlined.

Chapter One – Play and Games

1. Introduction

When we play a game, we rarely spare much consideration for its origins. Games have existed for millennia and will continue to occupy a place in human consciousness, it seems, for centuries to come. With the birth of modern technology, new varieties of games have emerged, games that challenge us in different ways. Said games borrow from their predecessors, from advances in technology, from cinema, even from literary fields. These games have fast progressed from dotted lines on the screen to huge sprawling 'realism' mapped around hours of user gameplay, allowing the user to not simply interact but also to achieve a high level of engagement. These games are known as video games. Their importance as new media forms the structure of this thesis, for video games have quickly taken over a space we were not even aware was there and have become a staple of life for many.

Of course, in order to gain access to the content promised by a game, the means of interaction must be that which propels the user into progression. Although engaging with a game is often fun, it must be separated from the idea of always being so: completion or progression in a game often involves a great deal of effort doing things that the user may not consider particularly enjoyable. When we interact with a game, we are at play, yet the experience is complicated by the levels of action, text and interactivity presented by the game.

This chapter focuses on the concepts of 'play' and 'games', their historical context, and some of the valuable research in the field. Further to this, it represents an introduction to games in general and to some of the concepts that become important later in the thesis. Finally, it helps to situate my position with reference to these concepts and allows for a sturdy background to underpin the remainder of the thesis. Here, I establish definitions of some of these important concepts. These help to draw out meaning, whilst also expressing my reasons for utilising certain theories over others.

Before I proceed with a discussion on the meaning of the word 'play', I would like to define the word 'avatar' and my usage of it throughout this thesis. I already established in the introduction that this study utilised avatar-based games, and that although I acknowledge that there are games in existence that do not use this

dynamic, I am struck by the complexity of the connection that occurs when the game utilises a specific avatar. Many mainstream games make use of this dynamic, and whilst I state that something similar occurs when we initiate contact with any virtual world, the centrality of the avatar in these particular types of game is striking and thus needs to be explored in its own right. An 'avatar' is an image-based representation. In games, it is the character that the user plays as throughout: it is their representation of the 'self', of the bond formed between the user and the game as such. Avatars may be customised, such as those used in online forums, and may look like the user or a favourite character or item. Avatars are representative of that individual and will display beside their name in any interaction on that forum. Characters in games are often fixed or customisable. In both scenarios, they are what the user plays as, and are therefore representative of the self (or rather bond between the user and the game) within that game. When I refer to games throughout this study, I refer specifically to those which are defined by the addition of this avatar. As aforementioned, this thesis does not represent a complete overview of all games, only a specific mainstream category which has a direct link to the user.

So, what does it actually mean to play these avatar-based titles? The concept of 'play' is a difficult concept to describe, but perhaps the simplest method of describing it would be to state that we are manipulating the structures surrounding us (both physical and imaginary) into a space or situation in which we might simulate or perform something. The addition of further structures to this situation, such as rules, would denote it as a 'game'. Video games elaborate on this additional structure and serve to situate the user in a specific location for play. This specificity of location appears to be based on the entire construct of a video game, ranging from the screen to the control system in place.

Roger Caillois defines games as inseparable from the idea of loss, and this is an important distinction, “Herein lies the irreducible element in play, inaccessible to mathematics. For one does not play to win as a sure thing. The pleasure of the game is inseparable from the idea of losing” (2001:173). Thus, playing a game is connected with this competitive element, but it cannot simply be about the idea of winning. This is because there is no such thing as a potential win without the risk of

losing existing. Even in some games, the scope for a ‘win’ is framed in impossibility (in early video games, in particular, this was prominent), and thus the game becomes about avoiding a loss rather than achieving a win.

Despite the huge range of structured elements that we call games, those of all varieties have long been considered an integral pastime, one that is mirrored throughout the animal kingdom. “The 1960s was only one of the few historical conjunctures in which the binary, play and work have been in heightened tension and opposition. Such has been the absolute dominance of the work ethic. The significance of this binary is that often our definition of concepts depends on our knowing what they are not. In this case, we know that play is not work which is generally taken to be its opposite. Arguably, whenever a concept of play is present one of work is not far away” (Brehony 2004:4). The entire idea of play appears at surface level to work in direct opposition with such qualities as hard work, and yet play forms a radical part of our learning experience. In turn, we can apply what we have learned in the play experience to future endeavours. Play does not simply cater to escapism, therefore, but is also linguistically irreducible from its attachment to this concept of 'work'. This idea is furthered by Gordon Calleja, who theorises that games can only be viewed as escapist if they are what is chosen over what we are trying to put off, “If I sweep floors for a living, I would be inclined to yearn for a more creative activity, like say, being a fiction writer. Fiction writing, for me, might be a form of escapism from the daily drudgery of floor sweeping.” (2010:349). Calleja goes on to juxtapose this with the experiences of a published author who puts off their work by sweeping.

I mentioned earlier Caillois’ statement that we cannot separate a game from the idea of loss, nor can we suggest that play can be reduced from what seems like a construct of opposition. Yet, what type of loss can there be in an avatar-based video game? If the character dies, the player restarts from a similar point. Even in games that offer the player only a certain quantity of lives, the game can simply be returned to at another point in time. What loss is it that the game must be framed in reference to, then?

So many aspects of our everyday lives are framed with reference to these important concepts that it seems only natural that we have a desire to understand

what it means to play and how this can affect us. There is a great deal of study already in the human sciences which focuses on elements of play. I intend to focus on the specific context of play that video games promote. Though they are borne of similar roots to other forms of game, video games have taken on an altogether different persona. Said persona emerges from the levels of attachment and immersion that the user affords the game. As I have already mentioned, the entire dynamic of the video game affords the user this experience, and it is because of the user's presence that the dynamic is effective. The game cannot function without the user's presence. Conversely, it would be an extremely different world if humans were separated from the structures of play that they place themselves in on a daily basis. Video games seem to encapsulate a dynamic whereby the user has some degree of singular control whilst at the same time presenting a portal to another realm. Video games are thus powerful tools and have assured themselves a place no less important for study than films or literature.

However, much like the research that is conducted upon them, video games have emerged from a number of different media forms and often borrow rather heavily from them. This is not to suggest that video games do not occupy a field of their own, more that they are situated in a contemporary context. In being so, video games are able to move with technology. The bare structure of a game is not just text, it is not just pictures or speech or action. It is all of these. Games borrow something from so many different fields, and yet they remain distinct in their own right. Galloway ascertains this proposition: "if photographs are images, and films are moving images, then video games are *actions*." (Galloway 2006:2).

I am particularly interested in this idea of video games as hybrid entities. I feel that Galloway's point is phrased as a major characteristic of games, something that identifies them as just that, rather than the central definition. Identifying games by their status as action, however, allows for one to perceive them at the structural level. This is partially because of this hybrid nature and association with fast progression in line with technology, but also because I feel that in analysing such elements we may gain a more concise understanding of what it means to play such games. In analysing video games in this way, it will therefore be important to refer to the history and definition of play, both in a personal and cultural sense, in order to

understand and place this modern phenomenon in its correct context.

2. Historical Setting

In presenting the historical background of the emergence of games, I situate it amongst scholars dealing with said emergence. This brings me to the contemporary research in the field, which encompasses a number of different factions which all have an interest in video games. This multidisciplinary approach to games is so important and is reflective of the games industry in general as a hybridised form.

My primary focus in this thesis is on utilising psychoanalytic and postmodernist theories, although other types of theory are given attention throughout. Psychoanalytic work provides me with the tools required in order to analyse the user/game dynamic, and this chapter forms an important introduction to some of the major theories from psychoanalysis that I use throughout the thesis.

I utilise a specific aspect of postmodernism in this thesis, related to the theorist Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard explored the idea of the hyperreal: something that has become 'more real' than the original. In this way, I am able to formulate an understanding of the role of objects and actions within the virtual world. Whilst I do not utilise it to explain the dynamic itself (psychoanalysis better exposes that structure), these elements within the dynamic feed back to the main process and allow for a greater appreciation of the situation. The importance of this theory cannot be understated: the very idea of a 'fake', something based upon a reality, as existing in a state that is somehow both more and less than that on which it is based is something I explore in much greater detail in Chapters Four and Five. Of course, as a theory of the external, of the object rather than the subject, attention must be given to how we might successfully make use of it with regards to the predominantly psychoanalytic elements that are introduced in chapters prior to its introduction. This is fully explored in the second part of Chapter Three.

Psychoanalytic theory (particularly Lacanian theory, which incorporates a structural, and later post-structuralist, basis) is important to games studies because it provides a route through which one can gain an understanding of what is occurring in the underlying structure presented by the game dynamic. This is important to me because in order to identify the user as just that, it is essential to comprehend their particular situation with relation to the other.

This is where psychoanalytic theory comes into play. There is, as yet, only a small body of research which makes use of psychoanalytic theory with regards to games theory (Rehak, Jagodzinski). Psychoanalysis provides an interesting framework by which to understand elements of contemporary life. This means that it lends itself well to the type of theoretical research that takes place in this thesis, although it obviously does not lend itself well to other studies such as those which contain a more person-centric or empirical approach. It is my intention to expand said field of research as identification of the essential structures should allow for many avenues of future research which expand upon this base.

I predominantly utilise Lacanian psychoanalytic theory as this assists me in identifying the perceived structures and understanding what is at work during the process of play. Whilst it is the case that psychoanalysis is my most prominent tool, I draw upon other research in the area too. The other research that has been referenced encompasses the spectrum of different fields that have provided new and exciting evidence towards the understanding of the game. This includes research from an empirical psychological level, theories from the multi-disciplinary game studies field, as well as philosophical theories surrounding play. This assists in providing a thorough assessment of the evidence and enables a new route through the issue of the nature of the relationship between the user and the game.

This chapter presents, above all, the context of games research, whilst defining some central elements to the thesis. It also exposes important and relevant theories surrounding our idea of play.

The act of play does not necessarily denote that a game is involved, and this seems due to the levels or types of structure involved in each incident. One might play a musical instrument or hop in circles. Playing a musical instrument has its own distinct structure, but under normal conditions one would find it difficult to consider such an act of playing as a ‘game’. Similarly, simply hopping around in circles for the sheer joy of doing so may not constitute a game, but it would be a form of play. It seems it is only at the point at which rules become involved we might begin to define the act that an individual or a group is performing as a game. Therefore, if the same individual was leaping around in circles with a particular ruleset in mind (for example, they might decide that they need to leap only four times in ten circles)

it would become a game. In order to categorically name something a game, there must be a rule-based structure involved. Conversely, a game remains a game regardless of whether or not an individual is at play, but in order to gain its full status a game must be played.

Bernard Suits defines a game as "to engage in activity directed toward bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by specific rules, where the means permitted by the rules are more limited in scope than they would be in the absence of the rules, and where the sole reason for accepting such limitation is to make possible such activity." (1967:148). Suits' eloquent definition allows us to place the game with relation to one of its most central elements: the rules. Without there being rules, could a game exist? Furthermore, Suits introduces the idea that the rules must be limiting, which is not something that I have previously mentioned. To make use of the rules as a specific limitation which creates the play situation is the very idea that turns it into a game and should be considered linked to elements such as engagement. Later in the paper, Suits separates games from other activities by suggesting that if one wished to be efficient in a game one would take that route rather than following the rules (which might put one in a more difficult scenario). However, without said rules, there would be no game. To cite Suits' example, if in a race I decided to progress across the centre of a field rather than following the circuit, I would not have technically played/won the game, "To break a rule is to render impossible the attainment of an end." (Suits 1967:149).

I have already established that play and games have long existed as a vital factor relating to the development of humans and other animals. Therefore, whilst board games and other non-virtual play mechanisms (such as sports) are not the focus of this study, it is important to realise their relevance to it. Many matters discussed in modern games research can be considered to apply to all types of games, because "It is by constantly affecting the game, modifying reactions, and directing actions, that a gamer can say that he is playing a game." (Arsenault and Perron 2009:114). The affect of our actions and subsequent reactions are part of what makes a game and part of what propels us to continue playing.

Playing games has been around since the dawn of man. Some of the earliest known board games include the Chinese game *Wei-qi* and the Ancient Egyptian

Senet. Although exact dates are unknown, these games are thought to have originated in 2000-3000BCE. This places the origins of playing structured games with the Ancient civilisations, if not before.

One of the earliest board games is thought to be the Ancient Egyptian *Senet*. *Senet* was located in a number of tombs and consists of a game board whose layout was thought to be associated with the Ancient Egyptian calendar. An original ruleset for the game is not known, and as with many such games the rules are likely to have changed over time (particularly as there is no evidence that said rules were recorded in the first place). Piccione theorised that "Senet was originally strictly a pastime with no religious significance. As the Egyptian religion evolved and fascination with the netherworld increased… the Egyptians superimposed their beliefs onto the gameboard and specific moves of senet." (2010). Over time, the understanding of what it meant to play the game, and what specific aspects of it symbolised, changed. This is mimicked today, as despite the lack of known rules, playable games of *Senet* exist in the modern world due to the creation of new rulesets.

Above: an example of a freestanding *Senet* board.

What is fascinating about *Senet*'s history as a game is that the *Senet* that the modern world knows is highly unlikely to have anything to do with the original ruleset. This almost situates the original game as a different specimen to that which

we know.

This notion strongly addresses the function of rules in a game. In particular, here we can perceive that the game is not the same when provided with a different ruleset. It retains the same physicality, but the underlying structure changes. With that, so does our way of thinking of it and relating to it.

Wei-qi is the ancient Chinese game that is now commonly known as *Go*. It is a strategic game with a level of complexity akin to chess and is still played today. *Go* consists of a board with a 19x19 grid, on which players attempt to lay stones in a specific way in order to gain more of the board. Stones may be captured by the opposing player surrounding them, at which point they are no longer counted.

The notion that *Go* would become a game so widely played in the contemporary world allows us to question the very nature of play. Much has changed in 5000 years, and yet *Go* continues to be a highly popular game, retaining its context regardless of time and culture. This juxtaposes it with the idea of *Senet*, the understanding of which and rulesets of, having changed so drastically over time.

Games, it seems, have a basis in life. Those which remain popular today, such as the aforementioned *Go*, have an abstracted level of basis upon contemporary culture. However, many games appear to make reference to occupations or materials. *Mancala* appears to do both. *Mancala* is a game played using pockets in which stones or seeds may be collected, with the aim of collecting the most. *Mancala* is still played today and remains a popular strategy game. The basis for its creation appears to be from what materials were available at the time: making small holes in the ground and placing seeds in them might be a way to play without a board being present. One might also gain the impression that it was perhaps based upon farming, an occupation that has continued to be prevalent since the game's creation. As aforementioned, *Senet* too may have a basis in Egyptian ideology. "Tomb scenes showing the deceased relaxing and playing the game illustrate its part in the leisure time of the rich. These depictions can also be interpreted as a reference to the fact that the deceased must find his way past many obstacles to reach the Afterlife, rather like a gaming piece on a senet board." (British Museum).

As we move closer to contemporary games, it becomes more difficult to perceive the roots of some games. Modern board games, such as Ideal's 1963 board

game *Mouse Trap*, allow players to 'manufacture' on the board a humane mouse trap constructed of rather silly apparatus. The basis of this is obvious, albeit it is presented in an absurd way that seeks to make light of a common household problem.

Prior to the boom of new and successful board games in the twentieth century, board games were played alongside what we would now consider sports, and indeed dice-based games. Dice-based games, whilst still prevalent in other forms, underwent a transformation with the release of tabletop roleplaying game *Dungeons and Dragons* in the 1970s. In such games, players conduct their game based upon a narrative. Said narrative is planned and enhanced during play by one of the players, called the GM (Game Master). The other players create their characters within the rules of the game and must play based on dice rolls, proceeding through the story that the GM maps out for them. This type of game is interesting in its development for it precedes role-playing video games, and in some cases the rules of certain tabletop role-playing games are utilised in video games (such as Bioware's 2002 *NeverWinter Nights*). This combination of structured narrative with a ruleset and virtuality is common in recent video games, but early video games were a different matter.

The virtual world should be considered as something separate, a representation of something familiar and yet distanced from the world in which we live. "It has come to mean a substitute that contains some, but not all, of the original's features, something that pretends to be, but isn't." (Aarseth 2001:227). This definition qualifies video games as a separate field of study from other forms of game, for the very nature of the world in which they take place differs entirely from any other media form. Indeed, the very nature of video games has changed dramatically since their conception. Some of the earliest games appearing on screens were text-based adventures, first appearing in the 1970s. Said games required the user to read the text on the screen and then choose an action based upon said text. There were few visuals, the user was required to imagine the proceedings and act based upon what was stated. This was much like the series of books in the 1980s called *Fighting Fantasy*, in which a reader had to choose an action on the page they were reading, which would lead them to another page where they must also make a decision.

Another of the earliest games, *Pong* (1972), comprised of a simple ping pong game in which players controlled a bat (represented by a white rectangle) on either side of the screen. The aim was to collect points by hitting the ball off one's own bat and depriving the opposing player of doing the same.

These early video games have a basis, a grounding, in the elements of life or the types of non-virtual game they were based on. Namco's 1980 hit *Pac-Man* seems to be based upon maze games. Atari's 1981 *Centipede*, in which one shoots swarms of insects to protect oneself, might be considered to have a basis in irrational fears (of insects). However, even at this stage in games, we begin to see how tenuous the connections basing them in reality can be. This is not to state that any modern game can be easily deconstructed and each strand potentially connected to reality. However, modern games are just that: a set of complex strands. Very early video games consist of a strong central core but not a great deal of complexity surrounds that, at least in the way we consider such things in the contemporary world. This is not to suggest that early games were altogether lacking in complexity, more that the basis was there but the variation of strands emerging from the core was limited.

Video games obviously run alongside advances in technology, and we can perceive that such advancements from the 1970s to today progressed extremely quickly. Each generation of console has increased its capabilities exponentially, in terms of graphics, media used (cartridges, CDs, DVDs, BluRays), and complexity. The state of engagement by the user has not necessarily changed, but it should be noted that with the increased attention to gigantic mapped worlds with rich stories to explore is potentially easier for the user to become engaged, and for longer. Having stated this, modern avatar-based games have shifted from the aforementioned irreducibility when connected with the idea of loss to a veritable stream of rewards (small wins) along the course of the journey for the user. Whilst this should be stated to be important in terms of engaging the user, a game in which a user must progress or level up in some way provides a type of broken immersion. The user can save, they can stop playing any time they wish to, but they must recall where it was that they were before returning to the game itself. An older game, in limiting the time the user has or disallowing them the chance to save or pause, provides a more stable immersive experience simply because the user is maintained in that dynamic

for that entire period of progression.

The development of artificial intelligence (henceforth known as AI) has also run alongside games and has assisted in their development. In the 1940s, Alan Turing wrote a chess-playing program. However, in the absence of an intelligent machine to test it on, he made use of pen and paper.

Since then, artificial intelligence machines have been produced which can defeat other players and also solve specific games (i.e., predict who will win based on the first move), such as Chinook, a chequers-playing machine which was the first machine to win a World Championship for a game in 1994. These developments in the field of artificial intelligence have assisted in the ability to create more three-dimensional characters in video games, and more complex scenarios for events to occur in.

Another sideline that has provided contemporary media with more depth is the creation of alternate reality games (ARGs). Said games usually take place alongside a piece of media (for example, a television series) with the purpose of broadening the scope of the piece of media into other forms, and allowing the viewers to actively take part (solving clues, for example). The internet and mobile phone seem to be commonly utilised tools. Thomas Abba states the following, “postmodern culture has acted to destabilise the authority of the author of a text, resulting in the responsibility for making meaning – for building worlds – being shared between author and audience. ARGs, alongside other forms of multiplatform narrative, heighten the significance of that collective role.” (2009:73). Not only do we have a culture of video games that have emerged and continue to thrive off of innovations in technology, we also have media forms that cross over, allowing for a deeper sense of meaning and immersion in the individual utilising that medium.

Video games are still a relatively recent innovation, invented in a period of technological advancement whereby the ruleset could not be altered, at least not in the general course of play. This is not simply because contemporary society keeps record of such elements, but also because the rule system itself is embedded within the structure of the video game. As video games become more advanced, so then does the system underlying them. Within that system is a complex series of rules that both the game and the user must obey.

This differentiates video games from board games and indeed other types of game, for the game itself is in a position to almost 'state' its intention. The game in itself is no longer a passive entity awaiting a system's placement upon it. It is now active, working upon and in opposition to the user. Because of this, the status of video games remains under constant question. Video games have only recently become the focus of researchers' attention, and it is important to consider why this is.

As aforementioned, video games began production in the 1970s. These early games were simplistic and had direct relation to that which they were based on. Many modern video games place greater emphasis on their own textual context and therefore do not usually have direct relation to external influences in quite the same way. In this way, we can perceive the direct influence that other forms of media have had upon the video game. What is of interest about modern video games is that this context is either embedded in fantasy or abstracted beyond. This is because video games have almost become their own fantasy environment, an environment which reflects reality and yet remains apart from it.

Finally, it is not simply the structure of games that has changed over the years, but also the societal attitude towards them. This is an important factor in dealing with research related to the field of games, for a number of studies work on the assumption of violence within games. Even in the short space of time that video games have been around, there are differences in the observer's feeling towards them. This affects our judgement and classification. Rebecca Chory-Assad and Dana Mastro state that, "Using today's standards, "Pac-Man", and other early videogames like "Space Invaders", "Defender", and "Asteroids" appear relatively non-threatening; however, in the early 1980s these games were characterized as violent." (2000:3). The history of games is thus not simply about their creation and use but also about the changing values attributed to them and their continually altered status based upon this. This is an aspect of what makes video games research so fascinating.

3. Contemporary Research

Research into video games follows a multidisciplinary approach. Many researchers specialise in other disciplines, which provides video games theory with a

wide variety of types of research. Video games are still a new field, so research remains full of debate, as do methods of teaching about them. There is a good deal of research into both play and games. All games are considered pastimes, and video games in particular have thrived since their invention. We live in a society where an increasing number of individuals play games. This in itself makes video games worthy of study. This evidence of the popularity of games rising may be to do with the accessibility of games consoles or the greater variety of games (including film tie-ins). This theme can be seen in the fact that in a recent survey in America, 97% of 12-17 year olds (out of a sample of 1,102) claimed to play games (Pew 2008). This may include a huge variety of games, for games exist in so many different locations. They may be on home consoles, at arcades, on personal computers, or even online. Whilst this data does not state anything about the habits of the users themselves or indeed what types of games they play, it does state something about the strength of this pastime. Further to this, it is estimated that 53% of American adults also indulge in video game play, although it also seems that those adults who do play do so more regularly (Macgill 2008). Thus, the demographic of video game play remains large.

However, the importance of games to contemporary society does not end there. In 2008, video games were predicted to outsell not only music but also films according to a Verdict report (Cellan-Jones 2008). A news report from January 2009 claimed that “the number of games consoles in use has shot up from 13.5 million a year ago to 22 million this month” (Wallop 2009). This shows the general trend towards video games reaching a larger audience. Indeed, the same article claimed that the stated figures would place on average a current generation games console in 80% of homes in the UK. With this being the case, we can see just how far video games have come from being a niche market. At the point that they are now such a relevant part of everyday life for so many individuals, they can no longer be dismissed as a hobby that few indulge in and must be explored in a capacity that accepts this as an important part of their genesis.

One might also look at how the cost of creating a game has changed in recent years, not just financially but in terms of how many individuals it takes to create a console game and how long it can take. There appears to have been a divide: there are games that are heralded as high budget individual titles or parts of series that

sell particularly well. For any one of these games to be imagined and created, it now requires an entire team of programmers, developers, artists, and designers. However, with the medium of the internet, and the introduction of online services such as Sony's online download store, a number of smaller developers (often referred to as 'indie' or independent) have released products. Such products (for instance, PlayDead's first title *Limbo* (2010)) appear often to honour their video game heritage. Rather than entertaining the possibility of ultra-realistic graphics, such games are often heavily stylised. Thatgamecompany's *Flower*, released as a download title in 2009, introduces the player to the idea of controlling a single petal on the breeze, collecting petals from other flowers in the game world and bringing life back to the fields. Said title does not meet the specification of a high budget title, yet it tests the boundaries of what it means to be a game whilst promoting a positive and relaxing atmosphere for the player.

A screenshot from Thatgamecompany's *Flower*.

Despite these creative sidelines in games, the main expanse of the games industry is constantly growing: bigger teams, bigger budgets. More games are being created to coincide with specific demographics, such as the recent training games released by Nintendo to appeal to the more casual market, or games that coincide with popular films, to catch the imagination of the film-goer who has enjoyed that title on screen.

Games have emerged from a culture of technology in which we must constantly better ourselves. When we compare a console such as the Mega Drive/Genesis to the Playstation 3, a number of facets come to light about the speed of progression of the medium. In a little over fifteen years, it seems our technological capacity has increased exponentially. Indeed, one only need run a game on the former console against one on the Playstation 3 to observe such a difference. Games creation, in comparison to consumption, has remained a tough business, as can be seen in the restrictions placed on developers by the very nature of the relationships between companies (O'Donnell 2011).

Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron's guide to home video game systems between 1972 and 2001 shows that there has been something of a slowdown in the release of new consoles in recent years, as compared to times such as the mid-1970s. This may be due to a stabilisation of technology (and therefore those who show as the forerunners of the market), and also to do with the time and expense now required to make both consoles and the games for them (Wolf and Perron 2003:303).

Since Wolf and Perron's report, we have entered another generation of games consoles, that of the Microsoft Xbox 360 (2005), and the Sony Playstation3 (released in 2006 in Japan). Both consoles are considered 'next generation', with high definition capabilities. Both have also received 'slim' versions, with slightly larger internal capacities and a few internal updates. Nintendo's Wii, a standard definition competitor, which aims to appeal to a wider demographic with its motion sensitive controller, was also released in 2006.

Since the release of these three consoles, a new generation has not been announced, although Nintendo announced the Wii-U at E3 2011 (Stuart 2011), and a new handheld console, the NGP, was announced by Sony (released as the Playstation Vita in February 2012). If we observe the gaps between releases, potentially because we are at a limit as to what can currently be produced that has the capacity to look better than current generation products, production of new consoles seems to have slowed down. Current generation consoles afford a great deal of attention. In addition to this, the online market plus the fact that games can readily be played on mobile phones (the iPhone, or the Android market, for example), the games industry is currently flourishing in a number of directions.

Therefore, it is not only of importance but extremely rewarding for research to be conducted in such a new and constantly progressing field. With the birth and rise in popularity of social gaming, for which the recent Nintendo Wii console is particularly responsible, playing games is no longer a process restricted to those who are particularly drawn to it. So-called 'gamers' are divided into those who play socially and those who consider themselves 'old school' or 'hardcore' gamers, and even the boundaries of that divide are slowly breaking down. So what do we consider to be the difference between a 'player' and a 'gamer'? With the vast variety of different types of games and virtual worlds available, and with the massive range of individuals connecting with them, can we even make a distinction? Jason Rutter, utilising other research which makes ready use of each term, shows that there is a difference. 'Gamers', in contrast with 'players', might be defined as those who are more embedded in the social of games. Further to this, one might deem such individuals as those who align themselves specifically with and take pride in the idea of playing a game, rather than those who simply play. Yet, this distinction is tenuous due once again to the wide range of individuals at play. Furthermore, those who align themselves with the title of 'gamer' have a tendency to place their own categories on who is and who is not in their in-group. Rutter states that "For gamers, gaming is a socially mediated experience and a socially contextual category." (2011:4).

Of course, there are subcategories of even those who identify with the term 'gamer'. James Newman suggests that said 'hardcore' gamers, who he defines as being players since before the advent of the Sony Playstation (2004) have started moving against the flow of games and technological advances progressing together and have begun to look towards more 'retro' titles, which provide the challenge that they desire (this would include the abovementioned independent titles). "While the late 1990s saw hardcore gamers attempting to grab the future of gaming by getting their hands on the latest titles, more recently, hardcore gamers have begun to look to the past for gaming experiences unaffected by consideration of the mainstream player. The emergence of retrogaming can be seen as an attempt to reclaim videogaming from the mainstream and can be understood as a form of hardcore fan resistance." (Newman 2004:53). The identification of 'gamers' with that title seems

here to be represented as an important facet of the act of playing a game. The term 'gamer' becomes an identity, but one divided between those who recall and struggled through early games, and those who have only recently begun to play. This divide in experience means that companies must make a number of decisions when releasing a game, decisions which will impact the success of the title depending on which faction identifies with it and how literate they are with regards to digital games.

To reiterate my choice of the term 'user' in contrast with the above, said term places the individual at play in a different dynamic. Because I am isolating the structure underlying the user/game dynamic, the term 'user' conjures up images of the player as structure rather than as individual (particularly as the term 'gamer' has such a social weighting, as illustrated above). This is not to state that there are not individual differences between users: this is acknowledged. However, in order to avoid the meanings already associated with those terms in a games studies context, the term 'user' is the predominant word utilised for the individual connected with the game during this thesis.

With the current progression of technology being so fast and the number of individuals at play being so diverse, it is obvious that video games would become the object of not only popular media but also research attention. As aforementioned, this research covers a wide variety of fields and continues to expand. Said expansion of research seems to correlate with the fact that so many different types of games are fast becoming available, and that so many users are at play now. Because of this diversity in games, it seems only logical that the types of research emerging around them would be just as diverse. Social games, for example, have inundated the market. Users can access games on their mobile phones, on their computers, on social networking sites. Games are not just found on consoles or installed on home computers anymore. They can be picked up and played for any amount of time, and returned to at a later date without the risk of loss of immersion in the story. Individuals lead busy lives, and more 'casual' games seem to fit in well with that dynamic. This has expanded the market exponentially and has allowed for more research into areas not otherwise explored.

There is a good deal of research that covers the social aspect of play and the

blurring of lines between the video game scenario and the real life of the individual. T.L Taylor's experience of an *EverQuest* conference shows the venue in reality as taking on aspects of the game itself, "Normal public behaviour gets thrown out of the window as it collides with the hotel's transformation into game space." (Taylor 2006:6). Mark Meadows' observation of game *Second Life*, in which individuals have free reign over what they create and do, exposes a fictional layer close enough to reality that utilises real-life commodities for virtual events. "By hiring people, I mean she really paid them money. Not a lot, only about US$15 total, but still, it represented real money, and so their labor was a real thing too, and that's pretty important when you think about it." (Meadows 2008:55). Matteo Bittanti adds that, "*SimCity* oscillates between interiority and exteriority: the computer screen becomes the mediation between the imagined city and the city that he can see from his apartment window." (2007:42). Ian Shanahan (aka always_black) documents his experience fighting a player in *Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast* and the supposed merging of the virtual and reality based upon this match. In using racially insensitive language, the opposing player begins to blur the lines between the game and reality. In his paper, always_black also expresses the rules that the game offers and the rules that players will create (such as bowing to one another, or adopting teacher-pupil relationships similar to those in the *Star Wars* series of films). In this, always_black shows elements of the game and reality being reflected back upon one another in a scenario that makes for both discomfort and confusion. "My concentration was absolutely intense and never before had I tried so hard to "be the mouse."" (Shanahan 2006:607). Here he shows an almost desperate need to gain a greater connection with the game in order to win the battle he was faced with, based on the effect of the opposing player's words and actions against him.

Other researchers focus more on the social issues surrounding players when interacting directly with the game, such as Helen Kennedy's essay on female players of first-person shooting game *Quake:* "These online personae or avatars provide us with representations of performed subjectivities where the boundaries of what is acceptable are potentially different to those experienced in the offline setting." (2007:134). What is notable about the social type of research is its ability to state more about the world in general than simply the question it is restricted to.

Kennedy's quote clearly shows this. Whilst Kennedy is formulating a statement about female gamers and their transcendence of real-world boundaries through an in-game medium, she is also making a statement about what that can mean to people in general, and not just those who play games. Games research does not necessarily offer solutions or hard facts and figures like some scientific or psychological research proposes to do, but it can provide an excellent understanding of the game, both on a textual level and beyond.

Thus, papers dealing with the social aspects of gaming often highlight and interact with ideas of immersion, whilst others utilise specific case studies and the feelings of the players in order to highlight points with reference to such elements in the game. Other papers regarding video games seek to situate them within a multi-media context or to expose their literary components. Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern's paper addresses agency and narrative, particularly with reference to a game called *Façade*, an interactive story based upon an arguing couple and the third person (the player) who enters the scenario (Mateas and Stern 2006). Other papers seek more to align video games with art, such as Aaron Smuts, who argues that "Modern video game designers are deeply concerned with traditional aesthetic considerations familiar to animators, novelists, set designers for theater productions and art directors for films" (2005). It seems that games are gradually becoming closer aligned with the idea of art, perhaps because it is such a broad term. In the USA, a recent change in the NEA's (National Endowment for the Arts) terms allowed for artists applying for grants to also be games developers (Sung 2011). Indeed, the Smithsonian American Art Exhibition has plans to run an 'art of video games' exhibition, exploring the evolution of the art of games over the past forty years. They state that, "Video games use images, actions, and player participation to tell stories and engage their audiences. In the same way as film, animation, and performance, they can be considered a compelling and influential form of narrative art." (2011).

Much research regarding video games attempts to observe them from the perspective of impulses and reactions in the human response structure, for example Craig Anderson et al., 2007. It is difficult to measure human response and to de-code its meaning in a reasonable way, hence why studies are divided when

analysing games effects. Diane Carr suggests that the “difficulty with replicating the conditions and ‘feel’ of play is one of the reasons that videogames are easily misunderstood, and a reason why research into links between actual aggression and the playing of videogames is often flawed.” (2003:166). Examples from both sides of this debate are mentioned below.

It is a matter of semantics: defining the word ‘violence’ is difficult and transitive: as aforementioned, what was considered violent a decade ago is no longer considered in the same realm. Equally, many of the empirical studies conducted aim to measure aggressiveness which is then linked in with violence. Jeffrey Goldstein’s paper on the effects of war toys on children also presents some application towards the conclusion on the effects of video game play. Justifying war toys, he states, “If war toys were a cause of aggression they would not so often be used in the treatment of childhood aggression. Play therapists rely upon toy guns to help children express conflict in a symbolic and non-threatening fashion.” (1992).

Despite this, much psychological research states otherwise. Psychological research tends towards covering the idea of effects of play on an experimental basis, and the idea of obtaining specific results geared towards attempting to prove that something “is” or “is not”. Effects studies seek to emphasise the connection between video game violence and the rise in aggression observed in individuals playing said games after the incident. An example of this would be the aforementioned Anderson et al's study which suggests that violent games increase violent intentions within the player (2007). Anderson et al tested this out utilising games considered violent and games which were not, and allowed the player to play a loud noise at their opponent if they won in an experiment mimicking the 1961 Milgram experiment (in which electric shocks were provided when a question was answered incorrectly). Anderson et al have suggested that there were significantly more energetic blasts from individuals playing the game picked out for its violent imagery. Experiments such as this call into question elements such as how we read aggression or violent impulses in the individual at play, whilst also delivering questions of how we might define that which we consider violent within the game. However, these studies also provide us with evidence that playing a game can be a moving experience for a player, and this should encourage one to observe the

underlying structures involved in the relationship between the user and the game.

Research into violence in games, much like with films, is extremely prevalent. Our obsession with the effects of the things we digest upon our bodies and minds is constant, with much attention from the media and from those not connected with the industry, too. Jack Thompson, attorney and outspoken activist against what I will define as 'extremes' (violence, sexuality, etc.) within the video game situation, has made a number of statements about specific titles, damning them and connecting them with high school shootings and other such tragedies (a collection of these statements can be found at jackthompson.org).

The manner of concern that produces experiments such as Anderson's effects study outlined above, can be directly linked to previous research on television and its effects. This may be because film, television and video games are all products involving the mechanism of the screen. This does not mean that the user of a video game interacts in the same way as the viewer of a film, only that the involvement of the screen in contemporary pastimes has been of concern to some researchers since before video games even existed. One such study into perceived televisual violence was Albert Bandura's infamous experiment of 1961, in which children were shown a programme with different endings and then asked to play after it had finished. This experiment showed that those children who saw the violent ending were highly likely to imitate what they had seen, shown through the beating of something called a "Bobo doll". This type of experiment combines elements of film and play in order to show mimicry in children. However, if games are to be treated as their own media form in research, this type of study only goes so far and should only be considered as the processes by which two factors (play and film) may be affected. By virtue of exposing children to a room containing the same toys as they had seen on the screen, the study might be stated to encourage replication. Do games offer something similar?

Parveen Adams' film study observes the 1960 film *Peeping Tom*, using it for its unusual imagery and the unsettling ways in which it positions the viewer with relation to the action on screen (and the gaze). The film's main character, Mark, is attempting to capture something on his camera. More precisely, this elusive *something* must be captured at the point of death, and he dispatches his victims in

such a way as their fear is mirrored, “the documentary is only a simulacrum of the documentary that awaits *him* as its completion. The attempt to mimic the Other in order to flee the Other returns him to the place of victim in these sacrifices to the Other.” (Adams 1996:96). This scenario, so perfectly laid out on screen, with the finale involving Mark himself as the victim, works immensely well as a film. This is because of the way the screen mimics what is occurring back at the audience. In this particular situation, it is even more powerful as it forces the audience into an uncomfortable place, where they are aware of themselves as something more than a spectator.

Video games have the ability to present stark imagery to the user and to provide them with a feeling of discomfort. Horror video games, such as Konami’s *Silent Hill* series are an excellent example of this, for they bring out feelings of helplessness and unease in the user due to the atmospheric build-up and the difficult to master control system. This, however, does not place the user in the same location as the viewer, despite the reliance of many recent titles on cinematics. The location of the user, as will be further explored later, resides in an area dominated by the ability of the user to control (or at least progress) the events of the game. Espen Aarseth states that “The distinguishing quality of the virtual world is that the system lets the participant observer play an active role, where he or she can test the system and discover the rules and structural qualities in the process. This is not true of a fictional world, where the reader/viewer can only experience what the author/designer explicitly permits.” (2001:229). Whilst I feel that the reader/viewer that Aarseth mentions has a greater degree of control than that stated, they cannot impact the environment. Thus, even if they have the freedom to interpret characters and events as they please, they may not exhibit any control over the events of the story. Equally, this is the case with the virtual, whereby the user is offered some control but must still adhere somewhat to the landscape that has been laid out. Thus, whilst the user experiences a greater sense of liberty within the environment, this remains tightly controlled by the game itself. Said freedom is misinterpreted (possibly deliberately) by the user as greater than it can possibly be. The film scenario takes the viewer with it, and the viewer retains none of the same level of perceived control. Thus, whilst both encompass the screen, their relation to it must

be carefully metered in order to produce the desired effect in the intended audience.

Further evidence for the separateness of games from other media emerges from the 1984 Favaro Study, as cited in Silvern et al (1987:209). The Favaro study had individuals perform aggressive versions of things such as darts using images of people instead of boards. By this, I mean to state that when individuals threw darts the target would have been a picture of a person, for example. The video game used in this study reportedly had lower hostility ratings than the lower ratings in both the darts game and televised violence. This should provide some idea of the different ways that games are approached when opposed with other forms of media, and how structurally there must be something different occurring for the reactions of the participants to differ so greatly in each scenario.

Much of the psychological research shown here concludes that games have a negative effect, but there are also many studies which show the positive elements of gaming, hence the difficulties many psychological researchers face in this field. In an article published on the BBC news website (2002), games were considered to actually aid children in learning. In this study, compiled by a teaching entity called "Teem", children played simulation and tactical-type games in order to assist development of reasoning and problem-solving skills. Similarly, James Gee speaks of his experience in playing video games and how they propel the user into something of a learning process in a much more natural way than school work. "Games always situate the meanings of words in terms of the actions, images, and dialogues they relate to, and show how they vary across different actions, images and dialogues. They don't just offer words for words. Schools shouldn't either." (Gee 2005:9)

A more recent article on the BBC news site (2009) suggests that playing puzzle game *Tetris* (1984) can potentially be used to assist in patients who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In this experiment, researchers attempted to replicate a similar state of stress through showing healthy participants images of traumatic injury within a film. After these events, some participants were given *Tetris*, a puzzle game in which one must sort falling blocks. Arranging them in a complete row without any gaps causes that row to disappear, thus allowing for more blocks to fall and for the player to gain a higher score. All participants were then analysed for frequency of flashbacks. Fewer flashbacks seemed to occur in

participants who had been provided with the game after the preceding events. Allegedly, the process "works on the principle that it may be possible to modify the way in which the brain forms memories in the hours after an event" (BBC 2009). Whilst this could be understood simply as distracting one from formulating those connections necessary for association with the perceived trauma, it does show how games can have viable uses outside of their usual sphere. Once again, it shows that games do appear to affect the user during the course of play, and although this does not provide evidence of the user behaving differently after playing a game, it does again show us that an important structure is involved that enables and maintains the user at play.

Many games researchers utilise empiricism in order to structure their arguments, and this is an important way to judge what is occurring in the game. Said researchers might combine social studies with empirical data, for example, but not necessarily in a psychological way. Kristine Jørgensen, in her study on the player's interpretation of their relation to the game world and the avatar, conducted a study whereby the individuals were exposed to specific games that involved different placements of the avatars and then asked a series of questions regarding their experiences after play. She found that "Regarding the relationship between player and controllable figure, the respondents do not see the dual position of the player situated in the physical world while having the power to act within the gameworld as a paradox, but a necessary way of communication in games." (Jørgensen 2009:1). This type of study is important to video games research because it entails a direct response from the user. Empirical research may also assist in distinguishing between types of users, user bias or preference, and other types of user/game activity.

My reason for not utilising empirical research in this study is primarily because the structures I identify do not directly correlate with conscious processes. There are elements of the relationship between the user and the game that might be considered to be beyond the user's ability to state. Such elements might be aspects which are considered to exist at the level of the unconscious, and might facilitate this reaction without the user necessarily being able to state their intent. The relationship between the user and game is problematic, and certainly in the

previous study we can perceive that the bond is surrounded by individual differences. The individual as user brings something to the game and indeed gains something from the game that might be quite distinct from a different user. The unconscious level that exists within the user, and indeed the user/game dynamic, is ultimately extremely important.

Whilst not specifically about the unconscious levels, neuroscientific studies can be utilised in our understanding of the process of identification, something which appears to be vital to our understanding of the user's impact over the game scenario. For instance, in Jamie Ward's work on sensory mechanisms, a 2004 study conducted by Keysers et al is cited: "It has been shown that watching another person being touched activates some of the same neural mechanisms in the somatosensory cortex involved when we ourselves get physically touched." (Ward, 2006:324). Looking at this idea, we can perhaps begin to understand from an alternate point of view the very complex processes occurring in our brains upon seeing another. Perhaps, then, this also relates to video games and may have a direct identification with the visual representation of the 'user' on screen (the avatar). One's player-character does not exist in reality, but the meaning might nonetheless be applied. Here I will define the process of identification in the way it is used throughout this thesis. This is also explored further in the next part of the chapter, with greater reference to Lacan's mirror stage.

Freud defines identification based on the Oedipal urges of the child. The Oedipus Complex is based on the myth of Oedipus and involves the male child desiring to take the place, usually of the parent of the same sex, in order to be with the parent of the opposite sex. This desire to replace the parent is the process of identification. Freud states that "A little boy will exhibit a special interest in his father; he would like to grow like him and be like him, and take his place everywhere. We may say that he takes his father as his ideal." (2001a:105). This placing the parent in the space of the ideal shows the child as wishing to occupy that space, to become that individual. Freud continues to state that "It is noticeable that in these identifications the ego sometimes copies the person who is not loved and sometimes the one who is loved. It must also strike us that in both cases the identification is a partial and extremely limited one and only borrows a single trait

from the person who is its object." (2001a:107). This expression of symptoms based on an identification is a powerful aspect to consider: the very fact that identification might be with an individual who is not the primary interest is interesting and has implications for how we deal with this construct in terms of video games.

Freud also describes identification through a common, or shared, emotion or desire. The split in the ego between itself and the ideal is an aspect of this process, and one that allows for both identity formation and identification with an other.

Lacan's formation of symbolic identification also defines identification against the ego ideal. Lacan, however, splits the notion into symbolic and imaginary identification. Imaginary identification is image-based, and exists as a part of the individual's connection with the ego ideal. The identification with an image allows for the individual to separate from their own fragmented self; "the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation - and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body" (Lacan 2006:78). Symbolic identification, in contrast, constitutes the individual's identification with an aspect of something. In identifying with this aspect, they take it on themselves.

Identification is therefore not simply recognition of another, but the development of a closeness with an aspect of that other. In Lacanian terms, this process begins at the point at which a child recognises itself in the mirror. This is important because it constitutes the formation of that child's ideal, something recognisable and yet unobtainable. More generally in psychology, identification refers to the process of closeness, and the taking on and presentation of specific attributes that bring about this proximity. Arguably, this process is simply the alignment of the individual towards the ideal. By taking on and relating to desired attributes, the individual gains a closer proximity to the perceived ideal.

In games this identificatory process works two-fold. At the point of interaction, we can perceive aspects of the child's initial interaction with the mirror, whereby the avatar becomes something akin to the ideal. Later we see it as a more internally reflective process. A bond is formed between the two, the user and the avatar, but this is complicated by the expression of the bond. The user not only feeds aspects of

the self into the avatar, but is also rewarded by these desired traits being reflected back. This increases the bond, but also presents identification in an unusual way. The user feeds in desired traits, but the game itself can only reflect these back. Thus the user unintentionally identifies with their own self, which increases the strength of the bond.

I would argue that here that this process is still identification, although the input and output elements are phrased in an unusual way. This is because the user is not identifying with an image or aspect of something, but with an aspect of a separate virtual space. The virtual medium is one of multiple reflective paths, which no doubt complicates the situation somewhat. The notion of identification still stands, however, even if what the user is identifying with is in many ways a distorted aspect of themselves.

For Lacan (Lacan 2006), the first time a child recognised itself in a mirror was a pivotal time, for it was at that point that the child became an 'I'. Whilst this concept is addressed in much greater detail later, we begin to see that it is feasible to assume that the user recognising the avatar for the first time might be a virtual reproduction of this important phase of childhood. Further to this, we begin to see how psychoanalysis might be of importance to video game studies, particularly to the relationship between the user and game which is emphasised in this project. Unfortunately, there is not as yet a particularly large body of work on video games which utilises psychoanalytic theory. Theorists such as Jan Jagodzinski and Bob Rehak have both utilised psychoanalytic theories to explain different aspects of the gaming situation, however. This, combined with those individuals with a psychoanalytic or structuralist background who have worked on play theory, ensures that there remains some body of related work, both on and off the screen.

Donald Winnicott's idea of "potential space" (2005), a paradoxical play space in which a child can reason and play, seems particularly prominent, and seems to fit well with the aforementioned Magic Circle. If we imagine that a play space might be maintained throughout an individual's lifespan, this offers clues as to where a user might be at the point of play.

Bob Rehak's recent works in the field have frequently discussed the concepts of play and gaming within a psychoanalytic framework. One such important work is his

paper *Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar*, which emphasises how we might understand avatar theory by using a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective (Rehak 2003). The aforementioned Jan Jagodzinski's (2004) book *Youth Fantasies,* which predominantly addresses video games from a psychoanalytic perspective, also remains an important work in this field, and, because it addresses structural issues as well, one which will become a staple reference point throughout my work. He proposes a diagram which situates the screen amongst psychoanalytic constructs. Said diagram forms a part of the theory behind Chapter Three's intermediate ego and is expanded upon in more depth there. Jagodzinski's interest is in asking what people desire rather than how it affects their being. He addresses this through the structure of the game, something which I will be building upon. Another theorist who brings psychoanalysis into popular culture is Slavoj Zizek, whose body of work, again, will be utilised throughout this text.

Roland Barthes states that "language can only obliterate the concept if it hides it, or unmask it if it formulates it" (1993:129). Language is situated at the very centre of our foundations: our society, our ability to communicate effectively, our ability to read everyday objects in the correct way. However, from a psychoanalytic perspective, language can be considered to destroy in the same sense as it creates meaning. Items are read in similar ways based on our experience of those objects and things related to them. Therefore, to examine an item through the language it permits one to use, and to unearth its essential structure that makes it like that should be of paramount importance to me. How something works, why it works, not if but how it can produce an effect, are all hugely important to this study. This is one of the reasons why psychoanalysis appeals for analysing games. Whilst there is no specific "right" question to ask, this study aims to illuminate what is occurring within the structure of the game, rather than what is outside it or what reactions may be caused by it. The intention of this body of work is to develop an understanding upon which other research can be conducted. Through understanding the underlying structures, a foundation is created for which other works can be conducted upon in future. What will be essential is taking heed of previous research from all fields and understanding what the results of such research can tell us. In doing so, I hope to be able to produce an informative study

that, whilst mainly focused on psychoanalytic theory, utilises a range of research methods and ways of understanding.

4. Psychoanalytic Background

I now go through a further review of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, something that will be important to be familiar with at this stage in the project. Whilst other psychoanalytic theorists and theories will be of importance later, it is here that I will explain some of the basic concepts of psychoanalysis. Jacques Lacan features here because his structural and linguistic take on psychoanalysis is something that is utilised throughout.

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory has had an effect on much of modern psychology. Modern psychoanalytic research is however distinct from much psychological research as it allies itself less with standard scientific methodology, such as the pursuit of empirical data to support theories, and more with philosophy. This does not mean that psychoanalysis is not a rigorous process, and Freud himself was keen to obtain a scientific identity for psychoanalysis.

Freud’s desire for psychoanalysis to be recognised as a science was in vain. The methodology he used was based upon the notion of the mind, of invisible elements that could not be perceived by an individual. Furthermore, the idea of repression meant that the mind was considered unreliable, so attempts to argue against Freud’s works could simply be put down to specific elements being repressed. Freud’s understanding of women, too, whilst perhaps attributable to the views of the time, was incomplete and contained undesirable elements. His notion of penis envy has been particularly controversial, even amongst psychoanalysts (Karen Horney, for instance, reversed this notion).

Lacan’s notions modernised Freudian psychoanalysis, yet they were not without their own critics. The man himself was ejected from the International Psychoanalytic Association following disagreements regarding how he practiced, leading to the formation of his own school (which was later also dissolved). As his work contained elements of structuralist theory, he was also separated from more traditional analysts in the field. Furthermore, at the time he was working, psychoanalysis was led by theorists who did not agree on Freud’s principles, which caused something of a divide in psychoanalytic teachings. Analysts such as Melanie Klein and Anna Freud

had taken Freud's theories in their own directions, moving in a direction opposing the original texts.

Lacan's theories have been noted to be inaccessible, based on Lacan's style of thinking. Lacan brought in elements of contemporary (particularly French) culture to his theories, whereby his theories were discussed in a context that related to elements that were comprehensible in the French language and to those embedded within the French culture. This coupled with the fact that much of his work was composed within seminars can make his theories challenging, even at times incomprehensible.

Despite this, Lacan's works have been utilised throughout cultural theory, with some theorists engaging with his works, whilst others reject it. However, specific schools of thought do not reject his works outright, it appears that it is individual interpretation that causes this division. In turn, this leads us to the conclusion that ambivalence towards Lacan's theories is impossible. This is clear in feminist thought "Many feminists use his work on human subjectivity to challenge phallocentric knowledges; others are extremely hostile to it, seeing it as elitist, male-dominated, and itself phallocentric. These contradictory evaluations of his work seem irresolveable; in some cases they are maintained within one and the same person... It is never entirely clear whether he is simply a more subtle misogynist than Freud, or whether his reading of Freud constitutes a 'feminist' breakthrough." (Grosz 2001:147). Lacan's ideas made people think, and in thinking, debate. Whether this was his intention or not, it is important to realise that in considering what he theorised, individuals consider their own knowledge and placement.

Lacan's theories have permeated contemporary critical readings of texts. Yet Michael Billig considers that this makes it difficult to critique his theories. "To criticize Lacan's psychological ideas from a non-Lacanian position appears to imply that the case has already been decided against Lacan. Yet there is the reverse problem. The rejectionist position, in effect, is suggesting that, in order to criticize Lacanian ideas, one must have already taken such ideas on board. In effect, this protects the ideas from critique." (Billig 2006:2). Much like elements within Lacan's work, there is a split. However, even if we accept Billig's notion that Lacan's works protect themselves from critique we can still acknowledge that their application

enables us to perceive elements (of a text, for instance) in fascinating ways. It is just that, from Billig's perspective, Lacan's theories become untouchable because at the point we acknowledge them we are already immersed within their structure.

Therefore my use of Lacanian theories within this thesis emerges from a backdrop of controversy. My use of his works in this context acknowledges the basis on which his works are considered. My work builds upon Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in a way not explored by the man himself, into the virtual. In making use of Lacanian principles, I align myself with his works in that they present elements of the psychoanalytic (and therefore the mind, such that it is) in a distinctly structural way. As I am identifying structural elements relating to the user/game dynamic, with particular emphasis on the location of the user, these theories help to appreciate what is occurring at that level. I also make use of Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality, and our ability to work with both theories in conjunction is further explored in Chapter Three.

Psychoanalytic theory relies on the idea that there are processes occurring that are invisible to the individual in question. Freud worked closely with the idea of an unconscious, in which processes beyond waking understanding occurred. The means to understand these processes involve accepting that one's memories are not what actually happened but a combination of events, some true and some otherwise. However, working with the unconscious meant also that an individual's memories must all be treated equally: that is, as true. Psychoanalytic understanding is not about the truth but about how what the individual perceived has affected them. Wilfred Bion described it as, "It is a way of putting an end to curiosity – especially if you can succeed in believing the answer is the answer." (1978:22). This is particularly important to my study as it highlights the user as a playful party. If there is no truth, only perception, we do not have to be limited to asking reality what it can tell us about games. We can also ask what games can tell us about reality, which relates strongly to the use of Baudrillard's theories in Chapters Four and Five. This study also relates to the structural elements of play. Gauging this 'truth' empirically would be hugely problematic, even if one accepts it as such. Observing the structures potentially underlying the user at play, I feel, will provide a more accessible route.

Freud utilised various concepts to describe what was occurring, and another essential element of Freud's work which must be explored in greater detail later is that of the id, ego and superego. These are three psychical components said to span the conscious and unconscious mind. This means that they do not exist as physical bodies and cannot be observed through conventional means. They exist as an aspect of the mind rather than the brain. They are essential elements of psychoanalytic theory, and thus will be central in this study too.

The id is purely unconscious and deals with the individual's primal demands. From that perspective, one might denote the id as pure desire, for it is unable to settle for staving off its demands. It wants, and expects immediate satisfaction. Consider the id, for instance, as the aspect by which a baby cries. A hungry baby will cry to satisfy its desire. The crying is conducted in order to achieve satisfaction (in this case, the baby cries until the parent feeds it). It is not able to bypass this hunger through fantasy or through the ability to put it off until a greater reward is acquired. The baby in this scenario must obtain food and has no mechanism to deal with it where it is not forthcoming.

The superego, however, is much the opposite of the id: it is an externally fuelled entity, created from the rules placed upon the individual by the parental entities. Therefore, it demands in an opposite way. It demands obedience, even if that does not correlate with the desires of the id. Imagine that, every time the baby cried, the parent berated it for doing so.

The third component in the triangle is that commonly considered to be the mediator. The ego staves off desire until a more suitable satisfaction can be achieved, and moderates the demands of the superego. It also “has to defend its existence against an external world which threatens it with annihilation”. (Freud 2001b:200). With relation to our baby example, this would be a case whereby the child was hungry but could put said hunger off until a better reward is available. The baby might suck its thumb, for example, until such a time as milk is offered. This takes the place in fantasy of that which it requires.

Obviously the baby example is just that. Whilst these components are formed in childhood, they are not simply a part of the crying baby dynamic. These three components exist within the human mind throughout our lifetimes and enable us to

make decisions based upon a variety of scenarios. Desiring something but being able to put it off until a better time shows a standard egoic reaction, whilst rushing in and buying something might show a reaction from an overactive id. Conversely, feeling like you shouldn't have something is perhaps telling of an overactive superego.

Freud considered the case where one of these three psychical components became too powerful (for example, an over-active superego), and the effects this might have on the other components, "Something that is a satisfaction for the unconscious id may for that very reason be a cause of anxiety for the ego." (Freud 2001b:170). This therefore would lead to problems for the individual as it grows. This will inevitably become essential to our understanding of the underlying processes in gaming at work later. He also conducted some important work on the stages of development in children and how this can create problems in later life, work that will not necessarily be as useful (at least in terms of application) to this study, but will provide a background of play (which begins in childhood) which will surely assist in the analysis of gaming.

In 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego', written in 1921, Freud also dealt with a number of behaviours found exclusively in group mindsets (Freud 2001a). This involved applying the knowledge he had acquired working on the internal to the external. This included analysis of individuals performing actions within groups which they would otherwise not do, and their ability to formulate said groups through the use of their ego ideal, a concept discussed here during Lacan's mirror stage.

Jacques Lacan furthered Freud's theories, but in a slightly different direction. One reason why Lacan's work has been chosen above other psychoanalysts for this study was his interest in the structural side of Freud's theories, something which shows prominently in his works. Of interest here is his aforementioned study on the mirror stage. The mirror stage is a Lacanian concept showing the child as recognising his- or herself in the mirror for the first time. This situates the creation of the ideal ego, that which we would ideally be. This is the nature of identification, the result of which is someone who strives towards the ideal ego whilst remaining somewhere between that which they are and that which they would ideally be, essentially

something akin to a split in ourselves.

Furthermore, if we follow Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel's perspective that the ego is reflected upon us by our peers, where does that leave the ideal ego? "Our peers then play the role for us of a mirror in which is reflected our ego with all its possible faults. It is as if our sense of personal worth, our self-esteem, the tension or on the contrary the harmony between the ego and our ideal depended, to a large degree, on the image of ourselves that our peers reflect back to us, as if it were through our peers that we had proof of the worth or lack of worth of our ego." (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1985:151). This statement is important to our understanding for it exposes the individual as incomplete, as a fragmented body. Reaching the ideal ego is a myth: it is an impossibility, and here it is phrased in tension with the ego. "It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context *as an identification*, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image – an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, as witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity's term, "imago"." (Lacan 2006:76). The reason for the importance of the mirror stage in this context is its relation to the screen in video games. Of particular interest here is the structural link between the individual and the game, in which Jagodzinski's idea of the screen performing the effect of a double mirror (Jagodzinski 2004) has a major place, as explored later. The other process to consider in relation to this is the placement of the avatar within the realm of identification, as mentioned earlier. We must look at the relation of the screen to the mirror as an important aspect.

Lacan refers to the notion of desire a great deal within his works, and this is extremely important to an understanding of psychoanalytic theory in that context. Lacan's basis of desire relies on an understanding that 1/ we are not in control of our desire, and 2/ desire relies upon fantasy. Lacan redefined Freud's notion of desire as a construct close, but remaining in opposition, to both need and demand. Jean Laplanche and J.B Pontalis cite this relationship as follows: "Desire appears in the rift which separates need and demand; it cannot be reduced to need since, by definition, it is not a relation to a real object independent of the subject but a relation to phantasy; nor can it be reduced to demand, in that it seeks to impose itself without taking the language of the other into account, and insists upon

absolute recognition from him." (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973:483).

Lacan's notion of desire, therefore, can only be considered with relation to this rift, this lack. It has no specific relation to an object, as said object is missing from the equation. Lacan states that "By a reversal that is not simply a negation of the negation, the power of pure loss emerges from the residue of an obliteration. For the unconditionality of demand, desire substitutes the "absolute" condition: this condition in fact dissolves the element in the proof of love that rebels against the satisfaction of need. This is why desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting (*Spaltung*)." (Lacan 2006:580). Desire remains in opposition to need and demand and is essential to our understanding of the complex processes at work. The lack is important to the mirror stage and will formulate the basis of what the whole idea of playing games appears to be centred around: desire.

Through specific activities we attempt to overcome that lack for a period of time. Games count as one such activity. We are lacking, we are not complete beings. Therefore overcoming this loss for a period of time produces satisfaction, albeit briefly. However, it can be replicated by repeating similar activities, which might explain why individuals play so many different games.

A further essential aspect of Lacanian theory to cover will be the Symbolic, Real and Imaginary, of which the Symbolic is representative of the rules surrounding the child and its acceptance of those. The Real is a concept existing outside of language, and is lost at the point of our initiation into a linguistic-based system. Despite this, there are elements of the Real in fantasy. Thus it is connected with desire, true fulfilment of which is impossible in Lacanian theory for it would expose the lack within us. The Imaginary is the location at which the construction of the ideal takes place, the point at which the child perceives itself as whole in the mirror. The Imaginary is therefore image- or language-based for it serves to function as a fantasy created by the child to achieve a sense of satisfaction. Using these structures, one can begin to see how precisely one might appear when playing a game and what could potentially be occurring beneath the surface.

I would finally like to introduce the concept of the gaze. Lacan separated the

gaze from the eye, determining that “I see from only one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.” (1977:72). The gaze is thus the idea that our look peers back at us, that a look can be returned by anything. This is something one might witness in a multitude of situations, but its occurrence in games can be particularly startling. We are used to seeing. The feeling that something we believe we are in control of might be looking back at us is disarming and difficult to comprehend. It serves as a reminder, a realisation of the lack of control we exhibit in the act of play with a virtual entity. One might say that the game breaches the gap in the Real through which we communicate. More disarming than this is the sense that what is looking back cannot actually see, thus adding a further dimension of what it is that is perceiving us at the point of reversal of contact.

Lacan's more structural approach to psychoanalysis is essential to research because it means that an idea is not simply placed upon the object of study, but that the object of study is analysed through its structure and relevance in terms of language, not its contents.

5. Rules

I mentioned the idea of play being inseparable from the idea of work earlier, and it is important here to justify this on a psychoanalytic level. Play has long been a concept of much debate, especially in the philosophical world. Indeed, the very idea that play exists in contrast with work has strong roots in philosophy, “Plato introduces a normative polarization of playfulness and seriousness.” (Nagel 2002:30). This notion remains apparent in modern society, where the idea that play may only occur outside of the rigid work model is ingrained. Furthermore, play is often considered frivolous and non-productive, albeit something that has a possible learning element to it. Conversely, work is treated as a necessity and is not supposed to be fun. The notion of 'fun' is a term associated with the concept of play, as per Brian Sutton-Smith’s (2001) dynamic, which characterises play in terms of its rhetoric.

This notion of separateness can work in favour of the idea of play, for it gives the concept of play room to be just that. There is no way to separate what it is: its meaning is clear, for it is embedded in language. We all know what it is to play and what it is to do the opposite, because that is its situation in the linguistic

environment. Equally, despite its linguistic separateness, it is inexplicably tied in with the notion of work. Its placement and definition must remain in reference to its opposite.

What is the psychoanalytic implication of this? Lacanian psychoanalysis borrows heavily from the Saussurian concept of a rule-based linguistic system, that is the signifier, the signified and the sign. Within this closed system, the signifier and the signified go together to create the sign. Such things are more problematic in Lacanian theory, for due to their position in both the conscious and unconscious mind's processes, chains of signifiers could get broken and reattached incorrectly, thus causing incorrect associations in an individual. Therefore, what I am stating when I speak of the definition of play being permanently in relation to the notion of work, I state that as its default current status, as being in flux. “Work” and “play” are inextricably linked. Whilst they can be defined without specific reference to one another, they work in opposition to one another. Equally, the word “game” emerges as a structure based on play, but cannot exist without reference to the concept of play.

Part of playing (a game) is accepting and being limited by the rules surrounding it, as stated previously. This means that it remains in opposition with work in terms of how it is socially, but not structurally. A game might be defined as “an activity defined by rules in which players try to reach some sort of goal.” (Galloway 2006:1). In doing so we acknowledge the idea that a play space involves certain conditions that must be met.

As we progress through a video game, we are met with specific trends and elements that propel us to continue playing. A game will follow a specific computational ruleset, and in order to initiate play with that title, one must follow the rules of the game which are presented. These rules might be defined and presented in a number of ways: other characters might offer quests, the player character might only be able to follow a certain path, or collecting money in-game might only be able to be used for certain items. I have already established that said ruleset is embedded in the game, which makes it distinct from other types of game. Because of this, it becomes difficult for a user to gain the ability to change the rules, as someone who wishes to have a quick game of *Monopoly* might do by limiting the

amount of money available, for example. It is, of course, possible to breach the rules of a video game, and this is often achieved through the use of modifications to the game's code and through cheat cartridges. Julian Kuecklich states that "Borrowing a term from systems theory, cheating is a form of 're-entry,' a figure that re-introduces into the system the basic distinction by which the system is differentiated from its environment. In the case of games, the distinction is marked by the difference between playing by the rules and playing with the rules." (2004:8). This relates to Suits' story of two warriors who have no interest in playing by the rules, which is discussed further in Chapter Four.

Some games developers actively encourage such communities of 'modders', with games like *Quake* (1996) and *The Sims* (2000) having user communities who are dedicated to creating custom levels or avatars.

Despite these communities, the majority of individuals play based on the rules outlined in the mechanics of the game. Some elements might be achieved without following the rules, but it is unlikely that one will achieve the ultimate end without doing so. If we consider that the ultimate end of a game exists as the reward that the user seeks to enable them to move on to another way of countering the lack, this is extremely important. There are three rules which tie in to this completion requirement, and I have defined these rules as follows:

What cannot be achieved – impossibilities within the context of the environment. An example of this might be running into an invisible 'wall' where one can see the scenery beyond but cannot access it due to the limitations of the game. This rule also exposes the rules of the game to the player, which in itself can become problematic, and differs from more socially imposed rulesets (such as all players in a multiplayer world agreeing independent of the game's design on a temporary truce). Users may attempt to locate ways around what cannot be achieved through specific jumps to access secret areas, for example, but in the end the achievement of what is not supposed to be achieved is not a specific reward-element in the game and does not actually progress the game either.

What can be achieved but is not a specific aim – what would not get you from A-B or cause any specific progression within the context of the game. An example of this might be completing a side quest, a quest which involves doing something that

runs alongside the main challenge of the game and might obtain for the character better armour or statistics but is not essential. It may be a requirement for obtaining a specific ending to the game (if an ending is feasible), but is not essential to a standard completion of the game, or for completing the game with a 'bad ending'.

What must be achieved – what must be achieved in order to progress through the game. This is the main quest. For example, one might have to fight a specific boss character or talk to a specific non-player character in order to activate something within the game that allows one to progress. This is essential to the game's playability, and a user will not be able to complete the game without completing the tasks assigned to this rule. An exception to this might be where, in *Metal Gear Solid 3* (2004), if you fail to find a specific boss character during the course of the game, said character will die of old age instead. This is, however, an 'either-or' scenario. One does not have to fight said boss in order to progress, although the game allows the user to assume that they have to.

These three rules overlap as such. One can carry on doing the second but in the end one will give up and begin doing the third after failing at the first. From a structural perspective these simple rules are the core of the gaming situation: it does not mean that one will not want to do the first two, but a game is based around progression to the desired end (in most cases this would be to win at whatever goal is set), and to that mind we are conditioned towards that response.

So much of life is defined by the dominating system surrounding it. Thus, games are defined by the rules imposed upon them. From a pure play perspective, it is the rules imposed on the game that make it what it is. Without them, the game would exhibit no structure and therefore would cease to be (a game). More precisely, everyone is looking for rules to play by, which would by definition satisfy their lack. This is apparent in everyday life and in popular media. For example, in *The Truman Show* (1998), Truman is the main character who is trapped in a reality television show situated around his life which he only slowly becomes aware of and comes to terms with. At the point at which he becomes suspicious of the world around him he seeks out something that will verify his mentality, and seeks to escape. This is a game in which nobody has ever told him the rules, or even that he is playing, and in the end he rejects the rules and enters into another system "There's no more truth

out there than there is in the world I created for you." states Christof, the creator of the show.

Of course, we cannot reject the rules, let alone the game, and this film is important in the way it shows us these rules in a triple structure. The screen is central to this, as we can perceive three levels. One is our location as unwittingly voyeuristic spectator, the second is the level of the film's perception of the 'real' world, and the third is the fictional world. It is unusual for this framing mechanism to be addressed so blatantly, and the reason for doing this may simply be to draw attention to the rules we all live by, to embed us within the middle level so that we can perceive the Truman level all the more clearly.

Structurally, these rules can have an adverse as well as a positive effect on the player. The player might become ultimately limited by the rules, much like the character of Truman. This, of course, is a destruction of the play environment. However, leaving the main rules that cannot be broken aside, one might tire of the quests and decide to interpret the space in a different way. Thus, one would be formulating one's own set of rules within the game's ruleset. The core of the game remains the same, but the play element and even the narrative element can change depending on how the user is viewing the game.

6. Conclusion

The field of video games is a prime area for research. With the quantity of new and innovative technology being released, there is the offer of integration into aspects which serve as an important pastime for many individuals. Alongside this, there is a great deal of innovative research from many different fields which celebrates or raises concerns for this exciting new field.

This chapter has explored some of this important research in the field of video games studies, and through this I have justified my utilisation of a psychoanalytic take on games. My intention to observe the structures underlying the video game situation falls directly in line with psychoanalytic studies, particularly Lacanian notions of psychoanalysis. This will, however, also incorporate aspects of the multidisciplinary approach that video games research has emerged from.

In this chapter, I have explored the history of games from their basis as structured play. I have referred to early board games and their systems of rules,

placing them as elements which link themselves with aspects of the everyday (both in terms of materials used and what the game appears to be abstracted from). In bringing the history of games to the modern era, I have observed how this element has eroded, that perceiving what a game is based on (particularly in terms of video games) is now a much more difficult endeavour. This is due to the overall complexity of the games we expect in the modern world and will be explored in greater detail with reference to Baudrillard's work later.

It has been important in this chapter to situate my study with relation to other research surrounding both play and game elements, and to define important factors relating to the game situation. In situating the study, I have also established some of the core psychoanalytic theories that this project deals with.

Finally, rule systems of games have been explored with relation to what they mean to the game and to the user during the course of play. I have established the scenario of the user/game dynamic as a complex one and one that will be explored in greater depth throughout this project.

The next chapter formulates an observation of play spaces, whilst also looking at specific types of games and how they might be constructed with reference to specific psychoanalytic structures and indeed psychical spaces. I also explore the idea of the 'between worlds' effect put forward by scholars and attempt to explain aspects of video games through the use of contemporary literary devices. This material works towards the formulation of the construct of the intermediate ego, and also the ideas related to hyperreality that will be encountered later.

Chapter Two - Play and Games in Contemporary Culture

1. Is This Play?

This chapter delves deeper into the idea of forms of play, with particular reference to one literary and a number of video game examples. Said literary example is significant as it questions a number of elements of what constitutes play and how the players of a game are formed. I also present ideas surrounding the avatar and in-game spaces, both of which are central to our understanding of what creates and maintains said spaces within the game. This chapter is therefore more about the internal components of the game within the dynamic than the overarching theories that were described in the previous chapter. What is it about a game that makes it such? How do the illusory spaces and pre-rendered objects create a space that is both entertaining and challenging for the user?

In contemporary culture, the idea of what constitutes an element of the play form seems deeply contested. Because of this, it appears throughout different forms: literature explores what it means to play and who is doing it, characters in films are pulled into play scenarios and worlds beyond their control. Even games themselves propel us towards a knowledge of what they are, as one can perceive with certain postmodern titles in which characters gain 'awareness' of being just that.

Each of these worlds is fictional. Yet, each offers us a representation that may be applied to reality. These worlds reflect back at us, and therefore whatever the media form we can gain some knowledge about the play scenario. This chapter focuses on what we can gain from specific examples in different fields. It also formulates an understanding of what the play/game dynamic is, and the beginning of an exploration as to where the user is with relation to this dynamic. The user's relation to the game cannot be understood here without first exposing aspects of the game itself.

The first case study I use in this chapter is from a novel. This has been chosen because of its resonance with play theory, and also to highlight that something does not need to actually be a game in order to show a complex understanding of that system. Furthermore, said novel exposes notions of the reality of play and questions the location of said play element when individuals are actually forced into such a

dynamic. The reading is presented from the perspective of observing the structures maintained within the novel. This is because the structures that are exposed bear relation to elements of the structure of the user/game dynamic.

Koushun Takami's 1999 book (translated 2003) *Battle Royale* is a Japanese novel which has also been made into a popular film and a manga (Japanese comic book) series. It remains controversial in terms of its content, but also tells an important story in terms of the act of play. *Battle Royale* is a novel offering the story of a changed world, a literary example of a play experiment on a much grander scale. The basic premise of the story is of Japan under the control of a dictator. Having banned 'dangerous' pastimes such as listening to rock and roll music and having isolated itself from the rest of the world, Japan has a deep-rooted suspicion of anti-government messages and a fear of the energy of youth connected with this. The Program occurs fifty times a year with a 'randomly' selected class of junior high children (we find out later that the selection process actually might not be so random), with the aim of one teenager emerging victorious over the others through the act of killing. This is stated to act not only as population control but also to increase control over those left alive. The Program is broadcast on national television and is considered an extremely popular reality television show and a civic duty to allow one's children to participate (it is implied that those who object are killed). It emerges later in the novel that some individuals in the government place bets on who will win a Program, thus decreasing the chances of them being able to interfere with it, and also creating a play scenario from the outset. It is assumed, therefore, that the two students who are killed by the coordinator before the beginning of the Program are not essential because no bets have been placed on them. The idea is also explored that previous 'winners' are released back into the Program in order to prevent the need to reinitiate them into the 'civilised' world.

In the Program we become the unwitting spectators of, we bear witness to a successful escape attempt instructed by the character Shogo Kawada, a previous winner of the series who is looking to redeem himself for being unable to save the one he loved in his previous Program. He is joined by the trusting Shuya Nanahara and Noriko Nakagawa. Aside from a failed attempt to destroy what is keeping the students there (foiled by another student who was 'playing'), some individuals play,

some commit suicide, others go insane or attempt to construct a community of hope and live 'normally' until time runs out. Whilst we follow the first of these stories to the end, we see from the perspective of the omnipresent spectator: we see what everyone is doing.

A screenshot from the film version of *Battle Royale* (2000) in which a rather excitable and out-of-place character explains the rules to the children.

The structure of the Program is as follows. The last student left alive wins the Program. This instantly places the Program into the structure of a 'game', and is the central rule by which all must abide. Students are given one weapon as well as water, food, a map and a compass at the beginning of the game. Weapon selection is random, so in order to get the best weapons to defend themselves, students are actively encouraged to kill. Equally, water supply has been cut off, so students must compete in order to get more sustenance. There are counter-rules which mean that even those who do not wish to play should be scared into doing so, such as the explosive collars the students wear. Said collars are tagged for life signs, location and sound. Also introduced are Danger Zones, where places on the island get activated at certain times to prevent students from entering (if they do so, their collars explode). This closes the space that students can run around in and increases the chance of random encounters. If there is no killing for twenty-four hours, all of the collars explode and nobody is victorious.

Borrowing this ruleset and applying it to what we have already covered, we can perceive a number of ways that this becomes not only a game but also a

manifestation of the politicisation of play (here represented as the loss of childhood: the age of play). The rules are sound and fit the aforementioned structure: there are elements within the rules that one must do, there are elements that one cannot do, and even elements that are not intended to be done but can be anyway. The Program also maintains interest (certainly in the meta-game of those who bet on who is going to win) and surpasses the idea of not being too real by entering the realm of hyperreality. Hyperreality is an extremely important component related to video games and will be explored in greater depth in the fourth chapter.

Further to the rulesets surrounding this fictional game, the novel also draws to light an important realisation about the desires of the player. In this scenario, it appears that one can still be playing a game even at the point of active resistance, despite the fact that this differs from some elements of play theory, “A game which one would be forced to play would at once cease being play.” (Caillois 2001:6). We have already, like Caillois, defined a game as a structured conception of our desire to play. Participants in the Program meet at the point of resistance and should have no desire towards 'play' in this sense. However, participation is mandatory and therefore the desire would be placed in the direction of the death drive: Freud's concept that worked in opposition to the Pleasure Principle. The death drive would propel the individual towards a state of non-being. *Battle Royale*, therefore, might be considered an active imagining of said drive, which takes into consideration the individual as desiring to play. This obsession with death in the play scenario can be seen replicated throughout video game history with the continual death and rebirth of player characters. It seems that our modern conception of what a structured play scenario consists of cannot necessarily be separated from these spheres.

As a novel, *Battle Royale* is not just important for its exposure of this aspect of the play element but also its replication of elements throughout its entire structure. The first thing one notices when reading *Battle Royale* is that the book's structure is constrained by the rules of the game within. At the end of each chapter we are informed of how many students remain alive. Our own structural relation to the novel takes on something more akin to our relationship with the screen when at play, meaning that it is possible to represent this element of play in different media. *Battle Royale* differs again from much literature in the sense that it takes on more of

a schizophrenic perspective: it twists reality into a sense that we are at once in the head of one student, and in the head of another in the following chapter. The effect of this is that we become lost, immersed in the world surrounding us, to the extent that the final lines in the novel, “Now, once again, “2 students remaining.” But of course they're part of you now.” (Takami 2003:616) become ultimately important to the understanding of this. We are interacting in the 'game' throughout the novel. We are not the spectators who watch, neither are we those who bet on the show. We are the students, and the structure of the book allows for this. In some ways, we are playing the game, but not through ourselves, and this seems close to the act of gaming as we know it.

It has been theorised, such as in Taylor’s 2006 *Play Between Worlds*, that there are points during the game process (or expression of) where one is interacting at a point between worlds. In our initiation into the structure of the novel, it is as though we are doing this. However, I will argue later that this 'between worlds' notion is an effect and is not, in fact, theoretically plausible even when considering the idea that we might switch into different psychical play spaces at the point of interaction. However, the idea that we are playing another being has huge implications on the reality of the current situation in video games.

2. The Avatar

Battle Royale's 'playing between' effect is close to the act of gaming as we understand it in this thesis for the reason of the avatar. I have already defined the avatar in this thesis, but here I go into further depth about the movements and connections of the user with the avatar, including differentiating a few types. To recapitulate, an “avatar” is considered to be a representational figure. Rehak describes it as “a perceived world and a sense of control; a moving map, like a projection on the inside of a sphere, and outside it the intention, attention, urgency and passion we bring to our virtual pursuits.” (2007:150). In video games, the avatar might look like the player. This type of system is often used in more social games, games in which one might pick up and play casually with one’s friends. In this instance, the user might create an avatar that they consider looks like them or a representation of an aspect of themselves that others will recognise. They may create something wholly random, but equally, for the duration of the game they are

recognised by that avatar. It distinguishes that individual's play from that of the others. Services such as the Mii creator in the Nintendo Wii console fulfil this role, and 'casual' games such as *Wii Sports* (2006) take advantage of the user's ability to customise their avatar. In such games, the user plays with a 'Wii Remote' (a motion sensitive controller), which they swing like a bat or use to bowl a ball (for example). As they do so, their on-screen avatar mimics this action. This locus of action potentially propels the user closer to the game. The recent Nintendo handheld console, the 3DS, has the same function. This time, however, one can make use of the built-in camera located on the device to take a photo of oneself. Said photo is then automatically converted into an avatar, often with extremely unflattering results. This surely seems related to the ideal, whereby the user represents his- or herself as an approximation of how they might perceive themselves, using the limits of the platform in order to create their avatar. The camera-based creator does quite the opposite, in that it makes the creation better mapped but loses both the humanity of the project and the image of the ideal.

Player-characters in games are more commonly entirely separate from both the looks and personality of the user (character/story-led games, such as *Devil May Cry* (2001), are a good example of this). An avatar should not be confused with the player-character, which can become the avatar of the player but has its own linguistic significance (such as in-game personality). Player-characters can be silent, such as the hero character of Link in the *Legend of Zelda* (1986) series, who is not offered a voice or a chance to speak. Characters such as Link provide a gap for the user to fill with meaning. That is, the user can assume elements of their avatar's personality. It is not that the player-character does not speak, it is that we are not privy to what it says, or indeed how it is said. This device is conducted in an almost literary sense, whereby the game does not reveal too much to the user. The user responds by utilising aspects of imagination to fill in the gaps, as it were. This has the potential to strengthen the bond between the user and the game, for the user has added something of themselves to the avatar. This psychical connection is extremely important to the maintenance of the play element, as we will see in the next chapter.

 A screenshot from *The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass*. Note how the text on the screen is directed at the user, from some invisible narrator, not the character himself.

Of course, not all avatars are like either of the two examples already provided. Player-characters may have voices, even personalities. This perhaps gives the user the feeling of presence, of travelling with someone, and of ensuring that said someone makes the correct choices. The player-character in such games must therefore resemble some manner of appeal to the user, for they will be travelling with, indeed controlling, said avatar for the duration of the game. Perhaps more importantly, this type of character is progressive and often must face a dilemma in the game which again must strengthen the bond between the user and the game. The user places meaning on the actions, and relates to what is reflected back. An example of this would be the main character in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2003), whose personal journey to restore the world that he unwittingly damaged the user must traverse. This game also retains some literary conventions, such as the main character narrating his story to the user throughout. As we will establish later, avatar-based games as part of contemporary media display some degree of mimicry of related media forms. This aspect of what exactly games are, and where indeed they are going, is of tremendous importance not only in terms of this document but also in terms of the wider context. The changing ways in which we perceive what is occurring on the screen (with, for example, the birth of 3D gaming

and ‘avatarless’ games) also change the location of the avatar. If the avatar could be described as the point of focus in the game (rather than other aspects of the game), what the user looks to in order to progress through, how will our interactions begin to change? This aspect is looked at further in the appendix.

The term “avatar” reflects the duality of language mentioned previously, and thus our relation to the screen: the word “avatar” has long been used to represent deities in Hinduism, whereby they take on or manifest a specific form. However, a far newer meaning, popularised in Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash*, is that of the virtual representation. Now, essentially this is the same word with two meanings, but if we consider the fact that its original meaning should still have an impact on its signification, we can conclude that the concept of an avatar in the gaming situation has godlike qualities. There is an implication that the user has some divine power in the space occupied. Furthermore, the user takes on the ability to inhabit both a virtual and physical body at once, which defines some kind of presence in the game's world, albeit an imagined one. What differentiates it from other media is, as aforementioned, the hybridised nature of video games. They appeal to all of the senses. However, the rules of this virtual world do not belong to, nor have any specific connection to the user aside from at the point of interaction. Therefore, despite the appearance of control, the power of the user in this variety of virtual world is imagined: the user overvalues the control they actually have. Aside, the system guides the user, but the user must remain a part of the system for it to proceed with this guidance. This is the position we seek when we are reading *Battle Royale*, and is something that is replicated throughout the novel: the desire to remain a part of the system.

3. The Structure of the System

This perspective, whereby the locus of control is misread by the user, above all provides us with a well-structured understanding of the story of *Battle Royale*, but it also prevents us from perceiving the motives of others when we are in that situation. It is a position of pure guidance masquerading as pure vision (again, much like in a video game situation). This adds to the structural anticipation that we are helpless. Naturally, we can do nothing anyway, but the fact that we have been placed in the situation of experience means that it is only the more horrifying when that

character is discarded from the story.

An important aspect related to this is the dream sequence in the novel. In this, the protagonist Shuya dreams that he is seeing his classmates at school, yet all of them are dead. However, the dream replicates the death sequences of said classmates. A degree of poetic licence is utilised here: as Shuya was not near them when his classmates died he should have no recollection of these events. However, the important element of this scene is that it also states that the future is changeable: Noriko is dead in this scene and yet in reality she survives. The scene, therefore, prepares us for an outcome. This is all the more clearly stated in Barthes' interpretation of photography: “Birth, death? Yes, these are facts of nature, universal facts. But if one removes History from them, there is nothing more to be said about them; any comment about them becomes purely tautological. The failure of photography seems to me to be more flagrant in this connection: to reproduce death or birth tells us, literally, nothing.” (1993:101). This is what it means to win the game, and the meaning is empty, because a game is representative of something, sometimes a combination of elements that once removed from their default setting are not filled with meaning but emptied of it.

So if to win is nothing but an empty signifier, what is the purpose of winning at all? This of course applies to all games and not just this fictional example. To win is to end the game for good. Anything beyond is no longer the game, the structure cannot be maintained. To win is, in many ways, equal to losing. Something is lost when the game ends. In this rather extreme example, it is innocence and innocent play. The Program forces one to shed one's 'childhood' skin and become a part of the economic game. It exposes play to the reader as far from innocent, as an aspect of our desire. It also exposes that adult play is increasingly linked with our own external/internal realities, something that will be explored further in the next chapter.

We witness in the above statement the huge power of meaning. We can look at the effects of something, but without first taking heed of its meaning and how it is embedded into the linguistic structures that surround it, we are quite likely to miss vital clues. Having stated that, we are also embedded in the same linguistic system: understanding those connections which lie beyond the reach of language would

prove impossible.

The characters within the novel are carefully constructed to convey certain meanings. Kazuo Kiriyama, for example, represents the rules, and lets us be clear that the rules are in place to ensure a victor. In this microcosmic space, the emotionally dead Kiriyama is constructed as a representation of the world surrounding the game. He is not, however, constructed in any way to appear human. He is the personification of the rules of a game that nobody wins. The rigid boundaries surrounding us in life; they are this character, which operates in direct opposition to the character of free-loving Shinji Mimura, whose desire is to beat the government at their own game. He is eventually killed by Kiriyama, which appears a way of stating that one cannot win by subverting the rules. Again, this adds weight to the video game dynamic, particularly to the later diagram concerning the ways in which we work with and against the rule-based system of the game. However much we attempt to subvert the rules and play in our own way, we always have to go back to them or else we will never complete the game. What cannot be destroyed, both in the novel and in games in general, is the *desire* to do things our own way, the hope that we can change things, and that is what Shuya's character represents. Being too steadfastly opposed to the functions of a game means that you do not have a chance of completing it (as is the case with Yoshitoki). Equally, moving too fast into a game that you do not understand means that you will eventually lose everything too (Megumi). Every method of playing a game has its merits, but only some methods will allow you to progress. The final lines of the novel do not just hold implications for the reader but also for the future of the game: whilst the construct of hope prevails, it is the way that said character is able to take on lessons learnt by his dead friends. We play games through learning from our past errors, and by that method we can win. We take the errors into account, we learn, as Shuya does. This does not mean we are changed by this sequence of events, but we certainly do not remain unchanged either.

Is the user changed by playing a game? Certainly if we consider the prospect of their overcoming the lack, we can perceive that the user must both remain the same (in the sense that they remain in the same situation, seeking out a new way of overcoming this gap in desire) but also be changed, for they will retain aspects of

the game within them. Aspects of this, such as the idea of merchandising as a method of assisting the user in retaining a grasp on the fleeting satisfaction they obtained in playing the game, will be covered in greater detail later.

Returning to *Battle Royale*, as one might expect, the nature of the novel is cyclical. The nature of Shogo Kawada's character is implied to have been like Shuya Nanahara's in his previous outing and the implication is that this is how Shuya as construct of hope could become: hardened to the world, playing alongside the game rather than in it. Kawada's character must then 'die' in the structure it is embedded in, otherwise the system cannot fully collapse. I state this because it is not so much that the game cannot be over but that it cannot be thwarted. Despite the blow to the government, it is implied that the Program will continue. Kawada, as previous winner, has become the system. Whilst detesting it, he is comprised of the meanings of the system, so it is only logical that when it collapses so does he. This collapse also occurs in video games, when at the point of completion control is removed and the game places everything in the correct place for the ending.

As mentioned before, we are initiated into the understanding that the characters become a part of you. In fact, they are also a part of each other long before the end of the game. There are similar aspects to them (for example, Shogo and Mitsuko act to get what they want), so they are already part of one another from the beginning. They are already aspects of one person trying frantically to survive in a world where everything is treated like a game, something we can all relate to. This is something easily missed in a reading of the book: the characters are all so distinct because they are all effectively symbolic of one person's struggle as a disjointed body, where Kiriyama is one's perception of what society expects one to be.

All characters within this novel in particular, and indeed in video games, serve specific purposes. Characters are representative of a purpose. They assist the user's progression whilst also allowing for a better understanding of the story.

4. <u>Games of Life</u>

A further application I will make here to video games is that the disjointed aspect apparent in *Battle Royale* runs into them too. The idea of testing out avatars, patterns, ways of playing the game, they all apply to life, as does that reading apply to *Battle Royale* as a novel. The issue with understanding the structure of a game is

that as soon as you understand it, you might not want (or indeed be able) to play anymore. Yet, this is fleeting. Perhaps we never truly understand a game's structure, even after completion. Does this desire to understand it make it any less of a game? The rules facilitate the idea of play, and in life there are always rules. In games on the playground, we impose rules as a symbolic salute to society, and whilst society itself might not be construed as a game, the constructions surrounding it are. Part of how we understand the world seems based on this primal aspect that desires play, so even as adults we play. We call it different things to subvert the idea onto children but the games we play are perhaps no more complicated, perhaps less so because whether we like it or not we are already embedded in society.

There is a certain safety in naming something a 'game'. Despite the recent media backlash against 'violent' video games, the idea of a game has associations with escapism, with exploration, with fun. The fact that one could decree, as the novel seems to imply, that every act we do could potentially be referred to as some form of game, is deeply troubling. We are linguistically so deep-rooted in this idea of 'work' and 'play' that we cannot associate the sense that the two are inextricably intertwined. You might be at work but you are still abiding by a certain set of rules. Perhaps if you obey them particularly well you will be in line for a promotion, a competition between people of whatever value is placed upon that promotion. And what happens when one achieves promotion? You win. The issue of course with winning, returning to an earlier point, is that winning is nothing but an empty signifier. Therefore, there is nothing more to do apart from continuing to strive towards an impossible goal, which appears to be a good reminder of the distance between the ego and the ego ideal. Therefore, perhaps it does not matter whether we choose to play or are already embedded in a system where it is a prerequisite that we do not acknowledge. We are forever striving towards desire, and these short excerpts along the way could easily fall into the category of a game.

It does not matter, then, that *Battle Royale* is about a game of life and death. In being so, it merely illustrates the difficulties there are in defining what a game is and what it is not. Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of avatar-based games, then, is that they hold a direct representative connection to our own lives. The game illustrated, here, is at once every game we play throughout our lives and every

persona we take on in order to get through them, and yet at the same time it is also representative (or at least masquerades as being so) of something much more ultimate, more final.

This sense of games, and not just video games, dominating how we live is apparent through the way media forms handle the issue. In some ways it is almost a primal fear of what we do not yet quite understand about ourselves: by addressing the idea as an abstraction, such as in the previously mentioned *The Truman Show*, we are in some ways attempting to understand this complex issue whilst in others projecting it so far out of the boundaries of language that any meaning it had is hopelessly disguised. One might recall the influx of science fiction films dealing with robots last century as evidence of this. It is a method of addressing the issue whilst at the same time neglecting the meaning to the extent that we have control over it and create an entirely new one (one that cannot upset the delicate balance we construct to keep ourselves from knowing). It is a product of the society in which we live that we have this intense fear of being watched, of not knowing reality for what it is. In this sense, society has produced us with a kind of schizophrenic view of the world.

In terms of video games, much the same process is true, though people are more honest with the idea that it is a game and do not hide it so much. However, outside of games studies, the addressing point for a game is either the game itself or the effect on the individual playing it. In truth, we have difficulty expressing exactly what we are doing when at play. A contemporary media example of this is the band Machinae Supremacy, whose unique style of music utilises the sound chip from a Commodore 64. Similarly, the songs revolve around playing video games and virtual reality. I feel that something like this ultimately addresses the idea that there is something uniquely important about playing a game for which we have not mastered the language.

5. Elements of Presence

I would like to proceed to a simple diagram comprising three separate spaces: the user/avatar space, the historical space, and the rule space. This will bring together the material that has already been mentioned in this chapter. The user/avatar space is something that has been referred to in a “between worlds”

capacity, which I briefly mentioned earlier as a theoretical implausibility. Here I particularly refer to Taylor's previously mentioned social study regarding the popular online game *EverQuest* and her experience at a convention related to said game. She states that, “When we play we negotiate a duality of presence (between the offline and the game world), and as we gain embodied competency over our avatars, we come to experience a satisfaction reminiscent of what is felt when we master a sport or embodied activities in corporeal space.” (Taylor 2006:109). Taylor is particularly interested in the social aspect of what occurs when we play, and whilst this should be deemed as important, as outlined below, I do not perceive that it places us in this “between worlds” state. Let me explain. To be between implies that you are no longer a part of yourself, nor indeed a part of the game mechanic. This relates to the psychoanalytic construct of the fragmented being, whereby an individual can never be considered ‘complete’. This is referenced further in the next chapter.

As outlined above, we can see a basic schema related to an understanding of the way in which the levels of the world interact with the player of the game. I theorise that this player/avatar space is not the individual as “between worlds,” but that the in-betweenness is where the perceived knowledge exists. This space on the diagram therefore represents the individual as an assembly of components: the individual and the player-character or avatar. The player/avatar space represents knowledge and empowers itself towards the game as the position at which knowledge is held. However, this space directly correlates with the historical space, which pressures

that of the player/avatar space into being empty. This 'historical' space is the simplest to describe, for it appears as both the internal and external. Of these, this psychical space is all about contexts and histories, both of and about the game/individual at play, and the current historical context (externality). If what exists in the player space exists at the level of knowledge, this knowledge must be in direct conflict with that of context. The historical space concerns itself with this, thus distancing the game from the level of 'reality' and the player from the level of the avatar (thus ensuring that the player cannot become 'between worlds' in this type of game). The rule space is the final space to be covered, but it remains separate from the others, floating at a distance between the two, for this space contains information relating to both sides. The rules are not of and about the game, but of and about the individual at play, too. The rule space takes and utilises, therefore, aspects of both positions already outlined. However, it does not exist in opposition, rather in mediation (much like the ego). This will be explored further with the introduction of the construct of the intermediate ego in the following chapter. The user's proximity to the avatar will be explored here as a grounding for the introduction of this new construct.

6. Avatar Studies

I would like to illustrate this duality of actions with relation to the avatar using three studies. This will assist in our understanding of how avatar-based games interact with the user. The first is the game *Black & White* (2001), important for its noticeable actions of proximity to the avatar. The second takes heed of games series in general, but with especial reference to the *Final Fantasy* (1987) series. The third is online game *World of Warcraft* (2004).

***Black & White* (2001) Lionhead Studios**

Black & White is known as a "god game", that is, it is a title that utilises the idea of the player as a deity who is able to harvest, grow or destroy as he or she wishes. In *Black and White*, the user is introduced to themselves as a god, and it is explained that they were brought into existence through, in an interesting reversal of commonly held beliefs, someone's prayers. One's aim, as god, is to rule over your tribe in whatever way you deem fit. For assistance in this task, you are provided with a suitably overgrown monster (aptly known as "the Creature"), initially limited to a

cow, an ape, and a tiger. Later, the individual playing is given the chance to unlock further versions of the Creature, which links in with the rule element. We might be in the seat of the deity, but we are simply abiding by the rules issued us by the mechanics we have chosen to pilot.

A screenshot from the game which shows the scale of the landscape in contrast with the villagers and the creature. The user is distanced from the action.

The game freely acknowledges the idea that you might want to be a “good” god or a “bad” god, but it does project forth an area of choice that is absent. In every action one takes during the play of the game, we can do “this” or “this”. We cannot do “that” because the game does not allow for that. Again, the significance of the word “choice” that is played upon heavily throughout the game is interesting, for the choice we have is really very basic. To do “this” or “this” can affect the storyline, but there is no further significant effect. Later, we might choose to do a good deed when previously we have only done bad ones and be rewarded differently for that. For a choice to be just that, one might conclude that it needs to have implications, which playing a game really does not, because we can restart at any time and make the other choice. The only concrete choice we have is whether or not to play. This does not exactly acknowledge the user as a deity.

The choice of avatar in the game is arguable, for it is not a direct representation, but a solitary hand, which can be customised to be a left or right hand depending on

the player's preference. One assumes this is to further identify the player with the game (achieved also with the tutorial). By mapping one's preferred hand to the game, one is allowed to select an obvious behavioural trait which they and their avatar will share. Of course, we would normally consider avatars to be humanoid, so this appears to be a quick way to identify the player with something that they are not necessarily used to being represented by, particularly as the avatarial space is really a presumed one - it is the assumption that there is an attachment to the hand (i.e., the user themselves). The only problematic idea with regards to this is that *Black & White* is a PC game, played with a keyboard and mouse. Therefore, there must be some transformative act that means the player's actions are shown as hand movements on the screen. The player's actions are translated through a structural barrier in which the hand on the screen almost takes on an identity of its own. Thus, despite the bond between the game and the player, it also serves as a clever distancing device. One does not wander with the people of the tribe, the hand is always lifted high above them. The screen only further projects this distance upon the player. This dynamic serves as a distancing effect which allows the user to carry out the deeds of the god as a detached and transformative being.

Games series

Games series take both the rules of the game and the nature of avatar relations into account. One might play a sequel out of desire to reconnect with the character and their story, or their world. Often, sequels present one with an already well-known character in a familiar world, so there is less need for learning either the controls or the motives of their player character. There will always be points of familiarity: the world already has linguistic significance to the player. A sequel is, let us not forget, another chapter in an ongoing plot. Individuals who enjoyed that will retain a connection with that material long after they have finished it. One might say that this is even more resounding of our nature situated with relation to the lack. We constantly strive for something, never truly knowing the significance of it. By playing a video game, we may only be distracting ourselves from this, or we may be attempting to bridge it. Once the game is complete, that bridging is lost, so we must move onto something else. I would state that a game that has a particularly powerful effect on us in this sense would be one that we would desire the sequel for.

I would like to briefly mention the SquareSoft/Square-Enix *Final Fantasy* series of games, as they do something quite different from many other series of games. The *Final Fantasy* series is a highly rated Japanese role-playing game (henceforth known as JRPG) in which one usually takes on a group of fantasy warriors and attempts to save the world from destruction by some force. *Final Fantasy* is interesting in the sense that it does not cater for familiar characters (some share the names of characters in previous games, but other than that the world they occupy is essentially separate, with only a small number of exceptions), but the monsters, jobs, races and classes often overlap. However, the battle system is not static, though it does share traits from previous titles in most cases. The environment is often regal and set around concepts such as good versus evil, man's honour, and such, and the games are extremely long.

A screenshot from *Final Fantasy Tactics* featuring a chocobo, one of the staple monsters/mounts throughout the series.

Freedom lies in one's ability to customise, which is more stringent in some games than others. One can often choose which characters the storyline has given to them to have in their team, what job classes they should have, the order in which they should fight, or what weapons they might use. The player is responsible for upgrades and the levelling up of traits which they will find most beneficial.

However, the entire idea of a minimum amount of similarities being shared

across titles should not necessarily appeal with what I have previously stated on this matter, and therefore perhaps it is not just the avatar itself that is responsible for the level of desire towards the game but the mechanism itself. From the moment we see the box of a game on the shelf, we instantly form signifiers related to that, be they good or bad. If it is a title we have previously enjoyed, we are more likely to end up with a positive value on the title and are thus more likely to try it. In the case when a negative value is assigned to the product, we may simply choose not to play it. The user's valuation of a game obviously has some bearing on the appeal of the box art and the description, but a sequel to a game that the user has already connected with might be perceived as less of an effort to connect in order to obtain satisfaction. The connection here between the user and the avatar is more closed, more personal, because of the perceived connection that already exists at the point of purchasing a sequel.

World of Warcraft (2004) Blizzard Entertainment

World of Warcraft is a popular Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (henceforth known as an MMORPG) based on Blizzard's *Warcraft* series, tactical games which were extremely lore-driven. *World of Warcraft* takes place in said fictional universe, but exists as an adventure game rather than its predecessors which were considered to be strategic. *World of Warcraft* is played online on a server, on which many other users also play at the same time. In *World of Warcraft*, one may create a character of a race from one of the two warring factions, the Horde and the Alliance, and begin one's journey performing various quests for those in or close to this faction and gaining "experience" (XP) which allows one to "level up" and fight stronger beings. This also allows for further customisation, for one chooses a job for one's character at character creation. The individual is expected to choose traits as they level up that will benefit their avatar. For example, a Hunter can (at time of writing) take on one of three different specifications, choosing which aspects to develop and when, though a combination of these specifications can also be used. Developing via these specifications can have a great impact on how that character should be played, both as an individual and when 'partying' (fighting alongside a number of allies). *World of Warcraft*, as an online game, is monitored and patches are often released which allow new forms of customisation, quests and

areas. The game is unfinished and cannot be completed.

A secondary aspect to the game is the Player versus Player element (I state this as secondary because only specific PvP servers actively promote this). Role Playing (RP) and Player versus Environment (PvE) servers do not place this limiting element on play, where every contested area forces one to battle other players, regardless of what you were intending to do prior to that. On PvP servers, one is encouraged to take on an appreciation for the war, and this is limited structurally by only allowing one to create only a Horde or Alliance character on that server. One cannot see what it is like on the other side, and therefore is forced into objectifying the situation. By allowing one to create characters on both sides of the divide, RP and PvE servers encourage one into the subjectivity of the situation. However, there remains an enforced allegiance to the side you have chosen: the quests revolve around profiting that side, and there is currently no way (without money, anyway) to change between the two or opt out altogether if you do not harbour a preference over who should win. There also remains a linguistic barrier, which unfortunately is a code that is not decipherable. Save for pre-created “emotes”, in which one makes a gesture at another player, one is unable to communicate with the opposing faction.

Interacting with one's avatar is instigated through a combination of the keyboard and mouse. Using these tools, one is able to bring up certain commands and slide between the avatar (play) interface and the control (game) interface. Below is a screenshot of a Hunter character in the game with her ‘pet’, a large white dinosaur (character and guild names removed). Along the bottom and right of the screen are commands, some pertaining to the player and some to the pet. Most commands exist for ease in combat, but others are for scaring enemies, locating hidden creatures, riding a mount, and even for cooking food. Along the bottom right of the screen exist bags in which the character can carry items of interest excluding those she is currently wearing. The bags have a maximum capacity, and whilst many crafting items 'stack' (many can be carried in one slot), weapons and armour do not. This encourages the player to stop off at towns and cities to make use of the auction facilities in which they can sell their excess items for in-game money. This in turn can be used to purchase more desirable supplies.

A screenshot from the game showing the interface. This one is customised to the needs of the user, with different types of skill grouped together. Once a skill is selected (by clicking on it), it can be cast or utilised in- or out of combat situations, depending on the skill.

One can view other characters' guilds (groups within the game used for questing, PvP/PvE combat, and social calls) and names. Pressing “M” brings up a map of the current area which is being explored by the avatar. This area can be zoomed out to reveal the specific continent, or indeed the entire world. From this, one can also select other areas, which will be revealed only to the extent that they have been explored by that character. This kind of element brings one outside the game environment as the interface options are prominently there. It is not that the character is looking at the map; it is the user. Equally, the use of action toolbars (pictured above) around the side of the screen achieves a similar effect, for they frame the action. It is not that the control pad specifically translates the move onto the game in this instance, for the screen is reflected inwards and multiplies into the game. Selecting a button on the screen to carry out a movement is more reminiscent of a God Game than an RPG, and perhaps this tactic is employed for this very reason. From the very beginning, we select our avatar ourselves and the game defaults to a third-person perspective (it is also possible to play the game in first-person), thus creating the illusion of proximity despite distance (we are assuming a

connection takes place with the avatar, albeit at a distance). Atkins describes this difficulty in identification with reference to the avatar of Ubisoft's *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2003): “He is not so much representative of the player who plays, with all the flaws and failings of the all-too human player who will fail and will make mistakes, but of some posited ideal Prince. This is foreshadowed in the cutscenes offered in the form of visions triggered when the player enters the save checkpoints before each major challenge – a Prince who never fails, who never falls to his death, and who stands outside the game.” (2007:247). This appears to be a return to the idea of games being related to other forms of contemporary media, and seems to be a common theme in games. The avatar reminds one of its own place in relation to your own. Having stated that, Atkins' notion that there is a role reversal in which we are standing within the game and the avatar stands outside is interesting. We play the story, but we make mistakes. The avatar reminds us simply that the story did not go that way. This differs from *World of Warcraft*, where death is, to an extent, embedded within the story (in that one must take on the form of a ghost and return to where the avatar’s body fell in order to continue). However, what the avatar or the NPCs (non-player characters – characters controlled within the game’s programming, rather than by an individual user) do is maintain this idea of the faulty player.

In terms of proximity, then, we are never actually the avatar, as the idea of seeing them move rather than *being* them moving actually seems to maintain this idea and allow for switching of psychical locations. We can see what we are identifying with, but sometimes it is as though they see us. Not only that, we can see what they see and control their actions, but we do not exist in the same location as they do. The purpose of the side panels is to situate one as this motivated spectator, to empower the user whilst also maintaining this identification.

7. Finance and the Desire for Exploration

Another tool of empowerment is the use of in-game money. The ideas here are further expanded upon in Chapter Four with relation to familiar objects and their translation and understanding in relation to the game. Here, however, I explore the basics of what money is in the game and its central purpose to the user. Returning to *World of Warcraft*, we see that this is known as 'gold'. Money in games has a

special significance that at once mimics, parodies and flaunts the way we understand the concept in reality. However, the linguistic signification of in-game funding is hugely different. On the surface, it appears that they both interact in the same way: we perform a task (e.g., our job), we earn money or reputation for our good deed. With this money or reputation, we may purchase items that make doing this job more efficient, save it, or purchase more frivolous items. This is where the similarities end. Because in-game money only parodies an aspect of real life; it cannot evoke the same kind of signification to us. Therefore, the very idea of in-game money is without significance as it merely alludes to a concept quite separate to itself. It makes no commentary on finance; it merely is. We know how to use it, and it has not lost its meaning as such; it has merely emptied itself of it. A clear reason for maintaining this distance, despite (albeit against Blizzard's terms of service) real money trading, is the previously-discussed differentiation between “work” and “play”. An increase in in-game money can increase the perceived value of play. One might buy a flying mount and proceed to explore previously unexplored areas, or one might purchase some armour that allows one to be considered for high-level instances (private areas where the user and their party can explore, gain items, and fight high-level enemies). One might even attend a festival and spend time purchasing in-game alcohol. Working to upgrade a character is essentially still within the realms of this concept of play. In-game money is released far more easily on items one is not obliged to purchase, like the aforementioned armour. It is perfectly possible to progress through the game without the purchase of the best armour or weapons, and yet it seems that in-game money mimics its real life counterpart in that sense too; in terms of desire.

Our desire does not just stretch to the realms of money, but into that of exploration too. More specifically, we have a desire to see places within the world and make sense of them, especially in cases where the world has been left unfinished. Whilst Blizzard makes every effort to prevent individuals from getting their characters into unfinished areas, players continue to do so. Unfinished areas of the map represent an unknowing: we are shown the map and are expected to assume that it is everything, but what about the areas that have been included but never used? What of the areas that suddenly appear with the latest patch? So, we

learn and unlearn the map at the same time. Stories and pictures emerge on the internet of areas devoid of their usual completed status, ranging from missing NPCs to partially-moulded landscapes, to areas devoid of anything.

Some of these areas are not supposed to be accessible, and entering such an area amounts to performing procedures not considered a part of the game mechanic, such as wall-jumping or taking advantage of other exploits within the coding of the area. These hidden areas are of interest because they do not follow the specific rules laid out in the game. As incomplete areas, they are not supposed to be discovered by even the most intrepid explorer, but what happens when a player decides to find out what is beyond a certain mountain range? Returning to what was previously stated on the matter, we are aware of the limitations within a game, that there will always exist walls which we cannot pass through. Yet, when an area actually exists beyond that wall, how do we react? Just the knowledge that it is there makes it an identified part of the game world, however incomplete it is, but it is not treated as such. Entering such an area has implications not just for the avatar that might get stuck there because it is incomplete, but also for the player, who can in severe cases have their account suspended for their trouble.

The game world exists in duality, then, not just the avatar: we are closely moderated to only see that world which is translated onto the map, and yet we are also aware of these undeveloped spaces just waiting for definition. These pre-development spaces lack the linguistic input which makes them mean: they are as much a part of the game world as any other area, and yet they lack the almost cultural significance awarded more complete landscapes. They are structures without definition, and our fascination with them lies in the sense that they are just that. Their purpose can only be imagined, and whilst they might gain this definitive process in future, they serve as an opposition to what granting linguistic significance to something can do.

There are other areas which exist similarly in duality, such as the recently-implemented Northrend quest chain. In this chain, players can create an 'Heroic' avatar called a Death Knight, and follow a series of quests in an instanced area (an area seen depending on where in the quest that individual is, rather than seen the same through everyone's eyes) in order to free the avatar from the control of a

character called the Lich King and subsequently join the usual quest chain that any other character of that level would be able to do. What happens at the end of this chain, however, is that one enters one of the major cities to ask for forgiveness for the crimes committed during the Lich King's reign and is booed and jeered at by the NPCs of the area. Once the situation has been explained to the leader of that area, it reverts to normal. One can see the other player characters in the area and communicate with them as usual; NPCs show as friendly and stop jeering. The interesting element of this area is that if one is not doing the quest one can occasionally hear NPCs shouting and see the new Death Knight run through the city, but they are unable to see the same. The area exists in two layers, one of which is 'switched off' at the point where they become friendly with the NPCs of the area. This is rather a new concept to be implemented into such games, where usually one would see the same elements wherever in the quest one is. This changes the mechanic entirely. No more do we blind ourselves to the fact that everyone else is doing the same quests; we see the game world as a progressive element rather than a static one. We are all too willing to blind ourselves to the fact that the game lies to us: we are not the only hero through this quest, we are not saving the world, and elements in which one notices this duality only make this more apparent. Yet, mechanically, moving through a known town and finding everyone to be hostile is an extremely significant event in that we take aspects of the game world and the structure it conveys to us for granted. Changes to this can alter our entire way of seeing such things.

Our relationships with both the avatar and the game space itself, therefore, are complex. Games create different feelings and surroundings for the player to indulge in that allow said player to spatially align themselves with both the game world and reality, something I deny as being 'between worlds'. The avatar is an extension of the game space, as we explored in the latter two studies, and therefore it is not simply the relationship between the user and avatar that creates this unique effect. The location of the user in this situation will be explored further in the following chapter.

8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how games are represented in contemporary society. This has been with reference in particular to a novel which I feel expresses much of our contemporary status with regards to play. That is to state that we are ambivalent towards play. At once we demand ultra-realism and immersive stories whilst also being unable to express quite when we are at play. The individuals within the novel each took a different standpoint with regards to their relation with the play dynamic and this is essential to how we must perceive play. This of course relates back to the dynamic I explore within this project and allows one to further question the location of the user when they are at play.

I have explored the elements that make up an avatar-based game and how they may be utilised in non-games in order to create a game effect for the reader to explore. The aforementioned novel falls into this dynamic, whereby it expresses a game dynamic without itself actually being a game. The idea of the avatar is brought forth and explained here for the constant movement between characters in *Battle Royale* rephrases it outside of the gaming dynamic by allowing the reader outside of the avatar's sphere. In exploring the avatar, I have shown it as a duality of meaning and explained some of the important points of distinction between avatars (and indeed how they affect the gameplay).

An understanding of the avatar also allows us to perceive the user as a structured being in their own space which occurs separately from that of the avatar/game space. From this I have designed a simple diagram which enables us to perceive how the two spaces explored interact and where the points of interaction flow from and to. This component is further explored in Chapter Three where I bring it closer to my construct of the intermediate ego.

Finally, this chapter made an initial address to the idea of finance within games and the signification of translating said commodity into the game world. This chapter has therefore explored elements of the game related to the user and the game spheres. These elements all form essential aspects of the user/game dynamic.

I have alluded to a number of partial theories of play with especial reference to certain games and novels to better highlight the core issues surrounding them. I have also explained the constraints of the different spaces surrounding the

individual at play, thus separating it from theories about 'between worlds' effects and exposing the avatar as an extension of the gaming environment, whilst remaining the central focus of the player for identification.

These elements are all essential to our understanding of the dynamic presented between the user and the game scenario, and therefore propose something important to games studies. By understanding the user with relation to the game and the structures presented when they play I present a new way in which this dimension can be represented and therefore understood.

In the next chapter I look further into the effect of this, how our relation to the game comes about and is maintained, and also how it may be broken. The next chapter serves as a formulation of a new concept with regards to the play element of games: the intermediate ego. The idea retains elements explored in this, and the previous, chapter and serves to provide a more structural way of perceiving the bond between the user and the game.

The next chapter also explores the idea of hyperreality and how this can be linked with the Lacanian notions already explored. This will be essential to our understanding of elements of the game dynamic that have not yet been explored, whilst also showing how these two rich theories can be utilised together. It also explores where this stands with relation to the aforementioned construct of the intermediate.

Chapter Three – The Intermediate Ego

1. The Intermediate Ego

This chapter comprises two parts. The first part deals with the introduction of the concept of the 'intermediate ego', something based in psychoanalytic theory which allows for a greater understanding of the process of video game play. The second part deals with the use of the theories of psychoanalysis and postmodernism within the same area. I utilise postmodern theory in Chapters Four and Five in order to explore the role of objects and actions within the game, and it is important to explore how it is that these two at first unlikely theories might be utilised in the same context. The reason for its placement here is that at the point of using both types of theory we are left with an understanding not just of the bond but also of the (social) elements that surround it. Whilst use of both theories is separate, they both address specific aspects of the bond.

In the previous chapters, I have addressed other works dealing with concepts relating to games, have defined what play is, and addressed the internal components of the game that make it as such. I have also confirmed the act of playing a game as important and relevant to our understanding of contemporary media, and indeed the contemporary world. Whilst I have explored this act, I have yet to define what is occurring between the user and the game from the point of interaction with the product until its end. It is therefore my intention to present an understanding of the link formed between the user and the game at the point of interaction.

The importance of isolating this bond as an aspect for exploration is simple. The idea of the user indulging in the game scenario for a prolonged period of time is clearly centred around the idea of identification. The user identifies at some level with the primary character. Furthermore, this expands into an enjoyment and appreciation of all aspects of the environment presented in the game. This is not to say that the user identifies with other objects within the game, more that they connect with ideas. To the extent that the game can be considered a broken reflection (as discussed with relation to hyperreality later), there is a connection with it. The main identifying point of an avatar-based game, however, is the avatar. This is because it is said character that the user must take on throughout the

duration of play. They play in the warped mirror, the avatar is a refraction of the self.

Before I proceed with identifying this bond, it is important to acknowledge the use of psychoanalytic theory with relation to other media. This shows the consistency of my application, whilst also acknowledging the importance of this theory to the understanding of complex interactions.

Whilst in this thesis I separate games from other forms of media, it is important to acknowledge the influence of film theory on game studies. The use of Lacanian theory to understand the processes by which we acknowledge and relate to the events on-screen has been a popular and insightful method of observing our relation to the characters and situations presented to us. Laura Mulvey exposes desire in the realms of our observation of the film, and the complex interplay of looks between the male and female bodies both on- and off-screen. "Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged." (1975).

In essence, what Mulvey states here is true. Without comprehending the structures underlying the situation in which we are embedded at the point of interaction, we cannot fully understand (or indeed challenge) anything that occurs above and beyond that. Furthermore, Jean-Louis Baudry makes use of the dynamic laid out between the apparatus of the situation in order to understand the mechanisms at work during the process of filming, "In focusing it, the optical construct appears to be truly the projection-reflection of a "virtual image" whose hallucinatory reality it creates. It lays out the space of an ideal vision and in this way assures the necessity of a transcendence - metaphorically (by the unknown to which it appeals - here we must recall the structural place occupied by the vanishing point) and metonymically (by the displacement that it seems to carry out: a subject is both "in place of" and "a part for the whole")." (1986:289). Baudry structures the relationship between the viewer and the camera as being rather akin to that of identification, the recognition of the self, the fragmented body, and the situation of

the ideal. Cinema's initiation into the world as an aspect of representation, a mantle taken previously by art and other related forms, differentiates itself through the use of moving images.

Cinema has been associated with the idea of the mirror, an important construct to psychoanalytic theory, and one that we can see has much use with reference to the screen-based media forms of television and video games. Christian Metz describes it as "the durable mark of the mirror which alienates man in his own reflection and makes him the double of his double" (1977:4). The screen functions as another mirror, as Metz goes on to state "All this is undoubtedly reactivated by the play of that *other mirror*, the cinema screen, in this respect a veritable psychical substitute, a prosthesis for our primally dislocated limbs." (1977:4). Metz describes the importance of the symbolic in both films and those who engage with them.

Here, however, I separate myself from the use of psychoanalytic theory with regards to cinema, for there is only so much that its use with relation to another screen medium can tell us. Certainly the user is positioned before the screen in both instances, but the very nature of what they do there differs. The entire structuring of the user to the screen is an aspect of a different system. One might state in the first instance that the viewer of a film interacts with the screen in a more passive way, for they have no locus of direct control. What is different about games is the very directness of the connection formed between the user and the screen, and the complexity of the bond that results there. Even the cinematic moments within games are phrased differently, for although they remove control from the user, they do so whilst phrased within a model of interaction. This is not to state that the viewer does not interact with the screen during the screening of a film, it is that these interactions are not phrased within a locus of control.

Psychoanalytic theory's application to film studies retains its importance as a backdrop for this study, however. Game studies is multidisciplinary in nature, and in order to understand the bond between the user and the game it is beneficial to understand how a different relationship with the screen has been interpreted through such means. Films and games do share some attributes, and it is important therefore to accept film theory as a grounding on which aspects of game theory can be defined. However, despite their shared features, there are enough important

differences between them that it becomes essential to separate them.

One aspect that film theory acknowledges is the importance of connection, of identification. I would argue that this process is somewhat warped in the video game situation because of the duplication of the mirrored/screened process and the points of interactivity, but as described earlier, it is still a process by which the user identifies. Because identification is so important to human development, it seems fair to suggest that if we are to gain a good understanding of the processes at play when we are in the game situation, we must uncover the dynamics involved between the user and the game. This means taking the game and user interface at a structural level and building upon that. I feel that in order to gain comprehension of ourselves at play, we must first establish this groundwork. This can then potentially be built upon in future studies which might take into account complex components such as user intent.

In the first part of the following chapter, therefore, I show a means of understanding the relationship between the user and the video game which makes use of the theories we have already explored. Elements of the play experience at the character/literary level and at the structural level have already been established. It is in this chapter that I will bring them together under the dynamic of the intermediate ego.

Before I begin, it will be important to establish the psychoanalytic components that underlie this concept. These components are essential to gaining an understanding of the structures at play between the user and the game. I am utilising a psychoanalytic model of thought for this study because I believe that it exposes not only conscious, but also unconscious, elements that are at play throughout the individual's lifetime. Unconscious elements certainly seem to be a factor when we are regarding a dynamic as complex as the relationship established with the user in the game situation.

The psychoanalytic model of the mind consists of the psychical components of the id, ego and superego, which span the conscious and unconscious mind. These were briefly explained previously, but will be explored in greater depth here.

The id should be understood as an unconscious element, present from birth in the individual. It is representative of pure desire and expresses this need in the

individual through demand. It demands of the individual instant gratification and might therefore be considered as rather destructive, particularly if not kept in check by other components. We can perceive this as something which occurs in all beings, but because individuals are able to keep from this constant desire for instantaneous gratification, we perceive that there are other components at play at the same time. In the game situation, we can see how this might be damaging and would cause the individual not to play at all. If an individual only retained the capabilities of the id, a game could not occur. Furthermore, any element in which satisfaction must be withheld until a later time could not occur. This is not to state that playing a game does not product satisfaction in itself. However, the progressive nature of the game means that something approximating a deeper level of satisfaction can be achieved through the play situation. This provides us with evidence for the components of the superego and the ego, for we would not function in the same way without this dynamic working together.

The superego should be understood as the parental motives weighing down on the individual. Through these imposed morals, a child will learn the difference between 'right' and 'wrong'. This weighing of morals can defer satisfaction due to the idea that the satisfaction obtained through that particular desired act is connected in some way with the idea of it being 'wrong'. An overactive superego, therefore, might prevent an individual from trying out new experiences.

It can already be perceived that, if these concepts can be seen to exist, they counteract one another's intentions. However, if they applied equal and consistent pressure on the individual, said individual would be able to achieve nothing. This provides evidence for the third component in the dynamic: the ego.

The ego is the mediating device that exists between the id and the superego. It defers pleasure and provides reason to the superego. This is the construct that I wish to focus on, because it seems that if we were to align the specific situation we experience when at play with any of these components, it would be with that of the ego. This is important as it formulates the basis on which the method of communication between the user and the game must be based. Logically, we must perceive the idea of the individual at play interacting with the game as something of a mediation, for the very nature of being involved with a video game forces

identification with an other. The perceived intent of this other will not match that of the individual at play, and thus something needs to be at play which mediates the 'demands' of both the user and the game.

Thus, the game and the user exist in opposition and must be coerced into prolonged contact through a device similar to the ego. I specify that such a device would be similar to the ego, but not the same. Whilst the opposition and resolution exists on an unconscious level (after all, these are not processes that the user actively or knowingly employs), but the function of this ego appears different to Freud's usage. Its concern is with other identities, and said identities occupy an existence in a location that appears to be a psychical space that considers different factors relating to the game and the user's individual situation.

2. Identification

I return briefly to the basis of the three Freudian structures to describe the other components surrounding them that are relevant to the construct I am to introduce. Although Freud's original theory has since been furthered by other psychoanalysts such as the aforementioned Jacques Lacan, the basic premise of these structures remains the same. Indeed, these components remain a central part of psychoanalytic theory. Lacan also furthered Freud's idea of the ideal ego, a component of the superego formed during the mirror stage. To reiterate, the mirror stage consists of the child recognising his- or her- self in the mirror for the first time. This recognised image, however, is not a true likeness of the individual. An ideal is therefore created, comprising of this fictional recognised image, unobtainable to the child. This is the nature of identification.

I have already explained the nature of identification in video games. The user inputs a great deal to the game, and much of that is reflected back to them. Yet, much of that content is what the user is prone to identify with. Thus the feedback between the two retains the idea of identification, even if it is across the boundary of the screen and involves a degree of the self.

The concept of identification is incredibly important, for at our point of interaction with the game we are faced with a construct which situates us before the screen. On the screen exists the character the player must adhere to throughout gameplay, and a representation by which the player can move around the world, an

avatar. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this 'avatar' might take on an implied form (like a hand), whereby the user is presumed to occupy the space of the representation (which they cannot physically do, but it is implied). The location of the player here becomes problematic, something I have stated cannot accurately be explained through considering the player to be 'between worlds'. The player cannot be the avatar but they may assume a level of becoming at the point of interaction. If an individual is sympathetic to the avatar, this should be enough to maintain play (although, the avatar may simply represent the highest level of the game at which the user can identify, because they are the element of control). As Fine points out, “If a player doesn't care about his character then the game is meaningless.” (2006:582). This element of care should be perceived as feeding back between the user and the avatar.

What does it mean for a user to ‘care’ about their avatar? Is it the product of identifying with the avatar? Certainly it seems to be the case that this process of identification allows for the user to formulate some manner of bond with the avatar, to the point that a user may confuse the ‘I’ form when addressing their exploits in the game. This means that the user perceives the actions of the player-character/avatar as their own, and this basis clarifies the position of centrality that the controller holds in this process. Through the translation of actions onto the screen, the user holds a real connection with the game. This connection allows for the user to act as though the avatar’s achievements were his/her own, on the principle that the action has been activated by the user. This bond, therefore, should almost propel an attitude of ‘caring’ onto the user rather than the user constructing that notion themselves.

Further to this, the game situation allows for the user to occupy a place of perceived mastery. That is, the user directly controls the action on the screen. However, the user does not actively control this action, for it is simply a perceived space. Cutscenes, elements where the control is taken away from the user, serve to remind the user of their place in relation to the game. They remind the user that they are just that. However, in the game space, this distinction may only be perceived when the control is not present. Of course, the game only provides the user with the illusion of control and decision-making throughout the game itself, but

the dynamic allows for the user to directly assume a position where their actions appear directly in relation to those of the character conveyed on the screen. This should be considered to exude a powerful effect on the user.

This effect differentiates the user/game dynamic from that of the viewer/screen and reader/novel dynamics. This is because the user of the game becomes directly involved in the storyline: they occupy a space of advancement. In the cinema, the plot moves at its own pace. Viewers may relate to characters and scenarios, but they do not occupy a space of action. Said space of action offers the user a space to explore identities and worlds as an active aspect. The space between the viewer and the television and cinema is also a space of direction, but not of directed action, for the user has no input. Thus, the level of identification achieved between a user and a character is on a different level to that achieved between a viewer and a character. Even when the cinematic direction forces the user into a perverse space whereby they appear to be a part of the film, the type of identification differs because there is no direct interaction or perceived influence occurring with the film.

There are of course times when the user does not feel so moved by the actions of the main character in a game. Sometimes we find that the actions of the protagonist do not abide by our own mindset. There are a number of different forms of avatar that the game might introduce the user to, and these different forms can also be influenced by the environment. Whilst the avatar stands out as the main point of connection for the user, it does not constitute the entire connection and simply remains representative of the game. The user feeds elements of the self into the game, and in turn the game feeds these back. Therefore, it should be construed as impossible for the user to fail to identify with the point of the avatar, for the perceived characteristics are fed in from the user. I will now state the levels of avatar and the difficulties presented to the user in each case.

An empty avatar seems to exist more commonly in first-person games. This is because first-person player-characters appear that much closer to the user space, whereby the user will appear to be situated ‘within’ the realms of that character. This space might constitute a more perverse space should the player-character show any form of personality. Instead, the character in these situations is silent, with their 'personality' not contributing to the story at all. This leaves an empty avatar for the

user to fill with meaning. The first-person perspective remains a limited perspective, one which often can only see what is occurring around the character rather than throughout the world. This should be a point of resonation between the user and the avatar for it reflects upon the user's limited position within the world.

A neutral avatar would consist of an avatar whose representative character almost appears lacking in conviction. Because of this neutrality and perceived lack, the character should not be considered the same as that of the 'empty' avatar, but rather as a method of achieving something quite different. This type of character more readily appears in third-person narratives, and the game might ask the user questions in order to provide the player-character with personality. Therefore, as the user proceeds through the game they will be met with questions that relate to the perceived character that they as the user have contemplated. Therefore, the responses will be targeted towards this perceived personality (that the user is actively encouraged to flesh out). The avatar in such situations is often silent, and this adds weight to the user's ability to imagine a personality. The character in this situation is motivated in the context of their movement throughout the game, but without motive in terms of their actions. That is where the user comes in. One might also deem the 'learning' character important here, whereby in being new to a world certain characters reflect our lack of experience back on us. In short, this creates this representative fusion of the self and the gameworld that we are better able to relate to.

Finally, the motivated avatar is one to whom the user is secondary, and with whom the user must come to terms. Whilst again set in the third-person, this type of avatar has 'personality' and the ability to 'speak' for itself (it must be stated that even in such a case, the representative understanding and connection comes from the user). Whilst the learning character also may feature here, it may be that the user is faced with a player-character already experienced which almost guides the player. Of the three avatars described here, the narrative elements of this final avatar resonate the strongest. The player here is almost passive in a story that is occurring around them, for the character (whilst understandable) is rarely a part of the user. The user assists the player-character in reaching its own 'desired' end, which in turn produces satisfaction in the user. The user still projects and is reflected

back, but in a less obvious way. In the previous two examples, the user more actively perceives themselves as a part of that story and creates a degree of the narrative themselves.

All of these types of avatar require the user to project elements, but they also require something different from the user. I have already established the idea of a play space, and this will be expanded upon here, for it is important to see how it is that the user is able to formulate these different requirements of them by the game and how they are able to interact with the game throughout because of that. Changes in the play dynamic would achieve this effect, so here I look at the idea of a separate play space in which the user must interact.

3. Playing in Space

Donald Winnicott was another important theorist to psychoanalysis, and indeed play theory. Winnicott's theories incorporate room for an understanding of moving between identities, whereby an individual can situate themselves in a psychical position where they can see themselves as an other. The implication of this is that one can inhabit various spaces and see oneself in different situations, suggesting not only that we can accommodate the possibility of taking on multiple avatars, but also that we do not necessarily occupy any sort of position of discomfort when we do so. This sort of identity-swapping should dissuade the idea of over-identification, although it should be stated that problems might occur if the same space remains occupied after play has finished.

What has also interested me is Winnicott's idea of a separate play space which is based on the relationship of trust between the mother-figure and the child, an area in which the child can separate itself from what has been rejected as a part of the "self" (the 'me/not-me'), "This 'space' or gap in-between Self and Other (Other may be a person, people, landscape, object etc.), and/or Self and components of Self, has a mediating, relational function where our inner and outer realities can co-exist and from infancy be explored and developed." (Bingley 2003). This concept makes up a large part of Winnicott's extensive play theory, and translates as the psychic space in which the child is able to play. We can already perceive how this might function with relation to the theory already specified in this chapter.

In Winnicott's play space, if the relationship between the mother and the child is

fraught with trust issues, the play space will be ignored. No play will occur. If we return to the earlier specification of the id, ego and superego, we can perceive this as something akin to the idea of an overactive superego. This would imply that the proximity of the device described in this chapter remains close to the normal egoic processes. An understanding of the interactions within and making up this space is vital because it appears to achieve something that no other media form seems able to. Of course, the idea that the player is between worlds is potentially a flawed statement, but perhaps there is a play space (this would have to differ from the ludic space projected by the game itself in this situation) in a similar capacity to what Winnicott described.

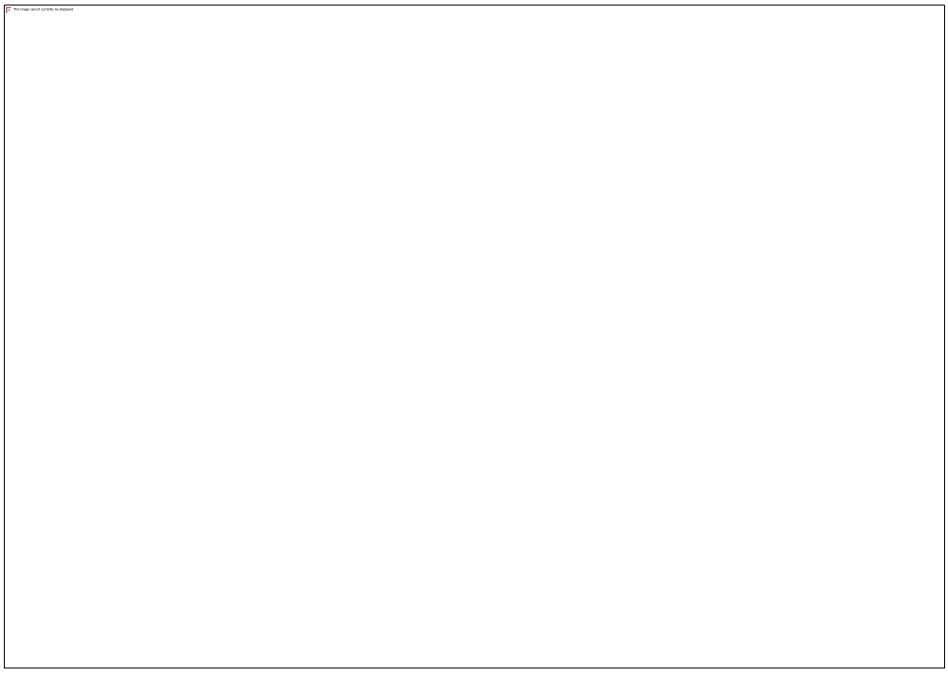
I state this because, when we look at the aforementioned mirror stage, we can perceive this childhood stage replicating itself throughout adulthood. As individuals become older, they change, as does their ideal. They might also amend something about their appearance, and this too must be factored in to the process. Therefore, there is a constant adjustment of the individual with reference to the mirror stage. In gaming, something akin to this stage appears to take place too. This relationship between the user and screen appears, at least at first glance, to represent the child perceiving itself in the mirror for the first time. One might state that the relationship between the user and the screen could be defined as a return to these stages because of this. Let us not forget that our reason for indulging in things is to overcome the lack we see within ourselves, and thus this kind of reasoning has its roots in the idea of the lost object. Therefore, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that we seek the same manner of proximity to the fictional image on the screen as we do with our own ideal.

Yet these phantom stages can only inform us of so much. What occurs between the user and screen, whilst mirroring this process, is complicated by the avatar being an unknown other. Our evaluation of the character when we perceive the avatar on the screen for the first time is not necessarily of desire. However, it should be considered as something similar, particularly as much of what we relate to is in actuality simply reflected back from us as users. The avatar, once in the play situation, is an aspiration because it is we who are playing them. We can never be the avatar, but in the action of play we identify ourselves with them. Having not

achieved full understanding of the game we are in, we strive to be more in the perceived mindset of that avatar so that we might better grasp the game. In turn, the avatar may mirror our gaze back at us.

4. The Screen(ed) Gaze

Jan Jagodzinski, a Lacanian theorist dealing with contemporary media, proposed a model of the screen as a double mirror during video game play. This model is based upon Lacan's notion of the gaze. Lacan produced a schema which has been modified slightly here by Jagodzinski in order to better expose video games in the manner of the gaze. Jagodzinski's version, which shows the screen as mirrored, is pictured below.



(Above: Jagodzinski's diagram).

Jagodzinski's diagram is based upon Lacan's *Seminar XI*, whereby Lacan formulates a diagrammatic representation of the function of the gaze. He remarks that "For us, the geometral dimension enables us to glimpse how the subject who concerns us is caught, manipulated, captured, in the field of vision." (Lacan 1998:92). Lacan refers to said domain as 'geometral', pertaining to the idea that the functionality of the relationship represented in his own schema is that of a trap.

(Above: Lacan's original schema).

In both diagrams there is the 'object' and the 'image'. Obviously these do not exist as the same thing: one is a perception, a representation of the other. Jagodzinski's interpretation of the diagram situates it with relation to screen media, however. By utilising the notion of the image/screen/double mirror, he represents the complex realm that the screen inhabits.

Jagodzinski explains that the Real is somewhere beyond the head of the player interacting with the game. If we perceive the idea that the mirror is doubled, this works in line with the notion of the Lacanian gaze: the object is looking back at you. "The gaze is presented to us only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience, namely, the lack that constitutes castration anxiety." (Lacan 1977:72) Here, the screen plays a frame, a window, and a double mirror. The frame encloses the action, separates it from our being. Equally, the mirrored screen reflects the look back on us through the windowed screen, whilst also reflecting our own look back (it is, after all, a double mirror). In turn, this draws us closer to the perceived action. However, the look that gazes at us must be false. The look we perceive is interpreted and therefore must still be our own ideal look. We receive the look in return, but that which gives the look is not our own reflection, it must (as explained above) only be perceived as something similar. In much the same way as we are split from our ideal, we are split from this avatar. The avatar does not occupy the same space as the ideal but might be considered to perform a similar role contextually. Avatars mimic the idea of an ideal, but do so whilst being centred purely in a discourse of play. That is, both reflect a fiction, it is just that each fiction represents a different aspect of identity:

one rooted in a personal narrative, and the other in a social one. This links with my later work on Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality.

I would like to take my interpretation of Jagodzinski's diagram further. The idea of something occurring structurally when we interact with the game's environment is key here. There certainly does seem to be some kind of passing through of the Real, especially in the case of the controller. This is because the controller not only performs the function of distancing one from the action (as mentioned in the *Black & White* study, in which the hand in reality performs actions on the keyboard, which in turn is translated to the hand on the screen) but also in the act of becoming. Whilst I do not agree that we exist, as some theorists have stated, between worlds when playing a game, or that we become the avatar, I will conclude that the connection between the individual and the game is extremely strong. The controller is an aid in ensuring that this level of projected identification occurs successfully. After all, there is a reason why some games favour distanced spaces above others, and the controller must assist in reflecting the proximity. The gun controller is not a gun in reality, but another controller. However, it mimics the gun on-screen, which is a gun in the *game's* reality. Obviously, this is conflictual. We are in a space of empty action, whilst the game's reality is in a space of controlled action, so evidently there must be some way to translate us from this space, which is the task of the controller. The gun is nothing more than an extension of the limbs which enables this to occur. Notice also that by mimicking the device the avatar uses on the screen, the gun controller actually brings us closer to the action, rather than separating us from it.

I mentioned types of avatar earlier and what each type meant in terms of identification between the user with the avatar. Here I look at how they perform an action of proximity for the user. I will list below a few types of game, the position of the avatar, and the effect this has on the sequence, with especial reference to the controlling method. This shows that it is not only the perceived personality structure of the avatar that holds importance for the user's ability to play, but also the perceived distance from the game itself.

God games: games which allow the player to take on godlike powers. Examples of this may be building a garden (*Viva Pinata* (2006)), raising a civilisation (*Black & White*), or controlling the lives of simulated individuals (*The Sims*). The 'avatar' in the

game is usually a pointer, an object or a hand, and this is what reflects the desires of the individual and translates the actions into the game. The game is usually controlled with a keyboard and mouse, although more recently there have been ports of such games to consoles, whereby a controller might be used. Distance is maintained by the translation from hand to screen, the fact that the avatar is not an animate object (identification is limited because the motives are both purely and blatantly left to us - there is no cover by the text of the game), it is something that perceives the user in the space of the avatar. Because of the top-down view the game is generally viewed from bizarre angles, such as above the action, rather than us being in the centre of it. In such games, there is a feeling of the avatar existing beyond the screen, at the level of the 'god'. This 'god' is thus the player, a being that exists in the room surrounding the television, the screen encompasses a microcosm. Despite the level of distance between the user and game, this effect appears simply to maintain the idea that the user exists in the impression that they are a god of this gaming world. This effect is merely heightened in god games.

First-person shooters (FPS): FPS games (e.g., *Bioshock* (2007) and *Halo* (2001)) initiate the gamer once again into keyboard and mouse territory (though, again, a multitude of such titles have been ported to console systems). Occasionally gun controllers are also used, such as in *House of the Dead 2* (1998). However, FPS titles are all about proximity. One must be as close to the action as possible at all times. This is achieved through the use of an avatar that one “drives” as such. We are situated within an almost perverse space, within the avatar, for all that we see is their arms. This space should be known here as perverse because we are not separated from the avatar. In third-person narratives, we exist apart from the avatar. The location of the perverse space is where we try to stand in place of the lost object in order to cover the idea that it was there in the first place: we obliterate it. In this instance the user comes dangerously close to a ludic representation of this space: this is the closest the user can be to the avatar, and (as aforementioned) may be a reason why the majority of first-person player-characters do not speak. When we press the “jump”, “run” or “shoot” keys, we see the avatar as performing those actions within that space. So, even though the keyboard and mouse should serve only to distance us from the game, we are actually drawn in, possibly due to the

directness of the action. There is nothing further to select once you have pressed a key (with the obvious exceptions of changing weapons or saving), and being situated within the avatar space certainly assists in this. A more comical way of drawing us in further is in the game *Typing of the Dead* (1999) where the avatar does not hold a gun but a keyboard in a direct mimicry of our own action (the aim is to type the words listed on the screen in order to perform attacks). The keyboard thus becomes the weapon.

Third-person action games: here I refer to such games as the *Resident Evil* (1996) series or *World of Warcraft*, in which we clearly see the avatar in front of us. Like with FPS titles, the avatar will usually be humanoid, but like god games some distance is maintained between the avatar, the screen and player/controller (I group the player and controller together, as one is simply an extension of the other). The controller in question, here, could be anything already specified. In playing a third-person game, one achieves the effect of slight distance. The avatar is our puppet, and through it we can spend time exploring. Because of this emphasis on devices other than instant action, the avatar is representative of stepping back from the game and working on clues, or looking at the whole area before proceeding.

So we can see that the space, i.e., the position of the avatar with relation to the player/controller has a significant effect on how we perceive the game we are playing. Perceived proximity to the action dictates how we will play the game, because it carries a linguistic code of its own. Of course, some games have attempted to transcend this code by incorporating elements of different types of game within a certain engine, but the overall feel of a game space retains its significance.

Cutscenes, scenes without user-controlled action that are generally utilised as a means of progressing the storyline of the game, vary widely but all seem to have the same structural imperative. With the progression of graphics considered “ultra-realistic”, much of what we now see in cutscenes is done in-game. That is, the same process that is used to create the play element of the game is also used for the sections in-between, rather than the process of using full motion videos (FMVs) which was previously popular. The reason for this change seems to be a combination of the ability to actually achieve the graphics that used to be shown off

in the FMVs, and a device to prevent the user from being removed from the space in which they have perceived occupation at the time of playing the game. Reaching a cutscene in a game is a milestone: it states that one has got that far and rewards one for doing so by progressing the plot. However, damaging the play space is not beneficial to this. Even though the control is removed from the player's hands, they still expect to remain involved in the same action. FMVs render the player powerless: it is as though they are watching a film. This puts them in an entirely different space to that occupied when they are playing the game, albeit one where they are aware that control will be returned. With games which use in-game footage for their cutscenes, the control may be taken and given back to the player at any point in time. The player thus exists within a dormant element of the game space, waiting for the control to be returned to them (which could be at any moment, because they are not simply watching a video). This drawing back of the action releases the player from the controls, but also allows them to perceive more of the game world and think about the situation. It also allows them to see their character in action, whereas before they may have only seen it in the first-person, which plays on the doubled mirror, thus increasing identification with the game space.

5. The Intermediate Space

I briefly touched earlier on the idea of the game already connecting with the user before the point of sale, especially with reference to games series. This connection can begin even before the point of sale, perhaps at the point of initial advertisement, and is connected (as explained earlier) with desire and the lack. However, there is a need to explain the process that occurs beyond this to propel the user to the point of the game's completion. That is, the user is already playing, and it is understood how they got to that situation. What I am questioning is what maintains the interest in the title beyond the identificatory process (obviously a part of maintaining interest) and a desire to bridge this lack for a period of time.

Whilst this attachment is not the only reason we would continue, it is vital to the understanding of the concept I am about to introduce: the intermediate ego. The intermediate ego is a psychical intervention based upon psychoanalytic theory which, I propose, allows us to structure our identifications and maintain interest in the product even when we are not specifically at play. This concept will assist in our

understanding of what might occur when we interact with the game environment. Consider it as a structure that formulates within the triangulation of the user, screen and game, the purpose of which is to ensure effective communication between these three components and maintain play until the completion of the game.

Earlier, I emphasised the position of the psychoanalytic ego and stated that the intermediate must be considered as something close to this concept but not the same. The intermediate ego should be considered an element of the psychoanalytic ego, but one that extends the purpose of the aforementioned ego in a way that allows one effective communication with and understanding of the virtual. This is because the intermediate deals with elements of identification that fluctuate over time (for example, bonds with different games change depending on what the user is involved with at any one time). It is also because the intermediate serves to mediate between the internal realities of the game and user, and also the external world. The basic construct resonates with the function of the psychoanalytic ego, but the situation and location of said ego differs.

Much like the psychoanalytic ego, this concept would be a mediator between the individual's reality (including external interventions) and the game space (including cutscenes and other elements out of the user's control), and would include elements such as identification. The difference between this egoic space and its psychoanalytic counterpart is that it exists outside of the psychic space occupied by the ego, id and superego, and only really comes into play at the point of intervention with the game space. The intermediate should be considered as a concept existing at the position of the Imaginary, being linguistic in nature. It should also be thought of as distinct from its namesake and not simply a part of it. We have already seen that the space created between the user and the game is of importance here. The intermediate ego takes in and formulates a two-way link between the game and the player. This psychical space thus incorporates the player's internal world, external reality, and the game's 'truth'. These elements in themselves might be described as potentially so conflictual that we would be unable to even begin play. Therefore it is up to this construct to assess and mediate the possibilities, thus allowing elements of each of these 'truths' to be taken into account without damaging our desire to play. Each individual's experience of certain

games would change over time depending on the weighting of these elements at the time of play. Tastes towards certain games would also be affected and should predictably not only change over time but differ immensely from person to person. Though we are forced into a situation of identification due to the mirror-like nature of the user-screen dynamic, one assumes that differences in taste between individuals are based upon this dynamic of internal and external spaces. Whilst the game space may 'speak' in the same way, the way it is interpreted and understood will differ.

Whilst I am predominantly interested in avatar-based video games here, this is not to say that something similar does not occur during the process of playing any other variety of game, although specific aspects would differ, such as the lack of screen as mirror in board games, which is central to the idea of play with regards to video games. This is not simply due to the mimicry of the idea of the ideal but also because of the importance of the two realities (user and game) being taken into account during the course of play. Although Lacan's original schema did not provide adequate coverage for the complexity of the gaze in games, it did provide us with the way it worked in other forms.

The intermediate ego is thus a disposable phenomenon, active only at the time of (potential) play. It is an ego combining physicality with virtuality. I would like here to reiterate how we are not between worlds at all, and to differentiate this from other studies. We do not become the avatar at all. We are merely in the process of doing so, but this is a process that never reaches completion, for once the game is over we simply shed this ego and take on another one. Putting this another way, the intermediate ego is the product of the collision of the game world and reality, granting it the appearance of "between worlds”. In allowing the reflection and combination of elements and ideas, the intermediate ego allows for the user to identify with a space that they would not otherwise necessarily be able to identify with under other circumstances. It offers a valid reason for doing something. We can perform an action without the guilt or legislation associated with it, because we are not and never were that character. However, this research does not aim to look at the moral perspective of taking on a character, merely the structure underlying the normal formation of the user/game dynamic. Therefore, any allusions towards such

thinking should remain simply that at this stage.

There is a realisation of the falsity of the nature of games throughout play, of course. This is often contained within aspects of games such as the HUD (heads-up display), whereby the game visualises elements that the user will find important. The character and scenario are fictional, and the game world reminds us of this constantly with status bars, save screens, control tutorials, and breaking of the fourth wall. The avatar has no awareness, cannot perceive the HUD or other elements that we as the user see. Obviously there are exceptions to this, and they should be considered as breaches to the user's control. Examples might be where the character of Deadpool, a comic book character famous for breaching the fourth wall in his stories, attacks another character in fighting game *Marvel vs Capcom 3* (2011) with the character's health bar (an element of the HUD, something for the user and not the avatar). Equally, another breach might be when a puppy in *Nintendogs* (2005) walks up to the screen and appears to actively see the user, or when it licks the screen.

When we switch off the console, the game will not continue to run in our absence (we might term this a 'broken gaze'): it requires the user to run. However, it is also directive of the user: the user assumes control but actually has very little, as previously established. Sometimes it tells us things where we are assumed to be able to recall similar situations in our own society, in which case it becomes a commentary on reality. What looks back at us is our reflection, familiar and yet slightly warped. This relationship can be explained using Freud's death drive, in which one is constantly propelled towards non-being.

When one starts playing a game, the external world "is", and the game is "not". However, immersion in the gaming situation reverses this process. Whilst in a state of immersion, the "not" is the external world and the "is" is the game. After the establishment of the intermediate ego, these roles bounce between the two, something dependant on the level at which immersion is retained.

Of course, in actuality, both forms exist at once. It is merely our perception of them that changes: they cannot both be envisaged as "real" at once in subjective reality. Only one constant "is" must exist at one time, even if it is a changing process.

I mentioned earlier that games are structured in certain ways that make it

possible for them to address the lack within us. Games also go through a process of revealing in the same way. This shows the complex nature of the mirroring dynamic surrounding video games, for this process of hiding and revealing not only the human condition. It is also possible here to mirror it into the game itself. The method of achieving this is through replication, and is a reason why the intermediate construct might be able to survive for such lengths of time. The lack can be shown as replicated throughout the game itself, for it is a position that some games characters appear to occupy, as though to mirror or remedy our own situation. Taylor states something similar, “Game worlds do not lie outside of our ongoing cultural battles, anxieties, or innovations but very often mirror them quite well.” (Taylor 2006:129). The interesting aspect about this is that such characters are not necessarily player-characters. This is a necessary level of proximity for us, and also gains the appearance of us 'looking out' at what is occurring rather than perceiving what is happening inside ourselves. This means that the game does not have to damage our internal comfort zone in order to show us what is occurring. If anything, the concept usually takes the form of more borderline characters or ideas. For example, consider the 'Heartless' and 'Nobodies' in Square-Enix's *Kingdom Hearts* (2002) series of games. These creatures take on the role of enemy within the game, representationally causing us to attempt to defeat the lack. Perhaps this defeat is a reason for the existence of so many games whose goals entail one to defeat or destroy other characters or players. Defeat of the other prevents painful revelations within ourselves. We are perceiving a visual representation of something it seems we ourselves do, and yet we are separated enough from the situation purely by the fact that we play as this figment of impossibility, and this protects us from our actual motive of play. In the Disney-themed world of *Kingdom Hearts*, these collapsed hearts and souls left by their hearts seem somehow reminiscent of human morality. This is relevant because in separating those beings who have some 'darkness' in their hearts from those without, we are presented with an impossibility. The pure being that is our avatar throughout the game, Sora, is himself this impossibility (the illusion of ideal, unobtainable, beyond human), and certainly not representative of our selves. Thus, we must see Sora as something akin to the ego ideal. He does not represent our own ideal, but in the situation at which we are

interacting with the game, the intermediate ego provides us with a temporary identity which exists as a combination of external, game, and internal 'realities'. Once formed, this provides us the illusion of ideal. Therefore, one might look at the 'Heartless' and 'Nobodies' as covering the lack by moving in on the avatar. Yet, as controllers of Sora himself, we are placed in a situation of opposition.

So is it not simply coincidence that this 'lacking' character has emerged in video games? Not necessarily, for there are numerous examples of this type of exchange within popular culture. Whether it is the Hollows in popular manga *Bleach* (2001), or those left by the destruction of the hourglass in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, these monstrous figures emerge time and again, portraying to us an aspect of our nature that can only be revealed in a form quite unlike ourselves, or as a split from the main character. The intermediate ego allows play, yet it also provides the role of adding to the distance from it, thus allowing us to continue to enjoy the play element. Even if the lack is identified in these characters, the intermediate ego rationalises this occurrence. This in turn prevents us from becoming too close to our own lack. A success in the game replicates to become a success for the user, too, moving away from Caillois' (2001) idea that games do not produce (addressed again in the appendix). The player character is on a quest to find something, but it continually occupies the ideal, and in doing so the game allows the avatar in most cases to succeed. This is the reward element of playing a game. Even if we cannot gain control over the lack, the journey of this ideal and its eventual end produces satisfaction within us. Our virtual body is able to achieve what we cannot. Furthermore, our virtual body is versatile and almost limitless: it can be switched and moulded, and it can end and be reborn.

So, how does this imagined space presented by the intermediate exist when we are not playing the game? I propose that it continues through the processes of merchandising and association. Association is speaking about the game, visiting related websites, and otherwise maintaining interest. Merchandising would be defined as the bringing of an aspect of that title into the Real, be that item a figure, a doll, a shirt, or something else that has some significance with relation to the game. In bringing this into the Real, we take a small piece of the game with us. The game becomes in some sense obtainable, and not lost. If, however, conditions that

maintain interest in the product between play sessions are not maintained, the imagined space created by the intermediate ego will begin to dwindle. Essentially, the imagined space could be considered forgotten: to replay the game would be to relearn this space. Some spaces last for longer, such as continuous games that have no proper ending (rhythm action titles, such as *Dance Dance Revolution* (1998)*, Para Para Paradise* (2000), or *Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan* (2005) in which one attempts to move ones arms, hands or feet in time with the music to a sequence of increasingly complicated maps), whilst more story- or character- based games are much more tightly constrained spatially.

6. Conclusion

This is the basic space of the intermediate ego, a device that will be constantly drawn upon and expanded throughout this research. I believe that utilising this construct as a method to understand the complex processes underlying the relationship between the game and the player not only differs from previous research in the field but also might go further in our appreciation of what is occurring. This chapter exists as an introduction to both the idea and the research surrounding it. Subsequent chapters will serve to apply the concept directly and expand upon it in order to formulate a more complete understanding of the nature of the structured bond between the user and the game situation. Furthermore, it will also now be possible to explore the space that the game itself occupies and its relation to the user's default own. In the next section, I explore this idea with reference to Baudrillard's concept of simulacra. In doing so, I bring together theories of postmodernity and psychoanalysis, both of which have distinct differences. I explain my choices and accommodate their differences in a manner that allows for both to be appreciated within this theory. In turn, this provides us with an explanation of both the space and the bond, and helps us to comprehend more about the game as a whole.

The Psychoanalytic Postmodern

1. Introduction

Before I begin this section, I would like to first acknowledge the notion of what a video game presents to a user. A game is a structure containing a rigid set of rules, overlaid with a text. Structurally, many video games follow an extremely similar format, and so it is up to this textual overlay to situate them as distinct from one another. The text allows for the story to progress, for characters to have expression, 'personality', and to cover the mechanisms that underlie the game. Elements feed in and out of this structure, and that enables a user (through the intermediary device) to perceive that the game does return the gaze, that there is something occurring that differs from the reality of the situation. Elements within the game are constructed in such a way that they are out of our reach, beyond reality, unable to be adequately represented as what they appear to claim to be. Whilst not directly psychoanalytic, these elements resonate with the processes already described, and it is through the process of assumption, of perceived recognition, that we interpret the game. Here I describe how it is that these elements can work together.

In the first section of Chapter Three, I highlighted how we might define the bond between the user and the game through the use of a construct called the 'intermediate ego'. Chapter Four discusses the construct in practice, through the formulation of that which is external to the user. In Chapter Four, I deal with the concept of Baudrillard's hyperreality with regards to the constructs already detailed within the thesis. Hyperreality is a concept founded on the basis of postmodernism, which initially may appear to contradict the predominant theories already outlined in this thesis. Psychoanalysis and postmodernism have emerged from different areas of philosophical thought, and do not at first appear to adopt similar stances in how to interpret either the subject or the world around us. In this section, I briefly address what this means for the idea of the intermediate.

Here I present an account of the emergence of postmodernist theory, a discourse under which hyperrealism falls. I also go through how the theories of hyperreality and psychoanalysis can be utilised together and how they might be acknowledged and processed with regards to video games. This is predominantly explored through the main theorists of Jacques Lacan and Jean Baudrillard, due to

the vast amount of (often contradictory) material contained within these discourses. Whilst these theories are at odds on certain points, they also share a good deal of insight. This section therefore shows how Lacan, the construct of the intermediate, and key works from Baudrillard can be understood together before hyperreality is formally introduced in Chapter Four.

2. The Emergence of Postmodernist Thought

Postmodernist theory emerged in the late twentieth century. As a philosophy, it is reactionary to popular ideologies in that it rejects concepts of 'self' and 'objectivity'. Key thinkers in the field overlap somewhat with other discourses, such as post-structuralism, which Jacques Lacan's later work is considered to be a part of. Respected philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have been considered to have something of the postmodern about their theoretical standpoints due to their rejection of contemporary perspectives on truth and reason. For example, Derrida's formulation of deconstructionism, a theory which observes the links between words, and attempts to 'deconstruct' the text in order to question and subvert meaning, can be understood in this way. In looking at the text from a deconstructionist perspective, we ask questions of the text itself, and therefore the situation and reality from which it has emerged. Deconstructionism deals with duplicity and pairings within the text which formulate a means by which to negotiate its 'truth'. Derrida states that ""Experience" has always designated the relationship with a presence, whether that relationship bad the form of consciousness or not. At any rate, we must, according to this sort of contortion and contention which the discourse is obliged to undergo, exhaust the resources of the concept of experience before attaining and in order to attain, by deconstruction, its ultimate foundation. It is the only way to escape "empiricism" and the "naive" critiques of experience at the same time." (Derrida 1974). Derrida's statement here shows deconstruction as a method by which to expose the text, to perceive a text or concept in and of its contradictory nature. In doing so, we acknowledge Derrida's contribution to postmodernism as both an acknowledgement of the existence of multiple interpretations, and a rejection of a central 'truth'. Brendan Sweetman defines it as such: "All knowledge is *contextual* and is influenced by culture, tradition, language, prejudices, background beliefs, etc., and is therefore, in some very

important sense, *relative* to these phenomena. The influence of these phenomena on truth or meaning is not trivial or benign; it is such that it inevitably undermines all claims to objectivity that one might be tempted to make from the point of view of one's worldview. So the job of deconstruction is to challenge and call into question all claims to objective knowledge by illustrating alternative meanings and "truths" in any particular worldview, which are really there whether the adherents of the worldview recognize them or not. And these alternative meanings will undermine the worldview in question, because they will be different from, and often opposed to, the original, "objective" meanings claimed for that worldview." (Sweetman 1999:3).

Postmodernism is by no means a complete philosophy, and along with there being a good deal of crossover between discourses with specific thinkers, there is also debate over theoretical standpoints. However, there are some central themes.

A key component of postmodernism is its rejection of truth. In this rejection we can perceive only the subjective: there is no level of objectivity in the world. The fact that there is no overarching central discourse in postmodernism is reflective of the perspectives it entails. Language is central to postmodernism, not as reflective of our nature, but as tangles of meaning, "Because meanings are in this sense functions of other meanings – which themselves are functions of other meanings, and so on – they are never fully "present" to the speaker or hearer but are endlessly "deferred"." (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Technological progression in the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century moved at a pace previously unseen, with the invention of radio and television. Video games began to appear in the 1970s, and from that a whole host of new experiences were born. Naturally, as human beings our relation to the world in which we lived changed, and we can perceive how it continues to do so now, with the invention of mobile telephony and its steady integration into the human lifestyle. It is fast becoming unusual for an individual not to be connected to a device at some point during their daily life. Electronics dominate, and individuals utilise them for both work and play in equal measure. We are reaching a point where it is inconceivable to consider how life would be without being surrounded by these devices.

Postmodern theories acknowledge the idea that life as it is today has changed exponentially over the past century, and that the idea of the human is no longer perhaps structured in a traditional way. The human being and situation is acknowledged as complex, with scientific and philosophical reasoning looking not only to understand the mind/body itself but also to place it with relation to new technologies. We create things that change our placement in the world. As we do so, elements are phased out or forever changed, and so traditional conceptions of who we are and how we are attached and related to the world around us must also change. Therefore, postmodernism makes use of the idea that we can elicit new understanding from these forms. In the book 'Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations', Steven Best and Douglas Kellner assert that, "Postmodern theory also rejects modern assumptions of social coherence and notions of causality in favour of multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy. In addition, postmodern theory abandons the rational and unified subject postulated by much modern theory in favour of a socially and linguistically decentered and fragmented subject" (1991).

Jean Baudrillard's theories have been influential to the postmodernist movement, although Baudrillard's theories were influenced by other contemporary thinkers "The postmodern social theories of such French figures as Baudrillard, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, and others were also influenced by theoretical developments in France such as Roland Barthes' (1962) explorations of mythologies and popular culture, Henri Lefebvre's (1971) critical dissections of everyday life, Guy Debord's (1976) critiques of "the society and the spectacle," and developments in literary and cultural criticism which advanced new conceptions of writing, theory, and discourse (Derrida, Foucault, *Tel Quel*, the later Barthes, etc.)" (Kellner 1990:256). Baudrillard's work exists as part of a strong philosophical trend in France during his lifetime. Indeed, another key thinker of the same tradition at the time was Jacques Lacan. Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, which is the key component of his work that I utilise in this thesis, emerged from the introduction of postmodern thinking. It is important to add here that, whilst both Lacan and Baudrillard existed in an important environment for philosophy at the time, their theories (and indeed postmodernism, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism) were by no means

considered mainstream. Whilst each of these theoretical discourses has its importance in contemporary analysis, they continue to exist outside of traditional analytic methodologies. That aside, I believe that they represent a strong case for initiating our comprehension of the game scenario. Their focus on language enables us to approach the connection with the video game as a structure, which in turn allows understanding from a unique perspective.

Baudrillard's theories relating to simulation appear to have emerged from elements such as virtual reality, which (in theory at least) broke the boundaries of what we consider to be 'real' and what we consider to be 'virtual'. Jaron Lanier, co-founder of VPL Research in the 1980s, was a part of the first company to sell virtual reality products, and is a key theorist in virtual research. In 2006, he wrote a paper about the collective and its influence upon decisions, in particular with regards to our reliance on the collective in a contemporary society which regards 'hive' resource sites such as *Wikipedia* as valid sources of information. Said sites allow for users to edit content with the aim of the collective extracting a valid and well-referenced approximation of the 'truth'. Of course, this can go wrong. Lanier's own experience with his personal page on the site saw him struggling to get the title of 'filmmaker' removed, when on his own admission he had written a single short film many years prior and did not consider it as a part of his career. Lanier states that the influence of the collective, particularly in the virtual world, has had an impact upon us as individuals. Anonymity is prevalent, content is no longer an author's work. "In the last year or two the trend has been to remove the scent of people, so as to come as close as possible to simulating the appearance of content emerging out of the Web as if it were speaking to us as a supernatural oracle. This is where the use of the Internet crosses the line into delusion." (Lanier 2006).

Lanier's point extracts the internet as portal, within which many different voices engage in situations and topics. The internet itself, however, is empty of meaning. As a portal, its mode of expression is through the collective of voices contained within it. It requires these voices to exist, and yet these voices are what have moulded it into what it has become. It is through user desire and design that it has become a portal which gives preference to some pages over others. The portal is organised by the designer/user in a way which allows for maximum immersion in the emptiness

that it is. This emptiness is an essential aspect of the hyperreal experience, as will be detailed further in Chapter Four.

The concept of hyperreality observes the phenomenon of an object misplaced, an incomplete representation of an original. It has been documented by a number of theorists other than Baudrillard, including Umberto Eco, author of the paper *Travels in Hyperreality*. In said paper, he refers to the 1906 drawing room of Harkniss Flagler. “But what was the original Flagler home like? As the didactic panel explains, the living room was inspired by the Sala dello Zodiaco in the Ducal Palace of Mantua. The ceiling was copied from a Venetian ecclesiastical building’s dome now preserved in the Accademia in Venice. The wall panels are in Pompeiian-pre-Raphaelite style, and the fresco over the fireplace recalls Puvis de Chavannes. Now that real fake, the 1906 home, is maniacally faked in the museum showcase, but in such a way that it is difficult to say which objects were originally part of the room and which are fakes made to serve as connective tissue in the room (and even if we knew the difference, that knowledge would change nothing, because the reproductions of the reproduction are perfect and only a thief in the pay of an antique dealer would worry about the difficulty of telling them apart)”. (Eco 1986:5).

Baudrillard’s own work on the hyperreal has been utilised in the mainstream, with films such as *The Matrix* considered by critics such as Catherine Constable to incorporate his theories of hyperreality into a contemporary context. It is rumoured that the cast was required to read Baudrillard’s text before filming, and there is certainly evidence in the film itself to support that the Wachowskis were at least influenced by his work – an early scene in the film shows the main character, Neo, removing a disc from a hollowed-out copy of *Simulacra and Simulation*. This action in itself seems to nod to Baudrillard’s work. Baudrillard himself stated that he had been invited to assist with the sequels to the film, but that he refused due to his dismissal of the first film as having misunderstood his work. “The Wachowski staff did contact me after the first episode to involve me in the following ones, but that really was not conceivable! ... These people take the hypothesis of the virtual as a fact and carry it over to visible fantasms. But the primary characteristic of this universe lies precisely in the inability to use categories of the real to speak about it.” (Baudrillard 2004). In another interview, Baudrillard stated that “The most

embarrassing part of the film is that the new problem posed by simulation is confused with its classical, Platonic treatment ... The Matrix is surely the kind of film about the matrix that the matrix would have been able to produce." (Guardian 2007). Despite Baudrillard's assertion, Constable argues for "active dialogue" and engagement with the text, whereby the film is able to offer answers to the questions posed in Baudrillard's text (Constable 2005:151). She states that "The *Matrix* trilogy clearly draws on key Baudrillardian concepts, such as the hyperreal and the code; however, their recontextualisation within the filmic narrative results in a reworking of Baudrillard's theoretical framework." (Constable 2005:159). Here we can see that, even if we accept Baudrillard's assertion that the directors misunderstood his work, the *Matrix* films do at least offer some commentary on his works.

The hyperreal is described further in the next chapter. Here, I briefly introduce it as an element that is more 'real' than reality, as more perfect, as greater than the original. This can be understood, for example, as the process by which a film presents the viewer with an interpretation of a time. Said representation is not the same as the original time to which it pertains: what it contains are indicators which render it with key visual and auditory signifiers which allow the viewer to perceive it as a rendition of a specific time or place. What the viewer expects from the signification is key here, too, for the representation cannot actually be that time, nor does it in itself have the capacity to adequately represent history. What it can do, however, is present aspects which the user interprets and reflects back with their own knowledge. This works with the psychoanalytic understanding of images being empty of meaning. Whilst the representation appears full of meaning, it is actually what is reflected back which creates the discourse of meaning. Theories of the hyperreal and psychoanalysis can assist in our exploration of the game situation in this way.

3. Connections with Related Discourses

Psychoanalysis and postmodernism can work well together. Despite their differences, they enjoy certain complementary principles, principles which allow for modes of interpretation to comfortably utilise both in the same context. In this thesis they are used to deal with different aspects of the same dynamic, aspects

which relate to the components of theory that they correspond well to (such as their focus on structure). The elements that differ between the two allow for a greater understanding of that process: after all, we should not try to understand an object in the same way as we do a subject, or even a subject's interpretation of an object (which is most of what an object is). Consider the two working together as much like a Venn Diagram: the concepts they deal with can exist in isolation, whilst there is some common ground, some connectivity, in the centre where they both overlap.

It is the centre, where the two overlap, that tells us what the product of their whole can be: the idea of (virtual) objects being empty and subsequently assumed to be filled with meaning. Please note that the context in which I make use of the two differing theories (video games) is unique to the situation, and this does not necessarily denote that the two theories can be successfully utilised in contexts outside of the virtual.

Roger Frie states that "Most psychotherapists and psychoanalysts rightly welcome the postmodern themes of difference and uncertainty as refreshing changes from past adherence to sameness and universality. Postmodernism... has freed us from the strictures of a one-person psychology that views the mind in essential isolation from others. The reliance on the analytic neutrality and objectivity that defined classical psychoanalysis has given way to a therapeutic relationship based on mutuality, in which traditional assumptions about authority and reason yield to ambiguity and uncertainty." (Frie 2004:3). Frie's point here illustrates the changing nature of the world and the fact that there is a need for theories to progress and incorporate elements of one another. As we become more connected through different media forms, in the contemporary world, we also bring with us a sense of disconnection. This disconnection come from an almost hyper-connected state: in being connected to aspects such as the internet, to mobile telephony, to video games, we lose aspects of sociability and exist in a state in which there is almost too much connectivity. This leads to a feeling of disjointedness, of communicatory inconsistency.

I would argue that psychoanalysis has a place in contemporary theoretical discourse because it addresses something more innate, more internal: the

mechanical workings of the subject. Hyperrealism observes issues of the self in flux, issues of a world changed by our increasing reliance on technological innovation. Arguably, psychoanalytic theory deals with the same issues. However, aspects of psychoanalysis need to be understood and moulded to gain insight from a (post) modern context due to their situation in the time at which Freud was writing. This does, of course, mean that such theories will have to adapt with our increasing reliance on aspects that did not bear any relevance on the matter when Freud was writing. "With the advent of postmodernism, the unity of the individual mind, the notion of an objectively knowable world, and the view of language as the carrier of truth have all been implicitly or explicitly rejected. In place of the ego, the postmodernist speaks of momentary selves to refer to the way in which the self is relationally generated and maintained. In place of objectivity, the postmodernist turns to social constructionism. And in place of language as truth bearing, the postmodernist asserts that meaning in language is inherently unstable and that truth is open to multiple interpretations." (Frie 2004:2).

Frie's interpretation, of course, argues more for the integration of psychoanalytic theory with postmodernism than intended. Within psychoanalysis (particularly in practice) resounds the idea that objectivity is not feasible, that each individual might see things in a different way, that they may have created false memories, or understood something in a context that, whilst not 'true' (and there is no universal 'truth') is real to the individual. In psychoanalysis, of course, that does not actively matter, for it is about the way the individual has understood and utilised that event, not what 'actually' occurred. Finally, the idea of the imaginary and its identifications, and the sense of the subject in flux, are elements of the ego in psychoanalytic theory. The idea of the *ego ideal* exists as something that the ego strives towards but can never be.

In entertaining the idea that we can utilise both psychoanalytic and postmodern theories in order to understand contemporary concepts, we understand this movement in how our understanding of the individual within the external has changed, and must continue to do so. We also accept that both theories of mind and social theories must also move with the times. In understanding the (post)modern being, we have to realise that our comprehension must change with

the steady progression of these elements. Our cyborg nature differs exponentially from how we perceived and interacted with the world around us just a century ago. The need for theories to progress means that we must take what retains relevance in the modern world. Whilst heavily contested in their own ways, both postmodernism and psychoanalysis have the potential to allow us to do this.

This is not to suggest that both theoretical dynamics always work well together, for there are elements of the postmodern which have no place in psychoanalytic thinking. Postmodern thinking allows for the whole reality to be fragmented, whilst psychoanalysis deals with (human) aspects which are undergoing this process, and fragmented interpretations. In this way do we perceive postmodernism as a more social/cultural phenomenon, whilst psychoanalysis deals with the individual/psyche. In utilising the two together, we can make use of both in order to comprehend the processes at work during play in terms of the whole, the being *within* society.

Frie states that “Lacan’s fundamental revisions of classical psychoanalysis resulted in his expulsion from mainstream institutes and led to the subsequent growth of Lacanian language-centred psychoanalysis as distinct from traditional Freudian drive theory.” (Frie 2004:11). Whilst Lacan could hardly be called a postmodern theorist in himself, his theories as being rejected by mainstream psychoanalytic principles, and his use of both structuralist and post-structuralist thinking, allow for his work to be utilised in a way which also acknowledges postmodern thinking. Indeed, Eli Zaretsky's perspective is that "Jacques Lacan gave us the first postmodernist conception of psychoanalysis, the first conception that truly broke with modernist assumptions concerning subjectivity and sexual difference." (1996:163).

Lacan’s revisions to psychoanalysis were certainly important, and we can see already that there are some links between postmodernist thinking and his works. However, both psychoanalysis and postmodernism are discourses which contain a number of different theorists, not all of which agree on specific principles. Therefore, understanding not only Lacan’s link to postmodernism but also that there are general connections between it and psychoanalysis provides us with a solid base on which to proceed, but the important element now will be to link specifically the theories of Baudrillard and Lacan.

4. Lacan and Baudrillard

I will work with the notion of subjects and objects within the texts. In Baudrillard's hyperreality, there is a subject, but they are not an 'active agent' within the context. "Indeed, Baudrillard has no theory of the subject as an active agent of social change whatsoever, thus following the structuralist and poststructuralist critique of the philosophical and practical subject categorized by Descartes, Kant, and Sartre which was long dominant in French thought. Structuralists and poststructuralists argued that subjectivity was produced by language, social institutions, and cultural forms and was not independent of its construction in these institutions and practices." (Kellner 2009).

Baudrillard's theory dealt primarily with the object in context, the subject was simply the element which observed and added to the process, not that which had any depth beyond that context. Lacan's more subject-centric approach also utilised language as a central element. Both deal consistently with the fictional. In Baudrillard's world, it is the external, in Lacan's it is the idea of the fragmented subject and the ideal.

Here I move on to these ideas, relating to both the subject and the object within Lacan's and Baudrillard's works. I begin with the object, a complex element within Lacanian psychoanalysis, but nonetheless one that can be utilised within our understanding of Baudrillard's hyperreality.

In the hyperreal dynamic, an object exists in and of the understanding that it is only in existence with relation to the original, which it has replaced. It has replaced the original through being 'more' than the original, by being able to signify what is expected of the original more concisely than the original was able to in the first place. In this sense, the object does not so much exist because it can only do so with reference to the very element that it has destroyed in the process of its creation. It is, therefore, empty. The meaning afforded it can only come from the signifiers it carries with it.

For Lacan, the object constitutes a loss. That is, the object is missing, and desired, by the subject. This constitutes the idea of the lack. In Lacanian thinking, an object cannot be filled with meaning as we would with Baudrillard's works, because it does not exist outside of fantasy.

Beyond this, however, Baudrillard and Lacan do connect. In both cases, we are perceiving a fictional object, and surrounding that fictional object is the idea of loss. In Baudrillard's work, this is the loss of the original that has long been replaced. For Lacan, there is no replacement. There is, however, fantasy and desire. Of course, for Baudrillard, the object is perceived to have existed in the first place. The object for Lacan is a representation of a something that never existed in the standard sense.

Whilst we can instantly see that these conceptualisations of the object immediately have a deal in common, it is important to note why my representation of the game's reality would require Baudrillard's understanding. When we interact with a video game, it is as though we are interacting with another world, another mind. This, as explored later, is little more than a myth, than something akin to Lacan's gaze, whereby we interpret the look we perceive to be returned. The user acts upon the virtual, which initiates a comprehension of that external object. This comprehension, however, is not all it seems.

Games are representative of reality in the sense that they incorporate known elements and allow the user to act upon them. The user's recognition of these elements allows them to behave in a specific way towards the game and gain the desired output. However, there is some duplicity here, and that is where both theories come in. The world that is being acted upon is reminiscent of Baudrillard's fake. In bringing in familiar elements it allows for the user to reflect their desires upon it (through the intermediate bond, as explored later), and reflects back perceived understanding of these objects. The user feels as though they have understood these objects, but their understanding is grounded in their own linguistic grasp on the world surrounding them. The objects therefore also represent an emptiness, and they allow the user to feel that they have a sense of agency (false though this is). Lacanian psychoanalysis comes into this through the desire to play the game emerging from the sense of loss in and of itself. The desire to reclaim what has been lost propels the user towards play. Perception of Baudrillard's objects stands in this desire, where we seek that which has been lost. We work with a fake, something that has emerged from beyond the fantasy.

In this way do they work together. Lacan's object is lost, Baudrillard's represents something both discoverable and present, even if it constitutes a fake. Baudrillard's

object is able to allow the user to perceive the contents of this fake and to place understanding on it, in the meantime putting off the very fact that what they are seeking in the video game is not the real fake of Baudrillard's writings but that of fantasy and loss in Lacan's works. In utilising the two together, we are able to see what this external world contains and represents, whilst acknowledging that these objects are not that which we seek. They represent on different planes. It is by acknowledging that the user interprets this external in order to continue to exist within the psychoanalytic framework that is key here.

Earlier I cited Kellner's important article which deals with Baudrillard's perspective with relation to the subject, and how said subject is not one of agency. The idea of subjectivity is essential to our understanding here. For Baudrillard, there is no objectivity, because there is no real theory of the subject.

Equally, the subject within Lacanian works is not structured as a complete being. Rather, for Lacan, we exist as fragmented beings. The subject for Lacan comprises of a being initiated into and comprehended through language before it is able to comprehend itself. The point at which the subject does, it is through this linguistic layer, and understanding of needs and desires has already been provided the layer of language, which affords actions with perceived meaning.

Perception of knowledge in the subject is just that: assumed. A subject will look to another subject as a being 'supposed to know'. The Lacanian subject is embedded in language, is utilised by it. Furthermore, the Lacanian subject is split, as it strives towards an implacable, unachievable, wholeness (discussed in my previous work on the Mirror Stage). This relates to Baudrillard's subject without agency. Neither the Lacanian subject nor the subject within Baudrillard's work is an active agent because they are both lacking. Let us recall here the exploration of the lack within Lacanian thinking, and how the subject is never complete. In Ayla Michelle Demir's paper on Lacan's formation of the subject, she states that "For Lacan, the reality of the self is an unnamable truth outside of language and consciousness, an unconscious gap in representation that escapes all self mastery and self authority." (2012:7).

We can see here that this places both Baudrillard and Lacan in a similar perspective. The subject does not occupy a space of knowledge, nor indeed of agency. The ability of the subject to occupy a space of knowledge, and therefore to

have an active agenda within this space, is false.

5. Applications of the Intermediate

Demir's paper leads us to the consideration of Lacan's Real, a component already discussed in the first and third chapters of this thesis. To reiterate, the Real is one of three components (the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic) used to explain the subject's initiation into language. The Real represents the element outside of language, that which cannot be placed within its realms.

Earlier in Chapter Three I took into consideration the idea of the Real, and of Jagodzinski's interpretation of Lacan's schema to explain the gaze. Jagodzinski's interpretation was framed in light of games and incorporated a doubling of the mirror to explain the presence of the screen, whereby the gaze is reflected back. I also discussed the idea that the controller undergoes a passing through of the Real in order that it might be utilised and framed in light of the user/game dynamic. I then introduced the concept of the intermediate ego.

To reiterate, the intermediate ego is a construct that allows the individual to be comfortable within the (virtual) play dynamic. Within this scenario, the individual is expected to interact with a world that they have no prior knowledge of or integration with (at least initially), and the intermediate is the force that formulates a play experience that enables and maintains this situation.

As a construct, the intermediate combines elements of the postmodern, whereby we focus primarily on the object, the external world. This world is empty of meaning, waiting to be filled with it, which is what the intermediate allows the player to do. The game world is without reference, waiting to be interpreted. It contains no objective reality. The game world is pure subjectivity.

Of course, the gaze is what allows the game world to be interpreted, and it is through refining elements of Lacan's and Jagodzinski's essential schema that I have formulated something which takes the notion further. The gaze contains desire, and it is through this that we gain an appreciation of the other. The feeling of something as looking back at us, as returning our gaze, is strong. This works in games, of course, for the nature of the returned look is actually our own. We fill that which we perceive with meaning and in turn it reflects that meaning back to us. We absorb this as though we are perceiving and making judgement on another living being.

However, in a game scenario the object that does the reflecting in itself is perceived as more than it is. Being more than the original (occupying the hyperreal) causes it to be perceived with this enhancement. The user gains pleasure from finding this perfect replica, from already 'knowing' it. In reality, of course, the object cannot truly mean.

I have already established that what the object can be differs between the two theories. However, with the use of the intermediate they exist in a more layered space, yet when perceived from the outside appear the same. This is because they exist as layers of desire, and the user's placement of this desire is connected to their lack of the (psychoanalytic) object. The hyperreal object provides the appearance of something which communicates with the user, thus its use within a psychoanalytic dynamic is almost therapeutic in nature. The psychoanalytic object is lost and does not communicate, but the hyperreal object is representative of the finding (albeit fleetingly) of something better. This might explain the hyperreal's presence within the video game dynamic.

Furthermore, the intermediate perceives and makes use of the elements of the game scenario in a way that enables these two separate theories to work together. In combining the subject's understanding and feelings towards the internal/external, and enabling the placement of their own interpretation, it allows for the reflection of these elements back to the user. This produces the illusion of content for the game, though the device is actually empty.

Without a device such as the intermediate, we would be unable to place these two theories side-by-side, for their use together would be fraught with difficulty. The intermediate takes into account the importance of both the individual and the external, elements which are addressed separately within the two theories. That which surrounds the user has no meaning other than that which is placed upon it by said user. From the perspective of hyperreality, the objects surrounding the user are not the same as that on which they are based: they are emptied of meaning, unable to adequately resemble that which they once were. This fits well into the game situation, for if we assert both elements as true, the intermediate performs the function of translation, at which point the user is able to comfortably play the game. That which the user must place meaning into is empty, awaiting this meaning. Said

meaning is constructed from the user's external interactions with 'reality', whereby in classical psychoanalytic thinking we might assume some degree of objectivity. However, in postmodernism this objectivity is lost. That which is there is no longer what it is supposed to be. In the same way as the subject looks to another in Lacanian analysis as a 'subject supposed to know' do they view the game world as an 'object supposed to be'.

In this section I addressed the ways in which postmodernism and psychoanalytic theory can be united in order to solve the dilemma we face when attempting to understand a scenario as complex as the video game situation. This was then narrowed to explain how Lacan's and Baudrillard's theories could be utilised in order to comprehend what is occurring between the game and the user. Although some reference was made to them, simply addressing the discourses of postmodernism and psychoanalysis in and of themselves would have been fraught with difficulty as both incorporate a huge variety of challenging theories, some of which challenge each other even within their own discourse.

Both Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and postmodernism rely on similar propositions, and render the importance of language and fragmentation as essential. If we can make use of both theories in a modern perspective, whereby we make use of a bridging device (namely the aforementioned intermediate ego) we can see the user within the game situation, and how they function when they are there. Either theory alone is too limiting in order to present this understanding of the dynamic.

We have seen that the objects that surround us are empty because they are not adequate representations of the 'reality' on which they are based. In Chapter Four, I fully introduce the concept of hyperreality, and utilise it to show how these empty objects are used by the individual at play to elicit this 'meaning'. This is shown in three different forms, whereby the user is able to abstract this subjectivity in order to 'learn' more about what they perceive that the game is telling them. In Chapter Four, I deal with objects, and in Chapter Five actions. In acknowledging the hyperreal dynamic in the game situation, we are separating the two worlds which must be woven together in order to create the play experience for the user, and accepting them as the essential aspects which create and maintain the play situation.

Chapter Four – Refractions of an Object

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I wish to move away from how our interactions with games are constructed and maintained and begin thinking about a different issue: that of familiar objects and acts being translated into the game world. The previous chapters have focused on the construction of play and games from the inside, including the use of spaces. The previous chapter moved to the area between the user and the game in order to define the process that is occurring between the user and the screen at the point of interaction. This chapter presents a basis of looking from the outside world into the game world: how do familiar objects get translated into the game world and subsequently understood by the user?

This chapter utilises theories from both postmodernist and psychoanalytic spheres. These theories can be successfully used together, and the idea of doing so was explored in the second part of the previous chapter. Further to this, the previously cited Jagodzinski (2004) has also utilised both theories with relation to contemporary media forms.

In this chapter, I speak about the emptiness and fullness of objects and acts, and it is important to explain this choice. Psychoanalytic theory focuses a great deal on the emptiness of objects, and indeed in previous chapters I have recognised the notion that we place our own ideas upon these empty objects, thus affording them meaning, which is thus reflected back. This means that objects are afforded the illusion of meaning. Baudrillard's hyperreality discusses the notion of the simulacrum, a representative that is more real than the original. In combining these two theories, Baudrillard's thinking can be framed within this psychoanalytic spectrum of emptiness.

A representative of something does not necessarily contain meaning of its own, for it feeds off the original in order to be what it is. This means that the meaning it is afforded is borrowed from an external other. Without this other, it is empty. The way I utilise Baudrillard's theories here acknowledges the object as empty, because the meaning it is afforded is through a process of reflection that acknowledges an illusory understanding to take place. In the context of games, the meaning afforded objects and acts within the game situation feeds back from the user, and the

understanding of the game's text that it feeds back is in the direction of the object or act. Combined, these provide the user with the illusion that said object or act can in itself retain meaning.

Our interrelation with these objects and acts within the game setting should allow us to gather more evidence for and better understand the idea of the intermediate, and indeed the structure of the user/game bond in general. This is because objects and actions translated into the game world already have representational activity in reality and therefore must be translated through some medium in order to be understood at some level by the user. I theorise that the action of the intermediate is associated with this. Whilst this understanding is based upon the user's own initiation into the structure, the methods by which objects and acts are translated feed back in very specific ways that alter the user's comprehension of them. The intermediate process is a combination of the external and internal worlds of the user, understood through their own internal processes. If the intermediate is a combination of the social and the personal, of object and subject, we can begin to see how Baudrillard's theories and Lacanian psychoanalysis fit together in the context of the game situation.

Jean Baudrillard's work became popular in the 1980s, "At the time, one of his key theretical concepts, "simulacrum" was the buzzword of a wildly influential "Baudrillard Scene" that stretched across academic disciplines from science fiction studies to geography, animated interdisciplinary conferences, and spilled out into performance and art spaces. Not even leisure wear was immune as baseball caps emblazoned with *simulacrum* were regularly sighted in North American bohemias. Baudrillard was thought by many to be the ringmaster of the postmodern circus of late capitalism." (Ritzer 2005:29). However, Baudrillard was not without his critics, particularly with reference to his later works that dealt with political scenarios, including controversial material such as September 11th. Eoin Devereux states that Baudrillard "has been criticized for over-generalizing, for being politically disengaged, and for not testing his ideas against any empirical research findings on how audience members actually experience media saturation and whether or not they engage critically with media content." (2007:22). In terms of empiricism, Baudrillard existed as part of a tradition where this was not done "It [The "French theory"]

doesn't believe on the scientificity of the sciences, specially the human ones, and it doesn't see on the data collection anything beyond a journalistic enterprise. To Jean Baudrillard everything was about opinion." (Da Silva 2007:182).

It is true to say that what we would perhaps define as scientific rigour cannot be seen within Baudrillard's works. Indeed, in the introduction to a collection of Baudrillard's essays on the Gulf War Paul Patton stated that "Baudrillard's essays pursue a high-risk writing strategy, courting equally the dangers of contradiction by the facts to fit their own rhetorical oppositions" (Baudrillard 1995:6). Much like with psychoanalysis, without empiricism it would be extremely difficult to denote the accuracy of the work. However, it would present us with an immense challenge to locate a methodology that could attempt to empiricise either. As aforementioned, Baudrillard was a popular theorist, and his influence expanded into a range of territories. Thus, a theorist who has captured the imaginations of so many is worth consideration outside of the default scientific spheres.

Furthermore, this thesis seeks to uncover the underlying dynamics of the game situation. It is my belief that the theories used to do so must be those which present a good understanding of the structure surrounding this. Something that both Lacan and Baudrillard do is isolate and analyse specific structures. It is my opinion that empiricism cannot teach us anything in this specific context, and that when observing bonds such as that which I have identified in this thesis, we must try to understand from the deepest possible level. Adding empiricism to this work would add another layer to the text: what I am interpreting here could not be the same, it would be lost in another layer of perceived meaning.

Jean Baudrillard's work presented a myth in crisis, a reflection of the world distorted into behaving as that which it was only supposed to represent. Baudrillard's work seems to be significant to video games, for it adds scope for an exploration of two worlds (reality and the virtual), whereby each imprints upon the other. This is a representation of a world outside of the user, and is something that can be used to better comprehend the processes involved where the intermediate forms. Video games are not simply based in the user's personal sphere, and utilising theories that expand into the area beyond is important. Baudrillard explores scenarios whose essence might be captured and understood through the idea of

simulation, where simulation is a mimicry or imitation of something we consider real.

Here I present my findings with reference to Baudrillard's work. Although Baudrillard's focus was not with relation to video games, these ideas can be understood with reference to games in order to better understand the user-game interface. Simulacra, copies of aspects of reality (one might define them as the objects of simulation), are something that Baudrillard wrote at length about. In utilising Baudrillard's work, we gain a greater ability to bear witness to elements in the relationship between reality and the game world.

Jean Baudrillard was a philosopher and cultural theorist writing from the late 1960s up until his death in 2007. Baudrillard was writing during a time of change, of the beginning of a greater reliance upon technology, of commercialism, of the postmodern. His works reflected these processes. Jacques Lacan was a prominent analyst during much of Baudrillard's early years, and his work was influential to Baudrillard, as discussed later.

Much of Baudrillard's later work focused on current events and politics. However, in 1981, Baudrillard wrote a book entitled *Simulacra and Simulation*. Said book brought to attention the concepts briefly alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, whilst also considering the idea of hyperreality. Hyperreality was considered to come about through the creation of a simulacrum which mimicked reality. However, Baudrillard considered that both the reality and the illusion would eventually fade. This would leave only the hyperreal, the intertwining of the reality and the illusion. Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality is of particular importance for it exposed the world as no more real than fictional realms (for which he cited Disneyland as an example). Relating this to psychoanalytic theory, whereby the concept of 'truth' remains an impossibility due to the complexities of the human mind and memory, seems of particular significance here.

As part of the theory of hyperreality, a simulacrum is an element of something, a copy or imitation. This element is denied the original: in itself it has become more real than the original. In his paper on the role of technology in creating the hyperreal scenario, Benjamin Woolley describes us as "like cartoon characters who have walked off a cliff edge and, still suspended in the air, have suddenly realised

that there is nothing beneath us." (1992:204). His use of technological examples of making elements appear more 'real' is of importance here: war is witnessed and understood through the medium of the television. Equally, da Vinci's *Last Supper* painting is rarely shown in its original form: it is recoloured and thus offered a layer of perfection in print form.

Television, Baudrillard states, "has become virtually disconnected from the world and has begun to turn back in on its own universe like a meaningless signifier, desperately seeking an ethic to replace its failing credibility, a moral status to replace its lack of imagination" (2002:187). Television mirrors reality, but what is reflected back is not that which was initially there, or indeed anything that even vaguely resembles that.

Video games perhaps suffer from this scenario in a slightly different way. Games are not supposed to be reflections of reality as such, but may contain elements of it. Elements of the game, particularly in modern games where graphics are so important, seem to mirror reality, or perhaps the user's view of it. This mirroring takes place with objects, people, environments, even systems. Abstracted though they are, we see a semblance of reality reflecting its image back at us. Yet the very thing which returns our gaze is inevitably something more perfect, more *real* than the user. Of course, this added layer of perceived realism is really a myth: what is reflected is not actually more real in the sense that it does not actually exist. However, in its space of perceived realism this is not the same thing. It is more real because it acts as expected. The environment (excluding bugs or inaccessible areas) will behave like one would expect, but there is something more to it. For example, if a brick wall appears in a game, the bricks will be beautifully rendered to look as much like a brick wall as possible. This might include different coloured bricks sandwiched together, or chips missing from the bricks themselves. However, in this, it is made too perfectly. The attention to detail is perhaps the very thing which differentiates it from an ordinary brick wall. It has become too perfect by virtue of the effort to make it look as realistic as possible.

The complexity of games with regards to the hyperreal may also be due to the fact that they are virtual in nature. Of course nobody is going to state that the above example is not actually a brick wall, but it is within the limits of the game. Video

games require many layers of interactivity. Said layers are utilised by the game in order to function. The communication between the user and the game is two-way: we can perceive it as a reflective medium. Our gaze is returned by the game in the instance where we recognise these elements within it. We take part in something that appears to almost mimic Lacan's mirror stage. In itself, this shows a greater embedding into the idea of hyperreality. We do not simply perceive what certain elements of a game are based upon and utilise them as such, but we also learn to question the function of these stationary objects and reflect this back to reality.

There appears to be a requirement within the game space to allow room for certain objects to act as they do in reality. However, there also appears to exist quite the reverse of this within games. It seems that in order for the game space to function in the hyperreal state, we must at once be appeased and surprised by what we see there, appeased because we are satisfied with the resemblance of reality, and surprised because we are not used to it on that level. The merging of the understanding of the user space and the game narrative provoke this effect. The space of reality that exists outside of games may appear to be less 'real', but this allows us the ability to explore this in an interactive environment. Therefore, this idea of being more real than the original is extremely important here. Deconstructing the elements that make up this world that both surprises and satisfies the user should be the next logical step.

We are at a stage where we assume that games are reaching a point of ultra-realism. If we have in fact gone past that point, then they represent a space that is more real, much like Baudrillard's Disneyland. Game worlds are a product of attention to detail, albeit one as being unable to express decay. Each brick in a house is perfect, the cracks in a wall rendered with every attention to detail. This attention to detail is almost the downfall of the gamespace: it is too much. It cannot adequately represent the original because it is already better. Baudrillard states that "Everywhere we live in a universe strangely similar to the original - things are doubled by their own scenario. But this doubling does not signify, as it did traditionally, the imminence of their death - they are already purged of their death, and better than when they were alive; more cheerful, more authentic, in the light of their model, like the faces in funeral homes." (1994:11). Objects in the

representation are too perfect. This is, of course, the mainstream of games. There are a number of different visual styles used, particularly in the independent market. However, the 'Hollywood' of games appears set in the visual, the 'realistic', and that is what is being addressed here.

If representations carried across to the game world exist in this state of ultra-perfection, how might we define them? Can they adequately represent the real item, even in the acknowledgement of their own emptiness, or do they replace it? Do they even need to? I have formulated three different methods by which these elements are translated into the game space. I call these methods 'duplication', 'double abstraction', and 'subversion' depending on the method by which they are translated and understood across the boundary between the user and the game. These will be described and analysed, before I return to Baudrillard's work in order to situate them contextually against the hyperreal. This will assist in situating an understanding both of the intermediary device and the user/game dynamic as a whole.

The first aspect we should take into account is what the elements that make up the hyperreal situation in the video game space might be. There are aspects that we expect to see in the game world that garner specific interpretations. These elements include in-game money, social actions, behaviours, creatures and objects. Because we already have knowledge of these elements outside of the game setting, our judgement of them is clouded by the game space. That is, we carry with us through the intermediate the artefacts of our understanding. This presents us with the familiar diagram explored in the previous chapter, and explains how we can perceive an object as containing meaning even when that meaning is something we expressly apply to it.

Objects, once translated into the gaming scenario, seem to predominantly fit into the definitions of duplication, double abstraction and subversion. Some actions also fit into these categories due to their familiarity for the user. However, some actions defy traditional understanding due to their distinctness from the action that they claim representational value on. This includes elements such as the violent act, which takes on a different meaning due to its having already been translated through the medium of the screen (i.e., the effects of televised violence on the

image of violent actions presented within the game scenario). This will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Five.

I will now introduce the aspects of duplication, double abstraction and subversion. They are ways in which our structural relation with the game world changes depending on the level at which our understanding of these objects as familiarities changes. This will serve to create a more complete understanding of the user-game interface.

These methods should be understood as viable ways for objects or actions to be translated through the perceived membrane of the intermediate. All three serve to destroy and reaffirm our relationship with the game world. These constructions once again represent our structural relation to the game, but carry with them the appearance of meaning, which can accelerate understanding within the game or change the user's interaction with it.

2. Duplication

Barthes stated that “it is possible to watch, through a large window-pane, the outside vagueness of the waters, and thus define, in a single act, the inside by means of its opposite.” (1993:67). Duplication will be described as an object or element that we have understanding of in reality that presents itself in a similar way within the game world. Based on what is outside, we can add definition to that which occurs within the game world. I will use money as an example which remains related to the matter but shows as a different type of reinforcing structure to the user. Duplication signifies in a single direction. External and personal meaning is applied to the game world: the game world does not provide an alternate channel.

Baudrillard stated that “Therein shine in a sort of hyperresemblance (like history in contemporary cinema) that makes it so that fundamentally they no longer resemble anything, except the empty figure of resemblance, the empty form of representation.” (1994:45). This can be understood from the perspective of a game in the sense that the item within the game resembles the object outside. However, because the projection of this image into the game space can only be empty, it gains meaning from the user’s understanding of that object in reality. At one level it both resembles and also transcends this idea of resemblance.

This idea of duplicating familiar objects and affording them similar purpose in

the game world must be understood with regards to those elements it is based upon. Money in-game is able to be comfortably used for its intended purpose by the user because it has the properties required to make it behave like that object in the game. Furthermore, the user does not require an explanation of how the duplicated object works because of its immediate presence and permeation of the real world. Objects that we already have an understanding of not only assist in this way but also through providing us with a tool that works as a layer of familiarity. Put simply, it reinforces the user's experience by being internally consistent.

An example of monetary duplication into the game world would be in *Bioshock*. During the course of the game, defeating enemies allows one to accumulate wealth up to a certain point. This works in the same way as weapons: one cannot carry more than a specific amount defined by the game, presumably as a limiter on making the game too unchallenging. Money in *Bioshock* is never explained to the user: we are never explicitly taught that said money can be used in machines in order to purchase health packs or ammunition, nor indeed are we presented with any external exchange rate for how much the in-game money is 'really' worth. This is because its value, or worth, is internally consistent. It gains value as an aspect of the game, but the value it attains within the game is not valued outside of that scenario. This means that the 'pricing' for in-game items with relation to the amount of money spent is made to feel like the 'correct' amount when placed in relation to other objects available through the same means. As explored later, the introduction of a real-world exchange rate may destroy the illusory capability of the in-game idea of value.

In *Bioshock*, both money and weapons may be 'looted', collected from corpses found strewn amongst the depths of the decaying underwater city one must explore. Money may also be collected when one defeats an enemy during this exploration, and the amount of money earned from this is usually related to the strength of the enemy. For example, the main boss characters during the game are named 'Big Daddies'. Big Daddies are fearsome creatures, men encased in diving suits and equipped with powerful weapons. Once one defeats one of these protectors, one gains an amount of money proportional to the difficulty of the fight, up to a third of what the main character is capable of carrying. In contrast, weaker enemies offer

anything from nothing to small change.

The construct of money is taken from reality and displayed within the game, along with the user's understanding of that commodity. However, the value of this money is constructed by the game itself, rather than knowledge of what such elements might cost outside of the game scenario. The user knows innately what the item is and what to do with it. The value of it, however, is instructed within the game space, without any verbal cues or training. The user does not require the idea of money to be explained to them: they are already well aware of the commodity. The game, however, has carefully placed machines within the levels which allow the user to make use of that which they have acquired. The game is therefore passively instructive to the user. By showing these brightly lit machines, it makes it clear to the user what the purpose of the machines are and how to use them, without necessarily having to provide clear instructions or an idea of what the money should be used for. Another example of this passive instruction on value might be an object that one can only gain and utilise once within a game versus an object that can be gained and utilised multiple times. The value of the former item is instructed by the game to be higher to the user than the latter.

Making the role of the object internally consistent with how it would be utilised in reality initiates a response in the user that means they do not simply treat the familiarity as a duplication but as they might the real thing. This means that there are expected responses and ways to behave with the accepted representation. It also brings us closer to the game as the differences between the game world and reality become indistinct at the point where something behaves as expected. Of course, not all familiarities behave as expected, and this idea of subversion must be considered something of an opposing force which will be described in greater detail later.

Upon our interaction with the game, we utilise our own knowledge of how money works in order to effectively use that commodity in the situations presented to us. Whilst we may be introduced during gameplay to various places to spend this money, there is an almost unconscious level of understanding of how we might obtain it and what it is useful for. *World of Warcraft* fails to inform the player of where they might obtain money or what to do with it, for example. To inform the

player of something so basic would, under most circumstances, destroy any illusion presented by the game and with it any strength in the transferential relationship between the game and the player. Some titles, such as recent *The Legend of Zelda* titles, inform the player of how much each monetary unit is worth (for example, a small green rupee is worth one rupee, and a large one is worth one hundred) but remains internally consistent with the monetary system of the game. As with *Bioshock*, there is a desire here to separate values, even though the user is aware of the potential uses of the commodity. This may be a reason why so many games opt to not call money by a familiar name. For example, in *Scribblenauts* (2009), money is known as Ollars rather than Dollars. *The Legend of Zelda* series opts for Rupees, which, though they are a real-life monetary system, are markedly different in appearance. Often there is a difference in spelling which also provides in-game and real-life money with different perceived attributes. We do not concern ourselves with 'cost', nor indeed whether or not the price demanded by the game for an item is 'fair'. We simply must use units of it in order to purchase items and objects that will be important and protect us throughout the game. This presented layer of familiarity that the game offers us is important for maintaining the illusion offered up by the game. The user gains empowerment through the presence of duplicated meaning, which in turn adds to the power the game exerts over the user. Initiation into a game involves the learning of many extremely basic commands, therefore this basic perceived empowerment of the player should be considered to be important in maintaining interest.

Money in-game must work at gaining value, however, and the game does this by offering us useful objects. In an earlier diagram, I explained that there are elements that one must do in order to progress, elements one can do, and elements one cannot achieve. Objects fall into the same categories. There are some one must acquire in order to progress. That is, one might require a key for a specific door which is only available from a certain place. Some items one can acquire if one wishes to. These items would include better armour or greater storage space. Finally, items one cannot achieve things with might be additional reward or comedy items within the game. These items might be exhibited or worn but in practice, within the realm of the game, they are entirely useless and will do nothing to allow progression.

This tiered exchange allows money to gain value within the game.

Naturally, this money within the game has no real value save for that placed upon it by the cycle of buying and selling that is occurring. However, we do enter the game with the expectation of meaning, which causes a gap. Money in-game can only mean with reference to its real-life counterpart. This is automatically assumed and the gap in meaning is filled with the user's cultural, social and political understanding of the world in which they live. Relating this back to our intermediary device, we can perceive that we carry with us these specific personal elements. These elements can thus be utilised by the intermediary space in order to present the user with a comfortable play space.

On a slightly abstracted basis, rewards can function in the same way. However, they exist as the product of a duplication rather than the duplication itself. Rewarding specific behaviours comes from behaviourism, specifically B.F Skinner and operant conditioning. Skinner utilised positive and negative reinforcement in order to train creatures. For this, he used a device known as a 'Skinner Box'. This adapted the behaviour of the creature through rewarding it when it exhibited desired patterns.

This strikes me as somewhat similar to how a user proceeds through a game, something noted by both other researchers and those familiar with said psychological concept. Nick Yee states that "if EverQuest exposed the underlying numerical experience points and told you how many points a mob gave you, and how much more experience you need to gain a level, it would be less effective as a reinforcement schedule." (Yee). Whilst I do not agree with this emphasising an addictive pattern in individuals at play, Yee's essay raises some interesting points about how this behavioural model might affect the player. The 'mob' spoken of here should be defined as a non-player character, often one whose defeat provides the player-character with points for levelling up or items to assist with continued play.

The game trains the user to complete it, with each successive reward sequence propelling the user through the story until the game is complete. The relationship between the user and the game, however, is not that of the scientist and the rat. This is due to the perceived level of mastery the user exerts over the game. In exerting this perceived mastery, the user claims an ability that the rat may not:

choice.

To bring the element of duplication back to Baudrillard, through duplicating a known object we are presenting a simulation that functions more perfectly than its real-life equivalent. In the game, we do not perceive elements such as exchange rates or stocks. Money is used only for its most basic purpose: to buy and sell items. It thus enters into a state of hyperreality.

3. Double Abstraction

Earlier, I stated that an action should be considered as distinct from a translated object. However, some actions may fall into both the category of an object and an action. That is, in its use, it produces an object which may then be utilised within the game. This is where double-abstraction comes into play.

When the user has an element of perceived choice, situations may occur which involve cheating. In some games, players make use of hacks and modifications which allow them to gain extra wealth or items. This means that their progress through the game is assisted through the use of items that otherwise would not be present. A user might also make use of a ‘level select’ cheat in order to return to where they were last in the game or in order to skip whole levels altogether. However, in massively multiplayer games, some individuals have taken to a business called 'gold farming'. Gold farming is a way by which players earn money within the game and then sell this money in reality via certain portals and websites to players who either do not have the desire or the capability to gain such in-game wealth through the course of their own play. Such business detracts from the play element of the game by not only combining work and play on the side of the gold farmers, but also in combining in-game money with the real-life commodity it is based upon. The process is specifically banned from most MMO games, to the point that many accounts are terminated each month for partaking in either side of the transaction. It is also frowned upon by many individuals who perceive the buyer as exhibiting an unfair advantage for not having worked so hard to obtain what they have. The game, which has initially been laid out to the individual as offering equal advantage (depending on the chosen difficulty level) to all players, suddenly takes on a dimension of being unable to fulfil that role. However, the purchase of a commodity brings forth a different structure and reflects in-game money directly back at that

which it is based on, a process I call ‘double-abstraction’. The item is not simply duplicated into the game but blatantly and aggressively reflected back at the player. This is not the same kind of reflection that occurs naturally through the course of play, whereby the user's ideas are mimicked back to them to reinforce the bond between them and the game. This type of reflectivity exposes the game for what it is. It cannot remain internally reflective like the aforementioned construct because the level at which it is abstracted is unable to maintain balance within the game. The individual has not understood the process through duplication but through directly overlaying his/her understanding of the commodity onto the game. Because this is not intended, the structure built up in the intermediate of the game-user dynamic begins to crumble. The game is unable to hold suspension of disbelief as the money within the game is granted meaning it should never have obtained. This could perhaps be understood by looking at the notion of standing in place of the lost object. Through standing in its place, one masks oneself with the notion of completeness where actually there is none, thus creating a perverse element in the structure of the user to the screen. Here we see the user place money in reality over in-game money in order to provide it with some relevance, some meaning. In doing so, they destroy the illusion, at least initially. Naturally, this is something that would create a whole new dynamic that the user would become used to.

Here it almost takes on Baudrillard's form of the fake hold-up. In this, Baudrillard describes how one might be intending to carry out an imitation of a robbery when actually one becomes involved in a real robbery because it is not perceivably different from the real act it is based on. So indeed of in-game money. As soon as one has paid real money for that commodity the dynamic changes. One brings the rules of the real money and places them directly onto the in-game commodity. An instance of this might be where an individual goes to purchase an item but then realises how much of their own money as user they have spent on it. The fake becomes the real: "You will immediately find yourself once again, without wishing it, in the real, one of whose functions is precisely to devour any attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to the real - that is, to the established order itself, well before institutions and justice come into play." (Baudrillard 1994:20). The simulation, and therefore the game, fails.

An example of this occurring might be a user playing *World of Warcraft*. During their time playing the game, they have spent numerous hours levelling up and gaining items, but have reached a specific point in the game where they need to purchase a new mount. The purchase of the mount will enable them to reach places faster, level up their character quicker, and gain additional items which can then be used to complete higher-level instances. However, the purchase of a new mount was, up until recently, extremely expensive in-game and the user realises that they do not have the time to put into the game in order to make the level of money required. Thus, they go outside of the game and purchase enough money to buy the mount. Later in play, the user takes their avatar to an auction house and is surprised by how much 'real' money it would cost them to buy specific items. The illusion is destroyed, all internal consistency with such an overarching system is gone. Once again, this is not something that the user is unable to become accustomed to. This refers to the initial impact of such processes and how they must fold back in order to reveal another dynamic. This new dynamic might reach out to the user at a more 'real' level, thus providing them with additional external feedback for the game, or destroying it entirely.

Money that has been purchased can signify at two distinct levels: that of the in-game money, and that of an item in reality. Under normal circumstances, it remains at the level of in-game money because that is what it is. However, it also becomes an item that somebody has purchased (this does not count with paying to play a game because it is abstracted already from the reflection of money), albeit it does not gain any element of physicality in the process. When money buys money we draw attention to its own lack, and this allows for the game to reflect its reality back at the user. This in turn becomes the realisation that it is empty. This almost represents the opposite of Baudrillard's fake hold-up in that the real covers the fake, which in turn grants it the impression of realism.

This realisation destroys any context in meaning created during the reinforcement process acted out at the beginning of the game by the user. The in-game money can no longer exhibit the values afforded it by the user, because the very element that it was mimicking is what carried out the transaction in order to obtain it. We have lost the fake economy of the game world, which, ironically, is self-

imposed at the point of interaction.

So what of games which actively encourage the user to purchase commodities? Free-to-play online games often encourage this: a user will play the game for free but spends real money on points to be utilised in the game dimension. Holin Lin and Chuen-Tsai Sun recognise that "It is possible for the independence and fairness concepts to lose their power when players use real-world money to buy virtual products." (2011:272). They add that it is perfectly plausible for the sense of immersion to be damaged by the encounter, something that has been mentioned with reference to double-abstraction already. However, when money buying is actively encouraged in a game, perhaps it becomes an aspect of the game. In the first chapter, I briefly described Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), which exist in a number of different planes to immerse the user. Perhaps in this case, the purchase of money should be considered on a similar level? I would argue that at the point that an external commodity directly (and deliberately) influences the actual action of the game (not simply, as with many MMO games, by charging a specific fee to the user on a monthly basis) it changes the structure of the user's relation to the virtual. Can we call this a game in a standard sense? By bridging the gulf between the user and the screen with a real commodity, the link becomes damaged. In this case, however, said link should be considered to have been formed from the outset in a different way.

This differs from the events described prior to this, whereby an event could be considered as destructive of the transferential link between the user and the game. It is an analysis of what occurs when we come to the realisation that the commodity we have been utilising in the game is not what we unconsciously reinforced but something very different. So what does this mean?

Through aggressively introducing something that originally was formulated in reality (through the personal interpretation of the user) back to that same reality, we doubly abstract it. Double abstraction is a collision of the user and the game. Therefore it represents a breach in the intermediate. In subverting a commodity at this level we exhibit a failure to remain true to the game space and we expose the user as a user: connected but not in-game or indeed between worlds. We expose ourselves as users and the game as something which contains emptiness that may

only be filled with expectations and prior knowledge of situations, acts or objects. This failure to remain true to the game, therefore, reveals both the user and the game as what they are. The simulation becomes damaged, and the representative system in place within the game cannot maintain its functionality in the hyperreal.

4. Subversion

I would now like to go beyond this idea into a more intentional form to show how the game can reveal such processes to the user and yet still retain an enjoyable game experience. Here I will show the process of subversion, in which the user has a knowledge of the object but the game exposes the 'reality' of the familiar element to the user. That is to suggest that the meaning the user assumes to be there is reversed by the narrative of the game and the placement of that object out of context. This idea works in the opposite direction along the intermediary link to the concept of duplication, whilst still maintaining internal consistency. I will use the video game *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3* (2006) as an example.

Persona 3 is a role-playing video game created by Atlus. Set in Japan, it follows the story of a young transfer student in two distinct aspects of his life: his school life (which includes social issues and examinations) and his life at midnight (the 'Dark Hour', a time only a few can see) whereby he gains the powers of beings called 'persona' and fights monsters utilising these powers. The story follows a full school year and one must plan effectively what one is going to do on each day in order to maximise as many abilities as possible before the end of the game.

All characters available for use during the Dark Hour are able to use the power of a single persona. The 'Main Character' is able to use multiple personas and the player must choose effectively based on the battle as to which persona he/she will use. The element that appears subversive at this level is the way by which characters release this inner power. For this they use an 'evoker', an object shaped like a gun. Characters summon their persona through 'shooting' themselves in the head using this evoker. This allows the persona to emerge and perform an attack on an enemy unit.

The ‘persona’ character could be considered an aspect of the character’s personality within the game. For example, the character of Koromaru has the persona Cerberus. Said persona takes on very specific traits that are shared with the

character the persona is based upon, as Harper also notes. “Their personas and abilities tend to strongly reflect the user, both thematically and statistically.” (2011:404). Both Cerberus and Koromaru are canine characters with strongly protective traits. The Main Character is something of an open personality. If we consider the analysis of the avatar in Chapter Two, this type of player-character is simpler for the user to identify with as elements of the character’s personality may be assumed. Harper notes that “his chameleon ability to change the inner self reflects on what his purpose is in the first place.” (2011:405). The Main Character, thus, changes both personas and users. The nature of his changing personas is a direct reflection that the current user is not the only one to take on that mantle and serves as a constant reminder of this.

Since the Main Character does not actively speak during the proceedings of the game, we can only infer what it is that the character is ‘thinking’ and make his decisions based on that. Because of this multi-faceted reading of the central character, we can see that it would be ideal to have him able to take on the traits of any persona. This is a reflection of the ability to take on any user. Personas are mapped against specific personalities of characters within the game and can only be released through the use of the evoker.

The evoker looks and acts like a gun. Holding the evoker to the head is symbolic of a reversal of the gun's intent: a gun is created to protect or defend (which, ultimately, the evoker does), not destroy its user. This stance is recognised symbolically as an understanding of the destructive nature of the gun. We are therefore wary of the evoker because it cannot be separated from this image of a gun. Thus the evoker carries with it all of the connotations of what a gun is and does. It is important to recognise, therefore, that the gun is abstracted to meaning at the level of the game. It falls short of all expectations. It is not a dangerous object but one representing liberty and courage. However, because the image of the gun in reality can never be truly removed due to our relation with the game through the intermediate construct, we might remain discomforted by its presence throughout the game. In betraying our expectations, the game releases us from the perceived grasp of our desire to impose meaning, but only to an extent. This adversity to acceptance of the object as what it is in-game when we have different perceptions

of it in reality strengthens the idea of the intermediate processes at work during play. It is in this distinction that we can perceive something of us and yet outside ourselves at work. The object cannot be, yet it exists at the level of the game. It is a representation, and is nothing without the order it is presented in within the game.

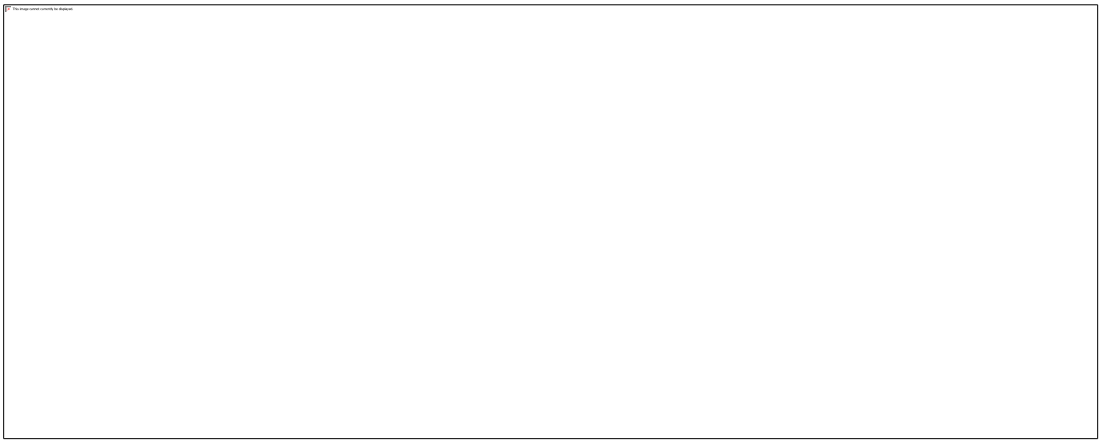
As with imposed subversion, this fragment removes layers of imposed meaning and exposes the structure of the game for what it is. My hypothesis based on this is that an act or item, once translated into the virtual realm, can only be void of meaning, whereby it is able to take up meaning from the narrative of the game, and the user's interpretation of that. This returns us to Baudrillard's construct of empty forms of representation. We are still actively able (and willing!) as users to impose meaning. However, this imposition of perceived meaning is not equivalent to that act or object's meaning outside of this context, because it cannot be. These translated objects are able to borrow from our social and cultural perceptions in order to gain meaning. This gained meaning is achieved at two levels: at the point of the game's creation (and thus a collective interpretation is achieved and retained) and at the point of play (at which a temporary understanding is imposed by the user). This is likely to be more fluid and less well-constructed than the ideas placed upon the item by the developers, due to it emerging from the gut instinct of one individual locked in an intermediate relationship with the game.

The only way, therefore, we can avoid coming face-to-face with this lack of meaning is by extracting it from reality and imposing it upon these acts and objects, as we do when involved in the intermediate experience. When this is subverted, we are awakened from this fantasy and forced to address elements of ourselves, our perceptions and our relationship with the game. This does not, however, prevent us from attempting to align our imposed meaning with that given to the object within the game. Beyond this, there is an element of acceptance that this imposition of meaning is fictitious in that scenario, and this prevents us from having to face the problematic scenario of our own lack: something which I have already stated that the game serves to overcome. Therefore, this imposed meaning, even if it serves only to cover the meaningless, can actually be accepted as meaning in its own right provided it does not fall so far out of line with the individual's perception (in which case, the likelihood is that they would lose interest in the game). The individual is

able to question but also to accept the imposition of meaning that differs from their own. If we do not attempt to alter this in any way or question it to too great a degree, it can be accepted. This is the illusion of meaning.

5. Directions of meaning

Below is a diagram showing the emergence of each type of modification of act or object emerging into or out of the game space as described in this chapter. Here we see that subversion emerges from the game space in the direction of the user space. This is because subversion works by altering our connections with the act or item contained within the gaming space, thus causing us to relate differently towards it during the process of play. Duplication performs the opposite. It is situated in the user space, meaning that our connections to an act or item are acknowledged within the game as 'truth' (regardless of how accurate that actually is). Therefore, this moves in the direction of the game space, for it is our understanding projected into the game space. Double abstraction combines elements of the other concepts and therefore remains between the two spaces, with movement in both directions.



So what does this mean if we consider it with regards to the intermediary device that was discussed in the previous chapter? The intermediate ego works by combining the different spaces surrounding the user: that is, the personal (internal), the historic (external), and the game space. This makes for a unique play experience for the individual and has the ability to allow for play even on the basis that the individual may not be entirely comfortable with the content of the game.

Subversion, double abstraction and duplication all exist within the intermediate and yet move in different ways, as outlined above. Their existence within that space means that they may have a direct impact upon the individual player, and that their impact in itself will be tailored to the individual's personal space as rendered within the intermediate ego.

Finally, let us establish what the purpose of these devices is. Perhaps the most important element is that they allow us to gain some understanding of the world surrounding our character within the game space. These familiarities are woven into the text of the game and ensure that the player has some assurances of their own world, thus making the transition into the game world all that much easier. To be propelled into a world that did not contain any familiarities would nevertheless be impossible, for everything within a game text does, to an extent, reflect an aspect of reality. Furthermore, these reflective elements are required by the user as cues for what to do in unfamiliar terrain. Finally, they serve to assist the user by allowing them to have some mirage of mastery. Mastery is a matter of much disagreement among games researchers, and one that I will not be going into further here. However, providing even an illusion of the ideal of mastery is important to the user as it prevents the user from giving up, in much the same way as the illusory ideal that the individual aspires to. Suits makes an important point with reference to this in his short story regarding two retired warriors who seek to play one another at games as a way to while away the time. However, neither of them has a desire to follow the rules and thus rather than it being about them adhering to the rules of the game, they are considered to be adhering to those of the situation. One of them remarks with the following after a rather volatile game of chess. "'For, since we will not abide by the rules of the game, the winner can only be he who has gained final mastery of the situation.'" (Suits 2005:69). As two individuals in the same frame of mind when at play, the rules can be deliberately coerced. They have forced the game to another level of play, where the rules are their own, and they can achieve the end they require. Mastery here is about that of the situation. The individual who has the best grasp on the situation wins. Then, how does that work with games which are single player? Can mastery ever really be achieved, particularly given that bending the rules is impossible in the majority of games?

If we require these familiar objects within the game scenario in order to continue playing, why would an object that is at least familiar to us in terms of looks turn out to be quite the reverse of this? I mentioned previously the potential difference in analysing actions with regards to the play space. More specifically, these actions will take the part of the 'extreme' considered in the next chapter. For actions, one can easily see why, at the very least they may differ slightly. Performing an action (unless, of course, one is utilising the Wii controller which makes use of standard motions in order to perform actions) is altered by the control mechanism in the first place. However, this is not the case for objects. If these components are warped beyond recognition (except visually), we are caused to question their nature in reality. In doing so, we are left with the remnants of an idea that is not quite what it began as (its origins in reality), or indeed what it was reflected through the game as (game reality), but something that is doubly interpreted through the intermediate.

Thus, how do games controllers achieve the desired affect? Earlier we explored the idea of the dimensions of space affecting how controllers functioned with reference to the game space. This was considered with reference to the idea of the avatar's proximity to the screen during the process of play. However, the nature of the control system was also considered as a factor due to the perceived complexity of the control scheme. For example, some games played using a keyboard and mouse utilise a control system that appears deliberately designed to project an element of distance between the user and the game.

Because the controller is situated in the physical user space rather than the game space, we should perceive it as a part of reality. Certainly that is where its structure lies and is where the user controls the action. However, the controller is an important aspect relating to the Imaginary space purely in its being the method of control. Because the method of control in the majority of play scenarios is abstracted from the movement of the avatar on the screen, a passing through of the Imaginary must take place. In some games, the movement of the avatar is mapped to the movement of the user's own body. Accessories such as *Kinect* on the Xbox 360 achieve such an effect and are explored further with regards to the future of the industry in the appendix. Such accessories might be considered in a similar way to the idea of a physical controller, because the set-up required with the camera

attachment in order to map the body achieves the effect of forcing the user to pose in the space of the controller. Furthermore, if the user performs an action which is misread by the game, the resulting output will differ from the user's intended action. This equates to the same level of passing through as achieved with a normal controller and exposes the flaws of placing the user closer to the space between reality and the virtual.

So how does this relate to the work on hyperreality? Does the idea of the controller represent a reversal of the simulacrum, whereby the controller is the representation and the in-game action is the reality? Is this type of reflective simulation possible? Or might it be that both the action of the character and that of the user are both abstracted simulacra of the same action in reality?

If we consider the latter point, the idea would be that the representation of action in-game is divided in the hyperreal scenario. We are already aware that without the element of control the game cannot progress, in the same way as if the game is not present then the controller is equally useless. Therefore, to take Baudrillard's ideas further, we might postulate that the very idea of an action with relation to the game is deeply embedded in this idea of a split. The game (story, controls, etc.) itself is divided between reality and the virtual by virtue of the virtual space itself and the idea of the user/controller in the space of reality with the intermediate interacting with the two levels. When engaging itself as a representation, the idea of an action must take into account both the controlling mechanism and the movement to that degree in the game itself, and therefore remains divided up until the point where it is actually fulfilled as an action on-screen. It cannot exist as an aspect of the simulation without this refinement. An action cannot exist as an action unless something is controlling it, and the way for a user to control an in-game action is through the pathways of instruction filtered from the controller's location.

Obviously, this differs from the work, here, on objects, and will be explored further in the following chapter. Objects and actions differ in their appearance within the game and the effect they achieve with relation to the user. However, in propelling both familiar objects and actions into the game scenario we are achieving similar effects on the user. The user must at once be propelled into a world both

alien and familiar to them, and the combination of the effects stated here and in future chapters should allow for a description of a concrete play experience for the user of this type of game.

With regards to actions in the game, the locus of control is spread across two poles, the user/controller and the game. Therefore the simulacrum undergoes a split. However, with objects, this split is absent. This means that in-game objects as representations are able to be categorised as their basis is not directly related to user input.

Take, for example, the game *Fable* (2003). *Fable* is a single-player action-adventure game that utilises role-playing elements in order to progress one's character through the story. The entire game is played in the third person. *Fable* plays strongly on the user's emotional weighting of the word 'choice' and allows for the player to 'make' choices throughout the game which determine the alignment of the character the user is playing. One might determine that this is therefore based upon the user's morality. However, 'morality' is a loaded term and allows for the 'choice' element to become real. The element of 'choice' not only cannot be based truly upon the user's morality because of its situation in the game, an area where acts can be performed without real-life consequence, but also because it is split. This split constitutes the user and game space, utilising the intermediate. In and of itself, this action cannot be morality, or indeed choice. In this situation, however, an object would fall into a distinct category in its hyperreal state. The relative complexity of action over object will be explored in further detail later.

6. <u>Merchandising</u>

I would like to follow one further example of translation, one that exists outside of the game and therefore encompasses a wholly different type of theory: that of merchandising. Merchandising is the purchase of items relating to the game, be they art books, keyrings, or soft toys. Merchandising doesn't appear to fit into the same paradigm as the other elements discussed within the chapter, but because it is a familiar object (albeit one that is taken completely out of the game) it is one which will be explored here.

Lacan's notion of *le sinthome* is a concept that cannot be interpreted. It remains beyond the reach of analysis and therefore must remain as it is, unable to be broken

down or understood. *Le sinthome* exists as an important part of the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary dynamic, and in being so is beyond meaning. Indeed, Zizek states that "This point functions as the ultimate support of the subject's consistency, the point of "thou art that," the point marking the dimension of "what is the subject more than himself" and what he therefore "loves more than himself," the point that is nonetheless neither symptom… nor fantasy" (1992:132). Le sinthome is "the kernel of enjoyment that simultaneously attracts and repels us." (Zizek 1992:133)

Merchandising relates to this notion. It forms the fourth node in the relationship between the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic, and essentially acts as a construct that exists beyond levels of meaning. The four elements intertwine in the positions constructed by what Lacan referred to as a Borromean Knot. Said knot consists of three interlocking rings, the shape and therefore the nature of which Lacan addressed a number of times during his seminar *Le Sinthome*, "this is exactly what the sinthome consists in – not in so far as it is personality, but that in relation to the others it specifies itself as sinthome and neurotic." (Lacan 1975:16). It is the fourth ring in an unsteady dynamic. Lacan described the structure of the knot as such, "I situate the support of consistence in the imaginary. Likewise, I make the essential constituent of the symbolic the hole. And I make the real the support of what I term ex-sistence, in this sense: in its sistence outside of the imaginary and the symbolic, it knocks up against them, its play is precisely something in the order of limitation; the two others, from the moment when it is tied into a borromean knot with them, offer it resistance. In other words, the real only has ex-sistence – in rather an astonishing formulation of mine – in its encounter with the limits of the symbolic and the imaginary." (Lacan 1975:14).

Merchandising in the way I phrase it here could be anything from a t-shirt with the name of a video game on it to a special edition of the game that comes with an artbook. Other aspects of merchandising might include fan-made art and fiction based upon said game. This could easily be perceived as a method intended to maintain our relation to the intermediate, and therefore the game, for longer. In producing an object from a game that we can bring into reality, we propel an aspect of the game beyond its realms. This does not simply place pressure on the intermediate dynamic but also the constructs of the symbolic order which has

already been expressed exist outside of the intermediate area.

Does this make merchandising dangerous for a user? No, it merely expresses a component of the game dynamic that reaches a place that exists beyond our ability to express it linguistically. This is because it is something that cannot be a part of the game and yet somehow retains meaning to the user.

This should be demonstrated with an example. *Pikmin* (2001) is a strategy game which involves the user playing an alien who goes by the name of Olimar. Olimar has crash landed on the planet and needs to locate the missing parts of his ship within a month (before he runs out of air). Olimar is extremely small, smaller than an average beetle, and thus must fight many enemies along the way who have either eaten or are protecting the parts from his ship. Olimar meets a group of creatures called 'Pikmin' who must be grown through bringing defeated enemies and pellets to their home bases (known as 'Onions'). There are three colours of Pikmin, five in the sequel, and each of them has a specialist skill (for example, blue Pikmin are able to move through water, whilst red Pikmin are resistant to fire). The Pikmin make up the components for Olimar's army, which he uses to proceed through the plot and gain the missing parts of his ship. Should he not obtain all of the parts of his ship by the time limit, he is unable to go home and becomes a Pikmin himself.

Pikmin are large eyed carrot-like creatures with large feet and a leaf, bud or flower upon their heads (which allows them to be plucked from the ground). If a leaf Pikmin is left in the ground for long enough, it will become a bud and finally a flower Pikmin. This provides it with additional benefits, such as the ability to run faster.

With the release of *Pikmin 2* in 2004, a number of cuddly toys relating to the series were also released in Japan. Said cuddly toys were plush versions of fifteen Pikmin (the five varieties each with a leaf, bud or flower), one of the main enemies of the series, and Olimar and his brother. Whilst merchandising for video games is more common in Japan, such aspects are now widely considered to be an aspect of the culture surrounding video games. Because of this, users import merchandise. Many developers and publishers in the USA and Europe are also beginning to product different items of merchandise (such as collectors' packages of games).

In order to understand the underlying purpose of the rising trend towards merchandise, we must return our attention to Lacan's Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic.

All three components form part of the development of the individual and of their ideal self.

The Mirror Stage forms an important part of this development for it allows the child to situate itself as an individual being through recognising the self in the mirror. This separates the child not only from its parents but also the environment surrounding it. This recognition allows for the formation of the I and the Ideal-I, the latter of which formulates an aspect of the individual which can never be real but is also of great importance to the individual because it illuminates how the individual would like to be seen. This Ideal-I, therefore, can only exist in the Imaginary of the individual for it is formed entirely of fantasy. The Real is outside of language and is connected with the abovementioned idea of *le sinthome*.

Once their image is reproduced outside of the game, the Pikmin become just that, an image. In itself, the image created by the plush versions of the Pikmin is representative of the game itself and contains aspects of the character to which it pertains. However, it can only carry specific elements of this. It is as though it contains a bubble of the intermediate which is impenetrable to language itself. The reason for this is that the plush in this scenario is something that has been removed from the game situation. Whilst it means something, and as previously explained, is adequately able to maintain the intermediate during the time at which the user is not at play, it cannot fully express what it is that it means. This is because it almost exists at a deeper level than the game itself does for the user. Something removed from its environment, regardless of whether said environment is natural or virtual, cannot adequately represent what it first appears to simply because it does not retain the meanings surrounding the original item, the meanings which created the original to be as it is.

This in turn relates back to the idea of the translation of familiar objects into the game world, and also to Baudrillard's hyperreality, thus the idea of it appears internally reflexive. The plush toy means, but it cannot mean at a linguistic level for it no longer has the linguistic grounding in order to maintain it as such.

So why is merchandise becoming more prevalent with relation to the video games industry? Is it due to the fact that games are now reaching a larger audience the world over? Or is it due to a need recently expressed that provides us the

opportunity to better form bonds with the game if we are a part of this unspoken ritual?

Perhaps it is a symptom of how contemporary society is structured. In spending more time utilising machines, we lose much of the natural contact that humans would usually be a large part of. Because of this, perhaps there is a certain desire to obtain a part of the images that we constantly see flickering before our eyes. I have already stated the power of the bond formed when the user begins play, and how that structures their play experience. Important connections are formed between the user, the avatar, and the environment, until such a point as the user must finish the game. Even then, an aspect of that bond continues, and bringing something meaningful (if empty) from the game allows the user the physicality of that connection. Furthermore, the loss of certain face-to-face elements in society may serve to create something of a void in the user that through this contact with an empty object they can fill with meaning.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have utilised Baudrillard's theory in order to establish how the user understands specific objects embedded within the game scenario. The next chapter will cover acts, and therefore actions, relating to this. As stated, this should enable me to concretise the dynamic of the user-screen interface, which in turn will enable analysis of other developments in similar fields, such as artificial intelligence. I would finally like to address the element of hyperreality and determine the effect its presence has as an overarching quality of the game as a whole, rather than in its component parts.

The nature of how an object that we perceive in reality might be interpreted in games is a difficult subject to breach. This is because we assume that we have reached a state of realism in the realm of games. I would, however, argue that we have long since passed the point of realism and have now entered a state pertaining more to hyperreality. By this, I mean that the games we play have entered a state beyond this level of realism. I justify this with regards to the points made in this chapter: if a familiar act or object is translated into the medium of the game and can, at the point where it has been translated, act out in a different manner to that which we would expect of it, it seems to me that it has reached this level. Should

the familiarity rest at the level of reality, it would not be able to be manipulated in this way. The manipulation occurs at the level of the mirrored effect: the object may contain representations both of itself in reality and of an empty image. This is what induces the hyperreal effect in the familiar object. In propelling the object closer to its real life counterpart, we allow the two to lie in opposition. The proximity shows them as separate and takes them beyond the level of reality.

A good example of this would be the virtual world of *Second Life* (2003), a game that, even in the title, mimics reality. In Alison McMahan's paper on the aforementioned, she details how *Second Life* is not like a 'normal' video game. In this sense, I agree. Whatever style of the virtual *Second Life* claims to be, it does not manage to escape from its roots as a video game. This in itself is neither a problem nor something that requires argument here. The important element is that it is succinctly representative of this feeling of hyperreality.

When one enters the world of *Second Life* one is able to customise his or her character and choose a world to go into. There is a brief training level on basic forms of movement. One of these types of movement is flight. In games, one is used to mixtures of the fictional with the 'real'. However, when a game phrases itself as a sophisticated life simulator, flight is not generally a means of transportation (unless one uses an aeroplane).

McMahan argues for an increased sense of presence in the virtual world brought on by, amongst other things, increased realism. Whilst I agree that what we define as 'realism' in the game's setting can indeed have a stabilising effect on the individual at play, I disagree with naming it as 'realism', as I have already explained. An excellent example of this hyperreality that has been perceived within the game is used in McMahan's paper when she speaks about metagames. Because *Second Life* does not have direct goals in the same way as those games which have already been discussed, players create elements of mimicry. This gives them active goals in the playspace. McMahan's example of a scenario that was out of the ordinary was when a group of players had their avatars enact 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', “On the day of the performance, the audience, about twenty strong, sat everywhere in the proscenium space except in the space designated for them – many of them sat on ceiling beams or on the chandelier. Some would arrive in *Second Life* right in the

middle of the stage and had to quickly be escorted off. No one seemed to mind this, and the play performance continued without interruption." (McMahan 2007:169). Here we perceive the hyperreality of the simulation coming through. We have established that the rule space of the game differs from that of reality and that the opposing elements of these realities are contained and moderated using the intermediate space. At the point where something within the game is staged as realistic but is directly subverted by the players of that world, we have to look at it as an example not only of the lack of extension of the rules of reality (as McMahan concludes) but also of the lack of meaning we make use of in these familiar elements. Furthermore, our explicit desire to test boundaries within the game world only propels us further beyond the idea of reality.

When referencing popular culture, Baudrillard speaks more with reference to films than games, hence here I have focussed more on the visual elements of modern games as much is borrowed from filmic conventions. "Myth, chased from the real by the violence of history, finds refuge in cinema" (Baudrillard 1994:43). What does this mean to games? Does this construct of 'myth' or 'history' pervading the construct of cinema mean to games in the same way as Baudrillard manages to ascribe it to films? If we look back at what has been described previously this would make sense, albeit moving somewhat away from Baudrillard's limiting sphere of the cinema. The personal and external histories combined with those of the game are joined in the effective space of the intermediate. In turn, this intermediate understands these histories with relation to the game. Baudrillard continues to state that "today one has the impression that history has retreated, leaving behind it an indifferent nebula, traversed by currents, but emptied of references." (1994:43). In games, however, we may conclude that this empty space fills itself with perceived meaning. History is not only emptied of meaning but also ascribed to it, through and surrounding the game. It would thus be unfair to name it as a false history. I return to Baudrillard here and suggest that the realness of the history presented by my construct of the intermediate might be suggested to be more real than that which we experience around us. Therefore it must be considered as hyperreal.

When attempting to justify what we perceive to be occurring within the game scenario, we must be aware of the nature of the reality. In this chapter I have begun

to describe the nature of the game's reality both with reference to the reality it mimics and the problems that surround this. Furthermore, the idea of a reflected object not claiming to adequately represent the original is in itself perhaps a sign of the true nature of games as their own media form and will be explored in greater depth later in the thesis. In the next chapter, I explore the idea of the extreme in gaming, utilising some of the elements that I have introduced here, and attempt to discover if the extreme is an adequate representation (or indeed a representation at all) of reality. This should allow me to further explore the user-game dynamic in greater detail.

Chapter Five: Understanding the Extreme

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I addressed the notion of familiar objects within the game scenario, with the intention of exposing what it is that they are and how they go about meaning. What is external to the user but occupies an aspect of the game is essential to our comprehension of what is occurring when the user is at play. In explaining these aspects we are left with a more complete interpretation of the game situation.

It is important to note that the objects and actions discussed in both this and the previous chapter are elements based upon the external, and therefore the social. By utilising Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality we can expose what is occurring with these objects and actions as they are translated across through the medium of the personal (which is where Lacanian theories come into play). I have already identified the ways in which we might consider objects in reality to become translated into the game world. However, in order to analyse elements on which we as a society present a more marginal perspective, I wish to present a different method of analysis. This chapter remains on the basis of the external being translated into the game world, but from the basis of elements that we comprehend as aggressive. This is in juxtaposition to the elements such as money that were described in the previous chapter, as said elements should be considered passive and non-reactionary to the user.

For something to be 'extreme', we must consider it as something that resides somewhat out of the realms of what we consider 'normal' practice. In this thesis, the examples that I use relate to marginalised acts such as violence and sexuality within the context of the game situation. Once again, I am dealing with these acts from a structural basis. This assists in placing them both as actions and in terms of what they could be considered to mean at a base level.

This chapter constitutes a continuation of the previous chapter, but also one which focuses on these specific elements. I have termed them as 'extremes' because I do not feel that acknowledging them as the action or event on which they are based correctly defines them as what they are in a game sense. To name something as an 'extreme' situates it at the level of difference but without the

connotations of the act on which it retains a basis. This is important because, when we look at perceived violence within a game, we need to be able to separate it from the act on which it is based in order to analyse it. What is being mimicked when a violent act is portrayed in a game? Does it retain anything of the original, or has it already passed through the level of televised spectacle?

Extremes in this context are important as they tell us a great deal about the game itself and the nature of the scenario. If we express something as akin to its real life counterpart when it is there to perform an entirely different task, we are at risk of misunderstanding both the locus of the game and that of the user.

The question of the extreme within a game is one which will constantly be redefined socially, because the concepts that are marginalised within the game are concepts that are currently considered as either difficult topics to address or difficult to control. Stating that violent impulses caused by playing a game could cause one to become violent oneself or to view the action that one perceives as acceptable might be regarded as a statement of our paranoia over losing control of these difficult concepts, or it may be rooted in fact. Perhaps it is a combination of these factors that marginalises the concept of violence with reference to the video game.

The theory here will be situated in the context of Baudrillard's works that have already been explored. In utilising these works, I am setting the construct of the extreme up on the same level as the idea of the transcription of familiar objects. However, because of the structure of the action, both the translation and purpose of the extreme differ. Whilst we have already explored the idea of doubly abstracted elements giving way to actions, here I am speaking only of the action itself.

In this chapter, I intend to define actions within the setting of the user-screen dynamic. I wish to observe how they function within this state and how they might be utilised. My reason for making the choice to address the concept of the extreme action rather than simply a normal action within games is varied. Primarily, I have already dealt with familiarities within the context of games. My choice of extremes addresses this previous choice by utilising recognisable concepts within the gaming scenario. However, the familiarities dealt with in this context are more cinematic, more from the perspective of something that is blatantly representational. I also

consider the notion that one can often see much more about what might be occurring when looking at things that are not specifically always present, or are extremely marginalised, within games. However, when they are, they can be far more revealing. Aspects of life that are marginalised and then translated into the game world should make an important impression, and one that can be analysed to explain some of the questions of how the intermediate construct performs. Once again, I will not be investigating user bias or individual differences which emerge in the user when playing the game. Therefore, whilst this chapter does investigate extremes, it does so with reference to the structural and psychoanalytic constructs that have already been explored as opposed to an overarching layer of intent.

2. Defining the Extreme

It is important here to define what is meant by the term 'extreme', specifically what it means within the context of the video game. The word 'extreme' implies an element which exists on an outer limit of some kind: an intense act or element that occurs outside of the sphere of what we would define as 'normality'. Let us also differentiate it from what was explored in the previous chapter by defining it as an action (or series of actions) of some kind. This was established in Chapter Four as different from the idea of an object because of the split nature of the user controlling the action and the game providing feedback. In games, we might define an extreme act as something involving violence, sexuality, or war. Literary conventions, when added to this, can contribute to an extreme act within the context of the game (a breach of the fourth wall might be defined as a moment like this). When looking at violence within games we must recall, however, that it is not always a marginalised element within the game and can become normality within the game world. This offers us a duality of meaning between the two worlds, which adds to its complexity.

In the previous chapter, I briefly explored what influence the controller has over the understanding of an action within the game. The controller, I hypothesised, was a direct link between the user and the game. The action could be considered as split in two because neither the in-game motion nor the controller could function without one another. Furthermore, this helps to explain the intermediate's role in the intricate link between the user and the screen. It brings the user closer to the

action and enables the functionality of the intermediate space. Historically, there has always been a controller for the user-input of games, and said controller has always been shaped specifically to the user's requirements. There is, at this stage, no way of demonstrating ability in a game unless one utilises this real-world aspect of the action. The appendix will explore possible applications that may no longer require this aspect, including some games that already limit the requirements for such an obvious abstraction from the action on the screen.

There are a number of actions that we might define as extremes within the game, and here I will only be focusing on a few of the more prominent ones. Fundamentally, they should follow a similar structure with relation to the user due to their position as marginalised elements. After all, games themselves often follow a specific structure: similarities in characters and plots are rife. What is different is that "What defines a character the most is their actions during the course of their story." (Finnegan 2010). This idea of a character being defined by the action is extremely important and will be explored within the context of both hyperreality and recent articles dealing with gaming from an external perspective.

3. Alternatives to the Extreme

Of course, it is not simply this notion of the extreme that can be used to inform us of the structural significance of the game. The elements described in this section do not fall into my previous definition of what an extreme might be with relation to the game. They do, however, provide us with a greater understanding of how the user's dialogue with the game isolates elements that are not specifically exposed as that which the game intended.

Above and beyond elements considered troubling that we place in the game world, visual cues such as art style and making use of recognisable character 'types' within the game, assist the user in making clear distinctions very quickly within the game. This is important in teaching the user about the environment using low level references to reality that will be translated through the intermediate.

These cues equate more to the study on objects explored in the previous chapter. However, they have some relation to the idea of the extreme as action, as described in this chapter. This is because they assist the user in making a decision. This allows for the action to take place. Without visual and audible clues, the virtual

would be extremely difficult for the user to navigate, or indeed for the constructs of the extremes to retain their level of representation.

Stereotyping should be considered one of these elements, for it exposes some similar elements to those already described and allows for better placement of the extreme as action within the game.

Within games there exist certain specific stereotypes of personalities. These aid the player in relating to the character presented on the screen, because the user recognises elements in the representation and attributes elements of their knowledge onto the game. In *Pokémon* (1996) for example, we perceive the enemy characters within the game through what they wear, what they say/their actions, and what Pokémon they have captured. These teams of characters were initially known as Team Rocket in the first games. In later titles, other crime syndicates existed, such as Teams Magma, Aqua, Galactic, and Plasma. Each team fulfilled the same role: to be the faction that the game's protagonist fought against. The syndicates typically wore similar outfits to one another: for Team Rocket, each member wore a shirt with a red 'R' emblazoned on the front. In the games, the shirt was black, although it was changed to white for the animated series based on the games. The teams in the games always acted in a certain expected 'bad' way: their moral choices were always contrary to the main character's. Finally, each team would use specific Pokémon. In the original games, Team Rocket would typically utilise ferocious-looking Pokémon, or Pokémon which exuded a specific image (such as Pokémon of the class 'poison'). Their Pokémon matched their 'badness'. This is shown as reflective across the titles, so whilst a player of the series here works with the stereotype created by the structure of the game's text, which is understood as such through the intermediate, they also enter the game with prior knowledge.

A screenshot from the *Pokémon* animated series, featuring Team Rocket and two Pokémon that one might consider to be stereotypically kept by 'bad' characters: Ekans (a snake), and Koffing (a ball of poison gas).

Equally, choosing one's faction in *World of Warcraft* has been subject to complaints of stereotyping as each faction remains distinct, and carries with it a certain look, attitude, and accent. For example, the Dwarf race is physically shown to be stout and bearded, and is offered an accent based on Scottish. This is a stereotype that pervades not only dwarves in video games but also in tabletop role-playing games. Furthermore, films based in a fantasy setting often give dwarves a rather gruff sound, if Gimli's dialect in the recent filmic portrayal of *The Lord of the Rings* (Jackson 2001) is anything to go by.

These characters, which are based in the realm of real or fantasy stereotypes, are not necessarily damaging in the game world and may actually be beneficial to the user who is better able to understand the role of the character through specific visual and audio cues. Stereotyping simplifies the character's motives and allows for the story to expand at a far quicker pace than it otherwise might be able to. However, it also loses the subtleties of the character that one might find in other texts, such as novels. This particular extreme, once placed in a game setting, no longer functions as such and instead assists the user in further exploration of the world.

Sometimes these stereotypes occur outside of the game and permeate the idea of play, such as in instances where a woman chooses to play a male avatar or vice

versa. This is prevalent in chat rooms but also readily occurs in games where one may choose an avatar. Women take on what they consider to be a typical 'maleness' and men vice versa. Numerous reasons for this type of practice have been cited, and there is a good deal of sociological research into it. It implies something about the experimental nature of playing a game, whilst also allowing users to explore and take on roles that they would not otherwise feel comfortable in experiencing. It plays upon socially imposed aspects of gender roles, "For a man to present himself as female in a chat room, or in a MUD, only requires writing a description." (Turkle 1995:212).

This type of response shows the user as controlling the level of play that occurs within the game. It shows a level above the baseline of the game itself and is important for exposing this additional level of play brought about not directly by the game awaiting action but by the user consciously projecting that action above and beyond what the game requires in order to play.

Art styles, or 'milieu', are often used within games to add an extra layer of meaning to the setting of the story. They may be representative of a place, an era, or simply a specific style. They are not an action carried out by the avatar but one prior to the beginning of the game. Background art grounds the user within a certain specific locale and timeline which is essential for the game to proceed with the story. For example, *God of War* (2005) is based upon ancient Greek mythology and takes place in and around Athens, a visually perfect location for such a game as it creates a mood and setting that the user can interpret instantly. Graphically, the environments are sprawling and atmospheric, with the player character Kratos standing out against them. Kratos himself is something of a caricature in many ways, with his giant blades that appear to warp his body as he runs. Kratos is a distinctive character, both in terms of looks and personality, and it is certain that this domination of both the story and the environment would have a strong impression on a user.

A screenshot from *God of War*, featuring the protagonist Kratos.

Similarly, *Bioshock* creates an undersea haven built in a fictional version of the 1950s where the elite make the decision to create a whole new society. Therefore, whilst the technology used to create this is almost alien for the time, it situates us in a far less alien world. The user sees items that they might only have seen in antique stores before, the music soulfully proclaims the problems of an era, and the architecture makes one feel as though they have stepped back in time. The user can place it as a certain time, based on these cues, and understand it as such, placing meaning where required. The underwater haven itself is ruined; water leaks through the walls, bloodstains and party masks litter the floors of restaurants, indications of the dark events one must uncover throughout the course of the game. Not only does art situate the game but it also represents a loss. This loss constitutes the time in which the game is supposed to take place: the loss is our own lack of knowledge. Even if we did have the knowledge of said time, we could not possibly accurately represent it, hence the placement of the hyperreal. Equally, the user has no specific desire towards accurate representation in this way, else fantasy games would not have gained such popularity. The representation the user receives, however, is one pertaining to something familiar, something that can situate them, combined with their own expectations. The milieu in itself, however, becomes an extreme through

the fact that it cannot possibly represent that which it seeks to, and yet does so anyway. Here we must return to hyperreality, whereby this misrepresenting art becomes more than the reality in itself. It becomes that time in our representations. We might also consider the setting of a game as many familiar objects located together, the art style of the location being just one of those objects.

I would like to also touch on functional actions within the game's text before proceeding with the notion of the extreme. In the *Pokémon* series of games there is an individual called a 'name rater'. Said individual 'rates' the name the user has offered to one of their creatures and allows them to change it if they so wish. *Pokémon* is a game about collecting monsters and using them to fight battles against other monsters and other individuals who have collected said monsters. Because one has the option of naming their monsters upon acquiring them, it is important to the game's mechanics that this kind of service is offered. However, it is hidden in the text of the game. The name rater will 'rate' the name of a Pokémon, specifying how much they 'like' the name before offering to change it (the latter being the actual purpose). If a Pokémon has been acquired by trading with another trainer, the game's mechanics will not allow for this change and the name rater defines the name as 'perfect'. The purpose is covered by the text of the game, which in turn offers some aspect of 'personality' to initiate the user into both understanding and performance of that act within the game.

Whilst not an extreme within a game, this does show how this hyperreal effect is achieved. The structure underlying the game is sound but the text coerces the user into behaving in a certain way towards what it covers. It is this level of structure that shows how calculated the virtual is and therefore how it can be considered as beyond real. Even 'glitches' which create random effects are simply incorrect calculations on the part of the system and they achieve a level beyond. Said glitches perform a process of revelation for the user: as specified in the previous chapter in the instance of gold farming, this manner of revelation exposes the game for what it is. If only for an instant, the user is removed from the dynamic.

4. <u>Violence</u>

With any marginalised element, there will always be some difficulty in how to perceive it once it is translated across to the virtual. Violence is no exception to this

rule. This is because it exposes itself as a mimicry of an action in reality and yet appears to perform a task of a different nature. In the games described in this thesis, the idea of progression has long since been coupled with the concept of levelling up. In context, this levelling up is often based around becoming stronger (in line with the scenarios that the game produces being tougher), which in itself is based upon winning against others. The others in this scenario may well be non-player characters in the game, whose only purpose within that context is to be dispatched by the player-character in order for them to level up and therefore progress. Structurally, this appears far from the actual act of violence, although it does interestingly share components with competitive sports, such as boxing. Visually, it also shares elements with televised violence. Therefore, we can deem the structure and look of the scenario as entirely staged.

These in-game extremes exist as beyond reality anyway and therefore cannot necessarily be adequately symbolised. Baudrillard states that "the wearisome character in films of all this violence and pornographied sexuality, which are merely special effects of violence and sex, no longer even fantasized by humans, but purely machinic violence which no longer even effects us." (2002:178). Violence is now rendered by machines and its very nature now bears very little resemblance to the act on which it is based. The game world is already hyperreal, as previously stated: beyond the real in both name and exposition. If we consider actions in terms of the objects we established previously, a complete idea of what is occurring cannot be formulated. Therefore it will be important here to both define these extremes and explain their use within the game situation.

There are many accounts regarding perceived violence in games and the potential effects it can have on individuals. In the United Kingdom, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) has recently been overturned in their video game ratings in favour of Pan European Game Information (PEGI). In light of the differences between the media of films and games, this appears to make sense. However, the reality of the situation has become a case of two sometimes different ratings appearing on the same game while the transition period between the two structures occurs. This is because the two corporations are viewing the content of the media under slightly different conditions. On the BBFC's website, it cites

elements such as the contextual nature, the format, and the tone of the piece as factors which would influence the rating of a product by them (BBFC 2011). PEGI ratings "use a combination of content declaration and game review to determine the appropriate PEGI rating for each game." (PEGI 2011). Both boards view the title individually, based on its content. The BBFC, however, appears to take a view more based upon films, which makes sense given that films are the reason that said company exists in the first place.

The rating systems of both the BBFC and PEGI have been enforced for regulatory reasons. This level of censorship is to protect minors from content that is deemed unsuitable for them to play. PEGI utilises a pictographic system with their ratings which explains why a specific game has been given a certain rating. This might be to do with swearing, violence, drug use, discrimination or horror, amongst other categories. When someone purchases a game, they only need look at this rating to determine suitability. However, how do we determine a valid ratings system if the actions we are judging are not those actions at all but abstracted representations? Perhaps this does not matter, for even in their abstracted state they still retain a level of familiarity which relates something to the real action.

In order to establish the need for such systems, we must first establish what these extremes actually are. In his book *Violence*, Zizek speaks of both subjective and objective forms of violence. With objective violence, we must consider symbolic forms, whilst the forms of violence we commonly consider to be so (murder and such) are set in the subjective. At its base level, this allows for the idea that violence in most forms must be considered subjective. There can be no objective level to it because it is only considered violent through our own perceptions. We translate it as such: it is not violent in and of itself. There is no such thing as violence without our linguistic refinement of the definition of an act. Zizek states that "When we perceive something as an act of violence, we measure it by a presupposed standard of what the 'normal' non-violent situation is – and the highest form of violence is the imposition of this standard with reference to which some events appear as 'violent'. This is why language itself, the very medium of non-violence, of mutual recognition, involves unconditional violence." (2008:55). He continues to state that "Reality in its stupid existence is never intolerable: it is language, its symbolisation,

which makes it such." (2008:57). Therefore, we might determine that the perceived violence in a video game is violence in its own right simply because it can be subjectified as such. Linguistically, we can justify it as 'violent' because of what is embedded in the language itself.

So we come to an inability to describe something as an extreme without announcing our own subjectivity, which is problematic for many studies. This also becomes problematic when we consider the idea that emotional responses such as morality might be set at the level of the game/intermediate rather than the player. This means that the perceived violence is too. However, in order for it to be interpreted as inherently violent, it must reach the user's conscious ability to define it as such: it emerges from the level of the game and is issued meaning from the user.

Effects studies seek to empiricise data relating to reactions of the individual, such as perceived aggression in the individual. If we consider the other method and deem that we cannot describe this perceived aggression as a violent reaction, this causes problems not only for the ways in which certain research is carried out but also for defining specific elements of the game space. If we accept that familiar objects and actions that are being translated into the game space are not the same as the objects and actions we are familiar with, as described in the previous chapter, how then might we define them?

These elements are more real than reality. These elements are also a more perfect (albeit empty) rendition of the original. They are more defined in their purpose, scenes are better posed, lighting and camera angles are more sensible. They are empty, perfect renderings of imperfect things, requiring the user's judgement to make them more. I mentioned prior to this chapter the rendering of walls, for example. Everything is defined by its specific purpose: items can be acquired but must only be utilised in specific circumstances.

Yet, this element of perfection does not need to be in the realm of the visual. In Ian Bogost and Dan Klainbaum's essay on *Grand Theft Auto*, they state that "the *GTA* series embodies a highly playable (though geographically incorrect) translation of real places. In this context, *translation* refers not only to the physical treatment of each city's local architecture and atmosphere, but also to a rendition of the spirit of

these cities as they exist in popular culture." (2006:162). What Bogost and Klainbaum are asserting here is something akin to the idea of the hyperreal. We recognise these mapped out cities by recognisable elements rather than them requiring an accurate map of the area. The feel of the city as the user propels their avatar to move around is as important as the look. We recognise here that what is represented in the virtual is not necessarily directly associated with what it is in reality. However, something must be retained that provides it with the appearance of what it is in reality.

The violent act relates to this in the sense that it also retains some element of recognition. The user does recognise something as violent even if they have not seen that action occur in reality before, much like they will recognise the aforementioned city in *Grand Theft Auto*, because the recognisable cues are there (generally formed through television). "Modern violent content is enjoyable in part because filmmakers and game designers have systematically stripped it of all that makes it unpleasant, leaving only the highly appealing narrative of struggling against adversity." (Edge 2011:87). However, whilst it might be recognised as having the same attributes as what is recognised, the element presented in the virtual is not the same. This level of perfection, the *feel* of something as accurate and yet somehow beyond this (more real than reality), is extremely important here.

Another example of this is the controversial Playstation2 title *Manhunt* (2003), "which was withdrawn by some high street retailers" (BBC 2004) due to an assumed connection between its content and the murder of Stephen Pakeerah in 2004. The game was infamous for its levels of perceived violence and the concern that individuals might replicate the actions in the game. *Manhunt* produces the effect of the avatar being perceived through the medium of a camera, yet it becomes ensnared by this element of perfection. Imperfections cannot be rendered imperfectly by computers due to the very nature of machines. If something is programmed to perform a specific function, it must perform it in precisely that way. This means that, even if the computer needs to render 'imperfection' as it were, it will remain unable to render it so.

The main character of the game is a killer who, though supposedly executed, wakes up to be offered a series of tasks which he must perform in order to gain his

freedom. The tasks involve murdering specific gangs of individuals in a series of graphic ways whilst making use of ordinary objects in order to perform these gruesome tasks.

As established, the action is split, and the initiation into said action is represented by a targeting system that changes colour (and therefore the intensity of the kill) based on specific conditions. Therefore, one must press at the correct time in order to initiate a specific dispatch of the enemy. Whilst it is not specifically encouraged, achievement of the bloodiest dispatch 'rewards' the player with a more gory scene. Because said scene is more difficult to achieve, the expected desired outcome is the more brutal scene. In normal play, however, it would also be expected that the user would not achieve the desired outcome often.

The game is framed immediately through cameras, which puts the user rather closer to the viewer of a film, albeit one with control over the action. The constant reminder to the user is that this is the case: the screen flickers, lines of static rise and fall across the screen constantly. The game also plays in the third person, so the user always maintains a certain separation from the character and the scenes portrayed. There is also a certain abstraction with the user being situated in such an enforced perverse space: there is a constant reminder that the user is a separate entity to the player-character.

What does this inform us of with regards to aspects of violence? It shows clearly the distinct split in how the action element functions within a video game. This is something that would be more difficult to identify in games where such a prominent exposure to extremes such as violence was not present. Games that display such leanings expose more about their rigid underlying structures in their conscious narrative of the extreme space.

The split in action *Manhunt* offers is an example of the user distanced from the action they initiate. The action they create is done through a key press rather than a lengthy selection of keys throughout the event. Being distanced from an action in games does not just allow the user to observe the entire experience of what is occurring from the game, it also provides them with a layer of separation. Such separation does not allow for a structurally emotional space to form. Furthermore, the action is forced into a televised space. Any perceptions of the game as gritty

realism should be lost in favour of seeing the scene as a parodied televised space.

Emotional detachment is of concern when it comes to the virtual, because even real tasks, when translated through the virtual medium, can appear to be situated in a game-like scenario. For example, there is real life concern about pilots flying drones and the impact this can have on their ability to choose targets. Philip Alston of the United Nations stated that "Because operators are based thousands of miles away from the battlefield, and undertake operations entirely through computer screens and remote audio-feed, there is a risk of developing a 'Playstation' mentality to killing." (BBC 2010). This is an example of such a gap being perceived as dangerous, and in an extremely real situation. Placing individuals performing real actions into a virtual space in order to perform them designates a perceived difficulty in defining the difference between 'work' and 'play' and allows for spatial elements to be organised by the user as in a video game. Within the situation of a game, the user experiments with what their avatar is allowed or expected to perform. The distinction in this scenario is the structuring of a real-life situation in the realms of a game. The intermediate scenario is occupied in the wrong space.

A different example of the violent act within games is with *Bioshock*, a game set in a failed undersea paradise called Rapture. In said dystopia, many scientific advances were made, including the ability for an individual to control 'plasmids', elements that the character could fire at enemies. One other major advance was for the collection of Adam, the substance which allowed the characters to evolve their skills and utilise these abilities. Using another substance, Eve, one could utilise these new powers for protecting oneself or even for controlling new skills. The game is an extremely tightly-scripted text showing a previously great civilisation brought to its knees by war and other violence. When Jack, the player-character, reaches Rapture he is faced with individuals who, in a parody of a possible future, have been driven insane through masses of surgery and upgrades. These sad shells of beings attack the player-character amongst the remnants of their lives: photographs, audio diaries, promotional posters, and evidence of parties lie littered throughout the map. The violence here is all around the player: the whole of Rapture holds a sadness, a history of violence, in its crumbling walls. Indeed, the method of progressing can be rather gruesome as one has to dispatch of enemies with a number of different

weapons (including plasmids), and as the game is in the first person this action remains closer to the user. If this action is closed, this differs from the structure of *Manhunt*. Thus, perhaps it is not the violent action itself within a game but the layer of textuality around which it is centred. The difference here is the level at which the extreme takes place.

In *Bioshock*, the violent act is embedded within the text. That is to say, the act is considered of paramount importance to the telling of the story throughout the game. Therefore, despite the relatively gruesome dispatch of enemies, the story itself promotes something quite different. If we look simply at the actions of the player-character, Jack, there is a distinction between him and the main character from *Manhunt*: in *Bioshock* we play in the first person, in *Manhunt* we play in the third. However, the situation in which the actions take place is relevant to the proximity the user may get to the character. *Manhunt*'s main character is morally dubious, and the game sets the user behind a safe veil whilst proceeding with the action. The story of *Bioshock* could doubtless not function as well without the user-avatar proximity being so close: the twist would not work unless a good intermediate bond had formed between the user and their avatar. This was stated through their perceived proximity.

5. <u>Sexuality</u>

Let us move on specifically to sexuality within video games. Sexuality should be considered an extreme in this context because it is something that occupies a perceived 'adult' space, equally so in games which have strict ratings which are there to restrict the sale of games containing references to sexuality to minors. I will show some examples of sexuality within games and aim to identify where the sexuality lies (if indeed it is present) and also whether or not we can justifiably name it as sexual, which should be clear depending on the result of where the perceived sexuality lies. Tanya Krzywinska warns that "the ways that sex and the sexual body have become conventionalised in their representation in film have found their way in games, even if some differences arise around the active role of the player." (2012:9). The conventions of film have an effect on those in games, and if films have this influence more than reality, what we are left with is not the same as sexuality. As with the previous example of the location of the player with regards to the game

space, the location of the action is ultimately important in designating the effect it has with regards not only to its location in the hyperreal scenario but also in a much wider context.

My first example is *Playboy: The Mansion* (2005), something of a parodied look at the perceived world of Playboy. It was a multiplatform title released in 2005. The basic premise is to 'become' Hugh Hefner and create the Playboy empire. This involves hosting titillating parties, conducting photo shoots, managing relationships and finances, and meeting deadlines. This may sound familiar because it has a similar premise to all simulation-based games, albeit in this example one plays as a specific character. Simulation games are about micro-managing, often with multiple avatars, in order to reach the desired end. The structure differs considerably from the more standard types of game already mentioned, for the user typically jumps between avatars but does not actually directly control them. This type of game remains rather open-ended, too, for there is no established ending for such a game. One must manage the lives of the individuals within their care through the duration of the game. In *Playboy: The Mansion*'s case, this is not a sex simulator.

A screenshot from the game in which a party appears to be occurring.

As if to suggest this, the game is packaged with a large Playboy bunny logo on a gaudy pink background. From this, we understand what the game might be about: the Playboy logo is a widely recognised symbol. So what is expected from the game

based on this? This is a game specifically based around a business model, perhaps even around a wish fulfilment: the idea of being successful and rich, organising events surrounding the rich and famous.

Where, then, is the sexuality? This is a game very much targeted at a specific audience, in much the same way as other life simulation games are. The fact that this particular game has explicit references to sexuality, nudity and sex simply opens up that market to a different demographic. This is not the location of the sexuality, however. Throughout the game the sexual elements are separated from the user: they may in some cases be initiated by the user, but the user remains almost voyeuristically separate. Perhaps the problem is this: the game offers some form of sexuality but that sexuality is, in the end, not actually directed towards the user but internally so. As already specified, this represents a similar situation to the 'violent' games already mentioned. The user may initiate actions within the business, but can only watch as the results of those actions occur. Therefore the location of what we would consider sexuality is located in the game, not in the user space or even the intermediate. It is not translated by the user as sexuality because it is not fully representative of sexuality. Going slightly further, it is not representative of the sexual act and therefore is not translated as such.

This means that sexuality in games is not internally representative of sexuality in reality. This does not of course mean that a user will not achieve some state of arousal from witnessing these acts (not that this is necessarily the intention), which would imply that there is a level of understanding in the intermediate. It may well be that this level of understanding is not enough to allow 'sexuality' in games to be comprehended as the same thing in reality. This does not mean that it is not representative of sexuality, however, if that is how it is interpreted. Likewise, it does not mean that it can specifically be called sexuality.

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (2004), a game well-known for its free-roaming elements, optional missions, and portrayal of sex and violence, was released in 2004. Some players of the PC version of the game became aware of a file that was inaccessible during the main course of the game. This file was for a minigame that was not in the final release of the game, but for reasons unknown remained on the disc. The level of outrage at its presence was extremely high, especially since the

title carried an adult rating and the mini-game was said to not be intended to be a part of the game's release. This caused the game to be re-released without the modification included.

The premise of this 'Hot Coffee' modification was that the main character of the game, one's avatar, was able to commit sexual acts with his partner. The user pressed buttons on the keyboard or controller to induce the act.

Once again, any form of sexuality in this is reflected internally. It is simply a game framed in a layer of imagery that makes it appear sexual. It is this framing that gives the perceived action any kind of meaning pertaining to sexuality or otherwise. Much like the name rater's role in *Pokémon* is actually to change names, the 'Hot Coffee' modification falls short of its promises. It offers a game situated within another game in which one must press buttons in time. Ability to do this is rewarding for the user but does not constitute sexuality.

Let us look at two further examples. The first was produced in 1982 and was entitled, *Custer's Revenge*. The game was a two-dimensional adventure in which one played as the naked Custer. Custer's goal was to avoid enemies and reach the end of the game, at which point he would be able to have intercourse with a captive woman. Many were outraged by the contents of the game and the company was threatened with legal action. Protestations appeared to be surrounding the indecency of the game and the fact that the lack of story behind the female character could cause people to construe the situation as rape. Whilst the game is by today's standards extremely basic, it must be judged by the standards of the time, and this was one of the first games of its type to be released on games systems of the time.

When asked to respond about the contents of the game, Keston, head of the company that produced it stated, “'Our object is not to arouse, our object is to entertain'”. Later in the same article, he is shown to have said that, “'We just couldn't see adults playing with space ships any more.'” (Ocala Star-Banner 1982). Whilst the last statement perhaps misunderstands the draw of games, the first statement does not. These games were stated to not be pornographic, and purely for entertainment purposes. One accepts that the ending of a game is something that the character is written by the game's script to 'desire', and therefore what the

user desires from the game. Once again, there is no sexuality in the game's structure. The text of the game hides the same basic premise as existed in many games of the time (and indeed many today). Utilising sexuality for this means that the player is enabled a different goal in the game, not the opportunity to 'play' pornography. The positioning of the user to the screen when observing is evidently extremely different to when they are playing a game. Whilst both the observation of pornographic material and playing a video game might retain some similarity in the voyeuristic sense, there is no sense of action. Earlier I spoke of the theorist Galloway (2006), who described video games as actions. This is predominantly what differs between the two media. The fact that there is an action to perform enables the user to have a goal throughout the game. Once again, this goal is internalised into the text of the game and becomes difficult to render aside from the game text. The user, once again, performs the 'desires' of the avatar, not their own. To explain this further, the user is not the location of the perceived desire, the avatar is. Yet, what the avatar is can be construed only through the game's text and the refinement offered by the user who understands that in their unique way. The location of the desire in this context does not exist, but is implied or assumed. The action is something created by the game, something created with a specific purpose. It is the user who interprets that action in a specific way.

My final example of sexuality being used in a video game is actually an offshoot from an entire genre of games: dating simulators. This type of video game is extremely popular in Japan and has achieved some degree of popularity in the West. Some of the more extreme titles are limited only to Japanese audiences. Take the recent case of one such game being sold by a third party individual on popular online store amazon.com for example.

There is a huge range of dating simulation titles available. Some allow one to simply dress up a virtual girl. Others allow the user to 'get to know' the dating matches within the game and woo them into becoming their partners. There are more extreme games than this which allow for a variety of scenarios, including *Rapelay* (2006), whose title tells of its content, which was the subject of the aforementioned amazon.com controversy.

In all of their forms, dating simulators are closer in proximity to the action as it

were than any of the aforementioned titles. The characters in such games often speak directly to the screen, therefore locating the avatar 'beyond' or perceived to be in the position of the user. Despite this, scenes of 'action' commonly take place using an on-screen avatar, so the gaze is removed at specific points within the game.

Such games exert elements of control over the user. In order to progress the user must please the partner by becoming acquainted with their interests in an extremely single sided affair. This limits the user and ensures that they 'work' for the reward. What strikes one about the more extreme titles in the genre, such as the aforementioned *Rapelay* is that these boundaries are lifted. Descriptions of such games remind one structurally of free-roaming titles. One wonders if perhaps the element of patient work in these games in order to achieve the reward was perhaps somewhat frustrating and thus titles like this began to come to the fore.

In such extreme simulators, one can target what they choose at whatever time they like. This changes the boundaries of the game: earlier I described the breach to the game dynamic where a user inadvertently discovers the limitations of the game with their avatar. This might be through the act of running into an invisible wall when the user can perceive an environment that has tricked them into thinking it stretches further. The user retains the element of curiosity, the element of ‘how far can I go before the limits of the game show?’. The resistance of the victims within the game is assumed to allow for just enough 'gameplay' to provide it with rules. Rather disturbing gameplay, but gameplay nonetheless.

How, then, can we relate such elements that I have clarified under the tenuous heading of ‘extremes’ back to what was stated in the previous chapter? Obviously, these games bear a structural resemblance to other games with different storylines, and I have explained how it is that the gameplay is placed on top in order to hide this, and that it is the user's refinement that provides the central understanding. Fundamentally, of course, there are only a few types of game and whilst this should not matter due to their application towards overcoming the lack, the maintenance of interest matters and thus elements of the story must be taken into account as well.

With games involving perceived sexuality, we have established that the sexuality is not on the part of the user but the avatar. The user exists to understand the action,

and to ensure that the avatar achieves their goal. Therefore the user is distanced from the action. The sex itself is emptied of meaning. It must be in a sense duplicated. This means that the action that is occurring in the game is an element that was formulated and has specific meaning in reality which the user is perceived to already be aware of. In this case we are considering extremes in sexuality, so the user must be aware of the issues surrounding this. This concept is then constructed by the game and reflected back at the user through the intermediate medium, refined by the user's own understanding. However, the usual rules do not surround the act as they would in reality. The act in-game therefore at once can be representative of the act in real life and also something quite different. In this situation, it can only empty itself of meaning: it cannot signify in the same way as the act in reality because the very rules of the game alter the entire dynamic. Therefore it may only be internally consistent. Thus it reflects back in the direction of the game.

What can these extremes tell us? It is important to take into account the value of the intermediate with regards to these efforts to propel the user closer to the game. The nature of an extreme, when filtered through the intermediate into the user's understanding, is not considered in anything like the same way as such an item or act would be considered in reality. When used with reference to the game world, the user initiates understanding of that object or act with reference to the game, not specifically to reality. Despite this, reality plays an important part in structuring these ideas and making them useful within the game. It is, however, also our understanding of reality that twists these concepts into something so different within the game. Without the intermediate's moderation, we would be inundated with ideas that clashed with our understanding in reality, and we would be unable to make sense of them in a separate way. We bear witness to these events but do not physically take part in them: the user has no place in the taking part. It is us who propel the avatar into the space of participation, however. We must only bear witness to what occurs beyond that point: the action is split.

6. War

This brings us to a final expression of the extreme: war. War is no new scenario to video games. Entire series are developed to enact elements of specific wars, both

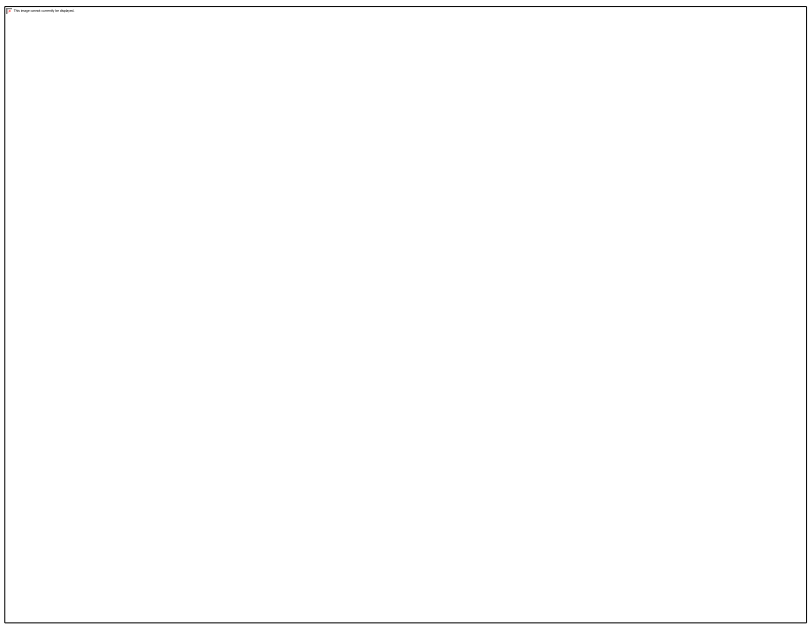
real and fictional. Indeed, specific genres also address war in a play dynamic. Strategy games allow one to place troops and control their every movement in order to capture enemy bases and defend one's own. First- and third-person shooters drop an avatar into the centre of a battleground and encourage the user to fight their way through, sometimes strategically yet often with vast amounts of brute force. The previously mentioned *World of Warcraft* takes place in a world constantly at war, and many quests are tailored towards defeating those in the opposing faction in order to gain favour with one's own.

Video games are filled with wars and references to them. Many games employ the tactic of having the user fight multiple enemies with a rather scant explanation of what took place in order to get the avatar to that situation. However, at this stage, I will be referencing war that occurs at the forefront of the game, and indeed other ways in which war simulation is used outside of games.

In a game of war, the ending is inevitable, of course. However, what propels the user to play is not a desire to attempt to change this, often not even that it is a game about war which sometimes is based upon real-world events. It is the play element. Children play with toy soldiers. In much the same way do users play war games. It is not an experience of learning. What the user is becoming good at is not how to participate in war but how to be good at a war game.

A complication to the above statement comes from the introduction of war game *Full Spectrum Warrior* across multiple platforms in 2004. The game was created with the intention of complimenting training for soldiers in the United States Army, although the version that was sold to users was not the same as that which was used for training purposes. Presumably this was due to a realisation of the entertainment value of games differing from a training programme for real soldiers. However, the version of the game that the army received was penned as not realistic enough, to the point that, "Lt. Col. Jim Riley, chief of tactics at the Army's infantry school at Fort Benning, Ga., says his school rarely uses the game because it doesn't offer a realistic simulation of urban combat." (Adair 2005). According to the same article, the military version of the game does not include personalities for the troops one must guide through the fictional war-torn country, and it also produces reports of one's progress. Likewise, the user version offers

troops with personalities, thus adding to the entertainment and perhaps even assumed 'realism' factor of the game.



Screenshot from *Full Spectrum Warrior* depicting some soldiers in battle.

America's Army is an online game that "provides players with the most authentic military experience available, from exploring the development of Soldiers in individual and collective training to their deployment in simulated missions." (America's Army 2011). Said game once again blurs the lines between the game and reality through attempting to create an 'authentic' experience in a gaming space. It continues to blur said lines through links on the website to the real United States Army, including promotional videos.

Finally, *Close Combat: First to Fight* (2005) was a more 'realistic' version of a military simulation and training aid, whereby it involved elements such as AI for the non-player characters that simulated stress within the game and allowed for more natural reactions.

So why do such war games exist within this duality? The training version of a game contains essentially the same elements but with less focus on entertainment and more on statistics, with the idea of assisting an individual virtually with their very real combat training. The question of whether this additional training poses any benefit to soldiers is irrelevant here: the important focus is that the lines between 'work' and 'play' become extremely blurred in this context. A training tool which is

essentially repackaged with some additional personality to become an entertainment tool might be thought of as no different from the training tool in some scenarios. Yet, a functioning intermediary device should take into account elements of context and allow the user to regard it in the way its usage was intended. Further, the training game itself, despite the removal of the majority of the 'entertainment' should be able to be used comfortably as part of a 'work' and part of a 'play' dynamic. Therefore what sets them apart should be regarded as the location and significance offered to the game/programme, and not which of the two are used.

This blurring between game and tool is utilised again with treatments for ailments such as PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), whereby one treatment method enables the sufferer to become reacquainted with the cause of their disorder through the use of their senses. The visual aspect is created through using images from the previously referenced *Full Spectrum Warrior*. The use of this video game as a tool for combating the deep-routed trauma of soldiers may come in part from the fact that the images are not reality, that the individual can clearly see that they are not. Yet, they represent aspects of reality well enough. The fact that these images are in this representative state, a state of meaning that may only be attributed by the individual witnessing them, is important as it allows the individual to build resistance to their own trauma through a virtual representation of it. The non/hyperreal aspect of the game's setting offers the familiar objects within the setting to be considered differently to the traumatic perception of the actual object again.

In the same way do soldiers willingly play games related to their field. "Johnston knows how quickly the visuals can induce a response, not just from watching the study subjects, but also from his own experience. He was embedded with a combat group in Ramadi. He was surprised to find that after coming in from patrol, Marines would often sit down and play "Call of Duty" and other combat video games. Using the same kind of medium for therapy, he said, "may be a more comfortable modality for them."" (Muckenfuss 2008) Playing a game in some way related to one's craft but out of context, then, allows for important constructions based upon where the user is and allows for an active differentiation between fantasy and

reality.

Users are constantly placed within the dynamic laid out by the video game, but rarely is there so much cohesion between reality and a game. Not only in this circumstance has a video game been created solely for the purpose of training but the uses of the game post-production have allowed it to be reflected back into reality. The video game's usage outside the context of the gaming situation, by which it is utilised as a device for PTSD sufferers that is controlled directly by the analyst, reflects the limited grasp the user holds back out of the game. It is the user's understanding of these familiar objects that allows for such usage outside of the gaming scenario. As explored above, there is something of a 'safe' layer for the sufferer, as despite the representations involved, the game reflected back at the user cannot adequately describe reality. In the PTSD sufferer's case, however, it is not reality they need to face but repressed traumatic events. Both concepts are already twisted beyond their original state, and therefore it no longer matters that the PTSD 'cure' represents fantasy, because so do the traumas as represented within the individual's mind. They are based on real events but the trauma and repression have warped them beyond coherent recognition.

Earlier in the chapter, I stated that Zizek had explored the subjective nature of violence. In video games we are met with a problem whereby this so-called 'violence' is not just subjective but also questionable in terms of presence. By way of an explanation, we need only look back at what has already been explored in the previous chapters. An element, once translated into the game, cannot contain the same elements as it did in reality. What is produced is an empty image, an image which may be filled with meaning. The reason we consider violence in games is not because they contain violence but because that is how those actions on the screen have gained meaning. Attempting to separate these actions from the perceived violence cannot be done, and therefore we are left with something that does not quite mean and yet cannot be renamed.

Each of the elements ascribed the term 'extreme' that I have discussed here differ immensely from the elements in the previous chapter. This is because they are not simply afforded meaning based on the intermediate context. Meaning is offered at a cultural level, from other media forms. For example, the way in which

violence is shaped in games appears to come more from the way it appears on television or in staged spectator sports (such as wrestling or boxing) than in real life. Similarly, sexuality in games has also lost its sense of reality due to media interpretations of what it is. However, where other media might retain some form of sexuality, it appears that sexuality in games has been emptied of itself. Finally, war games occupy a difficult scenario whereby they bridge the gap between reality and the virtual, where they can interact both at the levels of 'work' and 'play' whilst apparently occupying the same virtual space.

Each of these elements exists in a state of loss, because whilst on the surface they have the appearance of what they are supposed to represent, they are emptied of the very meaning that they are supposed to convey. Whilst this appears to be a troubling scenario, it could be stated that in actuality the user interprets and accepts these elements within the game as separate from their real life counterparts and utilises them freely in this knowledge.

7. Conclusion

This chapter has argued the separation of the game and user rather than the perceived proximity. Furthermore, I have explored the idea of this divide between the user and game as being beneficial to the layer of textuality upon the game. The action within the game is split between the user and the game, and within the context of the extreme this can benefit this textuality. Throughout the games that have been addressed here some similarities show. First, all games are distinctly similar processes that alter based on the textual aspect and the actions produced. Second, the location of the extreme appears similar in all cases: it is located at the point of the action in-game rather than in the locus of the user. Finally, the idea that these extremes are representative of their non-simulated acts is troubling as they are propelled through a layer of abstraction before reaching the game. This means that, whilst to an extent they retain resemblance of the actions on which they are based, the fact that the abstraction is through a medium of televised actions makes it difficult to call them the same process. Much like the familiar objects, they are hyperrealised and cannot be treated as their basis because they are emptied of meaning. Despite this, they are named the same which leads to studies treating them as the same element.

Finally, games take on a sense of space in which, much like Winnicott's play space, the user can be comfortable trying new things. We have established that games undergo an extremely similar premise. Games, however, simulate something that a user would not be able to try out, even in fantasy play. Similarly, the idea of a user playing a game which simulates situations that represent morally uncomfortable topics may really be based simply around the idea of this sameness in games and the ability to have the avatar do something that it would not be able to achieve under normal game structure.

Conclusion

This thesis dealt with the issues surrounding how we interact in the avatar-based game situation, what maintains this situation, and why we play in the first place. Video games have had a huge effect on the public's consciousness, in terms of their perceived positive and negative traits, and because of this they were studied here in a way that made no commitment as to their effects. Instead, this thesis addressed what, under normal circumstances, could be said to be occurring between the user and the game in terms of the structures at play between them, taking into account both social and personal spheres in order to produce a model that worked between the user and game.

Whilst my initial proposal highlighted an attempt to comprehend the function of violence within the game dynamic utilising a psychoanalytic framework, this became more of a background situation that could be made sense of through the structures I uncovered. I provided a means to understand elements of the game situation and in doing so provided a way of understanding what we are seeing when an act considered to be violent occurs on the screen. It is my belief that future research that attempts to tackle such acts within video games needs to address the structures at play underlying this complex dynamic. After all, if we are unable to define such acts as approximating what they are in reality, we need to reconfigure our thinking towards how to analyse them.

I also initially intended to cover all types of video games in this thesis, and to provide a model that understood all of them collectively. I amended this to avatar-based games because the sheer diversity of games is so wide that it became important to identify what was occurring in a specific (and popular) type of game before addressing more marginal examples. The construct of the intermediate can no doubt be applied to other types of video game, albeit in a slightly different way, but due to my focus on the bond between the user and game (and therefore the avatar), games that did not contain a specific avatar fell outside of the limits of what was intended in this thesis.

Both of the major theorists utilised within this thesis emerged from an exciting time, charged with important thinkers and exciting ideas. Both have been

acknowledged to have their critics, however. What Baudrillard and Lacan put forward was exciting, challenging, and new. Both had dedicated followers and critics in equal measure. Lacan's interpretation of psychoanalysis (itself a more marginal form of analysis) separated him from others in his field. Lacan's more linguistic, structural understanding of psychoanalysis placed him more in line with notions of philosophy than the scientific method that Freud wished it to become. Lacan himself was criticised for his approach to carrying out analysis, and this in turn led to his ejection from the International Psychoanalytic Association, as previously mentioned.

None of these elements situate Lacan as a theorist whose body of work should not be utilised. Indeed, Lacanian insight has been a popular methodology for understanding texts (for example films, as detailed in Chapter Three). Its use of structure and language allow for us to propel analysis deeper into a text, to uncover elements underlying its basis, and it is for this reason that it remains an important methodology for analysis. Psychoanalysis' understanding of the subject appears to correlate well with how we appear when we are at play, and it is for this reason, despite Lacan's critics, that I have made use of his theories.

Baudrillard also had his share of critics, particularly with his later works, and I have acknowledged that the lack of empiricism was important to individuals who disapproved of Baudrillard's writing, as he did not have a clear method of collecting data. Baudrillard interpreted what he saw, what he perceived. This type of analysis is not almost the most popular as it can be difficult to understand where these perspectives have emerged from.

Of course, in having critics, both Baudrillard and Lacan provided both insight and argument. They both refined their theories over time, often causing further controversy (as in the case of Baudrillard's interpretation of the Gulf War (Baudrillard 1995), which he famously stated did not exist due to media manipulation). My reasoning for making use of both theorists' work is that I feel they were the best match for the level of the bond I uncovered. Lacan's structural psychoanalysis enabled me to identify aspects of the bond and the situation of the user, whilst also providing context for the subject's layers of existence and desire. Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal allowed me to delve into the video game in and

of itself, as an external, in order to see it as more than itself, and to perceive how elements of it are translated to the user.

In utilising these theories, I feel that I have been able to gauge a more complete level of understanding of the structures surrounding the game situation. Whilst the subject may be split and retains a psychoanalytic situation, elements of the world surrounding it have changed, and making use of purely psychoanalytic reasoning fails to explain the presence of these elements as beyond reality. In combining these theories I was able to do that. Furthermore, it would be impossible for me to make use of the entire bodies of work relating to these theorists, so in narrowing the sphere of their use I have also used specific elements which relate well to the game scenario.

Video games are progressive. They work with the latest technological advancements in order to create worlds beyond our imaginations. In order to understand them, therefore, we must allow theories to progress with them. Let us not forget that we as human beings have been changed by the elements that surround us: our entire communicatory system has changed exponentially over even the past century, and it will continue to do so. The fact that these changes are taking place means that individuals have had to adapt, and this means we must develop our understanding towards appreciating how we work with relation to these new and exciting experiences. This also means expanding theories to acknowledge this change.

Whilst Lacanian psychoanalytic theory has been used with reference to Baudrillard's hyperreality and video games in the past (Jagodzinski 2004), it may at first seem difficult to merge the two theories. In the third chapter of this thesis I acknowledged the ways in which the two coincided, by exploring their similarities. Baudrillard’s works represent an approach which explores the external, the social, whilst psychoanalysis is primarily about the subject. We can perceive that the game world and our interaction with it logically represents a combination of these two elements. It is a logical continuation of this into a world in which we are increasingly embedded in the virtual, a world in which the idea of simulation is rife. The idea of the destruction of aspects of the psychoanalytic framework by which the world is understood in order to make way for something which infinitely flaunts itself as

bigger, brighter, better does make sense. Here, I make use of aspects of both theories in a way which enables them to both occupy their place within our understanding of the bond between these two worlds.

This bond is based around language, and therefore it was important to utilise theories that made use of a clear understanding of the essential nature of language. Both Lacanian and Baudrillard's theories exist as a part of this understanding, and were utilised together in order to strengthen our comprehension of the structure, its component parts, and the aspects it relates to. As established, both Lacan and Baudrillard emerged from a French tradition of philosophy which enabled thinkers to look beyond the modern.

The evidence for this notion exists when we observe that in both Baudrillard's and Lacan's works there is a sense of emptiness, of fragmentation. In Lacan's work, this fragmentation is the subject's, for Baudrillard it was the inability for that which was being rendered to compare to the original, and its fervent ability to overtake or replace the original. In the thesis, I related the theorists' perceptions of subject and object in order to describe how it was that they could be placed together. The idea of the gaze, and the idea that something can be perceived to be returning one's look, is also important to our situation when placed before a game. Indeed, a game might appear to return our look, but it does so from the perspective of already being beyond reality.

Fred Botting believes that postmodernity fails to escape the psychoanalytic framework, stating that "The ramifications of psychoanalytic frameworks are important for accounts of the hyper-real or aestheticized form of contemporary culture and subjectivity; they are, moreover, important for examining the ideological investments, the cultural fantasies, of positions analyzing postmodernity." (2001:88). Botting's consideration is that Baudrillard's writings deal with "a reality of images, signs and simulations beyond the control and comprehension of any particular subject" leading to "plural and decentred selves" (2001:88). In Lacanian theory, we are dealing with a subject. With Baudrillard's work, that subject is hidden. Baudrillard addressed the scenario of the object, not the subject. Yet in being absent, the subject calls itself into question. Video games draw upon this idea of being called into question, they represent a space of excess, and yet this level of excess is

established at the point of the subject. In regarding the subject in this postmodern environment, we can perceive the tensions expressed in the already fragmentary self. Indeed, Mark Fisher comments on a similar process in the film *Basic Instinct 2* "The fantasies of the characters, the characters as fantasies, become like free-floating deliria unmoored from any individual psychological location." (2007:81). In a world in which the virtual assigns itself such a large part, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand how the subject processes without the refinement of postmodernity.

Furthermore, when we acknowledge the object in this situation, we are not specifically speaking of the psychoanalytic object, for if the game is a basis by which we stave off desire, the very objects within it exist beyond the realms of psychoanalytic fantasy. Objects in the game cannot be psychoanalytic in this way because they expand beyond the locus of desire.

I present these two theoretical structures in different ways with relation to how aspects of the video game situation are emptied and filled with meaning. With consideration to this, I feel that Baudrillard's theories are ideal for describing the difference between the game and virtual reality situation. Within this, the hyperreal element is made up in part from the unrealistic scenario that a user can be initiated into, and in part with the 'real' elements that represent the scenario and characters. Furthermore, immersion in a video game is in part an immersion into the level of the fictional. This means that the objects and actions within the game may remain empty of meaning for the user. However, much meaning comes from the external, and this places it in a position for a different level of understanding. This placement of meaning, however, is all it can ever be. These items remain empty, and it is up to the intermediate structure to maintain this implication of meaning. This means that they cannot not be empty, for they must be interpretable for each individual user.

The merging of these two theories enables a greater comprehension of the video game dynamic, including that of the user's relation to the avatar and the game space surrounding it. In gaining an understanding of the intermediary bonds formed between the user and the game, we can appreciate that much of the information that the game projects onto the user is warped from aspects of reality. From this we might infer that what the game offers us is not meaning in and of itself but our own

warped projection. Even when meaning is directed from the game to the user, it has already come from the external in the first place. They are the point of understanding, and therefore regardless of what the game appears to show us, it can only be empty without the user and therefore the intermediate.

One might consider this construct of the intermediate as a connection between two theories, in the same way as it connects the user to the virtual. It is the connective branch of my theory, a method of allowing an object to take on the appearance of something it is not quite, through the insight of the user.

The basis for tackling the video game dynamic from a more structural perspective was to fill a niche into which not a great deal of research falls. In exposing the structure of this bond, I have contributed to the field a dynamic which can be utilised as a means to understand underlying processes and therefore assist in furthering other types of research. The limitations of this particular study are that, because it is the structures comprising the user/game interface that are being addressed, the user is unable to be addressed here as a distinct player. By this, I mean that this approach does not allow for the player as an individual to be acknowledged. It is my hope, however, that this is the type of framework that will work alongside studies which favour player input and motivation. An understanding of both factors would allow for a more complete framework of this type of game situation.

During this study, I felt that it was important to acknowledge video games as separate from other types of structured play. This is due to their embedding of the user into a complex world that is addressed through the means of visual, auditory, and control mechanisms. Whilst games of all varieties feature a rule-based system that the individual must accept in order to commence play, the types of rules that a user of a video game is subject to are both rigorous and external. The way in which the user must be situated before the screen, for example, features as part of this distinct dynamic and enables the user to proceed with a deep and immersive experience quite unlike any other they might have experienced. Further to this, they are also subject to social rule systems, for instance in online play, whereby groups of users must play together in order to achieve certain goals. The user of a video game must utilise so many different sensory components in order to both make sense of

and progress within the game world. Video games require the user to take on certain roles, and to be able to switch between them depending on the game. Therefore, whilst video games borrow freely from other types of play experience, what they offer the user remains distinct.

The primary conclusion of this study is that games differ not just from other media, including other screen-based media (though they do share similarities), but also from reality. This thesis has shown them as worthy of study independent of these other forms and has contributed to our understanding not just of games but of their relation to the user. Because the user is an essential element of the game (for it must be played in order for it to obtain its full status as a game), acknowledging this bond allows us to perceive elements such as the user's status and ability to comprehend aspects of the game with relation to their own unique insights. This means that, whilst this thesis generalises the status of the bond, there is an understanding that each user stands in a somewhat unique setting. It is not what the bond is that differs but what the user brings to it that changes its status. The user may have specific individual feelings towards elements covered within the game. This is something they bring to the game, and therefore each individual user's experience with one game will be different, because they are taking something different from it.

Naturally, this means that the structures could be more refined based on individual user experience. Conducting qualitative research with individuals at play remains a potential avenue for grasping how the bond affects people as individuals rather than as the more generalised 'user' state that I have referred to here. Of course, there are also many different types of games, many of which were alluded to here. However, treating them as individual components for study would in future refine understanding of the player's bond with the game. My choice to observe the processes as I have in this thesis allowed me to identify the overarching concepts controlling the game dynamic, and will provide me with a stable base on which to draw out individual components of games and users in future studies.

The central construct that I introduced in this thesis was that of the intermediate ego, a construct that is representative of the user's relation to the video game. It is based around the construct of the ego as mediator and allows for the user to play

without fear of conflict between the reality and the virtual. Because of this perceived connection, and drawing on the ideas of the Mirror Stage and the ideal, the user cannot only play but also maintain their link with and interest in the game during times when they are not at play.

The importance of this dynamic, therefore, is that the user is involved in a process of complexity that must therefore adapt to what is to come in the future of gaming. In the appendix, I look at some of the changes that are occurring in line with recent adaptations to technology. These changes, such as the introduction of three-dimensional technology, are sure to affect both the location of the user at play and also the way in which they play. Whilst I would consider that in future the status of the intermediate bond will change somewhat, the basic principle of how it works when the user is at play even in unusual dynamics should still be present. In order to maintain a healthy play experience, the user must present something to the game and make use of the cues translated across the gap between the user and the screen.

I felt it necessary to explore exactly how these processes are translated into the game itself, because if they are a notable part of the game scenario they must bring something to the dynamic. This led me to explore the concept of hyperreality. In turn, this assisted me in the realisation that both objects and acts may be translated into or reflected back from the game space while the user is at play, and that these objects and acts are often understood based on their origins in reality. This is further complicated, however, when the basis of the act or the object represented and understood by the user is one that has already been perceived through the medium of the screen (for example, televised violence cannot adequately represent real violence and therefore when it is translated across it has already been adapted from a secondary source). This meant that in order to fully understand extreme acts such as sexuality or violence, we must first realise how large an impact the screen has already had on warping these acts out of context.

The idea that we are already beyond the point of realism in games, and that games are incapable of rendering reality also returns us to the notion of the gaze, for it allows us to see the impact of the screen as double mirror. In this case, the ‘original’ on which the reflected image is based is not real, either. It is the image of a

fake, one which has some resemblance to something in reality but is unable to adequately represent it.

Thus, games retain their status as fake, not as imitations but as interpretations. Their representative capacity is high but they are not reflecting reality. So much of what they reflect is based upon the user's own understanding of what is occurring around them, after all. To situate games as an element in their own right is essential, therefore, to our understanding of them. We must separate them from the reality that they borrow elements from in order to represent them as both familiar and strange. In doing so, we can begin to look beyond the idea that, for example, the user is repeating violent acts. By looking beyond the game as a process of imitation of acts not freely condoned in reality, we can begin to perceive what is really occurring at the point of interaction. The game is not reality, nor is it a reflection of it. It is only at this point of separation that we can begin to ask ourselves what it is that the game achieves, and what the user gains (or loses) from playing it.

Video games are based upon changes in technology, and borrow from a number of different recent innovations, which makes them adaptive. Some control mechanisms, for example, have recently begun to move away from the common handheld controller (the configurations of which change over time, too) towards motion-sensitive controls, touch screens, and motion tracking (as outlined in the appendix). The user's link to the controller is an important one and one which was returned to throughout the thesis because of this. Games developers are quickly adapting to new technologies, and this means that the construct of the intermediate must also be able to be adapted in order to factor in these changes in technology. How we interact with games will undoubtedly have shifted exponentially in the space of another decade, and thus we need to be able to adapt our theories to progress with these changes.

Finally, this thesis has addressed the very structure of the video game situation, a place that I feel is at the very heart of our potential for understanding what is occurring. This thesis has exposed a skeletal structure which I hope may be utilised for further studies in future. During the course of the thesis, both video games and the research focused on them have moved on. What I have proposed is something that stands somewhat outside of this and presents theories that suggest that we

begin to discard certain beliefs about what video games do in order to observe what they can achieve. Video games are a popular and in many ways positive tool of creativity and exploration, yet their uses are currently somewhat confined due to their status, which limits them. The power of play is not to be underestimated, and what we choose to do with the tools we have at our disposal in order to present them in fresh and innovative ways in future is up to how we understand this potential.

Appendix - The Future of Games

During the course of this thesis I dealt with the rich and complex dynamic of the user when structured in relation to the avatar-based game situation. This provided me with not only a means by which to locate the user during the course of play but also to observe the user's relationship with the game both during play and in the time during which the user is not at play. This exposed an important knowledge that not only frames the particular details of the play situation but also allows us a basic framework that has the potential to be utilised in more direct studies relating to the user.

This part of the thesis forms an afterthought to the main aspects that have been dealt with throughout, as it deals with aspects outside of the main dynamic. In particular, I look at the future of games and the directions aspects might be taking. This is dealt with by alluding to the concepts already introduced in the main body of the thesis.

This is not intended as an all-inclusive report on what form the future of video games might take, but it does deal with some important components of games and some aspects that have entered the game situation historically. In this appendix, I deal with cutscenes within games, virtual reality, movement-based control systems (such as the recent Xbox 360 Kinect), 3D technology, and the role of the internet as a mechanism relating to the game dynamic. This helps me to address the area surrounding the game rather than the bond between the user and the game in and of itself. Whilst I speculate here on the role of the intermediate process to the game, I do not specifically define anything new about said bond.

All of the prior mentioned elements are either aspects that will continue to change throughout the course of the lifetime of video games as a genre, aspects which have failed to become a part of the medium, or aspects that may or may not change the ways in which games develop. It is important to mention that the development of video games runs alongside developments in technology, and that there is an attitude of progress amongst individuals when they perceive the latest technology being utilised in the creation or rendition of a video game.

During the course of the thesis, I have drawn on ideas of the user-controller dynamic. In Chapters Four and Five, I placed this in reference to Baudrillard's work

and established the controller as a split in the simulacrum, whereby the locus of control cannot only remain with the user. Here I continue to deal with the controller's role, but with reference to both the present and future of modern video games. This aids our understanding of the role of the user-game dynamic, whilst also allowing us to assess both its shape and importance in the future. I address not only current elements that are coming to the fore and how they are structured with relation to this bond, but also elements which have failed to become a part of this in the past.

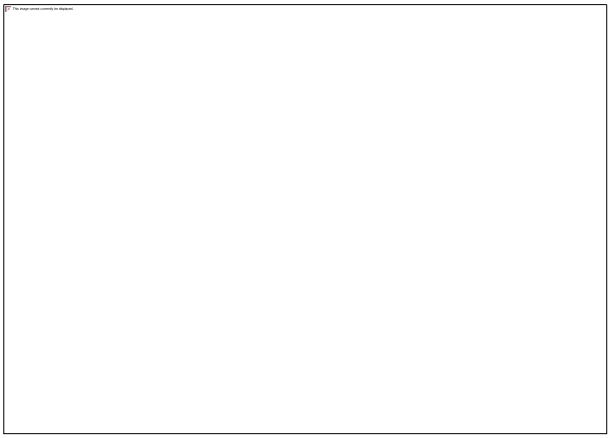
Therefore, this appendix represents a look at the developments surrounding games, and the future of gaming. In addressing the structural elements of the game for both contemporary play and the elements within that which may well expand into new and exciting ways to play in the future, I am attempting to fully address the bond between the user and the game. In order to further explore this bond, it is important to address how the future of gaming might impact how it works, whilst also taking into account past failures that have previously been considered to be the next element when it comes to video games. Whilst not essential for our understanding of the elements previously addressed in the main body of the thesis, this provides deeper examples and abstractions on the user/game dynamic already presented, and therefore will enable a better understanding of what is occurring around games in the current climate.

Throughout the years since gaming began, there have been many ventures into different territories. Not only have these ventures encouraged a wider demographic of individuals to begin playing video games but they have also acted in shaping what video games are today. The introduction of cinematics into video games in the 1980s heralded a new era for video games. Not only could it provide more details to the story of the game but it could also facilitate the connection between the user and avatar in a much faster way. They were also present to provide the user with something to do whilst their control was limited, such as when the game was loading a new level. Klevjer theorises that "A cutscene does not cut off gameplay. It is an integral part of the configurative experience. Even if the player is denied any active input, this does not mean that the ergodic experience and effort is paused. A

cutscene is never truly 'cinematic', no matter how poorly implemented it may be." (Klevjer 2002). This is all a good basis for understanding cutscenes, for it is not as though they actually pause gameplay: the game continues to progress. More, the cutscene is a form of progression, and a form of reward for the user. Klevjer finishes here with the idea of the cutscene not being truly cinematic, which may well be the case. However, in its borrowing heavily from film, we can perceive where it is that the impressive and lengthy cutscenes we see in games such as Konami's *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) series have emerged from.

Namco's 1980 arcade classic *Pac-Man* is credited as the first game to include cutscenes. *Pac-Man* is a game in which the user plays as a yellow crescent which must traverse the increasingly frantic maze of the game in order to collect pellets. In order to collect the optimum quantity of pellets and progress through the level, the pizza-shaped hero must also avoid ghosts. In order to do this, it might collect power-ups and devour said ghosts (who must then return to the centre) or avoid them. Contact with a ghost without a power-up causes Pac-Man to lose a life.

If a level is successfully completed, the user is sometimes treated to a comedy cutscene involving Pac-Man and the ghosts chasing one another, as pictured. This cutscene breaks up the action of the game and allows the user chance to rest between levels. It also provides the game and the characters with a little more personality, something which one would expect would reinforce the link between the user and the game.



The first cutscene from *Pac-Man*, featuring a ghost chasing the aforementioned hero.

Pac-Man is an example of a game that has not simply done something first but has permeated popular culture to the point of being considered to be one of gaming's most recognisable characters. The success of the game does not just reside with one system, either. *Pac-Man* has been ported across to multiple platforms, and countless remakes and spin-offs exist for it. Its success as a game has been phenomenal.

The cutscenes in *Pac-Man*, however, are relatively basic. If we compare them to cutscenes for most modern games, we might barely regard the brief interludes between levels in *Pac-Man* as cutscenes at all. This is because the expectation towards cutscenes in games has changed. This is because they have become a part of the game, a way to progress the story whilst also offering the player some level of reward.

Gradually, cutscenes in games became commonplace, and many games utilised them in a way that showcased beautiful animation, in stark contrast with the more limited graphics of the game. Consoles were capable of playing back video, so whilst the visuals of the gameplay itself were limited, games developers saw no reason why the cutscenes should be too. This provided the user with a rich environment, particularly in fantasy games such as the *Final Fantasy* series, where exposing the user to this environment was key to the user spending numerous hours fighting monsters in a bid to continue the storyline.

Final Fantasy VII (1997) is arguably one of the most popular in the franchise and one that I wish to focus on due to its utilisation of lengthy pre-rendered cutscenes. Such cutscenes are known as FMVs (full motion videos). *Final Fantasy VII* is a fantasy role-playing game where the user finds that they are playing as Cloud, an individual with previous experience in the military, who finds himself part of a plot to defeat Sephiroth. Sephiroth is an individual with mysterious power, and throughout the game we learn of Cloud's previous connections with both him and with Zack, another individual from his past. As we progress through the game, Cloud must face many challenges, including a sequence which takes place within his head whereby he must come to terms with both himself and his own past.

The importance of the latter part of the description is that, like many player-characters, Cloud is silent. This often makes it easier for the player to develop a

structured relationship with the game as the avatar's personality is flexible. The game facilitates this through the use of multiple choice questions throughout the game, whereby another character might ask Cloud a question and the user chooses an answer based upon how they deem Cloud should act in that scenario. This strengthens the intermediary bond between the user and the avatar.

The use of cutscenes in the game provides it with a cinematic edge, and with it an element of cinematic authenticity. By this, I mean it adds a layer borrowed from cinema to the dialogue of the user/game dynamic, although it does situate one in the same space as one would be when viewing a film. In doing so, elements of the game change. In this example, it is no longer the case that cutscenes utilise graphics from the game itself: they improve on them. Whilst not realistic, they show the characters in a closer approximation of what they are supposed to look like in the game, thus offering the user a better and more rounded view of both the characters and the environment.

However, the cutscene also removes action from the user. This combined with the use of cutscenes which render the characters differently to the actions in the game provides the user with a space of empty action. Borrowing these elements from cinema highlights the user's inability to change the action on the screen and serves to remind the user of the linear nature of the game itself.

Modern advances in graphical capabilities of games machines mean that, whilst cutscenes remain prevalent, they can be much more easily situated within the action of the game. Control is removed from the user, but often only for a short time, and usually within the game's graphical mechanics. Therefore, one may have control returned at any point (or indeed never have it taken away in the first place). This removes the element of return whereby a user is separated from play through the empty action, and adds consistency to the text of the game. An element that has been taken from another visual medium has been utilised by video games and its effects altered.

This can easily be perceived in many modern games. The cinematic element is deliberately reminiscent of the cinema, and was (I believe) initially intended to directly imitate and provide the feeling of watching a film. However, it is fast becoming apparent that this mimicry only works to a certain level. Beyond that, it

can be seen that games are beginning to forge their own meaning in such cinematics. Game cutscenes are no longer a direct mimicry of the cinema, but are beginning to become something quite different.

To cite a more contemporary example, *Portal 2* (2011) contains a minimal quantity of cutscenes. *Portal 2* is a puzzle-based adventure in which the player-character Chell must escape from the unscrupulous gaze of a crazed artificial intelligence who is out to kill her. In order to do so, Chell equips a Portal Gun, which enables her to manipulate passages through space and gain access to new areas within the game.

Both *Portal* games are interesting at the level of cutscenes, because the game tends to not make use of video in order to show the user elements of the game. Rather, it uses the space in the game. Said space is therefore accessible to the user through the use of modifications and clever tricks. Secret rooms would be a good example of this. There is a hidden room in *Portal 2* where Chell will be able to observe some of the enemies of the game (turrets – small tripods with laser beams) 'singing'. This is all within the game, there is no removal of the user from the gameplay in order to see these elements at work. In fact, the user must manipulate the gameplay itself in order to see these elements occurring. Even the first scene of the game involves Chell having to perform actions whilst around her the scenery is shifting into place. This occurs frequently throughout the game, and provides the user with a feeling that everything around them is happening in real time. Within the game's circumstances, it is.

This is a case where there is a silent first-person avatar (Chell) and no cutscenes, meaning that the user can relate quickly to the situation and remain occupied with what is occurring around them without being removed from it. The cutscene model is replaced with a constant audio track: guidance from an artificial intelligence by the name of Wheatley for the first part of the game. This audio track provides the user with the backstory and what is occurring within the story of the game without removing them from it.

Of course, all of the elements discussed here borrow from other technology. Games in themselves are a collection of elements from other media which have been brought together, which may be why their transition between different modes

of accessibility has been so smooth. Games are a composite. What we are beginning to see is that this composite is the entity that is video gaming, a creature that is always reforming due to changes in technology and other innovations. Whilst there are advances in technology, video games will never become static, because there is so much more they can do.

Not all elements that have been utilised in video games have been as successful as the cutscene. Virtual reality, the ability to create projections of altered realities, was approached as a potential idea for furthering development of video games in the 1990s. The aim of virtual reality in terms of video games was furthering immersion of the user. Virtual reality would remove the need for the user to be able to take note of the physical controller and indeed their actual surroundings. The notion of the screen would disappear, creating an entirely new dynamic through which the user could communicate.

In order to access virtual reality, users typically wear a visor that covers the eyes and ears. Special gloves or body suits may be worn which simulate the environment one will occupy. Once put together, the user is engaged in an altogether different environment in which they become their own avatar. The user can often move around freely in the environment whilst performing various actions. The capabilities of the suit can be improved to encompass elements such as touch, taste and smell, thus mimicking a realistic environment.

Realistically, the virtual reality of the 1990s was a difficult rendering of an impressive technology that posed a great deal of potential, not simply to video games, but to psychological treatments and combat situations too. To place a user in a place whereby their actual physical senses tricked them into the belief that they were there, where the feedback from their movement worked in harmony with the system surrounding them, is difficult. Psychically, it more realistically renders the aforementioned 'between worlds' dialogue than contemporary video games. Yet, is it possible that virtual reality takes it further than this?

In the late 1980s, a television show named *Knightmare* was broadcast. *Knightmare* made use of computer generated effects and the idea of a quest in order to create something that appeared rather like a video game. *Knightmare* was

situated in a fantasy environment, in which the adventurer was forced to wear a helmet which effectively blinded them. They had three friends who assisted them on their quest, acting as their eyes and helping them to solve riddles.

Of course, this is something of a reversal of what virtual reality was supposed to do. In *Knightmare*, the individual who was wandering through the dangerous places could not see what it was that they were avoiding, for example. It was up to the other members of the team to create the virtual for them and guide them through it. The three assisting team members were situated before a screen on which they could view the individual and also the fantasy backdrop which had been created. Obviously, in reality, the individual was simply wandering around a room. Blinding them to what was actually there was an ideal way of creating a suspension of disbelief in all parties. Watching the show gives the viewer a real sense of the urgency at which the parties acted, showing that they were willing to be a part of the story.

Despite the relatively poor computer graphics and the inability to use actual virtual reality, what *Knightmare* did was extremely important and shows how virtual reality works. The members of the team, the guides, act as the appendages of the individual. This disqualifies the problems faced by virtual reality with regards to slow feedback between the user and the platform.

This process of television shows creating a world that one might consider fantastical or virtual continued throughout the 1990s and included such classics as *The Crystal Maze* (1990). Others that attempted to encompass virtual reality elements included 1993's *Cyberzone*, in which contestants competed in various virtual reality simulated scenarios. However, "This is a classic example of trying to utilise a technology in a TV show miles too early. Certainly *Cyberzone* was without doubt the world's first virtual reality game show. However, it may well have done more harm to future VR projects than good." (ukgameshows.com).

Virtual reality simulations negate the need for both a controller and an avatar. This alters the user/game dynamic presented in this thesis immeasurably. In virtual reality, the avatar is not required, simply because the user stands in the place of the avatar. Psychoanalytically this is a cause for concern. Not only is the framed dynamic absent, but the lack of controller and avatar mean that the user stands in a perverse

space: they stand in the perceived location of the lost object.

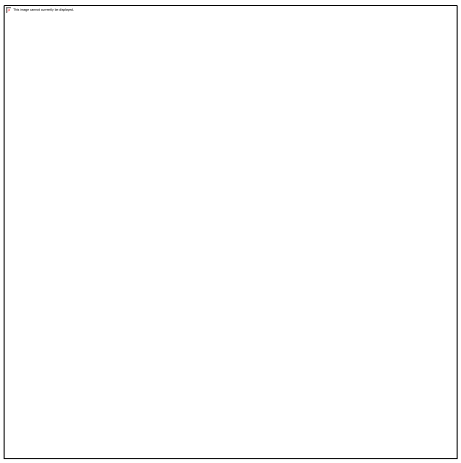
Virtual reality is utilised within the gaming mechanic, however. The methods of its use differ immensely from the usual gaming dynamic. For example, virtual reality simulators have been utilised to help war veterans on their return from the war (Science Daily 2011), and as a therapeutic model for treatment of a number of different conditions, for instance, stress, burns, and phobias. Virtual reality has also been used to research brain-induced controls that can be fed into wheelchairs and such devices. Indeed, it seems that virtual reality may make a return to the world of video games, but at what cost to the player? The separation between worlds has long been the screen, something which has maintained the engagement level of games, but might be stated to have hindered their progress in terms of the user engaging purely on the level of the virtual. Because this creates the problem of the loss of both the control system and the avatar, it also represents the intermediate herein described in crisis.

Numerous recent examples of attempts to remove the controller as an object towards immersion in the game have existed, with limited success. In 2008, BBC News reported about a headset that would allow the user to play a video game utilising their brain waves alone. Along with detecting expressions of the user, the headset "can also read emotions of players and translate those to the virtual world." (Waters 2008). The technology is impressive and borrows from research into the use of EEG (electroencephalography), where electrodes read electrical activity in the brain. Here the output is used for controlling specific practices within the video game.

The company that produced the aforementioned headset, Emotiv, is continuing to research and refine the technology, though it is unclear as to how much the user is able to process simply with the power of their mind at this stage. The difficulty with any such device is surely clarity (which one achieves with the controller. This poses a different problem when attempting to focus thoughts in order to control the game). However, the utilisation of something that acts for the user in place of a controller is something that numerous developers have been looking at recently, with examples such as the Xbox 360 Kinect system.

The 'neuro headset' is another example of video games as an industry taking on

other forms of technology in order to proceed in another direction. In this instance, the use of medical technology has created an exciting new interface for the user to be at play with.



A promotional photograph of Emotiv's current EPOC neuroheadset.

Yet, what is the fascination? So much money goes into the research and development of items to provide users with more interesting ways to experience the world presented to them when they are at play. Video games, much like the play scenario itself, are constantly claiming new technology in order to attempt to create a more viable virtual world. Play occurs from a process of creating structure using what one has around one at the time, and this is what video games development is almost unintentionally mimicking. Is work mimicking play? Perhaps, for as we see, use of virtual reality by companies involves placing the user in a space extremely similar to the gaming dynamic.

NASA is interested in the technology now that computers are becoming powerful enough to be able to add justice to the concept, meaning that the delay between user input and action should be minimal too. Interestingly, NASA stated that "One study showed that people wearing VR helmets like to glance down and see their own virtual body. It helps "ground them" in the simulation. And the body should be correct: arms, legs, torso; male for men; female for women." (NASA 2004). This shows a desire in the user to further propel the use of virtual reality away from the idea of it being 'just' a game. Realism is important.

Although NASA would not be utilising the game dynamic in combination with

virtual reality, problems in its use still arise. As mentioned earlier, delays between user input and virtual action can cause problems, and have been cited to leave the user feeling nauseous and disorientated after use. Home use of such equipment is unlikely to be more successful at suppressing this urge. The fact that the user physically feels sick after utilising the equipment is enough to question what is occurring psychologically when the user is within the virtual world at this time.

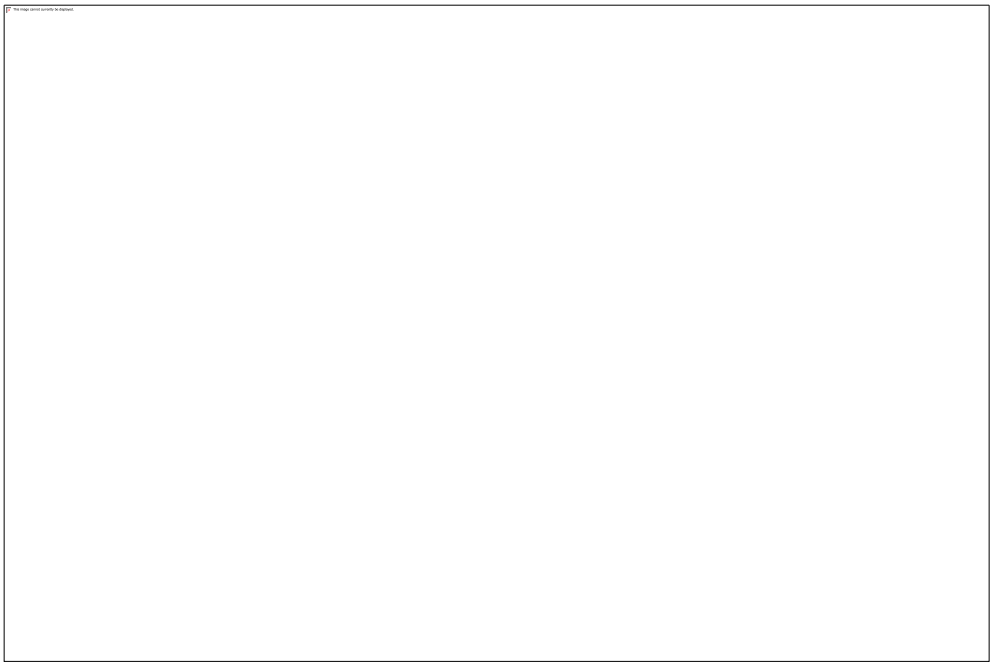
Much previous virtual reality was based around the idea of the user directly producing the action, which would then be replicated in the virtual medium. This put emphasis on the physical element, of direct input of actions. However, some current research deals with the brain bypassing the body and controlling the action through the detection of changes in brainwaves. Within video games, this concept eliminates the need for action, and again destroys the physicality of the controlling mechanism. In contemporary games, we are witnessing the opposite of this variety of control, whereby the controller might be motion-controlled or entirely absent. The physicality of the user is fast becoming paramount to some games.

Utilising the physicality of the user has effects which are in some ways extremely close and in others distant from the notion of virtual reality. Certainly, early endeavours to draw the two together utilised the user's physical body, but as above mentioned much current work on virtual reality has moved away from this.

A recent device has emerged as an extension to the Xbox 360 games console. Said device is called the 'Kinect' and consists of an auto-focussing camera on a rotating axis. Advertisements for the Kinect state that the user is the controller. This appears to bring the user into a psychological space closer to the screen. The Kinect is not simply a camera: it also utilises the software on the Xbox 360 to enable it to map the image of the user onto the screen. In order to achieve this accurately enough for said image to be used in the game, the camera generates light that is close to infra-red on the spectrum. Using this, the Kinect accurately maps the individual to the screen. Because there is a motion sensor, the software also recognises the limbs, so it can translate movement to the screen as well. Therefore, a game in which one is dancing can be more accurately captured without the need for the intermediate controlling device. Indeed, as website Gadget Lab identifies,

“Kinect is something different. It’s communal, continuous and general: a Natural User Interface (or NUI) for multimedia, rather than a GUI for gaming” (Carmody 2010). Kinect maps the avatar and utilises the physical movements of the user in order to control the game.

Of course, the Kinect is not the first camera device to enhance a game experience. In 2003, Sony’s EyeToy was released for Playstation2. The EyeToy came bundled with a selection of mini-games that allowed the user the experience of washing windows and other mini games. The camera feature effectively worked as a webcam and mapped the user into the game (see below).



This reliance on how the user actually moves does alter the user/game dynamic, but not in such a profound way as the use of virtual reality might. The use of the physical body during gameplay alters the course of the action. The action is only translated insomuch as the user is mapped in the first place. The user and controlling mechanism are fused, and this is directly translated into the action on the screen. This gives way for the chance to bring the user much closer to the action. Earlier I mentioned the need for specific games to decentre the user from being in the midst of the action, and I referenced games in which one plays a god as a good example of this dynamic. In games compatible with the Kinect, there is a great deal of movement and action from the characters. By fusing the user with the controller,

this action is able to be utilised at its purest level: before the control has been translated by the user. Obviously this greatly effects the immersion level that the game holds over the user, but it also limits the time of play by forcing users to physically exert themselves.

The Nintendo Wii was one of the first consoles to popularise the idea of fitness being played in a game dynamic. With the release of the Wii came a whole selection of new and innovative games which, whilst they did use a controller, asked that the user stood up for the duration of the game. This appeared as a direct mimicry of sports, for example. On one of the launch games, *Wii Sports* (2006), players were actively encouraged to stand up and imitate the actual sport being played. The controller itself is wireless and, in conjunction with a sensor bar that tracks the movement of the player, allows for the movement to be translated to the screen. This is particularly effective in sports games, but has also been utilised in other types of game. The controller is built in such a way that attachments can be used but the controller itself is the only part actually required for play. For example, one might play a racing game, steering by turning the controller. However, one could also purchase a plastic fitting that goes around the controller in the shape of a wheel. Said addition to the controller allows for a smoother emulation of the action expected by the game. Similarly, other additions exist, such as guns and golf clubs. All are relatively inexpensive due to them simply being plastic covers for the controller that can convert it into anything.

This process of conversion is interesting. It means that, rather than plugging in a different type of controller, the user only needs use one. However, because of the accessible nature of said unit, the user can transform said controller into any other form within the user space. In turn, the actions between the user and game space reflect off one another. The user is specifically holding a controller, which is where it differs from such advances as the Kinect. However, the movement of said controller (and therefore the movement of the user) is an important aspect of what controls the action within the game. The user's physical presence, once again, must be used for the purpose of the game.

Further to this, controllers can be obtained for most home consoles which allow the user the ability to interact with the game through the transformation of said

controller into game space. These controllers include gun controllers, racing wheels, snowboards, skateboards, and dance mats.

Dance mats are a peripheral that are based in the arcade but were so popular that they became a staple for home use also. Dance mats consist of four squares which the user must jump on to match the arrows marching up the screen in increasingly difficult formats, usually to the sound of dance music and a man shouting about how well/badly they are doing. Dancing games are so popular that international competitions take place, thus shifting the idea of the dance game from an area of 'play' into an area of 'work'.

Again, the peripheral makes use of the user's body and ability to move, as opposed to their ability to press buttons on a control pad. This is representative of a different dynamic, because rather than it being about simple hand-eye coordination and the potential for the feeling of mastery, dancing games also require a level of fitness. A user must be in a different space in order to play a game whose action requires active movement from the user, for the degree of movement expected can only proceed for a certain period of time (something that is not a danger for standard controller input games). This presents an element of the casual games market: casual games are intended to be played and discarded: the intermediate space for said game remains at the same level throughout normal play. Investment in such a game emerges from the more physical, social, and competitive challenges that are presented, rather than the immersion level of the game in itself.

Other types of user-based activations within games include elements such as speech. With speech-activated elements in games, the user is required to speak into a microphone. The game will then respond depending on the level of understanding it has gained from what has been said. The problem with such a feat is providing the artificial intelligence of the game with enough of a vocabulary to 'comprehend' what the user has said.

In 1999, a game called *Seaman* was released for the Sega Dreamcast. In *Seaman*, the user was provided with a vivarium which the user had to keep oxygenated and heated to keep Seaman (a fish) alive. The user also had to be invested in the care of their fish, which would grow on a daily basis, and return each day. If they failed to, the fish would die. The Seaman consisted of, for the most part, a fish's body and a

relatively expressive human face. The Seaman also had various stages of its evolution to proceed through, beginning as a parasitic organism, moving through a stage of devouring its siblings, to the point where there were two left. The two final Seamen produced an egg which hatched into Frogman. At this point in time, the journey was over and the player had to release Frogman into the wild.

Throughout the game, there are key elements which allow Seaman to grow. These consist of answering questions posed by Seaman through the microphone. Therefore, even though the user must make use of the controller (the microphone inputs into the controller as well), the microphone element is what progresses the text of the game.

Seaman was never released in the UK, although an English-language version was available in the USA. In said version, Seaman was voiced by Leonard Nemoy. The progression element, as above mentioned, was based upon the user successfully answering all of the questions posed (after Seaman had learned to talk). Said questions began as asking the user their name and date of birth, along with other basic information. Questions were generally regarding the user, but occasionally Seaman would ask something about politics. The user would have to answer slowly and in one word answers the majority of the time to allow for the game to process the words stated against the limited vocabulary assigned to the engine. Often, words would be misinterpreted, which could be frustrating for the player because they would have to repeat themselves multiple times throughout the game in order to enable some registry of understanding from the game.

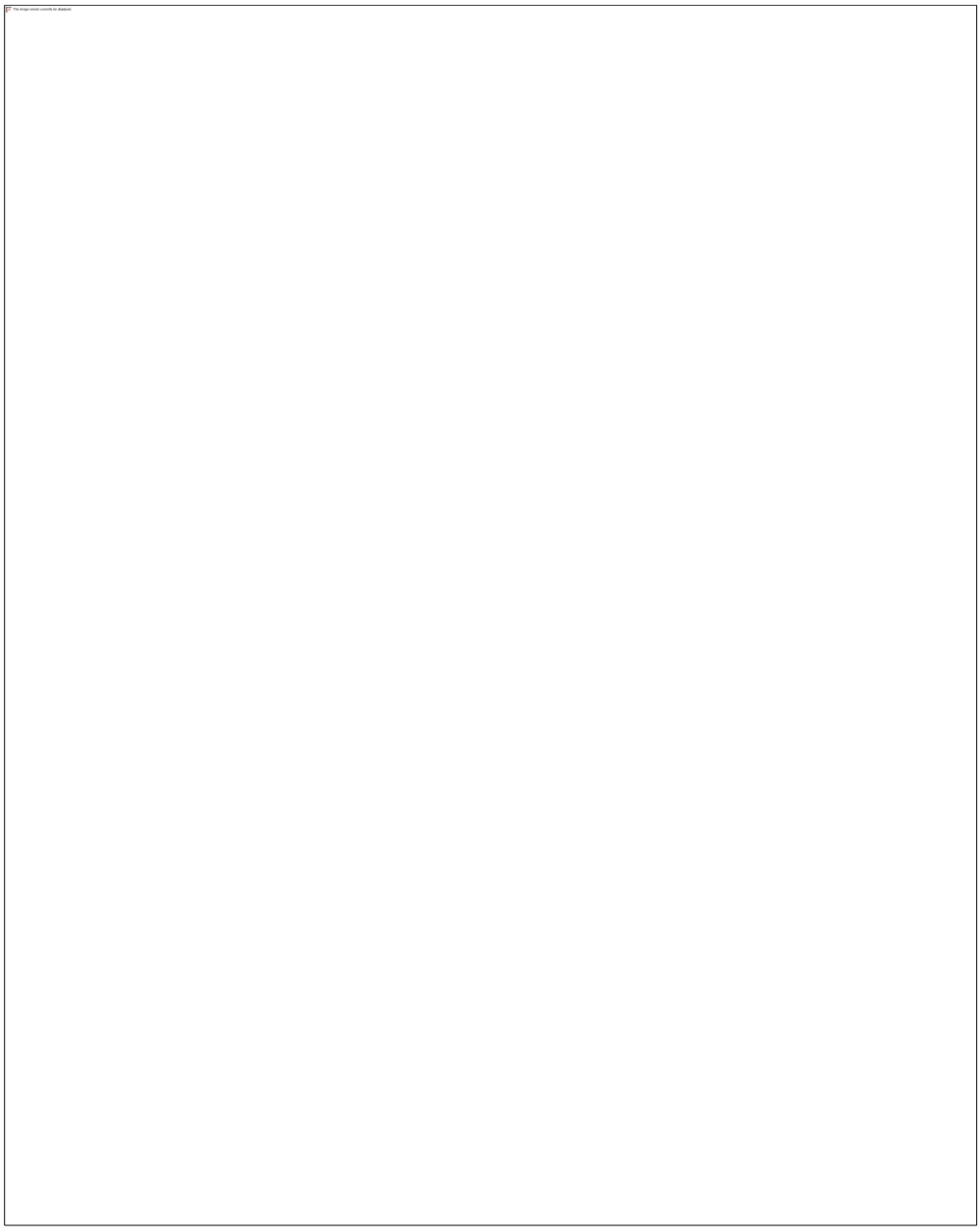
Despite the obvious flaws in the system, we can perceive that the introduction of voice activation within the virtual world is another method of providing the user with some freedom. This freedom does not necessarily come free of a standard control system, but runs alongside it and allows the user to be a part of an illusion of comprehension. If the game can ‘understand’ what is said and respond accordingly, this makes for a very different play experience for the user. It creates an investment for the user. This level of dialogue is not common even in modern games. However, due to the addition of online multiplayer, users often utilise headsets so that they may speak with the other members of their team during play.

This provides a similar capacity of feedback for, even though this does not

remove the controller from the dynamic, speaking to other users who are undergoing the same process should be considered as beneficial to the immersion level of the game. Based on this, something of a shared, a collective, intermediate ego would be born. Each user is experiencing the game in their own way, and yet the external monologue of experience is being shared. Thus the intermediate of one user begins to impact on that of another user who could be sitting hundreds of miles from them. Headsets do not remove the controller or the locus of action, but they do add a social element, one which provides the user with an extra level of experience. Individuals experiencing the same game, often in completely different ways, may begin to change one another's experiences of the same game through the use of said device.

Three-dimensional media has lately become important in cinema, and some video games developers have also worked towards this notion. Given the push in the West towards ultra-realism in games (already presented as an implausibility given the very nature of games as hyperreal), which we have already established is a myth, one can understand the draw of three-dimensional play.

Nintendo's 1995 project the Virtual Boy was a headset-operated version of its popular handheld games system the Game Boy. It utilised three-dimensional technology, albeit so that games were limited to a single colour (red), in order to create the illusion of depth when at play. Fitting with contemporary concerns about 3D technology, each games cartridge had an option to pause it after a period of time to encourage the user to take a break. The Virtual Boy was considered a failure and only a limited number of units were produced. It was never released in the UK. However, this shows that 3D technology was tested in games as early as the mid-1990s, and even though it was not considered successful, it is evident that developers were attempting to create a more immersive experience for players. The use of a headset was a unique attempt to obscure the screen by making it the user's only focal point. A relatively standard controller for the time was utilised, but again, the user's vision of it was obscured, meaning they could focus on the game alone without any external distractions.



A diagram of the *Virtual Boy* showing how the components fitted together.

The advent of three-dimensional (henceforth referred to as 3D) play in games is based upon technological progress. Polarised glasses are now commonplace in cinemas, and the technology is creeping into homes too. One can now obtain a 3D display and glasses for a reasonable fee, and many films are now packaged with a 3D version of the purchased film. The shift into 3D media is supposedly to increase the immersion level of the user, albeit not to problematic levels for whilst the margins of the screen are blurred by the imagery that appears to come through it,

the limitations of it remain. Furthermore, with 3D technology the use of glasses creates a 'second screen', albeit positioned closer to the user, which exists over the user's eyes. This is not so with virtual reality, where the screen dynamic is ruptured by the placement of the user within the virtual.

Traditionally, 3D uses have been limited to users wearing glasses with one red and one cyan lens. The image itself consisted of the same image projected twice around the colour image, a set distance apart. When wearing the glasses, the user would be able to perceive these colours together, and because of their distance apart, would perceive the image in 3D. This technique is still used, but modern stereoscopic 3D with polarised glasses is most common in cinemas now. Polarised glasses work by limiting what light reaches each eye, meaning that again the user perceives something different with each eye. This is understood by the brain as being 3D.

The Nintendo 3DS, released in March 2011, is another endeavour to bring 3D worlds to gaming. Nintendo's current consoles tend towards unrealistic, stylised graphics rather than the hyperrealism that many other games have achieved. The 3DS does not require glasses to use its 3D functionality, as whilst it utilises stereoscopic imagery techniques it splits the light source directly between the eyes rather than through glasses. Further, the user can adjust the depth of the 3D imagery on the screen to a comfortable setting for their eyes.

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time was an extremely popular addition to the *Legend of Zelda* franchise when it was released in 1998. It was released on the Nintendo 64 platform and was the first in that series of games to utilise 3D graphics (i.e., the character models and backgrounds were shaped in 3D, but the models did not 'jump out' as they would with true 3D). It was recently re-released with some editing on the Nintendo 3DS, with proper 3D functionality.

The Legend of Zelda, as a series of games, tends to have the same basic story with some additional background and character development on top. Therefore, despite the familiarity of the story, users are treated to a different game with each incarnation of the series. The basic premise is usually that Ganondorf, the individual representing force within the game, captures the Princess Zelda (representing wisdom). Link, the player-character, is representative of courage and must rescue

the princess. The three represented powers are supposed to work in conjunction, but the powers are out of alignment, meaning that Link must save the day.

The Legend of Zelda series does tell an old and much-utilised tale, whereby the hero rescues the beautiful princess and gains recognition and power for their trouble. This type of story has been the staple of many stories for centuries, so it makes sense that it has also cast its influence over the video game. After all, the archetypal story presents the reward of completion in a clear and concise manner. However, what sets the series apart from said story is the layers of textuality overlaying the story. This means that the user can almost forget that they know the story.

In its re-release on 3DS, *Ocarina of Time* received critical acclaim and popularity in sales. A month after release, Japanese ranking (by sales) website m-create.com showed the title as seventh in the list (m-create 2011), across all platforms. Thus, despite the familiarity of the story, the game has continued to succeed, whether those purchasing the item are those who played it originally or those who have never played the game before.

With the addition of 3D elements and a new graphical overlay has also come new gameplay elements. For example, because the game is on a handheld device, moving the console to change the camera angle when looking around or firing a weapon, has been implemented. This combines elements of movement with the usual gameplay tactics and makes it reminiscent of games such as the aforementioned *Seaman*. The 3D element allows for powerful new effects, too. The cutscenes in particular are extremely striking, and there is a feeling of vastness in the world which Link must explore.

There are health concerns about 3D technology, however, and as 3D technology in its current capacity has been in general use for a relatively short period of time there has been little opportunity to test the long-term effects on the user or viewer, depending on the medium. An article related to the matter in 2010 stated that individuals suffering from specific debilitating eye conditions might find it difficult to watch a film in 3D. Even some users without visual impairment would be expected to suffer similar effects, “When watching something in 3D, our eyeballs rotate inwards, with accommodation as the goal. But if that happened, the viewer would

be left focusing on a spot in front of the screen, rather than focusing on the screen itself. But this confuses the brain because the eyes have converged without accommodation. Instead, the eyes oscillate between their natural inclination and the artificial state demanded by the film. This can cause extreme eye strain, migraines and nausea." (Mulkerrins 2010). One assumes this remains the case with the 3DS as it makes use of the same technology. In addition, Nintendo released health warnings related to the system stating that children under six years of age should refrain from play due to their eyes being in development (Nintendo 2011).

How do these health warnings place 3D gaming within our structure? Psychoanalytically, 3D does not specifically isolate the user into a difficult psychical space in the same way as virtual reality technology does. However, what it does achieve is a displacement of the screen, which alters the user/screen dynamic. Earlier, I stated that virtual reality establishes something akin to a collapse of the screen, which the user is then able to proceed through. This limits the difference between the real and the virtual, and enables the user to explore the virtual world as though they are there.

With 3D technology, the screen is either offset (to the location of the lenses) or limited (in the case of the 3DS, the perceived outline is blurred but it remains present, as does the ordinary game dynamic). Despite this, 3DS technology does allow for the user to become closer to the perceived action. This is not through the propelling of the user into the virtual, as with virtual reality, but rather bringing the virtual to the user. When the virtual appears to escape the limitations of the screen and spills over into reality, what is occurring?

First, the proximity alters the distancing effect that comes into play through the control system: the user is instantly propelled much closer to the action. However, on a handheld console this dynamic is shifted from the beginning. This is because the control system is static: there are very few peripherals that one can plug in to change the dynamic of play on a handheld. In addition, the screen is both static and extremely small. This may have the effect of reducing the immersion level of the user due to the limitations of the screen being consistently visible throughout play.

The effect of 3D technology in this instance is not simply to bring the virtual to the user but also to expand the limitations of the screen, thus reducing the obvious

dynamic created when playing a handheld console. This is much what the above mentioned Virtual Boy was attempting to do: remove the limitation of the screen.

Reducing the obvious limitations of the screen's visibility during play through expanding the virtual into reality has an impact on the user, but the greater use of new technologies is requiring the body to adjust far more to the virtual. In particular, the difference one sees when moving from an ordinary game to reality differs somewhat from when one is playing a 3D game.

An example of this difference is in a game where one moves constantly between a 2D and 3D environment throughout the game, thus justifying that this dynamic is being used, even within the game's internal consistency, provides the user with distinct difficulties. Obviously the user moving from play to reality should be considered as a separate matter, but one that appears to have repercussions for such a jump. A game that utilises this dynamic is *A Shadow's Tale* (2010) on the Nintendo Wii.

A Shadow's Tale is the story of a child who, as part of an experiment, has been torn from his shadow. Throughout the game, the user plays in the third-person as the shadow seeking its body. In order to gain the body back, the shadow must proceed through two-dimensional levels in which the background is the play area. The foreground produces shadows. In turn, the avatar moves across these shadows in order to reach his eventual goal. Further to this, he must collect three specific objects in each level of the tower in which he is trapped in order to proceed. Elements such as light sources can be manipulated in order to change the shadows and therefore alter the path that the avatar can take through the level (see image).

A little way through *A Shadow's Tale*, the avatar gains the ability to enter the 'real' world for brief periods of time, the world that one can see in the foreground. This involves the avatar stepping through a door which propels them immediately into the same landscape but in the foreground. The other difference here is that the avatar is now three-dimensional and can act upon the full dimensional accessibility of the environment. This changes the entire game dynamic. It also serves to provide an extra area in which to alter positions of objects which will affect the backdrop of the game.

How does this sudden shift between 2D and 3D affect the position of the user to the avatar? Primarily, there is a sudden shift in proximity whereby the avatar is not only in the foreground but is also 3D (thus rendering them on a more realistic level). Because the majority of the duration of the game is played in the background, that is the focus of attention for the user. Therefore, much like with stereoscopic 3D, the user must refocus on a point of action that they are not used to. The frequency of this change within the game, even though the user knows to expect it, becomes a challenge. The user must adjust to the point of reference that is their avatar upon the map and utilise this knowledge in order to progress. The problem is that the adjustment is impermanent and becomes confusing.

The idea in itself is a complex one, however, for it constitutes a physical area of difference. Said area must be ignored throughout a great proportion of the game because it is of no direct use. Of course, when it becomes of use, it requires the user to perform extremely different actions. The action in the game must be re-learned in these areas, and on return from one to the other must be adjusted. However, the focus of the screen is ultimately the foreground of the map, and it is a challenge to the user to adjust to admitting the importance of the background before allowing them the opportunity to return to the foreground again.

Media forms of many varieties run alongside technology. Media is dependent on new outlets in technology to keep the viewer, reader or user interested. However, technology also relies on media forms to make use of its new outlets. I have already discussed the advent of 3D technology in cinema. In literature, e-book readers are becoming increasingly common. Technology is affecting media in sometimes extremely apparent and yet often minor subtle ways. Initiating the user to enter into

a bond with the screen seems to be the obvious goal, yet the screen performs different actions depending on the actions of the user relating to it. In a world where we are becoming closer and closer to technology, the games industry is currently undergoing the process of attempting to hide that technology from us, thus providing us with a more natural experience when at play.

Technological advances provide the amenities surrounding us and will continue to do so in future. One of the draws of advancements in technology springs from the embedded idea of 'progress'. Technological advances appear as synonymous with the symbolic identity of progression, and therefore we are drawn to new types.

Finally, there are other ways of producing 3D effects, if it remains in the public sphere. Holographic imagery promises to do the same, and company SeeReal is attempting to produce this technology for consumer use. The problem with such technology is the resolution required to produce such a complex image. Interviewed in Edge Magazine, CTO of SeeReal Hagen Stolle states that "[Holography] requires a very high-resolution medium – on film it's easy, but on a display, to create a decent angle, I would need pixels of less than one micron in size! Which means I'd end up with more than 250,000 times HD resolution if I wanted to follow the classic approach to holography – which is why nobody has bothered!" (2011:10). Holography such as that which is described by Stolle requires cameras which track the user's eyes so that the image can be rendered specifically for them. Furthermore, it can be applied so multiple users can perceive the image in 3D from different angles on the same screen. This presents us with an interesting dynamic of what perhaps the future holds in terms of 3D technology. If it is likely to remain a large part of visual media, it seems that a number of different attempts at perfecting it are likely to emerge.

Advances in technology do not necessarily mean that we are progressing. Concerns have been mapped, for example, over the social network Facebook (and, more recently, Google+) in which individuals add others as friends, post 'statuses' and photos, arrange activities, and other such networking tools. Facebook allows users the chance to connect with individuals both near and far, to have online conversations with them, and to explore the worlds of others in their network.

Recent changes to Facebook mean that an individual might find themselves

‘tagged’ in a random photograph. Tagging is essentially placing a name to a face, so an individual can be identified. When other users go through photos of other users, all tagged photographs come up. The user in question may remove said tag if they do not like the photograph or if it is not of them, but under normal circumstances they cannot remove the photograph entirely.

The facility utilised by Facebook in order to identify otherwise unknown individuals in photographs relies on the photographs already tagged of that individual as being accurate representations of that individual. It will then post suggestions as to who the unknown in the photograph is, and users can choose if they believe that to be correct. The individual in question can then remove the tag if they so desire.

This opens up a lot of opportunities for connecting with old friends and for locating older photographs that one may have lost access to. However, it also raises questions of security and information sharing, both of which are issues of contemporary concern.

Security issues have come into the foreground over recent months with the hacking of the website of games development giant Sony by a group of hackers who called themselves LulzSec (Arthur and Stuart 2011). LulzSec claimed to have been a group who aim to cause havoc for the sake of it. In Sony’s instance, they were thought to have been able to access users’ personal details, including their passwords that were used to log into their network accounts. At the time, it was suspected that LulzSec also had access to users’ bank details that were stored on the system, though this was not officially confirmed or denied by Sony.

LulzSec’s attack on the games developer’s website caused it to be taken down for a period in excess of a month whilst repairs to the security system in place were made. During this time, users were unable to make use of Sony’s store, nor could they backup and show their friends their ‘trophies’ (rewards for completing specific parts of games that are stored on a user’s account). For the duration of that period, users were also unable to make use of paid for services made available through their account, nor indeed could they play games with their friends online.

This affected the userbase massively. Denied the services they were used to receiving and at the news of the potential loss of their personal details to an

unknown, users were divided as to what had happened and indeed what the best course of action was. Users had placed their trust in an infrastructure that they had thought to be secure, and they had been let down by it.

Because Sony is a large company, users were also forced to question where else these problems could occur. Suddenly nowhere on the internet was safe, and questions pertaining to many different sites began to come forward. Sony eventually returned, promising a better level of security and forcing users to immediately change their passwords upon logging back in. Users were also offered a package of two free games from a small line-up for each of their Sony-produced consoles, along with a few other extras to reinstate the trust in the network.

Online gaming and social websites seem like an ideal method of keeping in touch with friends. However, the introduction of password-based systems and the idea of sharing one's information over the internet introduce as many problems as they solve. Societal structure means that individuals often have less time to spend with others, and expanding one's network is beneficial not simply as a tool to re-discover old friendships but also as a network of support. However, the security of one's personal data is constantly in question. We have sacrificed the personal for the social.

Facebook has additional features such as the ability to live chat with friends. It also has casual games whereby users can play and submit their scores or share items with others in their network. This encourages individuals to spend vast amounts of time playing at being in their spare time rather than actually seeing these individuals. It adds a layer of play to the situation that could not be simulated in real life. It also allows for the individual to retain a hybridised friendship system: that is, when using Facebook they do not actually see these people, but they find out as much (if not more) information as they would normally, but the information is coming in from all directions (contacts) at the same time. It is an invitation into many fragments of different lives, all at once.

We are now of a generation of individuals who rely on computers for so many aspects of our lives. Furthermore, we rely on the internet not simply as a source of information but also as a source of fun. Concerns over privacy are abundant, with individuals placing personal information in places that could potentially be exposed

to identity theft, and email addresses being passed off to third-party companies. Spam, unwanted emails sent in bulk to individuals often as a way to obtain money from said individuals or to obtain their passwords for specific accounts, is another by-product of our technological environment.

Of course, before computers, individuals continued to receive spam, either by post or by telephone call. However, the sensation of the internet has allowed those controlling such viral campaigns on a much grander scale. Because the internet is still relatively recent, laws surrounding specific acts remain unknown. Therefore, those controlling spam do not usually have to pay for the privilege. This type of mindset has created the internet as the mine of data it is today.

On-screen, everything seems clearer and brighter. The internet is no exception to this rule, simulacrum that it is. The internet as simulacrum means that everything is more, and more is better. It rationalises the capitalist notions of our society, makes it all right to spend both money and time. The internet is our hyperreal clone where individuals take on false personas invested with the rich personalities and lack of flaws that could only pass by in the world of fiction.

Equally, these personas set themselves apart by their anonymity. Whilst the internet is a mine of data, the point remains that those persona that an individual chooses are anonymous. On the internet, the user can play at being different characters, can try out what to say, can express opinions that are not reflected in themselves if they so please. Often, these statements are free from repercussions and we can see another level of the user/game dynamic whereby the user creates a persona (or avatar) and experiments with it in that environment. Baudrillard suggests that “the fact that identity is the identity of the network rather than to the network’s protagonists implies the possibility of hiding, of disappearing into the intangible space of the virtual, so that you are not detectable anywhere – even by yourself.” (2002:179).

Thus, we must view the internet as much like the structural dynamic of the game. Of course, this brings forth elements of what it is that the user is indulging in when ‘surfing’ the internet. Are they at play? Is it dependent on the type of browsing the user is conducting?

Perhaps the answer to this question is that the user is both at work and play. The

dynamic put forth by the user/screen dynamic here, as aforementioned, is extremely similar. In fact, the internet can be utilised for playing games, which should place it in the dynamic of game-within-a-game. The user before the screen in this situation is of a different type to the user who sits before a game. This is not to state that the two are different people: both users could be the same individual. However, what changes in the two dynamics is intent.

What the user intends to do is the important factor here, and changes the way in which the intermediate forms between the two elements. As always, action is important. The user acts upon the frame, upon the contents, in order to make things occur. There is no difference in either scenario. However, what does change is what the user acts upon. For example, a user may wish to locate information about a particular species of ant. Through typing said species into a search engine, they are met with a number of results which could potentially add to their research. Therefore, they begin to read through said results until they locate one which satisfies their desire for that information.

Again, this aspect of the dynamic is the same. Locating the information produces a level of satisfaction that the user measures as a success. The pursuit of any gratification, after all, might very well be connected to the user overcoming the lost object. However, the aspect that differs is the framing of that intent. An individual spending time locating information about something is not usually framed with reference to the idea of play. If we return to Roger Caillois and his extensive work on types of play, we see that one of the definitions he proposes, based on Huizinga's work, defines play as having no material gain. "At the end of the game, all can and must start over again at the same point." (Caillois 2001:5). Might we consider someone as conducting research into a particular species of ant more aligned with the construct of 'work' and perhaps even passing as containing a sense of material gain?

There is another factor that prohibits the internet from being in and of itself a game. That is the sense of the internet being a portal. The internet is not simply one aspect. It allows the user to perform all manner of actions, some more aligned with the conceptual idea of 'work' and some more aligned with 'play'. Thus, the internet, and therefore the entire dynamic is shifted. The internet exists because of its

contents, which come from and are for the users. Without these, the internet would be meaningless. Consider this in light of Lanier's perspective (referenced in Chapter 3.5) when faced with an internet resistant to his act of change, a portal, but one out of his locus of control. The internet is empty in and of itself, but that which is placed within the portal affords it 'meaning'.

This idea of the empty internet means that we can gain a better understanding of where the user stands with relation to it. The internet is not a game-within-a-game but a screen-within-a-screen. This is how the user is able to process so much random information: because the model of the dual screen situates the user further away from what they are reading or viewing. This might be why casual games are so popular on the internet: because the framing dynamic of the internet is so rife to achieve the effect of behaving casually towards a game.

As distanced users, information gained from the internet is often treated with layers of mistrust. Users debate what they have discovered on message boards, sitting behind their online persona, thus adding another layer to the already distanced construct. The effect is a desensitisation of the user. The user treats the internet as a game. Message boards exist where the user has taken their persona to levels whereby they have faked their own death in order to gain the affection and sympathy of those around them (Kleeman 2011). This of course doubles back. The avatar appears to show the user for all they are, when really the avatar behaves as the anonymous mask that we have already established as a staple of the internet.

Being a part of something is important, and the internet is rife with users discussing their favourite games. This allows the connection between the user and game to be maintained, even after the game has been discarded or completed. As aforementioned, the constant stream of merchandise related to specific games is also something which can maintain the level of connection between the user and the game between plays and even long after completion.

When we play a game, we are drawn to a variety of aspects: the avatar, the characters, the setting, gameplay, perhaps the music. This draw forms an aspect of the intermediary device existing between the user and the game. What merchandising and forums do is bring aspects of the game into the Real. In doing so,

the user can occupy a different status with the game.

The relationship between the user and the screen is a complex one, but also one which allows the user to occupy a space where they are not simply immersed in the game but also aware of the environment around them. The screen is a factor of separation, and maintains this dynamic with the user throughout play. This is equally the case where a user speaks in relation to a game on a forum. A similar dynamic is maintained: the user, the screen, the avatar. However, merchandise differs from this because it allows the user to carry an aspect of the game around with them: be it a bag, a figurine, or a cuddly toy. Aspects of merchandising provide the user with the opportunity to breach the layer of the screen.

Thus, the desire towards the game is maintained in both instances. What merchandising does is create a different level at which the bond between the user and the game can form. The merchandise is a little piece of the game, something that the user may relate to and desire to have possession of. In this way, it becomes representative almost of the lost object. The user has gained something that they can never really obtain, at least during connection with the game (I am hesitant to use the term 'gameplay' here as the user's connection to the game is powerful even when not at play). Once this connection is over, the merchandise may be replaced by another false object. Connections to different games may form naturally in this way and overlap, with some connections lasting a lifetime (for example, a user may feel strongly about an arcade game that they played when they were seven, despite having played and enjoyed many games since).

When video games were first introduced, not a great deal of merchandise existed. In recent years, overlapping with the surge in popularity of home consoles and film tie-ins, there has been much more for the average user to collect. Further to this, avid users have access to sites from which they can purchase memorabilia from overseas. Collectors' Editions of items tend to emerge in the UK only for premium titles, and often include art books or shirts. Has gaming become a part of this culture of saturation because of the desire amongst users to own something more physical than simply the virtual world issued to them in the game?

Perhaps this is the case. In virtual worlds, users have the opportunity to explore for anything from a few hours to a server's lifetime. During this time, a user

develops an attachment, but this attachment is not something that can reach beyond the level of the screen. It can be revisited but not taken home. Perhaps we are continually seeking ways to bring that aspect closer, to fill something with meaning that will serve as a reminder of something that remains ungraspable.

The elements described here will surely propel us into a new era of video gaming, one that will be unfamiliar and yet framed with recognisable elements. Whether we lose the controller, become the avatar, or lose ourselves in the internet, our ability to create lasting technologies that both engage and inspire is currently at an interesting phase. Games may well move away from their origins. They may stop encompassing literary or filmic representations of elements, or they may become further reliant on these elements. What we can interpret from our understanding of the future of games is that the user's position may change, and this in itself may completely restructure their bond with the game. Furthermore, as we become further and further distant from a past of direct communication, we will begin to see more artefacts of that loss enter into the fold, which may be a reason why merchandise related to games has become so prevalent in recent years.

Finally, we have entered a new era of communication. It is only natural that with emerging technologies and the popularity of the games industry that it should attempt to maintain its place in our technologically dependant society. Whatever the future holds for the games industry, it will constantly be followed by waves of technological advancement re-imagined into the pursuit of fun.

In this final aspect of the thesis I have dealt with potential avenues for the future of gaming and how they might affect the situation of the user with relation to the machine. It is extremely important that we consider the impact that these directions might have on both the user and how they might connect outwards in the future. Meeting up with another individual face-to-face is no longer the only way to spend time with them. Individuals spend a great deal of time immersed in the virtual, and for these reasons we must begin to put together an image of what and where the user will be when interacting with the virtual given the fast pace of technological advancement.

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Broadsword Productions (1993) *Cyberzone*
Chatsworth Television (1990) *The Crystal Maze*
Fukasaku K. (2000) *Battle Royale*
Jackson P. (2001) *The Lord of the Rings*
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Wachowski A., L. (1999) *The Matrix*
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A Shadow's Tale (2010) Developer: Hudson Soft, publisher: Hudson
America's Army (2002) Developer: United States Army
Bioshock (2007) Developer: 2k Boston, publisher: 2k Games
Black & White (2001) Developer: Lionhead Studios, publisher: EA games
Centipede (1981) Developer: Atari Inc.
Close Combat: First to Fight (2005) Developer: Destineer, publisher: 2k Games
Dance Dance Revolution (series) (1998) Developer/publisher: Konami
Devil May Cry (2001) Developer/publisher: Capcom
EyeToy Play (2003) Developer: SCE London Studio, publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Fable (2003) Developer: Lionhead Studios, publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Final Fantasy (series) (1987) Creator: Hironobu Sakaguchi
Final Fantasy VII (1997) Developer: Square Product Development Department #1, publisher: Square
Flower (2009) Developer: Thatgamecompany, publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Full Spectrum Warrior (2004) Developer: Pandemic Studios, publisher: TKQ
God of War (2005) Developer: SCE Studios Santa Monica, publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Grand Theft Auto (series) (1997) Developer/publisher: Rockstar Games
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (2004) Developer: Rockstar North, publisher: Rockstar Games
Halo (2001) Developer: Bungie, publisher: Microsoft Studios
Kingdom Hearts (series) (2002) Developer/publisher: Square-Enix
Limbo (2010) Developer: Playdead, publisher: Microsoft Game Studios/Playdead
Manhunt (2003) Developer: Rockstar North, publisher: Rockstar Games
Marvel vs. Capcom 3 (2011) Developer/publisher: Capcom
Metal Gear Solid (1998) (series) Developer: KCEJ, publisher: Konami
Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater (2004) Developer: KCEJ, publisher: Konami
Neverwinter Nights (2002) Developer: BioWare, publisher: Infogrames/Atari Macsoft
Nintendogs (2005) Developer: Nintendo EAD, publisher: Nintendo
Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan! (2005) Developer: iNiS, publisher: Nintendo
Pac-Man (1980) Developer/publisher: Namco
Para Para Paradise (2000) Developer/publisher: Konami
Pikmin (series) (2001) Developer/publisher: 2001
Playboy: The Mansion (2005) Developer: Cyberlore Studios, publisher: Ubisoft
Pong (1972) Developer/publisher: Atari Inc.
Pokemon (series) (1996) Creator: Satoshi Tajiri
Portal 2 (2011) Developer/publisher: Valve Corporation
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time (2003) Developer: Ubisoft Montreal, publisher: Ubisoft
Project Zero (2001) Developer: Tecmo and Grasshopper Manufacture, publisher: Tecmo (PS2 version)

Quake (1996) Developer: id Software, publisher: GT Interactive
Rapelay (2006) Developer/publisher: Illusion Soft
Resident Evil (series) (1996) Developer/publisher: Capcom
Scribblenauts (2009) Developer: 5th Cell, publisher: WB Games
Seaman (1999) Developer: Vivarium, publisher: Sega
Second Life (2003) Developer: Linden Research
Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3 (2006) Developer/publisher: Atlus
Tetris (1984) Developer: Alexey Pajitnov, publisher: various
The House of the Dead 2 (1998) Developer: Wow Entertainment, publisher: Sega
The Legend of Zelda (series) (1986) Creator: Shigeru Miyamoto
The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (1998) Developer: Nintendo EAD, publisher: Nintendo
The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D (2011) Developer: Nintendo EAD, publisher: Nintendo
The Sims (series) (2000) Developer: Maxis, publisher: Electronic Arts
The Typing of the Dead (1999) Developer: Wow Entertainment, publisher: Sega
Viva Pinata (2006) Developer: Rare, publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Wii Sports (2006) Developer/publisher: Nintendo
World of Warcraft (2004) Developer/publisher: Blizzard Entertainment

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