VIDEO GAME VALUE AND EXCHANGE AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT

Video games capture not only the attention of the popular imagination, or the dedication of so-called "hardcore gamers." Video games also capture value as saleable goods. But despite the practice of temporarily fixing their value in price, or of attributing some sort of durable use value to them, video games' worth is evanescent. Valuation - or value coding - is an imaginary, productive procedure that rests not only with producers, but also with consumers. That marketing is a "science" is proof of consumers' role in producing value. As templates for the imagination, value codings are concocted not only in marketing plans and advertising, but also online in gaming forums, where gamers congregate and exchange information and opinions about video games. This thesis examines four of the largest online video game forums to learn how gamers reconcile the pleasures and value of gaming in advance of purchase, during play, and after the game has been “beaten.” Unlike other media, many video games often emphasize spatial exploration as well as a conflictual relationship between gamer and game. This is an aesthetic that can be linked to exchange value. This thesis argues that the value codings inaugurated by retail exchange exert a powerful influence over the aesthetic reception of gaming as a set of enjoyable, exchangeable and exhaustible encounters. At the same time, the mere fact that gamers talk about and contest each others' valuations in online forums shows that there is nothing natural about such a valuation, and that the boundaries of value codings and the boundaries of what constitutes fun are tested, if not traversed.

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Introduction

In September of 1983, a strange burial took place in Alamogordo, New Mexico. Spectators were barred from the vicinity, and even reporters from the *New York Times* could get no closer to the site. According to a small story appearing deep inside a Wednesday edition of the newspaper,

> With the video game business gone sour, some manufacturers have been dumping their excess game cartridges on the market at depressed prices. Now Atari, Inc., the leading video game manufacturer, has taken dumping one step further. The company has dumped 14 truckloads of discarded game cartridges and other computer equipment at the city landfill in Alamogordo, N.M. Guards kept reporters and spectators away from the area yesterday as workers poured concrete over the dumped merchandise. (D4)

One can only imagine what a spectacle it must have been to see load after load of the stuff that had made Atari one of fastest growing companies in U.S. history pour to the ground as rubbish, crushed by steamrollers, and then sealed in concrete (Kent, 45). No wonder onlookers were ushered away; such a spectacle cemented not just the

cartridges but also the perception that the wild successes of the fledgling video game industry were now over.

One of the dump's tenants are the hurriedly-made *E.T.* cartridges that were either returned to the company en masse by disappointed consumers after Christmas 1982, or that were never sold at all. Only months earlier, Atari had paid $22 million to license the Spielberg blockbuster (Rollings & Adams 50). The landfill episode illustrates a crisis of value: a momentary reminder that consumers exchange money not for the game itself, but as with other commodities, for the value that the game represents. When a video game is purchased and then "consumed" via play, only the game's novelty is destroyed, not the game's physical presence. The difference that novelty makes is one major source of value that games' retail prices represent, but novelty is not a valuable property of a game. Novelty is a relationship to a game, since the same game can be new for one person but old for another. Both the devaluation of Atari's merchandise and its profitable exchange (the depletion of the value the game represents, by paying customers) leaves behind leftover objects, the substance of which remains unchanged. Lawrence Lessig recently opined, "Every bit of creative property goes through different 'lives'…*When* the commercial life of creative property ends, I don't know. But it does." (113-114). When it does, there is a substantive remainder.

In the hands of consumers, these leftovers can accumulate as collections, be traded-in or sold, played over and over again, or languish until salvaged into some other mode of valuation. (In compact disc form, defective games make excellent table coasters.) How or why a game is valuable in these situations is different from the value codings established by retail exchange, because the relationship between the consumer and the object after the moment of exchange – and in particular, the experience of the game - is different from that which preceded it. Mark J.P. Wolf's recent work on older "abstract" home and arcade video games suggests as much. As Wolf's analysis draws attention to the now-dated aesthetic of those games, one is led to consider how these games were or were not of value or enjoyable to consumers in the past, and how they might or might not be of value or enjoyable in the present. Indirectly, the slippage between substance and value becomes more apparent. It may come as little surprise that in general, objects are valued differently in different circumstances. But what is novel with regard to video games is that video game objects represent value in ways that are closely tied to games as a media form. Unlike other media, many video games often emphasize spatial exploration as well as a conflictual relationship between gamer and game.[1] While the game industry's revenue from retail sales top $11 billion a year in the United States, questions regarding the relationship between video games' aesthetic form, circulation, and valuation remain only partially explored.[2]

The most comprehensive examination and critique of video games as experiential products to yet appear is *Digital Play: The Intersection of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*. In that book, Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter chart the global waters of the video game industry, emphasizing the "post-Fordist" economic climate of video game production and consumption. Following the argument Baudrillard set out in *Consumer Society* they write, "Consumer culture is a treadmill whose machinery of desire is a marketing communication system based on the creative destruction of meaning in media, and a perpetual innovation and exhaustion of signs" (71). A significant analytical gap exists between video gaming as an individual fantasy experience, and video gaming as a global industry. One approach to this gap between subject and structure is to examine the coordinating role of marketing and advertising, as the authors of *Digital Play* have done. A different approach would be to examine the representations that video game players put into the same interstice.

So-called hardcore gamers experience the rush of the new that the video game industry generates more intimately than do more casual players. The goal of this thesis is to examine how these gamers represent to themselves and to each other the aesthetic experience of gaming in terms of its value. As both players of and consumers of video games, gamers must reconcile the enjoyable (and sometimes un-enjoyable) experience

of gaming with the value of that experience as a commodity. Against the backdrop of consumer society, this thesis aims to identify and in some cases critique the representational linkages between playing a game and valuing a game that gamers post in online discussion forums. The values that games represent both before and after the moment of exchange are the products of gamers' imagination, but are nonetheless real.

Speaking for gamers is not the intent here, but speaking about them is inevitable. The relationship between video game players and the representation of gamers and gaming has been poor, with a few notable exceptions; trade titles such as JC. Herz's *Joystick Nation* and King and Borland's *Dungeons and Dreamers*. With that in mind, the difficulty of representing hardcore gaming will be addressed in the following chapter. Following the review of hardcore gaming, a theoretical portrait of what has been called "consumer society" will be presented, with special emphasis and extension of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's notion of "the work of the imagination." The imagination increasingly plays a role in producing the value of merchandise, and the video game industry, as much as if not more than any other, is notorious for its lengthy periods of anticipation.[3] In part, this is a strategy to drum up as much longing for the forthcoming game as possible. But since consumer expectations are staggering and publishers cannot afford to release a game that as one gamer puts it, is "glitchy" or "bogus," release dates are often delayed to the chagrin of all. Such high consumer

expectations demand attention not only to how the imagination leads to consumption, but to the crucial role of imaginary relationships as a source of exchange value. Usually one thinks of purchases as the starting point of consumer's relationship to a product. The work of the imagination exposes the moment of exchange as the terminus of another relationship.

Video games cannot, however, be apprehended simply as objects roughly handled in transactional moments, because the experience of playing a video game - actual and imagined - influences valuation a great deal. In chapter two, gaming is considered as a distinct media form and a particular way of consuming video games, mastery, is elaborated. Mastery is a style of consumption in which the experience of navigating game space – not just game space itself – becomes exchangeable and exhaustible.

With these coordinates mapped out - gamers, consumer society, and an aesthetic of exchange - the third chapter consists of close analysis of several online video gaming discussion threads hosted by four of the most visible commercial video game magazines and Web portals (<www.gamespot.com>; <www.gamespy.com>; <www.gameinformer.com> and <www.1UP.com>). These close readings engage a yet unexamined body of representations. Furthermore, as sites of discursive activity, the

forums also serve as reminders that values are learned in company of others and that such linkages remain contestable.

Along with the surfeit of objects that consumer society provides comes a passing awareness of the emptiness spanning between those things newly introduced for exchange, and those old things salvaged for curiosity, investment, sentiment or amusement. James Fenton has recently called it "that period of disregard, that dangerous prelude to value," because into this cavity slip objects and experience, some seemingly never to return (38). This period is bracketed by the imagination as a productive social activity. Video game discussion forums certainly offer an opportunity to learn about the anticipation of purchase, but there is something else to be registered: gamers' perspectives on that unceremonious descent - that depreciation of aesthetic experience that follows the flight of exchange value from video game objects - and the role of the imagination in that decline.

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[1] In this work, "video game" refers to digital games on personal computers as well as dedicated console units.

[2] NPD Group, Inc. "The NPD Group Reports Annual 2003 U.S. Video Game Industry Driven by Console Software Sales." 26 January 2004. 1 April 2004 < http://www.npd.com/press/releases/press_040126a.htm>. Figure includes sales from console, portable and PC hardware, software and accessories.

[3] Suneel Ratan, Suneel. "No Room for Slacking in Game Biz," Wired News 13 February 2004. 29 March 2004. <http://www.wired.com/news/games/0,2101,62256,00.html >.

Chapter 1. Hardcore Video Gaming & Consumer Society

Insofar as gamers are assessors of value, it would be incorrect to describe the hardcore gamer as a person whose relationship to video games as products could be seen simply as an amplified version of consumerism. If experience has taught outsiders anything about studying video gaming, it is that cornering this subject rarely yields the desired result. Journalist Brad King writes,

> Ugh. Gamers and the press. What a disaster…Journalists have a host of pre-conceived notions about what computer games are, and they are unwilling to do the real legwork needed to uncover the stories out there….John and I wrote about a gaming café in our book. It's a fun place. Well lit. Lots of computers. The New York Times wrote a piece about this place and made it sound like a crack house.[1]

John Borland notes, "There are still two kinds of press, with not much in between: The games press, which is generally too close to the subject to be really critical, and the mainstream press, which is usually too far away to understand the culture."[2] Nothing disgruntles video gamers more than representations of gamers as obsessive loners, or as participants in a tenuous link between video game violence and actual violence. As a recent advertisement placed in *GamePro* magazine by the game industry's lobbying

group reads, "If you're tired of video games being misrepresented by politicians and special interest groups, here's your chance to help give them the real facts!" (6) Public policy and media coverage of video games and violence reached a head after the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in April 1999.[3] Such coverage often turns to media effects research for the link between virtual and real-world violence. In those situations the news media, politicians and academics are all involved in representing video gaming.[4] In the midst of such tensions, academic entrees into video gaming cannot avoid the distance between gamers and their others, but the impasse can be re-assessed.

1.1 Hardcore Gamers

Coming up with a narrow definition of the hardcore gamer is likely to fall short of capturing this enigmatic subject position. After all, it is a position the definition of which is by no means agreed upon in the haunts of hardcore gamers, online forums. To avoid the problem of defining the hardcore gamer it has become commonplace speak of "the gaming community." Although the phrase has colloquial purchase, it is too broad to be analytically useful without a survey of some particular types of communities that constitute the gaming community at large. Though these communities are probably no less “imaginary” than the gaming community at large, a

brief look at some of gaming's communities illustrates that hardcore gamers are a fragmented group of related interests, not a uniform whole.

Similar to the way that popular literature such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and television programs such as *Star Trek* have served as kernels for fan fiction and fan communities, so too have video games.[5] For example, the popular machinima series *Red vs. Blue* is an absurdist comedy that uses the video game *Halo: Combat Evolved* as raw material and inspiration, and short episodes are released regularly over the Internet. Fan productions are often the work of members of official and unofficial fan clubs based around a popular game. Fan clubs may also cohere around the developing company or publisher itself. For instance, Bungie Studios, (the Microsoft subsidiary that developed *Halo*) oversees 'The Seventh Column,' which is "the official Bungie fan club and underground army." Bungie's goal is "Bringing the community together in person and in spirit through gatherings and the internet, strengthening their resolve with exclusive Bungie swag, and providing new avenues for their intelligence, dedication and creativity" (Microsoft*, Welcome* par. 2). In this way, The Seventh Column not only provides outlets for fan enthusiasm, but builds brand loyalty as well. Besides gamers' own initiative, the sense of community seems to depend on the perception of Bungie as a small autonomous entity, as well as upon the popularity of the game *Halo*, and of course, upon "exclusive Bungie swag."

Hobbyist programmers and video game tinkerers form another type of gaming community. These groups represent video gaming's "computer nerd" and hacker heritage. Through the modification or "modding" of commercial computer games, especially first-person shooter games such as *Doom* and *Quake*, individuals construct new levels for others to explore and play by changing the appearance of the game's characters and environment while leaving the "physics" or "feel" of the game intact. As Hector Postigo notes, the modding community also has close ties to commerce. Talented modders can use their creations as resumes, which developers and publishers use to recruit new employees. Postigo argues that unwaged enthusiasts are "one significant source of the some of the significant value that the video game industry generates" (594). Gaming communities also form via actual game play. "Clans" are groups of players that compete with other groups online or at tournaments in team or "squad-based" multiplayer combat games such as *Counter-Strike*. One tournament, QuakeCon, offers prize money for top finishers in the neighborhood of $50,000.

Finally, Internet discussion forums realize the gaming community in venues where gamers talk shop, exchanging information, opinions and advice about video gaming. The interconnectedness of these different groupings via the Internet no doubt assists one's imaginary membership in a given group. The Internet, along with the relative maturity of video game players may also contribute to the "the gaming

community" colloquial meaningfulness. But although a hardcore gamer might participate in any one or more of these groups, they need not belong to any one of them to qualify as "hardcore" (although such memberships or lack thereof undoubtedly influence individuals' experience of being a hardcore gamer.)

Although their experience with video games is unmatched, hardcore gamers are not simply those persons that play a lot of video games. Game designers Ernest Adams and Andrew Rollings write,

> Games are more than light entertainment to them; they're a hobby that demands time and money. Core gamers subscribe to game magazines, chat on game bulletin boards, and build fan web sites about their favorite games. Above all, core gamers play for the exhilaration of defeating the game. (41)

According to Rollings and Adams' description, the hardcore gamer is not simply a skillful someone who plays a lot of video games. Rather it a term given to a subjectivity formed on multiple fronts: at the screen during play, at the store during purchase, on the couch while reading a video gaming magazine, among fellow players online and off, in the marketing plans of hardware and software vendors and in the pages of the popular press. Given the chance, one could add several other facets to this definition, and indeed, elsewhere Adams has done so.[6] In academic language, "the

loyal and habitual gamer" constitutes a "composite subjectivity, " a position into which gamers are simultaneously players, consumers and technology users (Kline et al. 295). As Kline and his co-authors conclude, "The various simultaneous subject-positions of the gamer - as player, user, and consumer - may corroborate or contradict each other" (297). Both of these explanations point to hardcore gaming as a fragmented and inconsistent. This work does not attempt to define hardcore gaming as extreme gaming, or extreme consumption, but allows that hardcore gaming is a constellation of activities - including consumption. In the current historical period, there is a particularly salient style of consuming video games.

1.2 Mastery

Rollings and Adams' claim that hardcore gamers play for "the exhilaration of defeating the game" becomes particularly interesting when mastery is thought of as a style of consumption. The word mastery has never been far from video gaming. There have been movies about video game mastery (*The Last Starfighter*, 1984; *The Wizard*, 1989). There was a Saturday morning TV cartoon about video game mastery (*Captain N: The Game Master*, 1990). Even the Clint Eastwood-esque player persona of the millions-selling Microsoft Xbox title *Halo* (2001) is a space marine "known only by his rank of Master Chief" (Microsoft 8). To be a master is to possess supposedly exhaustive knowledge and skill, but such possession is only temporary and

approximate. The notion that a game can be mastered tends to conceal the larger context in which this local act of mastery occurs. This contradiction is stated explicitly in Adams and Rollings' description of the hardcore gamer: gamers play for the thrill of defeating the game, and yet this mastery continuously calls for further outlays of time and money on what has not yet been mastered - more games.

The contradiction presented by mastery connects with one of cultural studies' primary interests, ideological critique. Books such Eugene Provenzo's *Video Kids: Making Sense of Nintendo* have critiqued the representations and themes that games contain, while other writers have critiqued the experience of gaming itself. Regarding the latter, the authors of *Digital Play* claim, "Precisely in that moment of suspension of disbelief, the system of interactive play becomes most fetishized. The construction of that willing delusion by which the players imagine they are controlling their own fantasy defines the magic of gaming" (21). Drawing on Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, the trio argues that the suspension of disbelief turns attention away from the labor that went into the game's production. But there is something else besides the intellectual and physical labor of others being avoided during play: players are "unlikely to think much about how energetically game developers have sold the play experience to them" (20).[7] This brings up another of Marx's observations, namely that consumption puts the "last finish" upon products.

Marx understood consumption to be reproductive "because consumption creates the need for new production…consumption *ideally posits* the object of production as an internal image, as a need, as drive and as purpose" (91-92). Playing a video game can also be thought of as consumption that reproduces consumption, since, as Marx would have it, one "mastered game" calls for another not yet mastered game. This reproduction depends upon the consumption of the product - what he calls the "last finish": "the product, unlike a mere natural object, proves itself to be, becomes, a product only through consumption. Only by decomposing the product does consumption give the product the finishing touch" (91). But gamers do not need to finish a game before desiring, anticipating and purchasing another and thereby calling forth more productions. Nor is a consumed game (in the sense that the player no longer derives value from it) unable to be played. What is crucial to understand is that production does not require that games be formally finished, but rather that the gamer finish with the game. Because these two do not necessarily coincide (one could theoretically play a game over and over, forever), the product under consideration is not merely the game object, but the experience of it. Consumption then becomes a matter not of physically destroying the game in the act of consumption, but of destroying the novelty of experience that the game signifies; this is why the authors of *Digital Play* speak of the exhaustion of signs rather than of actual game objects, whose

constitution remains unchanged (71). In this way, if there is a "use value" for video games that is to be destroyed and thus impel further production, it is their novelty. But if that is the case, then there is no such thing as use value inherent to video games, because novelty is not a property of the game, but a relationship to it. While Marx's writings on consumption remain relevant, they need to be assessed in the present.

1.3 Consumer society and the imagination as a social practice

Electronic games have been around almost since the onset of what has been dubbed "the information age," "post-industrial society," "late capitalism," "postmodernity," "post-Fordism" and "consumer society." Each of the scenarios described by these terms involves a shift in production and consumption that is now recognized as emerging after WWII, and that is exemplified by contemporary American culture and economy. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan writes,

> Over the past half-century, the increase in the value of raw materials has accounted for only a fraction of the overall growth of U.S. gross domestic product (GDP). The rest of that growth reflects the embodiment of ideas in products and services that consumers value. This shift of emphasis from physical materials to ideas as the core of value creation appears to have accelerated in recent decades. (Par. 9)

But accompanying the prosperity is a dilemma. Thanks to digital copying technology and the reach of the Internet, it has become startlingly clear that what consumers do with their "own" digital copies after purchase has the potential for tremendous effect on the market value of all other copies everywhere. As the products of information economies become increasingly digitized and take on the character of "intellectual property," consumption of these products has become increasingly regulated by legislation such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998. This has sparked protest from individuals who claim that fair use is being curbed, or that privacy rights stand in danger. The regulation of consumption is not a new development. When Marx noted that the "last finish" of consumption is what realizes a product as product, he also claimed "production gives consumption its specificity, its character, its finish" (92). However, as Napster and then peer-to-peer Internet applications have illustrated, the manner in which commodities are distributed may differ drastically from the manner stipulated by profit. At the same time, producers work ever harder to heighten consumer anticipation, and marketing is now a science.

The economic shift Greenspan describes has involved an interior shift as well, and Arjun Appadurai has offered a compelling account of the psychological experience of consumption. In this moment, Appadurai contends that "the work of the imagination" is something tugged between confines of consumer discipline and the

potential for agency (4). Now, the imagination is a social practice, not a just pastime of elites (31). Following Marx, Appadurai notes that the discipline of time and bodies during production that appeared even before Henry Ford's assembly lines also had the effect of disciplining what came to be defined in opposition, leisure. What is new about disciplined consumption is not a mere acceleration of circulation, but how time is experienced. Appadurai uses the phrase "aesthetics of ephemerality" to describes the transient relationship between consumers and the kinds of ideal commodities Greenspan speaks of, which best capture consumers' imaginations and wants as value:

> The pleasure that has been inculcated into the subjects who act as modern consumers is to be found in the tension between nostalgia and fantasy, where the present is represented as if already past. This inculcation of the pleasure of ephemerality is at the heart of disciplining the modern consumer. The valorization of ephemerality expresses itself at a variety of cultural levels: the short shelf-life of products and lifestyles; the speed of fashion change; the velocity of expenditure…. (83-84)

Such a description is exemplified by video games. As the tagline for gamers.com, (a video game Web portal owned by multimedia publishing giant Ziff Davis Media) puts it, "A moment enjoyed is not wasted." The claim here is not only that ephemerality is a condition of pleasure, but also that its ephemeral pleasures are no less preferable to

older, presumably durable sources of pleasure. For Martyn Lee, the commodities of consumer society are “either used up during the act of consumption, or, alternatively, based upon the consumption of a period of time, as opposed to a material artifact” (qtd. in Kline et al. 68). As commodities have become more ephemeral, the consumption of them has tended towards a psychological experience, and this is especially true of entertainment goods. Because it remains difficult to eliminate the actual object, even in the form of computer code, products are ephemeral insofar as they can be presented as a valuable, yet terminable experience that can be exchanged.

There is something more than reproduction of consumption taking place in the period before purchase. Given the centrality of the imagination to modern commerce, one can legitimately speak of an imagined consumption that takes place before exchange and terminates at the moment of exchange. Exchange value more and more represents the imaginary, anticipatory relationship that players have to games before purchase, and the video game industry has its own channels for reproducing what Appadurai calls "the conditions of consciousness in which buying can occur" (83). Video game magazines play a central role in stoking and sustaining gamers’ anticipation, desire, and imagination. Most video game magazines are composed of four sections. Advertisements take up approximately a third to half of the page-space. Short features or previews of recently or soon to be released games, and a number of

video game reviews make up most the rest. Short non-interactive game demonstration CDs are often bundled with magazines, and the last pages of these periodicals are usually occupied by cheat codes and strategy tips to help players finish games, or breathe new life into games that have been beaten. By introducing new products through advertisements, previews and reviews, gaming magazines and their online counterparts such as *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *GamePro*, *Game Informer* and most notoriously, Nintendo's own *Nintendo Power* forge a link between the imagined experience of playing a game and the act of purchasing it. News about forthcoming games are closely followed and speculated upon, and gamers' anticipation for popular titles grows as they imagine how enjoyable the game will be when it finally ships. Considering the perpetual innovation and manufactured obsolescence that characterizes the video game industry, it is small wonder that the consumer-oriented magazines and advertisements lend games a buoyancy and transient quality to video games. What is most remarkable about video game magazines is that *everything* within them is either brand new or coming soon.

1.4 Questions of value

Despite video games appearance as ephemeral commodities *par excellence*, quickly after purchase they acquire a more durable character. Although the priced value of a game is rapidly depleted when the game is played, the material artifact

lingers. In their lives after commerce, or in their lives as re-circulated (used) goods, these leftovers may take on new meanings, pleasures and values. Although hardcore gamers are undoubtedly the group most in tune with the video game industry's outpouring of new offerings, they are also patched in to pathways that aren't usually addressed in theories of consumer society. Gamers do not apply a uniform rubric for worth to all games in all circumstances. Tinkcom, Fuqua and Villarejo's point about the mutability of meaning and value of articles found in thrift stores also applies to video games:

> Its potential handiness, its circulation, and, most important, re-circulation, and its potential to have any number of meanings (sentiment, nostalgia, camp, loving disdain) attributed to it are hard to seize within the "economic" as traditionally and rigidly understood. (460)

Having been stripped of all but a meager price new meanings and value codings for the item must be imagined if it is to be acquired. Similarly, besides the resale market for video games at brick and mortar chains such as Electronics Boutique, games can be found on Internet auction sites, discovered in a thrift store, rented, or take the form of a 'ROM' (a digital, often "pirated" copy of a video game which can be played on a modern computer using freely available emulator programs.) More obviously, gamers

may simply keep the games they own and organize the games' meaning, pleasure and value in ways that differ from those operating at the time the game was purchased. These opportunities make clear that neither the passage of time nor the initial consumption of the game upon its "debut" halt its circulation or exhausts it of the potential to represent some kind of value (460).

Now that hardcore gaming, the terrain of consumer society and the mutability of valuation have been introduced, what lies immediately ahead is a critique of the experience of video game mastery as a style of consumption particular to video gaming as a medium. Mastery represents one way - and not the only way - that video games can be played and consumed. As leisure theorist Chris Rojek cautions,

> The ability to manipulate the rules of legitimate pleasure and unpleasure as resources for experiment and innovation…is the main reason why people's experiences of leisure are certain to elude the limits of any theoretical classification system that we are capable of devising. (178)

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[1] This quotation and the following quotation were provided during a question and answer session hosted by washingtonpost.com in January 2004. The answers were given in response to a question about the relationship between gamers and the press posed by the author of this thesis. For a transcript, see "Computer Gaming: John Borland and Brad King, Authors, 'Dungeons & Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Gaming Culture From Geek to Chic." 30 January 2004. Washingtonpost.com 15 March 2004. <http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/zforum/04/sp_technews_borland013004.htm>.

[2] Ibid.

[3] For more information on the relationship between gamers and the press, see Jenkins, Henry. "Coming up Next: Ambushed on Donahue!" 20 August 2002. Salon.com 15 March 2004. <http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2002/08/20/jenkins_on_donahue/>. See also *Dungeons and Dreamers*, chapter eight.

[4] In my own experience of posting survey solicitations in online forums, gamers have asked that if the survey had to do with video game violence, to not portray them negatively. Other fourm-goers wanted to know if I was in fact an advertiser "spamming" the discussion thread, or if I had secured permission to post the survey solicitation.

[5] See Henry Jenkins, Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture. New York: Routledge, 1992.

[6] See Barry Ip and Ernest Adams, "From Casual to Core: A Statistical Mechanism for Studying Gamer Dedication." 5 June 2002. Gamasutra.com. 7 October 2003. <http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20020605/ip_01.htm>.

[7] Though developers are certainly involved, it is the game publishers who market games most rigorously.

Chapter 2. Mastery as an Aesthetic Style

According to the Entertainment Software Association, the U.S. video game industry trade group (formerly called the Interactive Digital Software Association, and analogous to the Recording Industry Association of America),

> In 2001, 87% of most frequent computer and video game players said the number one reason they play games is because it's fun. Games are challenging (72%). Games are an interactive social experience that can be shared with friends and family (42%). Games provide a lot of entertainment value for the money (36%).[1]

No critical theory has been applied more often to those associates of fun - pleasure and enjoyment - than psychoanalysis. A brief review of psychoanalytic theory and its application to media form can ground an explanation of mastery as a style of consumption.

2.1 Lacan

Jacques Lacan was Freud's most innovative interpreter, and he described his own work as "a return to Freud," and in particular, to Freud's discovery of the unconscious. Like Freud, he formulated a narrative of human development. But Lacan framed Freud's ideas about sexual development in terms of how an infant is born into

and becomes an agent of language. For Lacan, language is not just something humans do, but a structure that preceded our birth, which we occupy throughout our lifetime, and which remains after our passing. Lacan emphasizes the structured nature of language by naming this occupied territory the symbolic order. It is the third "register" of his developmental model of the psyche. Before the Symbolic, individuals pass from the first register, what Lacan calls the Real, into the second, which he names the Imaginary. While this passage is linear, for Lacan the registers are also cumulative, and so the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic each comprise an aspect of the mature subject's psyche. It is within the second register that the aspect of Lacan's work that is most often referred to in film and video game analyses - the mirror stage - is located.

In *The Mirror Stage*, Lacan describes how an infant is transformed from a discombobulated entity with no sense of self and limited motor skills into an ego possessed of a self-image. Upon looking into a reflective surface - perhaps not the first time, but at some point early life - an infant child claims its reflection as its "self," usually with the encouragement of a caretaker: "Look, that's you!" Lacan writes,

> The fact is that the total form of the body which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power…appears to him above all in a contrasting size (*un relief de stature*) that fixes it and in a symmetry that

> inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him. (735)

The mirror stage is pleasing because the reflection gives the child a sense of security and wholeness. But Lacan says this identification is erroneous, because when one looks in a mirror what is apprehended is a reflected image, not the person. The recognition "that's me" is therefore a misrecognition, it is "a mirage." Most importantly, "the *ego* is always an *alter-ego*" (*Seminar*, 321). For this reason, the ego is a source of error. According to Lacan, part of a person's psychic life always occupies this space of imaginary identifications and one-to-one correspondences.[2]

Following the mirror stage in Lacan's account is the child's acquisition of language, and once able to speak, the Freudian "split" subject emerges, split between the conscious ego and unconscious desire. In the mirror stage, prior to the splitting of the subject, Terry Eagleton writes, "objects ceaselessly reflect themselves…It is a world of plenitude, with no lack or exclusions of any kind" (166). But with the passage into the symbolic order – the fundamental feature of which is an unrepresentable center - the subject emerges:

> banished from the fullness of imaginary into the emptiness of the symbolic. Language is 'empty' because it is just an endless process of difference and

> absence: instead of being able to possess anything in its fullness, the child will now simply move from one signifier to another" (167).

As Eagleton concludes, "This potentially endless movement from one signifier to another is what Lacan means by desire" (167). For Lacan, the deepest desire of the unconscious is to reach a state of fullness, a sense of wholeness. But the unconscious is in no way equipped to accomplish this. Lacan says the unconscious itself is structured like a language because this is how the unconscious manifests itself, in slips of the tongue, jokes, and dream images. Representation can never present a completely full picture. This fact is evident in phrases such as "words aren't enough," which means that one can never express oneself to the fullest. This inability is due to the fact that to speak, write, or represent is to introduce the fact that something has been left unsaid, unwritten or otherwise un-represented. As Lacan puts it, language "installs the lack of being in the object relation" (749). The attempts the unconscious makes to realize fullness only continually re-introduce the absence that it is trying to fill, because the work of the unconscious works by representation and approximation.

The symbolic has two important aspects in Lacan's thought. First, individuals occupy it. As Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle summarize, for Lacan "subjectivity is always (after entrance into the symbolic via the mirror stage) really an intersubjectivity formed in and as dialogue" (733). Lacan's contemporary Emile Benveniste was also

interested in what might be called the environmental aspect of language. Pronouns, he noted, have meaning only when used in specific utterances; "I" is a word intelligible only in the context of a specific utterance. Benveniste explains, "There is no concept "I" that incorporates all the *I*'s that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers, in the sense that there is a concept "tree" to which all the individual uses of *tree* refer" (730). It is by occupying the empty spaces provided by pronouns that subjectivity itself is formed, in language, or what Lacan calls the symbolic order.

The second important aspect of the symbolic is that representation speaks the subject even as the subject willfully uses representation. The famous example is the "Freudian slip": A man walks up to a ticket counter with the intention of buying a train ticket, and tells the woman behind the counter, "Two pickets to Tittsburgh, please!" (Mollon 1). For Lacan however, it is not that the unconscious is some alter-entity using language as a tool to express a wish. Rather, the unconscious is systematically *Other*: "We must distinguish between two others " Lacan writes, "an other with a capital O, and an other with a small o, which is the ego. In the function of speech, we are concerned with the Other" (*Seminar* 236). Thus "others" are other people and one's own ego - the other in the mirror. But the Other is more profoundly alien. It is the unconscious, the structural function of language. While the unconscious is tailored to individual subjects' life histories, the unconscious, the Other, is not something "inside"

the subject, but a condition that immerses all subjects in language. The split subject posited by psychoanalysis is a contradictory one, speaking while simultaneously spoken by the Other. As Lacan puts it, "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other" (*Seminar* 16). What Other speaks is the desire for plenitude, the absolution of difference.

Because it seeks to understand both the conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche, psychoanalysis is a dialectical mode of investigation. Psychoanalysis describes on an individual level how subjects consciously position themselves while they are simultaneously positioned by their unconscious desires. The term "repression" refers to the psychic process by which this contradiction is avoided but not erased. Ideological critique therefore has common ground with psychoanalysis, because it too seeks to uncover the contradictions embodied in representational practices - practices such as watching a movie or playing a video game. Locating what aspects of those representational practices have been "repressed," but threaten to return allows the contradiction to be exposed, when they would otherwise remain concealed and the contradiction avoided.

2.2 Lacan, cinema, & video gaming

In the 1970s, a number of film theorists became interested in how the entire cinematic apparatus - the camera, the screen, the behind-the-scenes production, the

aesthetics of the darkened movie theater, etc. - positioned spectators as subjects. In particular, this work drew on psychoanalysis to describe how the cinema provided enjoyable positions for moviegoers. That is after all, the reason most people go to the movies - it's fun. These theorists drew upon Lacanian psychoanalysis to understand how cinema as a representational practice positions spectators in certain ways while concealing that positioning. Reviewing how film critics have adopted Lacan's ideas provides a point of entry for analyzing video gaming. As Wolf notes,

> As audiovisual entertainment whose content is largely representational, video games have a lot more in common with film and television than merely character and plotlines….It is perhaps due to the desire to measure up to the standards of visual realism set by film and television that the video game evolved as it has; today there are far fewer of the abstract game designs that were once so common in the days of Qix (1981) and Tempest (1980). (*Inventing*, 11-12)

A review of psychoanalysis' encounter with film can preface its application to video games. Such a review also brings into relief the differences between movies and video games as one attempts to describe the constant recession of the target of desire.

Similar to the mirror in which the infant first "finds itself," moviegoers were understood as taking up positions in relation to the film from which they could make

sense of it. Film critics described the way in which spectators identified with certain viewpoints and characters as 'suture'. As language contains empty signs (pronouns), so do films create positions for viewers that function like pronouns, empty spots in which viewers are split in to the film imaginatively but also remain outside the narrative so as to appreciate it. Film theorists described the sense of being part of the story using Lacan's imaginary register. But theorists also drew upon Lacan's claim that finding oneself is always erroneous. The cinema houses not only a sort of mirror, but is also a representational practice that constantly calls that imaginary fulfillment into question. Soon after the screen gives an initial impression of fullness, the spectator quickly comes to understand that there is something not being shown on-screen, that something just outside the frame is hidden. Kaja Silverman explains, "Camera movement, movement within the frame, off-screen sound, and framing can all function in a similar indexical function to a fictional gaze, directing our attention and our desire beyond the limits of one shot to the next" (214). Stephen Heath note that the temporarily full image continuously becomes a fragment: "Crucially, what this realization of absence from the image at once achieves is the definition of the image as discontinuous, its production *as signifier*" (87). Here, the imaginary register of one-to-one identifications and the symbolic register remain in tension, as the desire for a full presentation is temporarily realized and then vanishes. Viewers always want to see more, but the

means by which more is displayed inevitably installs further absence. This tension suggests that suture is, as Silverman puts it, an intermittent process (48).

Some of these same critics also described how sutured identification required not only that images be shown, but also relied upon concealing those aspects of the film that would prevent those imaginary identifications and corresponding positions from being taken up. Film must conceal a contradiction between the pleasures of suture ("that's me, I'm in this story") and the evidence that the film is a production ("This is a story produced by another"). Discussing this tension, Silverman writes, "when a subject reads a novel or views a film it performs only one of these actions, that of identification. The representations with which we recognize ourselves are clearly manufactured elsewhere, at the point of the discourse's origin" (197). For critics such as Colin MacCabe, what the film did not show is as important as what it does show. It is obvious that moviegoers do not produce films. MacCabe argued the pleasure derived from spectatorship mandates obscuring the fact that these films were *produced at all*:

> Hollywood cinema is largely concerned to make these two [the speaking subject and the subject of speech] coincide so that we can ignore what is at risk. But this coincidence can never be perfect because it is exactly in the divorce between the two that the film's existence is possible. (68-69)

What MacCabe points out is that by concealing the production of the film, spectators are more easily sutured into it, and less likely to be confronted with the fact that it is another's production. In this way, the film "speaks" the spectator in much the same way that unconscious speaks the subject. In psychoanalytic parlance, the origins of the film could be understood as "repressed." At this point, the political dimension of film criticism comes into view. Critics such as Laura Mulvey drew attention to the ways of seeing (to borrow John Berger's phrase) that the film endorsed, even as it appeared to be natural or "realistic."

Suture can also be observed – similarly, though not identically – in many kinds of video games. Players are positioned in video games somewhat similarly to the way spectators are in film. Bob Rehak covers both media when he writes, "Interfaces, then, are ideological. They work to remove themselves from awareness, seeking transparency - or at least unobtrusiveness - as they channel agency into new forms." Drawing on Lacanian film theory, Rehak describes how this channeling occurs via the erroneous identifications made between a player and the on-screen proxy or perspective provided for them. The error of this identification - and thus engineering of the players occupation - comes most clearly into focus when the proxy "dies" (107-108) One can illustrate Rehak's point with the stylized "fatalities" in games such as *Mortal Kombat*, *Quake III: Arena*, and *Halo: Combat Evolved.* In each of those games,

at a particular moment, the congruence between the player and the player's image (or perspective) snaps, and in dying, the seat of the ego identification - the avatar - shows itself to be an alter ego. For example, in *Quake III* and *Halo*, this realization is especially pronounced because the point of view changes from a first-person perspective to a third-person, out of body perspective at the moment of death, and the players see “themselves" killed ("that's not really me"). Suture in video games, while apparently more immersive than cinema, is also intermittent.

But the pleasures prescribed by cinema and video games, while perhaps not reducible to a vulgar active-passive distinction, are substantially different. Wolf observes, "Unlike the film viewer who is led (visually) through the film's diegetic world by the film's characters, the video game player has a stake in the navigation of space, as knowledge of the video game's space is often crucial to a good performance" (*Inventing*, 13). Wolf maintains that the pleasure of video games is in large part derived from successful spatial management. This attitude is absent from film; the techniques used to portray space in video games, as Wee Liang Tong and Marcus Cheng Chye Tan point out, are different as well. With the exception of cinematic cut scenes interspersed throughout some games, video games do not use such ubiquitous cinematic techniques as the shot reverse-shot, but instead something closer to continuous filming (99). As a result, the pair writes,

> Controlling the avatar thus becomes more than issuing of movement commands; it also entails the imposition of a visual narrative as the camera-view selects frames and focuses on elements of the game world that interests the gamer. While the visualization of such relationships with the game environment may not equate with Heath's notion of narrativisation, there is nevertheless a process of fiction making involved (109).

Tong and Tan's argument is that the experience of game play - especially game play using three-dimensional graphics - involves a directorial relationship between player and space, that fictionalizes player actions in real time. Unlike film spectatorship, which has a "look but don't touch" aesthetic, video game play is often predicated upon investigating and mastering space.

Spatial mastery represents a turning point between cinema and video gaming. In *Nintendo and Telos*, Peter Buse observes that "Video games, it seems, incarnate the perfection of the mirror, inserting the subject in to a narrative in which she or he sees herself or himself projected as the hero and potential master" (169). Buse writes "seems" because "the seeing subject in a Lacanian schema never achieves plenitude and is doomed to be duped, not satisfied" (169).[3] Buse's mention of suture is not uncalled for, but while film theory provides a helpful foundation for describing

mastery in terms of unconscious desire, it has not much to say about how video game mastery can be understood at the conscious level as a sort of antagonism. The reason is clear: the relationship between films and spectators is rarely confrontational or antagonistic, whereas the relationship between video games and gamers is. At least in the U.S., socially valorized norms of media reception (e.g., theater conduct) have not for example, included talking back to the screen. And only a few films present themselves as things a viewer might master in way similar to a game, "difficult" films such as Warhol's *Empire* or Kubrick's *2001*, or perhaps the B-movies mocked on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between mastery on an unconscious and conscious level. In the former sense, mastery may be interpreted as the movement of desire as the player navigates the game. But in the latter, mastery is about "beating the game" about playing against "the computer" or "the CPU." In turn an understanding of these two components can help link the aesthetic experience of mastery to the circulation of that experience as a commodity.

2.3 The video game as other

To talk about mastery in video games at the level of conscious experience requires consideration of another body of literature besides psychoanalysis. It calls for a look at how the enjoyable impression of agency is produced by video games'

interactive reward structures, and then, how these rewards are disbursed by an "other" which serves to recognize the player's mastery.

Interactivity is an attribute video games are said to manifest, and this quality is closely tied to the impression of agency. As Janet Murray writes in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, "Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (126). Similar to film theorists' critique of realism, others have critiqued interactive satisfaction and the impression of control, looking to games as scripted, or at least technologically bounded productions that circumscribe a player's choices (Kline et al. 2003; Gailey 1993). Few would deny that a game's designers and the constraints they work under do much to shape game play.

One technique for creating a sense of agency that is common to games but absent from film are reward mechanisms to recognize gamers' actions. These mechanisms reinforce a directorial relationship towards space by creating a feedback loop which signals to players that their actions have results, either good or bad. In other words, the relationship between in-game actions and their outcomes produces meaningful play - a satisfying sense of agency (Salen and Zimmerman 37). In their book *Mind at Play: The Psychology of Video Games*, cognitive psychologists Elizabeth and Geoffrey Loftus write,

> There are a variety of psychological theories designed to explain the role of reinforcement in behavior. Central to all of them, however, is the idea that any behavior that is followed by reinforcement will increase in frequency. In short, video games that do something to make the player feel good will be played again and again. (14)

Aki Jarvinen makes a similar point:

> Games offer instant action, instant pleasure. The doses of pleasure are delivered according to a game mechanism. This is created by the designer, who allows/constructs things to happen in the game environment, but also by the player who achieves pleasure by successfully executing the action that the game requires in order for the game to continue. (72)

While these doses of pleasure may appear satisfying in and of themselves (explosions seem to have intrinsic appeal), they also serve to recognize the player's efficacy. Early arcade machines accomplished this in couple of ways. Examples include the chance to win additional turns, or "1 ups," (the equivalent to earning an extra ball in pinball), or if one played well enough, the opportunity to enter initials into a high score list. Now, many home video games reward players with "unlockable" levels or items, or non-interactive movie sequences. Sacha Howells has noted that the cinematic cut-scenes that intersperse game play not only structure the narrative sequence of video games but

themselves serve as player rewards for successful play, especially in the form of so-called "end movies" (113-114). One can go a step further to ground this theme of agency, mastery and reward: Something or someone must be master/mastered, and someone or something must be rewarded/rewarding.

The modern forerunner to the anthropomorphized computer rests with Alan Turing, a mathematician who in 1950 proposed what came to be called the Turing test for machine intelligence: if a human can't tell a machine is really a machine in conversation, then the machine has passed the test. Nowadays, Turing's test has more currency in the popular imagination than in current AI research. Steven Johnson writes,

> It's tempting to trot out that old standby of AI research and ask whether today's games have passed some kind of Nintendo-era version of the Turing test, but in a way, the question is too easy. (The computer-controlled bots in a first-person shooter like *Unreal Tournament* can easily pass for human opponents.) What's more striking about he latest generation is the appearance of unscripted, emergent behavior - the AI stumbling onto new ways of responding to the world, strategies and behaviors that weren't deliberately planned by the designers. (80)

What is important here is not to determine the validity of direct comparisons between human and artificial intelligence, but rather, to note how human subjectivity continues to assert itself in relation to an other.

Several studies on computers as social actors have been carried out in the past. In 1963, IBM researcher Robert Lee conducted a survey to gauge public understanding of computers. In addition to general demographic questions and familiarity with computers, interviewees were asked a series of 20 questions distilled from 100 earlier, intensive interviews. Lee found that the popular beliefs and attitudes about computers of the 3000 people interviewed could be gathered under two factors: "Beneficial Tool of Man Perspective," and "Awesome Thinking Machine Perspective." Lee found evidence pointing to both but noted,

> It should be pointed out that this anthropomorphic conception of the computer is clearly not the dominant one in popular thinking - at least at the conscious level as expressed in a survey interview. Typically, only a minority subscribes to the various statements…in contrast to the vast majorities who readily agree with…statements that portray the computer as a beneficial tool of man. (56)

While relatively few people in Lee's study believed that the computer was "really" of superior intelligence, popular representations from science fiction of that period - and

the present - suggest that regardless of beliefs about the “reality” of the computer’s intelligence, many people behave as if the computer is another person.[4]

Another example of interpersonal relationship between human operators and the machines themselves can be found in the work of Joseph Weizenbaum, the creator of the computer program ELIZA. In the mid-sixties, using a script called "DOCTOR," Weizenbaum introduced the MIT community to a computerized psychiatrist, trained - or rather programmed - in "the Rogerian technique of encouraging a patient to keep talking" (369). As Weizenbaum reflected a decade after DOCTOR was introduced,

> I was startled to see how quickly and how very deeply people conversing with DOCTOR became emotionally involved with the computer and how unequivocally they anthropomorphized it. Once my secretary, who had watched me work on the program for many months and therefore surely knew it to be merely a computer program, started conversing with it. After only a few exchanges with it, she asked me to leave the room. (371)

Here Weizenbaum notes that despite his secretary's and other users' knowledge that DOCTOR was a programmed script, most behaved as if DOCTOR was a real person.

But most germane to the anthropomorphism of the video game apparatus is Scheibe and Erwin's article, "The Computer as Alter" (1979). Scheibe and Erwin had a

group of 40 students play computer games that manifested varying degrees of "intelligence," or rather, the appearance of intelligence mingled with difficulty. Nearly all - 39 of the 40 - addressed the computer during play. Often the subjects cursed the machine, calling it "you" or "it," and reminiscent of Turing's test, a few participants asked if the games were not being controlled by a human opponent (108). Scheibe and Erwin write,

> These results provide evidence for the temporary personification of the computer for tasks such as the ones used in this experiment. In addition, Ss tended to talk more in an isolated setting and to use more personal pronouns to refer to the computer when it displayed greater "intelligence" in its responses. (108)

In the preceding examples of human-computer interaction, the line between "interactive" and "intersubjective" is hazy. Peter Vorderer notes that one of the very ways that computer scientists first conceptualized interactivity was as a person-to-person set of exchanges (24). Interactivity, like intersubjectivity, is a relationship between gamer and game rather than a property of video games. This observation can return us to Lacan and psychoanalysis. The relationship between gamer and game has long been framed in terms of master and mastered.

2.4 Kojève

Although Freud was the figure who loomed largest in Lacan's work, the influence of Alexandre Kojève was remarkable. Kojève was a Russian intellectual best known for his influential lectures on Hegel in the 1930s, which Lacan himself attended. As Elisabeth Roudinesco recounts, Kojève "provided an enduring model for Lacan's own method of teaching. He too would reign over a whole intellectual generation by means of oral teaching, seminars that in his case were centered on the works of Freud" (102). Lacan's exposure to Hegel through Kojève very nearly culminated in a collaborative, comparative interpretation of Freud and Hegel (Roudinesco 104). Though that collaboration never appeared, the centerpiece of Kojève's lectures on Hegel, the master-slave dialectic, remained deeply embedded in Lacan's reworking of Freud.

Introduction to the Reading of Hegel is a collection of Kojève's lectures delivered in the 1930s, and it begins with Kojève's reading of Hegel's master-slave dialectic. Kojève immediately introduces two kinds of desire to his audience. The first is animal desire, which can be thought of in terms of biological needs, such as food. The second desire Kojève introduces he names anthropogenetic desire: "the desire that generates Self-Consciousness" (7). The difference between the two is that anthropogenetic desire "is directed, not toward a real, 'positive,' given object, but

toward another desire" (6). As Kojève clarifies, it is the desire to be desired. In the final analysis, says Kojève, it is the desire to be recognized by another. For Kojève, anthropogenetic desire brings with it a process of negation, a struggle between two potential masters. He postulates that recognition from another is what is needed for self-consciousness to develop, because only with the recognition of another can a person be certain that they are themselves a person. But when one desires to be recognized, that person cannot simultaneously recognize the other person. This is because in seeking recognition, one substitutes his or her own image as the object of the other person's desire. Whereas previously that other person had also desired to be desired, they must now desire that substitute image. The master is the recognized party; the slave is the party that recognizes.

Lacan's adoption of Kojève's theme of desire and recognition was by no means a simple conceptual import. Charles Shepherdson notes two disparities. Whereas Kojève has but two categories, animal desire and anthropogenetic desire, Lacan utilizes three categories, need, demand, and desire. In Lacan's system of thought, each corresponds to one of the three registers, the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The second disparity between Kojève and Lacan is the absence of the unconscious in Kojève's model. The result is that what Lacan means by desire is not comparable to either of Kojève's types. Instead, Kojève's anthropogenetic desire more accurately, but

not completely corresponds to what Lacan names demand (Shepherdson 202). Demand for Lacan is the ego's demand for recognition.

Bringing this philosophical model to bear on the gamer-game relationship, one can hear how resonantly words such as struggle, mastery and recognition ring with video gaming. As noted earlier, a challenge and reward-recognition mechanism is a basic feature of video game design, and this recognition is disbursed from an anthropomorphized, abstract notion of the game as an artificially intelligent adversary. Like Kojève's master-slave relationship, this interactive, intersubjective relationship between the gamer and game is a process of negation: gamers speak of "finishing" or "beating" video games. The question remains as to how these accomplishments are local and limited instances of an ongoing relationship between unconscious desire and video game space.

2.5 Spatial consumption

In *Nintendo and New World Travel Writing*, Margaret Fuller and Henry Jenkins propose that the navigational aspect of many video games distinguishes them from previous narrative media: unlike narrative representations common to films and novels, video games often emphasize movement through space over plot development and resolutions. Although they each possess some sort of story, Nintendo games, like the "discovery" narratives of the New World, are tedious when read for the standard

narrative trajectory of exposition, rising action, climax and resolution. Fuller and Jenkins argue this tedium is not the games' significance, but instead, what is most remarkable about games and discovery narratives is their treatment of space. In both discovery narratives and many video games, the movement through, the mapping of and eventual mastery over space takes precedence over narrative resolution. As Jenkins describes it, this style of consumption is most definitely imaginative and desirous: "Once immersed in playing, we don't really care whether we rescue Princess Toadstool or not; all that matters is staying alive long enough to move between levels, to see what awaits us on the next screen" (Par. 13).

Jenkins and Fuller's account of virtual tourism is not particularly illuminating of sports or racing games, but it applies to a great number of others: Third-person action games such as *Tomb Raider* or *Castlevania*; strategy games such as *Civilization*, first-person shooters such as *Doom* or *Halo.* Even role-playing games of staggering complexity such as *Morrowind* feature spatial exploration and mastery of space. Rollings and Adams emphasize that although story and character development are central to role playing-games, "In order for the story to progress and the characters to develop, they have to have something to do. Hence, adventure, exploration, and combat are the mechanisms by which the two primary elements are expressed" (348). When one considers the additional "campaigns" or "add-ons" that often complement

individual games, it becomes clearer that under an ideology of mastery, the thrill of defeating a game is always undergirded by an insistent desire to consume more. For example, action games such as *TIE Fighter* are complemented by expansion software that adds more "missions" to the game, while the turn-based strategy game *Civilization III* has expansion packs that recreate landscapes and empires of ages past. Military-themed first-person shooters such as *Doom*, *Quake* and *Half-Life* have received most expansions due to player modifications. One of the most popular first-person shooters of the last few years, *Counter-Strike*, originated as a homemade modification to Valve Software's game *Half-Life*. The popularity of both professionally developed and do-it-yourself spatial expansions suggests that for hardcore gamers, spatial mastery - and importantly the exploration and mastery of *new spaces* - is alluring.

The distinction to be made between conscious and unconscious mastery is that the demand for mastery (over a game) is possible but ultimately unsatisfying, whereas unconscious desire for mastery (over all) would be ultimately satisfying but is impossible. Each picks up where each other temporarily leaves off in the play of desire and satisfaction. This theme of spatial mastery - this style of consumption - gives desire a specific character, one that is different from that of narrative cinema. But unconscious desire in cinema and games possess a fundamental similarity: plenitude is continuously deferred. It is for this reason that there is something tragic about beating a

video game, because it spells an end to the pursuit. Because the game as other *is* the space that are to be mastered, once those spaces are revealed as limited, the game no longer serves as an entity which can recognize the player's mastery, except on the limited terrain the game offers. Achieving the game's formal victory condition signals mastery locally, but refers desire to those unfinished games and their spaces. While recognition and mastery is indeed satisfying over individual games, unconscious desire is never satisfied. Something more can always be imagined. Here, a system of exchanges couples with aesthetics, offering a target - in the form of another game - to alleviate that lack of satisfaction.

2.6 Capturing mastery

Game and film theorist Torben Grodal's idea of an "aesthetics of repetition" is a useful way to chart the encounter between gamer and game, and link mastery to consumption:

> The first time a game is played, it is experienced with a certain unfamiliarity the world is new and salient and poses challenges and mystery. By playing the game numerous times, the game world will become increasing familiar…the end result of the learning process is…what psychologists might call *desentization by habituation*. The virtual world becomes predictable, it loses its visual and acoustic

> salience, and the player will probably stop playing the game at this stage. (148)

Grodal's description can be read as a tracing of the progressive stages of challenge to mastery and to its ultimately tragic nature - the inability to satisfy indefinitely. Grodal does not address the economic context of video game consumption. Whether or not Grodal's cognitive model is the basis for the gaming experience as a terminal one, it seems clear that the "aesthetics" of repetition bear a remarkable resemblance to the act of buying a game, playing a game, and then growing bored of the game (and assumedly, moving on to a new one.) Grodal's aesthetics suggest that enjoyment has a sort of "use value" that is tied to cognition, but one might juxtapose this naturalization of use value to Ryan Cook recent work on libidinal partitioning. Cook notes that packaging enjoyment (utility) is a necessary condition for exchange and profit (36). This, argues Cook, from a psychoanalytic perspective, is the lesson of the dot com crash, which revealed that shaky New Economy "business models" often failed to circulate investors' exuberance in a controlled, profitable manner. Unlike the dot-com casualties, the game industry has successfully contained the value of gamers' exuberance: a gamer's desire for spatial mastery reproduces the gamer's want for the next game. As Kline et al. write, "the player who enjoys exploring the virtual territory of the game - is also the real-world colonized whose imagination is increasingly

occupied and shaped into a source of profits" (Kline et al. 127). Although gamers do speak of games as containers, that archaic metaphor obscures the fact that the commodity in question is not the game itself but the experience of playing it. It is not so much that games contain consumable space, but that the experience of moving through novel spaces has become contained. This shift is embodied in the conflictual relationship between the gamer and the computer as other. Looking to how the gamer's body is punctuated by commodity experience further evidences that attaining mastery is also about being disciplined.

2.7 The captivated body

In the early 21st century, "virtual reality" has already acquired quaintness. Pushed off the cutting edge by the World Wide Web in the mid 1990s, commercial VR now seems a silly relic, as amusing as the facial expressions worn by teenage boys donning gloves n' goggles in Aerosmith music videos (*Amazin*', 1993) or glued to computer screens in forgettable movies such as 1994's *Brainscan*. The most remarkable aspect of consumer VR was the way it was advertised. Though often positioned as an extension of video game technology, virtual reality was not something that could be depicted like screen-based video games. It was something a user had to experience "in-person." How else could a technology offering to simulate the mundane

("reality") be advertised, other than by depicting some strange contraption strapped to a user's face?

The step from the silliness of consumer VR to the gamer's body and the demands consumption places upon it is a small one. If a missing link is required, then it must be Nintendo's doomed Virtual Boy video game system, introduced in 1995. Unlike the successful 16-bit video game systems released in the years immediately prior, that emphasized graphics and processing power over earlier 8-bit systems, the most notable aspect of the Virtual Boy was it's unique interface. Red in color, the Virtual Boy looked like a cross between a Viewmaster toy and a pair of virtual reality goggles. Like VR, the Virtual Boy dragged the gamer's body out into the open, and forced the recognition of it by gamers and observers alike. It is true that the Virtual Boy's failure was over determined. Its odd, red vector graphics, the anticipation of soon-to be released 64-bit video game consoles and the lack of an impressive launch title all doomed it. But the dramatic way in which the Virtual Boy focused attention on the gamer's body was another reason the device failed. Users hardly appeared masters of anything.

Bodies that play video games are usually kept out of sight. Since the Virtual Boy, with the rare exception of spectacular oddities such as *Dance Dance Revolution*, and intriguing new devices such as Sony's EyeToy, gamers are made intentionally

unaware of their bodies during play.[5] Rollings and Adams write, "From the moment the player loads the software, and the first screen appears, he is in your world. Everything that he sees, hears, and feels from that point on -- every audio, visual, and interactive element - must strive to convince him that the only thing that exists is the game" (146). For Rollings and Adams, it is the game designer's duty to enable players to take on what Coleridge called the "willing suspension of disbelief," by offering an elegant interface that does not refer gamers to their placement in the larger context of the player's living room, or to the evidence of the game's manufacture. The word "willing" means that gamers aren't "duped," but rather repress the knowledge that they are being manipulated so as to have a good time. As Rollings and Adams note, these interface aesthetics are value-laden in a commercial sense as well: "The user interface can make or break your game: It can give it the perfect air of consummate professionalism or the shabby appearance of an amateur effort" (148).

Non-playing observers are often disturbed by or contemptuous of the sight of the immersed player. Observers might point out the seemingly stupidly transfixed posture of gamers, or to the ailment known half-jokingly called "Nintendo thumb." In a different context, Slavoj Žižek notes that there exists a popular feeling "of something unnatural, obscene, almost terrible when we see children talking with a computer and obsessed with the game, oblivious to everything around them" (294). The disruption

that the sight of disciplined bodies evokes in onlookers testifies that mastery is also about being disciplined. If bodies that play video games are disturbing, especially those bodies that consume a lot of video games, it is not because there is something "wrong" with those bodies, but that there is something impolitic about drawing attention to the physical aspects of consumption and commodity experience. Certainly, a host of other preoccupations and agendas have fueled the sense of something terrible that Žižek describes. But to onlookers and outsiders, this appearance of captivated bodies is disconcerting, in part because they reflect the video game itself as a well-marketed intersubjective, but "inhuman partner" (Žižek 294). Meanwhile, the longstanding tendency to personify technology notwithstanding, gamers' perception of competing against an other may be itself a projection of their own reified subjectivity, the experience of spatial mastery as a commodity circulating in what Baudrillard identified as a "fun morality" where subjects are compelled to enjoy themselves, over and over again (52).

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[1] "Digital Press Room." 2003. Entertainment Software Association. 15 March 2004. <http://www.theesa.com/pressroom.html>.

[2] Appadurai's concept of imagination as a productive social practice is distinct from Lacan's concept of the imaginary as a part of psyche that constructs one-to-one correspondences. However, chapter three demonstrates that gamers' imaginations are often anxiously put to work attempting to deduce such an imaginary (in the Lacanian sense) correspondence between the priced value of a game and the enjoyment it may or may not supply.

[3] Or really, subjects dupe themselves.

[4] See also Dertouzos, Michael. The Unfinished Revolution: Human-Centered Computers and What They Can Do For Us. NY: HarperBusiness, 2001.

[5] A comparative analysis of the body in the arcade and in the home is beyond the scope of the present work, but arcades - quickly becoming the drive-in movie theater for those who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s as they disappear - organize the sight of bodies differently. However, it should be noted that bodies aren't usually on display in arcades either, because onlookers are often observing the screen to assess the player's progress.

Chapter 3. Gaming Forums and Valuation

In the previous chapter an aesthetic - mastery - was described as style of video game consumption in which the experience of navigating and overcoming game space is manufactured, exchanged and exhausted. Buse warns,

> It is obviously very much in the interests of Sega and Nintendo to provide games with terminus points, because when players finish one game, master it, they will most likely want to head right out and buy another….although it is true that the circuit of desire in video games is set up, in the crudest terms, to make money, there is by no means a one-to-one correlation between the financial and libidinal investments made in the games by their players, because the significance of these narratives at the cultural level exceeds any reduction to the economy. (175-176)

Buse goes on to suggest, "how one might start to think about these video game narratives in terms of a more general economy of desire and expenditure" (177). His point, that player enjoyment and publisher's profits are not seamlessly structured, is well taken. But how is "the cultural level" to be separated from "the economy," especially for video gamers, whose culture is that of commodities and whose

commodities are constitutive of culture? Instead of reading the slippage between enjoyment and profit as the horizon of culture and economy (or suggesting that the "cultural level" subsumes the economic), the slippage of enjoyment and profit might instead be interpreted as a sign that gamers' imaginative production of value can be disciplined, but not mastered.

Video game discussion forums occupy an interstitial space between play and purchase, and the representations that gamers provide there afford an opportunity to examine the correlation and slippage between enjoyment and investment. The forums also provide a documentation of gamers' imagination at work, hammering out value codings in concert with those of others. These valuations are sometimes well disposed to the maintenance of profitable exchange, and at other times, are perplexed and critical of such a framework. Before examining these postings, the online forums themselves must be addressed as sites of discursive activity and storage.

3.1 The forums

Some of the largest video game discussion boards and the gamers that frequent them furnished the material for analyses. CNET's Gamespot forums and Gamespy Industries' ForumPlanet were both consulted, as were the forums hosted by *Game Informer* magazine. Additionally, the 1Up Forums hosted by Ziff Davis Media in association with their numerous magazines, including *Electronic Gaming Monthly*,

also supplied research material. The primary reason these large forums were consulted was the volume of available postings. ForumPlanet boasts of over 12 million posts dispersed through dozens of forums. The sheer number of postings publicly available in large forums such as these yields a volume of discourse unavailable on any single discussion forum. Of special interest was to locate and read closely those postings and discussion threads dealing with games at various critical moments such as purchase, rental, sale, and trade-in. Additionally, talk of "finishing" a game, replayability and collecting were also read closely to in relation to gamers' perceptions of exhaustibility and value. To locate these postings, keyword searches were conducted using the discussion forums' own built-in search feature. Though these searches were focused on specific topics, the postings the searches returned were embedded in larger discussion threads. The larger context of the thread gives some assurance that the chosen keyword search method did not neglect important peripheral topics not specifically searched for by name. For instance, a search for the word "replay" yielded a discussion thread entitled "Do you keep or sell the games that you beat?" in which replay was but one issue mentioned in a thread more than 25 postings in length. The search feature that is common to most discussion boards and allows visitors (including researchers) to extract specific and useful information from the forums. This archival quality

sometimes is overlooked in favor of the implications of virtual community that forums portend, but forums are clearly repositories of gaming information.

The archival aspect of very large discussion forums brings into relief the concept of network effects: the more users that join a network, the greater the value the network holds for its users (imagine how much less valuable a telephone phone would be if only a few other people had one). Thus, the largest discussion forums can be viewed as networks, and the more postings, the more value the network has for both gamers and researchers looking for information, for advertisers, and for operators selling advertising space. Implicit in the act of posting is the notion that one's contribution either is or should be of value; posting is a productive activity. In most forums, and not only in those related to video games, users are given rankings for the number of posts they have contributed - usually, the more the better. The most common discussion thread structure is an initial question or observation, which replies tend to directly address. Subsequent contributions may take various forms: postings about games-related news and news analysis, consumer guidance, industry rumors, and personal opinion and experience.[1]

It is worth emphasizing that postings regarding personal taste, accomplishments, opinion and experience cannot be directly translated into others' practical use, but remain valuable nonetheless. Those who have visited online discussion forums know

that depending on the subject matter, forums can be dreadfully banal. As ForumPlanet.com humorously declares, “Tell Someone Who Cares!”[2] Andrew Feenberg and Maria Bakardjieva observe of online forums in general that they are nothing if not ordinary: "Online forums….are rarely either uplifting or degrading and much more often simply amusing, instrumental or inconsequential" (39). However, forums do remain significant as sites of discursive activity. By closely examining the word, "forum," it is possible to draw out the significance of forums as sites of affective activity, rather than as merely a storehouse of information to be raided by savvy consumers (and academic researchers).

Holding gaming forums – perhaps online forums in general - to the imaginary standard of "the forum," (with all the semantic baggage that accompanies the term) may be one reason that online forums have turned out to be only intermittently enlightened, and are scarcely utopian or dystopian. Perhaps online discussion of matters other than gaming does justice to the Western ideal of the Roman forum and the Greek agora as those places from which, one is told, reasoned discourse sprang. While rhetoric is not entirely absent from gaming forums, they are by no means commonplace. Video game discussion forums, and many other kinds of online forums, are playful bull sessions, which seem to lead an almost timeless existence – one rough analog is ancient Greece’s symposium. Despite its association with learned discourse,

"the symposium," as Dolf Zillman puts it, was "plainly a drinking session" (7). Zillman's assertion is borne out by Plato's *Symposium*. The philosophizing is just about to start when Pausanias says to his guests, Socrates among them,

> And now, my friends, how can we drink with least injury to ourselves? I can assure you that I feel severely the effect of yesterday's potations, and must have time to recover; and I suspect that most of you are in the same predicament, for you were of the party yesterday. Consider then: How can the drinking be made easiest? (Par. 32)

Pausanias' query is amusing because of the formality it uses to address such a base concern. But humor aside, in this query one can detect the discursive mode that characterizes online forums: elicitation and response in potentially endless fashion.

As online forums have been approached within the normative expectations of utopia and dystopia, so too has the activity of video gaming been treated in an either-or fashion: educational or hazardous. If gaming provides players with a sort of intoxication, (or to put it more benignly, an altering of experience), it is perhaps not surprising that a description in *The New York Times*, according to Brad King, made a gaming parlor "sound like a crack house," while King himself describes the same place in enlightened terms. For many gamers, video gaming is something else, not quite nameable on that continuum, so it may come as no surprise that forums are venues of acculturation in which representations of gaming constructed by the popular press, or by academics, are challenged or ridiculed by gamers (Wolf and Perron 21).

3.2 Legitimate discourse and ambiguity

Insofar as video gaming forums are also sites of discursive production, they afford a somewhat malleable space in which self-representations can be beaten out. Sherry Turkle has described text-based Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) as sites where identities can be forged and users can experiment with multiplicity. For Turkle, MUDs make more concrete those "Gallic abstractions" that announced the decentering of Descartes' famous formula (15). In video gaming forums, self-representation takes the form of screen names or handles that many forum posters choose. Some forum-goers include a unique icon or a homemade signature graphic to affix to each of their postings. The use of taglines, epigrams and aphorisms, alternately humorous, gloomy, dramatic, or irreverent is also common. But while plumbing these archives, one must acknowledge that the content therein is not indiscriminately amassed, and that the relative tameness of the forums is due to rules on what may or may not be posted. As there is no one way that a game must be played, but constraints on how it may be played, similar circumstances govern the online forums discussed here.

Video gaming discussion forums are always moderated, and many forums cull postings that are fall outside of the terms of use established by the forum's proprietor. Contraband postings range from verbal harassment ("flaming"), to posting outside links or copyrighted material. In one observed exchange on a smaller discussion board,

a moderator warned a patron (and everyone else viewing the thread), "hey man, if you don't have anything to say then stop posting. You are spamming with little 3 and 4 word comments. They add no value to the thread and if you continue I'll be forced to suspend your account."[3] On larger boards such as *Game Informer*, rules for legitimate discourse are formalized. According to *Game Informer*'s "Forum Usage Guidelines,"

> Game Informer provides these Forums as a service to its users and customers, to help them exchange ideas, tips, information, and techniques related to our services…. For everyone's benefit please stay on topic. These Forums are provided for the specific purpose of making it possible for the users and customers of Game Informer to help each other in using Game Informer products and services. (GI-Billy par. 1)

Bearing in mind that Game Informer's ultimate service is to deliver gamers to advertisers, discussion forums are ambiguous sites of representation. Gaming forums are place in which gamers can "exchange ideas, tips, information, and techniques" - within bounds. For example, Game Informer moderators scrutinize talk of emulators and software piracy. Likewise the legal notice provided by GameSpy Industries reads,

> GameSpy Industries will act expeditiously to remove or disable access to any material claimed to be infringing or claimed to be the subject of infringing activity, and will act expeditiously to remove or disable

> access to any reference or link to material or activity that is claimed to be infringing. GameSpy Industries will terminate access for subscribers and account holders who are repeat infringers.[4] (GameSpy par. 6)

In short, forums contain explicit disciplinary codes and enforcement, but as in video games themselves, these rules do not preclude some amount of opportunity for posters' expressions of agency.

3.3 Methodology

In the excerpted postings that follow, the discussion threads and the Internet addresses at which they are located have been recorded, but the pseudonyms or "screen names" responsible for the postings have been changed to offer forum-goers as much anonymity as possible while also preserving the accountability of this research. The substitute names are approximations of the originals. Name changes are regrettable because some screen names seemed to illuminate the postings attributed to them.

While forum-goers' on-screen identity is not completely shielded, determining it requires more than a passing effort, and even then, the legal identity of that person remains concealed by a pseudonym or screen name. It should also be noted that these forums are publicly available, and the content of the excerpted postings contains no sensitive or personally identifying information. However, the very anonymity that online forums offer participants also makes it difficult to contextualize postings with

demographic indicators such as age, sex or income. While detailed information on each poster is unavailable, it may be safe to assume that a large majority of forum-goers are American males in their teens, twenties.[5]

3.4 Exchange value and the container metaphor

Before an actual purchase is made, there are what Marx called imagined exchanges – potential exchanges that take place mentally (140). Today, such imagined exchanges increasingly take the form of researching a purchase. The following posting in the 1UP forums, "Zombie" asks fellow gamers about the factors they consider before purchase explicitly linking aesthetics and priced value:

> What's the one thing that's importent to you when buying a game? i mean, we all have to have a reason.[6]

Zombie goes on to suggest that aesthetic considerations such as graphics or story might determine a purchase, as might others' reviews of the game. In response, "DOUG" writes,

> I think they are all important but when buying a game, I will read reviews and rent.[7]

DOUG relies on others' estimations of a game's worth as well as previewing the game by renting it first. These are measures are taken to reduce the chances of buying a game only to find out that it is "a dud." A successful purchase occurs when the game actually

played meets (i.e., is *equivalent* to) or exceeds those imaginary expectations. Recalling Buse, it is important to emphasize that as "composite subjects" considering a purchase - that is, as both players and consumers - gamers *do* aim to achieve a one-to-one correlation between libidinal "use," or enjoyment, and the price of the game.

In many postings, gamers share and solicit ways to test the equivalence between the price of the game, and the actual experience of the game. One method for doing so involves taking into account the formal length of the game in question until “the end” or victory condition is reached. In a thread titled "Game Lengths" in the Game Informer Forums, "Captain_Crunch" writes,

> How many people out there take the length of a game into consideration before they buy it. I do on most games and I wish that gaming magazines would include a estimated length for every game reviewed. I know this time is different for everyone and it would be kind of hard to include this in a review but an average estimate would be helpful, especially for people just buying a system and can only get like one or two games. My first game for PS2 was Zone of the Enders, which was a HUGE mistake since I beat it the first time in 6 hours and was stuck replaying it many times until I had enough money to buy another game.

> (I am aware I could have traded it off but I would not have gotten close to what I paid for it.) How do other people feel about this?[8]

What Captain_Crunch is asking that gaming magazines provide such information so as to help gamers make "equitable" exchanges: a certain amount of money for a certain, known amount of game play. For Captain_Crunch, the length of time a game takes to play is enjoyment time, and this time is in turn is valuable time. To appreciate the implications of this posting, it is necessary to dust off Marx's explanation of exchange value.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx lays out the operation of exchange value, which transforms unlike things into comparable quantities by mediation of "the general commodity," money. Marx writes,

> The value of the commodity is different from the commodity itself. The commodity is a value (exchange value) only within exchange (real or imagined)….Considered as values, all commodities are qualitatively equal and differ only quantitatively, hence can be measured against each other and substituted for one another in (are mutually exchangeable, mutually convertible) in certain quantitative relations. (140-141)

The role of money as a medium of exchange is something mostly taken for granted, but exchange has deeper implication that is often overlooked until a crisis of value - major

or minor, real or imagined - occurs. As Marx writes, "Money implies the separation between the value of things and their substance" (149). The commonsensical, but contradictory appraisal of games as containers of value, rather than a thing represented *as* valuable, calls for a closer look. Considering Marx's explanation of exchange value in conjunction with the above comments by gamers leads to the question: what are the particularized, unique "things" of video gaming that are abstracted by the mediation of money?

To return to Captain_Crunch's posting, the wish to know the length of a game in order to measure some amount of value implies that games are *containers* of a definite amount of game play, or what one might call "use value." Captain_Crunch is not the only one to conceive of games as containers holding valuable material that can be exchanged. Following that logic, Captain_Crunch would like magazines to reveal just how full games are of useful, enjoyable stuff, so as make an informed purchase. This finite amount of game play, insofar as it can be measured in dollars and cents, would assumedly be the same for all prospective buyers, as the price is the same for all of them. But Captain_Crunch also acknowledges that measuring this value is difficult because the time it takes to finish a game depends upon the individual gamer: "I know this time is different for everyone." This contradicts the notion that games contain some measurable quantity of value, because if length depends on who is playing - if it

depends on the specificities that money exchange glosses over - then games as containers of value must be filled to different levels for different gamers. This contradiction that Captain_Crunch acknowledges is a clue that in the retail setting, the value that price represents is quite exterior to a game's substance, and in large part, anterior to it.

According to a Marxian reading, the particulars being generalized as price are the qualitative aspects of the game. But such an analysis does not focus on the real commodity in question, which is the experience of the game, not the game object itself. Considered as an inexhaustible digital commodity, the game itself offers potentially limitless use; yet Captain_Crunch's experience of use value with Zone of the Enders expired without the destruction of the actual game object. The utility of the experience is novelty, but novelty does not inhere in a game object; a game can be new for one gamer and old for another. As Baudrillard writes, "utility itself - is a fetishized social relation, just like the abstract equivalence of commodities" (*For a Critique*, 67). If use value is actually the game's novelty, then the relationship that produces the fiction of use value is that of novelty. Exchange value does not so much abstract (the fictitious) use value of the game in advance of play, but instead refers consumer desire to the novelty of the game. To borrow Baudrillard's term, the usefulness of the game becomes

the "alibi" of exchange value, clouding the fact that novelty - which is a relationship, not a useful property - has been congealed as a "concrete" use value.

For their part, gamers such as Captain_Crunch attempt to deduce this congealed use value as such before purchase so as to make an equitable exchange. But at the moment of exchange, consumers exchange money not for the game itself or a quantity of usefulness inside of it, but for the value the game object represents, the novelty of experiences it promises, or - to use that trite sales 'secret' - “the sizzle, not the steak." That worn phrase is revealing, since the secret (that which is hidden from the subject) is the flip side of that which that which the subject represses. Conceiving of the game object as a container of use value is imaginary in the Lacanian sense: it posits a one-to-one correspondence between the substance of a thing and value. The insufficiency of this imaginary correspondence can be located in consumer anxiety about purchases, which appears to have motivated Zombie's and Captain_Crunch's postings (recall that the latter seems to worry about making another "huge mistake.") This pre-purchase consumer anxiety is mitigated, but never completely avoided by imagining that the game contains a definite amount of valuable, useful stuff - even if it is difficult to know how much or what.

Another strategy to mitigating purchase anxiety about equivalence relies on a different conception of utility. In response to Captain_Crunch's question about game lengths, "Redfeld" states that the quality of the experience trumps length:

> it matters how good the game is like if it's short and sweet its better and if its long and glitchy its bogus.[9]

Redfeld also uses the game-as-container metaphor, but argues that the quality of the container's contents is what matters, not the amount. Several other posters also reject Captain_Crunch's attempt to measure a game's value by its length. "Kid icarus" responds,

> One of my favorite games is Ninja Turtles: Lost In Time for SNES. I can beat that in 27 mins. and 36 secs. It's short but it still ROCKS! Basically it doesn't matter how long a game is. A short one can rock and a long one could bite. Or vice versa.[10]

While mentioning the importance of the quality of the play experience, other gamers also spoke of reassuring brand names. In response to Captain_Crunch's post, "Ribeye" writes,

> I do [take length into consideration] sometimes, like when I got Wind Walker. But then I realized no matter how long it was gonna rock so I got it.[11]

In this posting, Ribeye recounts that length was initially considered, but then discarded as a criterion of worth just before the purchase was made because he or she was sure of the game's value. "Wind Walker" refers to the latest game in a series that began with *The Legend of Zelda*. Since 1986, game designer Shigeru Miyamoto, also responsible for other well-known Nintendo characters such as Mario and Donkey Kong, has produced successive, and successful iterations of *Zelda*. The Nintendo brand, Miyamoto's name, and the popularity of the series are all signifiers that assure worth and justify the asking price.

Although gamers don't appear to agonize over the purchase of "quality" games, games designated as such are no more *inherently valuable* than any other game, although though this is exactly the impression that branding seeks to create, drawing on historical precedent and trusted signifiers to refer reassuringly at the object in question. Responding to Zombie's question about purchasing rationales, "Arcadia32," illustrates another example of the container metaphor and branding in the following posting:

> Well, if this was 1986, I'd tell ya that pictures on the back of package would have to look exceptional…I'm not a kid anymore, and games have gotten to the point where it ain't all about graphics anymore. There's a number of different factors behind a game purchase for

> me….If it's a continuation of a series I know is good…it's mine!!! If it's a Nintendo first party title…I'll pick it up, no questions asked. Everything else needs to score, at least, an 8 out of 10 review.[12]

Like Captain_Crunch, neither Ribeye nor Arcadia32 can see into the prospective purchase to gauge its value. Instead, each relies on the value represented by words like "Nintendo" and "Miyamoto." While game makers and their labor tend to disappear during actual game play, their work is indeed acknowledged as players' relationship to a potential purchase is formulated. Some celebrity game designers, such as Will Wright, John Carmack and Shigeru Miyamoto, are seen as auteurs that pour their talent into their games. The point is not that Wright, Carmack and Miyamoto aren't talented designers, but rather that, as Adams and Rollings observe, "A very small number of game designers - Will Wright and Sid Meier among them - have years of experience and proven track records, and can sell games on the strength of their names alone" (49). But even a renowned auteur cannot fuse the value of a game and its substance. When John Carmack's alter ego at id Software, John Romero, left that company to produce his own game, *Daikatana*, expectations were high because of Romero's visibility as one of *Doom*'s two dads. But upon its release, word quickly spread that *Daikatana* was a flop, and with it the uncomfortable realization that there are no

guarantees of value, only its signifiers. Even if consumer desire is disciplined, it can quickly sour and cease to produce exchange value.

As the excerpts above illustrate, separating value from substance is difficult and persists even when logical contradictions that reveal value's lack of substance emerge. Deducing equivalency between price and useful substance becomes even more difficult when the use value of a game also becomes a point of contention.

Some gamers responding to Captain_Crunch's question about game length said that replay value, not length of the game is what matters to them when buying a game. Because this implies a sort of stored value, "replay value" extends the container metaphor. But if a game can be replayed, then no substantive value is emptied during play. One way gamers have clumsily and only partially avoided this contradiction has been to propose that certain games have (contain) "replay value" while others games do not.

Replay value and is often talked about by gamers as a feature to consider *before* purchasing, as if it were a property of the game itself. In a thread in the 1UP forums titled "What is the main thing that you look for in a game that makes you want to buy it?" the thread's starter, "Burnside" writes,

> My main concern is replay value. i used to always have finished games sitting around that i never played. Now though, i only get games with

> high replay (mostly sports) because I feel like i am getting my money's worth. If a game that i want to play doesn't seem to have much replay, i rent it.[13]

Burnside is explicit here, claiming that sports games are innately replayable. Other threads, such as this one from GameSpy, "Replay value?" openly requests advice from others about which games have it, suggesting that replay value be taken into consideration prior to purchase. "Jaimie," the thread's starter asks,

> I was wondering what game has the most and best replay value that is very fun and almost never gets old…one that is well worth you money and is an all time classic (or will be). Please tell me your opinion.[14]

In both Jaimie's posting and the previous one, getting one's money's worth through replay is important. Yet while Jaimie speaks of replay value as a feature built into the game that would exist for any player, the posting at the same time seems to acknowledge that replay value is a matter of opinion or circumstance. This ambiguity suggests that replay is not something that a game has or contains, but a way of playing the game. In a different GameSpy posting, "Replay value…" a poster called "Nine_inch_Nail" attempts to clear the air of the ambiguities concerning replay value in a surprisingly lucid treatise:

> i'd like to have a word or two about 'replay value'. Everyone seems to have a different idea of what it is. most of you take it as how much potential does the game have to be played again. this really isn't what replay value is. It's not how much you *can* play the game, it's how much you *do* play the game. for example, thanks to the dog tags and easter eggs Metal Gear Solid 3 has pretty high potential replay value. But this means nothing if you can only play the game for a few days before putting the controller down and never picking it up again. on the reverse side you can play the game long after finding all the extra things. Many of you say that Max Payne has little to no replay value. If you look at potential, you're right. after 2 or 3 run throughs you've seen everything the game has. yet i still play the game several hours a week even after beating the game 5 times. why? i don't know, it's damn fun. Ever few days i just get the urge to play it and i do….it's not how long the game takes to finish on paper, it's how long you actually PLAY and ENJOY the game…[15]

Nine_inch_Nail is incredulous of "replay value" as some quality of a video game, and argues that replay cannot be reliably abstracted from the idiosyncratic relationship between individual gamers and games, by explaining that *Max Payne,* a game with

reputedly little replay value, continues to fascinate him or her. Why the game continues to fascinate is a mystery, but it cannot be explained as a function of a game's supposed replay value, or by its formal structure (e.g., narrative) because these explanations are in contradiction to Nine_inch_Nail's own experience. However, Nine_inch_Nail's posting is revealing not only for its demystification of replay, but the continued mystery of use value that Nine_inch_Nail admits is unexplainable. Though it is difficult to historicize a medium that in commercial form is barely 30 years old, a brief comparative media analysis not only lends credence to Nine_inch_Nail's critique of replay value and the container metaphor, but it also enables a demystification of use value.

When printed matter became more widely available just before the Industrial Revolution, *how* books were read changed. Summarizing Rolf Engelsing, Robert Darnton writes,

> From the Middle Ages until sometime after 1750, according to Englesing, men read "intensively." They had only a few books -- the Bible, an almanac, a devotional work or two -- and they read them over and over again, usually aloud and in groups, so that a narrow range of traditional literature became deeply impressed on their consciousness. By 1800 men were reading "extensively." They read all kinds of

> material, especially periodicals and newspapers, and read it only once, and then raced on to the next item. (qtd. in Birkerts 71)

This argument dispels the notion that narrative structure makes books intrinsically ill disposed towards multiple readings. Rather, intensive reading is a historical style of reading, based upon material conditions: the scarcity of books and the cultural practices surrounding reading. When books and newspapers became more widely available, a different style of reading emerged, characterized by temporary relationships between readers and texts. The formal narrative structure of books did not define when readers were "done" with them until the 1800s; for bibliophiles and professors of literature, it still does not. Another way of putting this is to say that with regard to reading, the use value of printed material changed - use value could now be exhausted after one reading, whereas before, it was more closely tied to the physical integrity of the book.

If Engelsing is correct - that readers' relationship to books veered towards the perception that they could be emptied of some stored amount of information when the supply an exchange of printed material expanded in late 18th century, a similar relationship seems to govern the reception of video games today. Compare Engelsing's analysis to the following posting in a discussion thread on *Game Informer* entitled "What do you think needs to be improved in games today?" Looney writes,

> I'd actually like to see a lot of single player games that don't have any replay value, but instead just focus on the best one-time-through experience possible. I know I'm in the minority, but once I beat a game, even a great one, I have no desire to play it again….There are too many games out there for me to be putting too much time into any one game.[16]

Looney appears to be the model video game consumer. Notably, the manner in which Looney describes consumption sounds positively laborious, and captures the disciplinary aspect of the consumer cycle quite clearly. Looney seems compelled to enjoy as many games as possible, without being burdened by depth, but instead by the breadth of games available. However, Looney's acceptance of the idea that some games are replayable throws the container metaphor into question by reasserting what the very commodity in question is. In light of this comparison, mastering games and then moving on, as Looney does, is a way of playing games that is closely tied to the circulation of the experience of game play - not just the game - as a product. Looney's and Nine_inch_Nail's postings are remarkable because they both acknowledge the commodity that is in question, and at the same time also acknowledge that serial mastery is not the "natural" or only way to play video games. In fact, the "usefulness"

of games to Looney are wholly attributable to their novelty: "once I beat a game I have no desire to play it again…there are too many games out there."

3.5 Valuation after exchange value

In the previous section, gamers' wish that the substantive aesthetic experience of a prospective purchase would mirror the representation of its value as price was explored. The errors and contradictions of the container metaphor show the tenuous linkages between aesthetic experience and exchange value. The inconsistency of the metaphor hints at the fact that it is that certain style of play, a certain way of experiencing the video game that is the commodity in question, not the physical artifact alone. Although space between the aesthetic experience of game play and the circulation of that experience as a commodity has been drawn, there remains the question of games' durability and valuation after their debut.

After retail exchange, commodities must be coaxed into speaking about their worth. In a thrift store, for example, when shoppers (especially those who also visit retail stores) "confront" the low price of an item,

> This act forces the thrift shopper to contemplate its pleasures and uses in another way. While we would hesitate to call this "use" in a simply nostalgic way…it is vexing to consider what other descriptive term we

> might bring to bear on the crisis of value which thrift so handily demonstrates. (Tinkcom et al. 462)

In other words, shoppers work not so much to establish if an item is worth the asking price, but if it is worth taking home, which requires the invention of some kind of value coding. This is a fundamentally imaginative procedure. In a similar way, when gamers are confronted with the low resale price that their game will fetch used, and decide to keep the game, they too must also imagine a valuation that one would similarly hesitate to call use.

Sold to second-hand stores or traded-in for store credit, games, like used compact discs, usually fetch only a portion of the price originally paid because their novelty has been consumed. This is where the ideological work of the container metaphor breaks down most clearly, because the game is both empty (for its owner, who wishes to sell it) and it is not empty (for the potential second-hand shopper). For some gamers, however, any deal is a good deal. In a thread entitled, "Do you keep or sell the games that you beat?" “Mel281” writes

> Unless its got multiplayer or something else to achieve in the game ill trade it in. once I beat the @#S% out of it there isnt any reason for me to keep it around, might as well get something for it if im not gonna use it anymore.[17]

The presence of used video game chain stores and online auctions show that resale is a common practice. But such exchanges are not universal, and many gamers are unsatisfied with the pricing of their used games in comparison to the original retail price. In a 1UP thread entitled, "Do you like to sell some of the old games you've got, or keep them?" "Dudley" writes,

> Its not in worth trading in your games..everywhere you go you get crap deals.[18]

In a 1UP thread called "To sell or not to sell?" "Squawk54" writes something similar:

> I used to trade in games like Spiderman or Red Faction, but after a while, I'd get the urge to play them and realize in silent frustration that I got screwed out a good game for a measly $20…[19]

Certainly, factors such as the rarity of the used game, judgements about its quality, and its physical condition (e.g., "mint in box") all influence resale price. But these gamers' belief that they are not getting a fair exchange for their used games seems to also stem from a misunderstanding about what the commodity initially purchased, and the commodity now re-entering circulation. A closer examination of this misunderstanding can explain the basis of a game's resale value.

When selling used games, gamers are not re-circulating the same commodity they bought. Nor is the difference between the commodity they bought and the one

they are selling merely a difference of wear-and-tear, rarity, or age of the game object. No, the commodity originally purchased - a *new* game - has been destroyed because the novelty has been consumed; its spaces have been mastered and become mundane. When the novelty of the game is destroyed, so is much of its priced, retail exchange value. In a 1UP thread entitled "Sell games," "Wolf219" does not identify this difference:

> I don't sell my games because you don't get shit for them. Gamestop wanted to give me $4 for Minority Report a $40 game. (Yea I know the game totally sucked but look at the selling price and resale price of it.) [20]

The disparity between retail and resale is of course, not wholly attributable to the changing relationship of the individual gamer to the game, but it is a major, if not the major component. This disparity marks the space in which profits are made, not merely by marking up the price from production costs, but via gamers' expectations and the novel, desirous relationship between gamer and game. It becomes clearer that this is the major source of retail price that used games necessarily lack when looking to gamers' comments about renting a game versus buying it. In a thread on 1UP entitled "the problem with renting games…" the thread's starter, "cris," writes,

> I find that when I rent games, I come pretty close to beating the game. Usually somewhere around 3/4 to 2/3 into the game. I cannot justify buying a game I have gotten almost all the way through.[21]

After actually playing the game, gamers' willingness to pay drops drastically. No wonder that in the late 1980s Nintendo litigated vigorously in a failed attempt to halt video game rentals at chains such as Blockbuster (Sheff 276-277). Renting threatens exchange value (for sellers) because it short-circuits the relationship between gamer and game set up by purchase.

Because of the disparity between retail and resale, many gamers decide to keep the games they've bought. As "SCRU49" puts it in a thread entitled, "Do you keep or sell the games that you beat?"

> Always keep. I've never sold any games ever in my 14 years of gaming. Its better to keep a collection and you can never get a good deal unless the game is rare which you should keep anyway. [22]

In each of these postings, the difference between a game's retail and resale price leads to the accumulation of games, instead of their resale or simple discard. Here, games are still valued, but for different reasons: as part of a collection, as a rarity, or as durable source of enjoyment. The sundry value codings possible after exchange preclude any exhaustive account of commodities' revaluation; one person's judgement of value may

be idiosyncratic and baffling to another. Therefore, the remainder of this analysis deals with the aftershocks of exchange value and the notion of utility as one way to approach the valuation of kept games.

Some gamers understand the game to be valuable as a durable source of entertainment, a use value. A glance to the previous excerpts indicates that gamers were trying to calculate utility in advance of purchase. Recall for instance, that Jaimie was interested not only in a game with "replay value" but one that "is an all time classic (or will be)." If the "use value" of games is artificial (not in the sense that no one has the biological "need" to play video games, but in the sense that the utility of a video game is its novelty - which is a social relation) then it remains to be seen how the use value of a kept game is also a social relationship, even if is no longer one of novelty.

It is difficult to parse the relationships that are congealed into use value after exchange. For instance, in a thread on 1UP entitled "Do you sell your old games?" "GameLord" writes,

> For the most part, I would never sell my old games because I might occasionally play some of them from time to time. The only exception is that if I absolutely hate the game but that usually never happens since

> I tend to research any potential purchases to find out what I might or might not like about it.[23]

It would be hard to describe GameLord's reason for keeping these old games as something other than their utility, although it seems that handiness might be discerned from use, since handiness evokes a specific kind of relational value, not an inherent one either - no game is inherently handy. Similar to GameLord's reasoning that a kept game's value arises from a sort of handiness, in a 1UP thread entitled "Do you keep or sell the games you beat?" "Wingnutz" writes,

> Usually I'll just keep them since most of the games I purchase tend to be beloved AAA titles anyway. But even for the ones that aren't, they'll rarely make a departure from my library. That only happens if I have an overwhelming sense that I wouldn't want to play it again, and could get a fair offering in return.[24]

Wingnutz's posting is slightly different that GameLord's. Though both keep their games, for Wingnutz, these games are not only assumedly worth playing from time to time, but are "beloved titles." If keeping one's video games is not simply a vain attempt to realize their absent "use value," (which it may be), then Wingnutz's comments lead the analysis towards more definite relationships between gamer and kept game that are not so well congealed as utility.

3.6 Imagination and retention

Alternative valuations such as sentimentality do emerge after retail exchange and its emphasis on anticipation and novelty. However, the valuation of kept games and their imagined utility continues to be influenced by the anticipation of future games. In particular, the anticipation of future games and technology that can only be imagined often serves as a template for nostalgic value codings of current games. These imaginary comparisons thus serve as the basis for new valuations.

Sometimes games are kept because they are perceived to be timeless classics, a designation which, paradoxically, can only be ascertained by comparing an old game and a new one. In other cases, even games deemed to be of little worth, and which are rarely "used" or played at all are kept. Several gamers reported that they imagined these old or beaten games would offer nostalgic experiences at some future time. In a 1UP thread entitled, "Do you like to sell some of the old games you've got, or keep them?" "Joker" writes,

> I don't know about you guys, but I like keeping them, even though knowing I can very well get a new game trading or selling some of my own. I like to keep my games as well due to the fact that most of classics…and having them, I get to relive the good old days.[25]

Reliving the "good old days" - in other words, recycling a past experience - is a common rationale for keeping video games. In a Game Informer discussion thread entitled, "What do you do with your games after you're done with them?" "Geek 5" uses nearly the same words:

> I never get rid of any of my games because I know a day will come somewhere down the line when I'll want to play it again. For example, I got a Final Fantasy 2 hankerin' last week, so I grabbed my SNES and remembered the good ol days [26]

"Angel" responds,

> Yeah that's me too. I know that someday I'll get back to the oldies for great memories. I played Sonic the Hedgehog 2 and 3 and it was still great as ever.[27]

When Angel writes that Sonic the Hedgehog 2 was "as great as ever," there is an implicit comparison being made between the dated-ness of that game and the quality of the experience it can "still" offer in present. So too do Geek 5 and Joker compare the good old days to the present, assumedly to present "superior" video games as well. As a rationale for keeping a game, looking forward to what might be called the "nostalgia value" a current game will offer requires gamers to imaginatively compare the game to some abstract future commodity of superior quality.

While Angel and Geek 5's games are designated as classics, games judged to be of poor quality are sometimes also retained for nostalgic value, and more caustic comparisons produce these value codings. In a 1UP thread "Do you keep or sell the games that you beat?" "Tico" writes,

> always keepem no matter how crap they are, and I like to flip on old consoles and relive the joy of the time.[28]

Other gamers also speak of how the passage of time will enable nostalgia to eventually be realized, and this where the imaginative production of kept games nostalgic value becomes clearer. In a 1UP thread entitled "Do you sell your old games?" "GibsonGamer" writes,

> I never sell my old games. One time i sold a crappy game back to Funcoland…can't recall the name…and I got 50 cents for it, and that's when i decided i will never sell any of my games, no matter how good or bad they are. It'll be fun to have things like the PS [Sony PlayStation] and DC [Sega Dreamcast] around the house when i'm older…I like nostalgia [29]

For Tico and GibsonGamer, whether or not a game is aesthetically "good" or "bad," its ability to represent value after exchange seems to depend primarily upon some future comparison when even the dated-ness of a game will override its current quality. In the

same thread, "Ron4977" writes that it is the very inferiority that games will eventually come to represent that merits keeping them:

> I keep em for my "collection" so I can go back and play em again after the XBOX 4 comes out and laugh at how inferior they are. [30]

"Chopper22" adds,

> i could never part with any of my games! Even if it was a "stinker"….going back always make it a challenge of time.[31]

Each of these postings excerpted in this section speak to the same peculiar justification for keeping old or beaten video games, but in a derogatory way that emphasizes the imagined superiority of future games and technology. The imaginative production of nostalgic value is inseparable from the speed at which cultural productions offered for exchange are quickly made obsolete.

To but note that gamers experience nostalgia does not explain the role of the imagination in producing these nostalgic value codings, or the continuing influence of exchange and novelty on that production. The nature of the imaginary comparison that produces the valuation of the kept games needs to be further examined. What does it mean that gamers anticipate the nostalgic value of these kept games? Though it resembles the same anticipation of nostalgia that accompanies photographers at weddings, it is different. Much of the significance of a wedding, its *raison d' être*, lies

in its presentation as a singular, recordable event. Pictures are taken with the knowledge that at some future date, they will be handled gently and reminisced over, and due to the singularity of the event, they will be priceless. On its surface, anticipating the nostalgic value of these kept games seems similar, but there is a difference: unlike a wedding, which is (ideally) a singular event in the married individuals' lives, playing a video game is an everyday experience for the gamer. And unlike the ostensibly incomparable wedding-event (woe to the guest who publicly compares a second wedding to the first, or the third to the second), explicit in the anticipation of games eventual nostalgic value is their comparison to future commodities and the experiences they might offer.

Anticipating the dated-ness of a contemporary game/gaming experience brings to mind Fredric Jameson's notion of "nostalgia for the present." As Appadurai glosses, this is the misrecognition of the present as a time already past, accomplished by presenting the consumer with the recycled styles of the past using a "back to the future" aesthetic (77). But the comparison gamers speak of does not require the presentation of the present as already past by employing the cues and styling of bygone eras, although examples of this in video games could likely be found. Postings from gamers like Ron4977 indicate that the comparison between the experience that the kept game offers currently, and that of some future gaming experience depends upon

gamers' capacity to imagine the images and experiences of the future as some abstract source of superiority. Thanks to the rush of new commodities, gamers do not have to wait around for more impressive games to actually appear in order to imagine how desperately primitive one's present game - or rather, the experiences of the game - will eventually be by comparison. If these experiences aren't already inferior, the oncoming rush of new products virtually guarantees they will be, and when this happens, the nostalgic value that gamers like Ron4977 anticipate, imagine and produce will be realized.

The significance of anticipating nostalgic value is that such anticipation reveals not just a case of planning, but a sort of perverse revelry in its depreciation. Before an object or an experience can be salvaged and re-valued as a collectible, a classic, a rarity, or remembered wistfully, it must first be devalued. Clinging to a depreciated object as it slides into the void of non-value involves a re-coding of value, but nevertheless relies on imagining the rush of new commodities and experiences to achieve its consistency.

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[1] These are examples, not a typology.

[2] ForumPlanet.com. 2003. GameSpy Industries, Inc. 12 March 2004. <http://www.forumplanet.com>.

[3] "Do you rent games 1st?" Online posting. 8 November 2003. Gaming Evolved Video Game Forums. 14 February 2004. <http://www.gamingevolved.com/forums/showthread.php?t=10369>.

[4] During the course of this research, GameSpy Industries and another online video game gaming portal enterprise, IGN Entertainment, completed a merger announced in December 2003. The merger resulted in a re-wording of the legal notice, but an archived version, which was up to date as of March 2004, is available and appears in the list of works cited.

[5] The majority of excerpted postings analyzed deal with console video gaming. According to Entertainment Software Association survey data, 72% of console video gamers are male. 40% of all console gamers (male and female) are ages 18-35; 38% are under 18; the remaining 22% are 36 years or older. For survey methodology, see Interactive Digital Software Association, "Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry," page 1.

[6] "What's the one thing that's importent to you when buying a game?" Online posting. 19 November 2003 6:45 PM. 1UP Forums. 11 November 2003. <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=30139>.

[7] "What's the one thing that's importent to you when buying a game?" Online posting. 19 November 2003 6:53 PM. 1UP Forums. 11 November 2003. <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=30139>.

[8] "Game Lengths" Online posting. 20 October 2003, 6:33 PM. Game Informer Forums. 11 February 2004. <http://forums.gameinformer.com/gi/board/message?board.id=sony&message.id=6088>.

[9] "Game Lengths" Online posting. 8 November 2003. 4:38 PM. Game Informer Forums. 11 February 2004. <http://forums.gameinformer.com/gi/board/message?board.id=sony&message.id=6088>.

[10] "Game Lengths" Online posting. 9 November 2003 11:55 AM. Game Informer Forums. 11 February 2004. <http://forums.gameinformer.com/gi/board/message?board.id=sony&message.id=6088>.

[11] "Game Lengths" Online posting. 20 October 2003. 6:47 PM. Game Informer Forums. 11 February 2004. <http://forums.gameinformer.com/gi/board/message?board.id=sony&message.id=6088>.

[12] "What's the one thing that's importent to you when buying a game?" Online posting. 20 November 2003. 12:48 AM. 1UP Forums. 11 November 2004. <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=30139>.

[13] "What is the main thing that you look for in a game that makes you want to buy it?" Online posting. 6 December 2003 5:05 PM. 1 UP Forums. 11 February 2004. <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=45599>.

[14] "Replay Value?" Online posting. 5 May 2002. 6:46 PM. GameSpy Forums. 11 February 2004. <http://www.forumplanet.com/gamespy/topic.asp?fid=2370&tid=634613>.

[15] "Replay Value…." Online Posting. 26 December 2001 12:23 PM. GameSpy Forums. 1 March 2004. <http://www.forumplanet.com/gamespy/ps2/topic.asp?fid=2388&tid=484706>.

[16] "What do you think needs to be improved in games today?" 22 November 2003 7:38 PM. Game Informer Forums. 11 November 2004. <http://forums.gameinformer.com/gi/board/message?board.id=GeneralGaming&message.id=9568>.

[17] "Do you keep or sell the games that you beat?" Online posting. 22 October 2003 8:14 AM. 1UP Forums. 11 February 2004. <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=5027>.

[18] "Do you like to sell some of the old games you've got, or keep them?" Online posting. 25 October 2003 11:21 AM. 1 UP Forums. 7 April 2004. <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=15180>.

[19] "To sell or not to sell?" Online posting. 4 November 2003 08:58 PM. 1UP Forums. 11 February 2004. <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=general&message.id=3055>.

[20] "Sell games" Online posting. 24 January 2004 8:17 PM. 1UP Forums. 3 April 2004. <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=ps_disc&message.id=35419>.

[21] "the problem with renting games..." Online posting. 7 November 2003 10:44 AM. 1UP Forums. 11 February 2004. <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=22785>.

[22] "Do you keep or sell the games that you beat?" Online posting. 11 October 2003 8:35 AM. 1UP Forums. 11 February 2004. <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=5027>.

[23] "Do you sell your old games?" Online posting. 11 January 2004 8:26 PM. 1UP Forums. 3 April 2004. <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=76405>.

[24] "Do you keep or sell the games that you beat?" Online posting. 14 October 2004 9:42 AM. 1UP Forums. 11February 2004 <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=5027>.

[25] "Do you like to sell some of the old games you've got, or keep them?" Online posting. 25 October 2003 3:51 AM. 1 UP Forums. 7 April 2004. <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=15180>.

[26] "What do you do with your games after you're done with them?" Online posting. 26 September 2003 12:52 AM. Game Informer Forums. 11 February 2004. <http://forums.gameinformer.com/gi/board/message?board.id=GeneralGaming&message.id=1323>.

[27] "What do you do with your games after you're done with them?" Online posting. 26 September 2003 6:28 AM. Game Informer Forums. 11 February 2004. <http://forums.gameinformer.com/gi/board/message?board.id=GeneralGaming&message.id=1323>.

[28] "Do you keep or sell the games that you beat?" Online posting. 22 October 2004 3:09 AM. 1UP Forums. 11 February 2004 <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=5027>.

[29] "Do you sell your old games?" Online posting. 11 January 2004 9:09 PM. 1UP Forums. 3 April 2004. <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=76405>.

[30] "Do you keep or sell the games that you beat?" Online posting. 22 October 2004 3:56 PM. 1UP Forums. 11 February 2004 <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=5027>.

[31] "Do you keep or sell the games that you beat?" Online posting. 22 October 2004 10:16 PM. 1UP Forums. 11February 2004 <http://boards.1up.com/zd/board/message?board.id=egm_disc&message.id=5027>.

Chapter 4. Conclusions

Atari's dump continues to capture the imagination of those who hear the story, to the point that it has become a piece of modern folklore with its own entry in the folklore and urban legends resource snopes.com. Should that an adventurous gamer plan the probably unoriginal idea of a pilgrimage to the site, a logistical difficulty emerges - where is it? Although *The New York Times* reports the burial site as the Alamogordo city dump, other accounts refer to an unmarked location. And if the site was found, what then? All that remains is slag, the failed smelting of a blockbuster movie and a powerful new media form. Like the pilgrimage that Jack Gladney and his colleague Murray make to "the most photographed barn in America" in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, when confronted with the supposed referent, its substantive value suddenly seems gone elsewhere. Why did we come here? The immediate answer is cliché but true: in retrospect, the value is not to be found at the site, but in the approach. This was no pilgrimage, but a road-trip.

This thesis has argued - first from a theoretical template and then through analysis of online postings - that video games' value is organized in a similar fashion to the imaginary episode just recounted. The "useful" joy of a video game resides in the passage through its uncertain novelties and the satisfaction (though ultimately local) of

beating it. Importantly, the promise of such enjoyment is imagined before purchase by gamers, and the game's price represents this desirous relationship. Those postings that question the terminality of a game (such as the discussions of replay value) throw into relief the influence that exchange has on how gamers' imagine and experience games as pleasurable and valuable. Although the harnessing of narrative by exchange has been powerful indeed, the terminality that exchange requires is not identical to a game's narrative or formal structure. A gamer may finish with a game without ever finishing the game. While a game's formal structure provides an oft-used map for the exhaustion of value, the notion of replay shows that gamers may derive pleasure - and thus value from games outside of the boundaries imposed by exchange.

Just as value is tied up in the pleasures of gaming, so too is value coding inseparable from what gamers do with games after buying them, after "beating" them, or after becoming bored of them. It is difficult to distance those value codings from the aftershocks of exchange value. The valuations that gamers invest into kept games, such as nostalgia and collecting, do not necessarily "rescue" games or the experience of playing them from the logic of the market. Whether games are kept because they are "good" in spite of their obsolescence, or because their obsolescence provides a basis for value, both depend on the imagined, future exchanges of new games as a touchstone. Larry Lessig claims, "Every bit of creative property goes through different

'lives'…*When* the commercial life of creative property ends, I don't know. But it does." (113-114). Creative commodities do have lives after commerce. This is true so long as a value can be invented for them; otherwise they disappear. But as gamers' postings about kept games illustrate, that creative property has a life after commerce does not mean a life apart from commerce.

Finally, the postings attest to gamers' imaginative production of value as a shared discursive activity. The mere fact that gamers talk about value in gaming forums reveals that there is nothing natural or substantive about the value that video games represent, even as advertising has become gamers' "natural" habitat. Advertising may be the primary organ influencing valuation, but it is not the only one. Communities of gamers - even tentative and transient ones like those hosted by online forums - are enclaves in which value codings are offered up, described, agreed upon and debunked.

Concerned as it is with gamers and value, this work has only made a brief foray into game production, in chapter two. Like gamers, designers and developers feel the gravitational pull of marketability, and this influences game design in ways that have been briefly touched upon. For example, *E.T.* showcases the dismal results that can occur when productive energies are spent on license exploitation, constraining the exploitation of design and imaginative labor (Rollings & Adams 50). But as the realms

of production and consumption become more easily traversed - for instance, by modders – it is important to see, as some game companies have, that revaluation can take a more durable form, and modded games and fan fiction are manifest examples. Id Software learned a decade ago that making production tools like level editors available for *Doom* fans helped maintain the sales of the product long after one would expect its shelf life to be over. Similarly, fans' creative use of a video game otherwise exhausted of value often acts as publicity, or transforms the game itself into a necessary ingredient or raw material needed for a post-production. This is why Bungie/Microsoft allows *Halo* to be used in the creation of *Red vs. Blue*.

But the manifestation of new value codings holds an ambiguous relationship to exchange and profit, and discussions of copyright are at the crux of this ambiguity. If the value created using the copyrighted work does not complement producers' values, litigation can quickly stymie post-production. As Henry Jenkins writes in "Interactive Audiences? The 'Collective Intelligence' of Media Fans," "If new media has made visible various forms of fan participation and production, then these legal battles demonstrate the power still vested in media ownership" (Par. 12). These legal skirmishes are not just a result of the Internet and the diffusion of production technologies that were once too expensive for private citizens to own. These skirmishes must also be understood in the context of social structures such as fandom,

in which a community of enthusiasts makes post-production and the re-calibration of value a worthwhile pursuit. Not all hardcore gamers are as engaged as the fans Jenkins has chronicled, and the degree to which one's identity as a gamer shapes one's perspectives on video games' value could benefit from quantitative study. But a critical understanding of the relationship between video gaming and even its immediate context (a consumer society that is but one terrain of a global industry) will emerge not only from quantification of gamers, nor even from playing video games attentively, but from knowledge of their production. Post-production holds the promise of a broader understanding of the potential of video gaming as a creative medium, and a deeper recognition of gaming's values and costs.

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