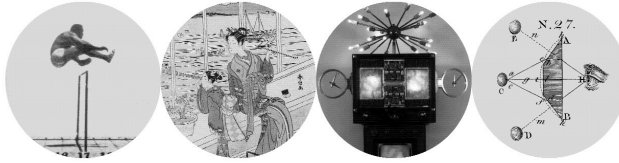# journal of visual culture

'Live in Your World, Play in Ours':[1] The Spaces of Video Game Identity

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Abstract
This article discusses how console video games map televisual space as both simulated and contiguous with the non-virtual space of the gamers and their own bodies. Gamer identification, identity politics in video games, video game stars and video game violence are also explored here. Murphy argues that video games utilize televisual technology to produce interactive experiences for gamers, whose own bodies are physically impacted by game play in subtle ways. How video gamers interact with the virtual bodies of their player-characters is key to understanding how video games facilitate a different interaction with televisual space than that enacted through viewing television programming.

Keywords
identification • identity • space • television • video games

I'm sitting around ... thinking about what you can do with a TV set other than tuning in channels you don't want. And I came up with the concept of doing games, building something for $19.95. This was 1966, in August.

> (Ralph Baer, inventor of the Magnavox Odyssey television console gaming system) (Kent, 2001: 22)

Videogames do not have any competitive edge over movies as an entertainment form. We have to pursue something that movies cannot do.

> (Shigeru Miyamoto, Nintendo game designer and creator of Donkey Kong, The Legend of Zelda and Mario) (Borow, 2003: 145)

Hey, tell me the truth ... are we still in the game?

> eXistenZ (Cronenberg, 1999)

I thrash, ollie, and grind my way through an abandoned park, then a suburban neighborhood and a parking garage. As I move through these spaces, I get better and better at maneuvering on my skateboard and the spaces I encounter are increasingly complex. Yet as I move through these spaces I am actually relatively immobile, seated near my television screen, which I am linked to via the mediating technology of my Sony Playstation 2 video game system and the umbilical that connects my game controller to the game console and television. I am not actually the rad skateboarder making these moves – but my virtual player-character is – inside the game world of *Tony Hawk: Pro Skater III*.

Since 1976, video games have been a key way of using television sets as something other than program receivers and video game systems have functioned as an alternate model of televisual space, mapping the TV screen into a multitude of game worlds and environments. In this article I consider how gamer identity and identification are constructed in relationship to video game space, which in turn is a specific manifestation of televisual space as a deeply interactive and embodied media zone. While video games potentially draw gamers into the screen space of the game through their storytelling devices and highly interactive game play, I argue that these video game systems also significantly extend televisual space outside the TV screen through 'force feedback' technologies on handheld game controllers that allow gamers to actually *feel* the rumble, shock and action of the game as corporeal sensations linked to onscreen game play. Instead of just drawing gamers *into* the virtual worlds represented onscreen, contemporary video games also extend the space of the game out into the space traditionally reserved for televisual spectatorship and consumption.[2] In doing so, contemporary video game systems mark that space out as one of *action* and *engagement*, rather than inaction and passive reception.

Leaving Reality Behind: Entering Game Space

Throughout much of the academic discourse surrounding digital media culture, the cyberpunk desire to escape or transcend mundane reality – as demonstrated in countless science fiction novels, films and television programs – is oft discussed as symptomatic of a desire to leave the 'meat' of the body behind in exchange for a perfect virtual body accessed through a screen or virtual reality interface/input device. Playing a video game is a risk-free and socially acceptable way of engaging in a bit of virtual body play – one gets to repeatedly 'do-over' an action or re-live an experience infinitely until one has perfected the necessary game skill to advance through the game. This play with the virtual body, which we could also call an avatar or what gamers call a player-character, is also a play with identity. When I game I am both player and character simultaneously – in the virtual space of the game I am Tony Hawk and Sheila Murphy. If my avatar were simply a character – Tony Hawk – he would effortlessly skateboard his way through every level of the game. But since my avatar is imbued with game artificial intelligence that gives him some of Tony Hawk's style and skill and my gamer ability to

control and manage the virtual Tony Hawk, he stumbles and scrapes his virtual knee and doesn't make his way seamlessly through the game. My actual skill at button mashing (the common gamer strategy of repeatedly hitting any and all buttons on a game controller device to progress in a game) has virtual consequences – Tony bleeds, falls, fails because of me. My meat-body has tainted his virtual-body, for together we constitute the player-character. Like a 1990s cyberpunk in mirror shades, I haven't left reality behind after all.

What then of this new virtual identity? How can I reconcile it with discourses of digital media identity and media identification? The topic of identity has been much explored within digital media studies – though the result has been a series of prognosticating and often celebratory essays around identity-in-flux or free-play. In his introduction to the anthology *Web.Studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age* (2000), British media theorist David Gauntlett bemoans the 'tedious and repetitive' academic attention paid to the concept of online identity-play that has manifested itself in numerous scholarly articles on cyberculture, which, according to Gauntlett, 'basically all say "cyberspace ... you can play with identity ... nobody knows who you really are ... gosh ..." but fail to develop any theoretical insights beyond this once-engaging thought' (p. 15). Much of the early critical writing on identity in digital media studies foregrounded questions of gender and performance, and the proliferation of virtual identities in cyberspace. During the 1990s, academic discussions of virtual and digital technologies, spaces and identities often triumphed the virtual as a realm where one could escape 'lived' reality and act 'freely' in the realm of the 'technological sublime' – in a cyberspace that was untainted by the social realities and inequalities of class, race, and gender (among others); see Negroponte (1995) and Dyson et al. (1994).

'Identity' in digital media culture is often understood through acts that dislocate embodied identity from the self online and how such a dislocation enables one to enact multiple, contradictory identities. By understanding digital identity as the virtualization of identity and as a form of free-for-all identity play, new media theorists risk 'reinstalling a new millennial version of the "universal subject" of 1970s film theory' (McPherson, 2002: 184). As Williams notes in the introduction to *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* (1995), the 'universal subject' of 1970s apparatus theory that focused upon the gaze was 'both oversimplified and ahistorical' because such theories didn't take into account the many different contexts in which cinema is viewed (p. 3). Within digital media studies, the diverse structures of new media technologies and experiences are just beginning to be theorized. Unfortunately, Gauntlett's comments on academic explorations of identity are on-target: very few theories of identity in digital media culture tackle the ways that virtual identities are deeply connected to the non-digital world.

Televisual Space as Cinematic Game Space?

I'd now like to discuss how the structures of many contemporary video and computer games utilize the codes of cinema and continuity editing, along with interactive perspectival systems, to expand one's involvement and inter-action with a game – though sometimes such strategies actually work against this goal. Video games – not to be confused with computer games – often emulate cinematic style and form even though they are primarily experi-enced through the interface of the television screen. Or, more tellingly, one can understand the space of the screen through the analysis of how television production and reception imagine televisual space as more diffuse, less direct, and more ambiguous than the grand spaces one encounters in a movie theater. Why games do not aim to emulate televisual style is a larger question that this article cannot answer but perhaps can be gestured to through the familiar refrains of cinema as high culture and television as low culture. Whatever the reason, game designers and programmers often look primarily to cinema for cues on developing and organizing video game space.

In contemporary video and computer games, the discourses of identity and the processes of identification are complicated by the shifting aesthetics of games that combine interactive action sequences with elaborate 'cinematics' (also called 'cutscenes' or FMV – full motion video) that advance a game's main storyline and plot. These sequences often advance a game's narrative and plot and borrow their aesthetics from the continuity editing system of motion pictures. Yet gamers have mixed feelings about these cinematic inter-ruptions into active game play. Some gamers resent the interruption and strategically 'mash buttons' in the hopes of bypassing a cinematics sequence. Other gamers play to get to watch a particularly well-rendered cinematics sequence as a reward. The Japanese game company Square Soft is known for its visually poetic cinematics sequences and their 2002 title *Final Fantasy X* overtly foregrounds numerous lengthy (over three minutes long) cinematics sequences and when one plays the game it often seems that one is *watching* rather than playing. But cinematics sequences are just one of many ways that contemporary games blend watching and playing through the importation of filmic elements into game design.

Perhaps the most successful gaming franchise of recent years, Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto* games are designed to combine the pleasures of watching with advanced, open-ended forms of gamer interactivity. The premise of *Grand Theft Auto 3* (GTA 3),[3] which was the top-selling video game of 2002, is that you are an escaped convict in Liberty City (based on New York) who is out to seek revenge on the woman (and others) who double-crossed you. In addition to the story established in this opening sequence and its overt invocation of cinema through the simulated camera work, edit-ing and the letterboxing of the screen, *Grand Theft Auto 3* also includes a 'cinematic camera' setting that can be activated during game play that takes the visuals of the game out of the player's control entirely in order to cross-cut between action and provide the most panoramic views of the game's action and mayhem.[4] Game cinematics force the gamer to perform yet

another shift – from gamer to viewer – again complicating identification in relation to the relative activity and passivity of the subject. Before this 'cinematic' sequence – which continues for several minutes – begins, *Grand Theft Auto 3* has a long credits sequence, as though it were a feature film.

The cinematic elements of the *Grand Theft Auto* games are even more elaborate in *GTA 3*'s sequel, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City.* The main character of the game and the avatar that gamers take on is Tommy Vercetti, a hired mafia thug in 1980s Miami, aka 'Vice City'. In the game's cinematics, Tommy is voiced by Ray Liotta; other actors who appear in Vice City include Tom Sizemore, Dennis Hopper, Burt Reynolds, Luis Guzman, Philip Michael Thomas and Gary Busey, among others. The appeal of both *GTA3* and *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* is the careful arrangement of elaborate 'cinematics' with an expansive game world for players to explore.

While there has been a great deal of attention to the violence of *GTA3* and *GTA: Vice City* and the way the *GTA* games let players pick up, abuse and kill hookers, the games are *extremely* open-ended. One can complete missions or just drive around in Liberty City or Vice City and listen to the radio station in the car one has stolen. For gamers, this open-ended structure is incredibly liberating. As Jenkins puts it, 'Grand Theft Auto expands the universe' (Kushner, 2002b: 614). Though many contemporary games use cinematics and cutscenes to engage gamers, not all games have the open-ended gameplay structure found in the *Grand Theft Auto* series.

While playing a game, one must switch between embodying and controlling a character as an avatar and then passively watching the same character in a cinematic (such scenes often include spoken dialogue between characters). Since the 1990s, video and computer games have also been produced so that players may easily switch between different perspectival systems during game play. One can began an action or motion in third person perspective and toggle between third person and first person point-of-view at will. This dizzying array of perspectival options allows a gamer to play as though seeing the space of a game through the eyes of the avatar or to play from a perspective where one can visually and voyeuristically watch one's avatar. Whichever perspective gamers choose, they still remain in control of an avatar's actions and movements throughout much of the game.

The effects of these multiple moving image modes and perspectives on gamers' identification with a character and their 'immersion' into the world of the game are quite profound and demonstrate how video game identity and identification works and how this increasingly central domain of popular media both builds upon the cinema as a cultural vernacular and also introduces a profoundly *physical* element into the discourse of '*virtual* identities' within the emerging field of digital media studies.

'... Play in Ours': Identification, Identity, Interactivity and Video Game Theory

In a key passage in his critically acclaimed study *The Language of New Media* (2001), Manovich derisively criticizes the existing scholarship on new media and interactivity, proclaiming that such work mistakes *physical* interactivity for intellectual, thoughtful interaction. In doing so, Manovich, like many before him, falls into the old Cartesian trap of separating the mind from the body. Manovich writes:

> When we use the concept of 'interactive media' exclusively in relation to computer-based media, there is the danger that we will interpret 'interaction' literally, equating it with physical interaction between a user and a media object (pressing a button, choosing a link, moving the body), at the expense of psychological interaction. (p. 57)

Yet psychological interaction begins and ends with the physical interaction of the body because when subjects view or interact with media, they do so from a specific historical and cultural context and as the occupant of a specific materiality (body). Later in *The Language of New Media*, Manovich goes on to discuss video and computer games as exemplary new media objects, but in doing so he mostly abandons questions of how identification functions in regards to new media, creating a telling absence in his text, especially since he provocatively declares that, 'Interactive media ask us to identify with someone else's mental structure' (p. 61). In discussing video game identity, I hope to uncover some of the 'mental structures' put in place by game and hardware designers and programmers and also how a gamer's navigation and play constitute a deeply embodied experience of digital media identities.

Questions of how gamers identify while playing a game are incredibly complicated, as Flanagan (1999) puts it in an essay on Lara Croft and the emergence of a digital star system in video games: 'The subject, object, audience, director, viewer, participant, creator and user tangle and double over; these roles blur into a new phenomenon that refuses to take on a shape' (p. 78). In order to understand how video game identity works, I want to discuss how video games are a part of digital media culture and describe the basic components of the video game apparatus – and of video game subculture.

At present, there are few scholarly texts on the games and no comprehensive critical history of video games and gaming. This is in sharp contrast to the academic attention paid to the history and culture of computers and computer-mediated communications – even though video games were actually among the first computers to be widely used as domestic technologies and some of the first personal computers were designed *explicitly* to play video and computer games. What scholarship does exist on video games tends to focus upon psychological and sociological aspects of games and children's use of the medium ('media effects' research), while the public discourse around games centers on video game violence.[5]

The lack of critical scholarship on video and computer games is even more difficult to understand given the size and range of the gaming industry. At the present time, games are played worldwide in several different formats or platforms and the industry itself has an increasing share of consumers' entertainment dollars around the world (on gaming systems, games, accessories, publications, soundtracks, etc.).

Video games are played on console systems that connect to a television set. Essentially gaming computers and audio-visual entertainment systems, game consoles can also function as CD and DVD players. At present, the three dominant video game consoles are the Sony Playstation 2, the Microsoft XBox, and the Nintendo Gamecube. On 10 January 2003, Sony released figures indicating that the company had sold 8.5 million Playstation2 consoles during the *eight-week* 2002 holiday shopping season (*New York Times*, 2003). Computer games also contribute to the overall revenues and culture of gaming, and are primarily designed to be played on PC clones (there are very few games designed for Apple computers), hence the designation 'PC games' in most video and computer game lexicons. PC games share much with video games: aesthetics, game design/physics, modes of interactivity, though there are certain genres that are more common to computer gaming than video gaming – like the controversial first-person shooter games that were originally designed for PCs and continue to thrive on that platform.[6]

At present, many games are released on multiple platforms simultaneously (a good example is the popular *Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring* game based on the film and book, released by Vivendi Universal, which can be played on a PC, a Sony Playstation 2, the Microsoft X-Box, or the Nintendo Gameboy Advance). In certain instances, a game design studio will have an exclusive development deal with one video game console platform, as is the case with the new titles in Rockstar Game's *Grand Theft Auto* series for the Sony Playstation 2. The success of the *Grand Theft Auto* games in 2001 and 2002 – *Grand Theft Auto 3* sold more than 8 million copies worldwide, approximately $400 million in sales (Kushner, 2002a: 61), while *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, released in October 2002, sold 3 million copies during its first 33 days of availability (Hunt, 2002: 11) – can surely be linked to Sony's lead in the console sales sector of the gaming industry.

Video and computer gamers are the eager consumers who are largely responsible for the rapid growth of the now-$7 billion gaming industry. And while the games that they play make up a wide range of genres (action games, adventure games, puzzles, simulations, role-playing games, racing, rhythm and real-time strategy – just to name a few), there is little diversity among the gamers themselves. According to data released by the Interactive Digital Software Association (IDSA), 62 percent of PC gamers are male and 60 percent of those gamers are under 36 years old. The numbers for video gamers are even more uniform with 72 percent of the gamers being male and 81 percent under 36 years old. The IDSA does not release information about gamers' ethnicity or income. They do, however, indicate that more and more women are playing 'interactive games' (a categorization that includes both video and computer games) each year – 43 percent of interactive game

players are female.[7] The upshot of all of this demographic information is that the majority of people who are actively playing with video game identity are young men. How these gamers play games and interact with the identities they embody while playing is important to understand, for it reveals both the priorities of gamers and game designers.

Control within a game and the controllers used to play a game are actually quite crucial factors in facilitating a player's identification with an avatar and establishing a connection between the physical body of the gamer in front of the television or computer screen and one's identity within the narrative world of a game. The input devices in contemporary video game systems have controls mapped to perform a range of different functions and are designed so that they ergonomically fit within a player's hands. Controllers also have a range of buttons (buttons, joysticks, digital, analog) and these inputs/buttons function differently in different games. Nearly the entire surface of a video game controller for a system like Playstation 2 or X-box is taken up by buttons that allow a gamer to perform tasks while playing.

Furthermore, contemporary home gaming system controllers include force feedback motors – variously called 'dualshock', 'rumble motors', or 'vibration feedback motors'. These devices work to make gamers feel the repercussions of their actions and inactions within a game. According to Nintendo, the company that introduced this technology to the home market in 1997 with its Nintendo RumblePak accessory for the N64 gaming system, a force feedback motor is 'a device that physically responds to the action in compatible games, immersing you in the game play'.[8] When I am unable to hit the correct buttons fast enough and in the proper sequence, my avatar in a game may lose a fight or run into a wall but I will also experience the consequences as the controller shakes, vibrates, and even jolts wildly in my hands. Indeed, Sony includes a disclaimer in their Playstation 2 manual that reads:

> The vibration function of the analog controller (Dualshock®2) ... can aggravate injuries. Do not use the vibration function of the analog controller ... if you have any ailment in the bones or joints of your hands or arms. (p. 2)

In combination with the three-dimensional graphics of the games played on these home gaming systems, force feedback motors are designed to make the virtual experiences of games more immersive, yet when I play, instead of feeling like I am drawn more deeply into the game, I also notice how the game is spilling outside of its digital space and onto the physical space in which I play. My lived space is saturated with and changed by the events occurring within a game and to my avatar.

And this is exactly the kind of experience game designers want players to have. For instance, Microsoft promotes its Xbox system as superior gaming hardware that 'empowers game artists by giving them the technology to fulfill their creative visions as never before, creating games that blur the lines between fantasy and reality'.[9] Reality isn't 'left behind' by games, but it is re-formatted.

When designing a game, designers and programmers map out how the video game system input devices will function with the physics of the virtual environments rendered in a game. Paired with force feedback motors and the perspectival system I mentioned earlier – the ways in which many games allow one to easily shift between third person and first person perspectives – a video game's controls become essential to players' experience of a game and their ability to identify with the avatar they are operating. Like viewpoints, gamers oscillate between identifying with and responding to their avatars and other characters in a game. One gamer I interviewed recently puts it this way:

> With a first-person mode I pretty much never talk to the character ... With third-person, especially if the controls are difficult to operate (thus making me feel much less strongly identified with the character and much more fighting to make the character obey my will; intuitive controls = greater identification), I'm more likely to blame my failures on the character. The usual shout is, 'move, you asshole!' or 'move, you fuck!' Tellingly, Lara is invariably a 'bitch,' and when she's particularly stubborn and clumsy she's probably a 'whore.' Characters who are prone to falling off cliffs receive the most abuse.[10]

Such a response seems quite typical according to the gamers I've spoken to – many of whom admit to physically 'dodging bullets' or attacks while playing a game and one who even destroyed his game controller after a particularly bad loss (which he now keeps nearby while playing in the event that if he gets angry or upset he can take his frustrations out on a broken piece of equipment rather than destroy any working equipment). Gamers don't seem to mind that they enact and react to the same character simultaneously, and perhaps this is simply the video game moment when willful suspension of disbelief occurs. Yet I, as a novice gamer and a not-entirely-novice digital media wonk, find myself wanting to figure out how this oscillation between watching and doing, identification and rejection works. To do so, I turn to the game *Kingdom Hearts*.

Dark Disney? Playing Around in the Magic Kingdom

Kingdom Hearts is a game that combines elements from role-playing and action adventure games. The game's plot follows Sora (voiced by Haley Joel Osment, the young star of *The Sixth Sense* and *A.I.*) as he sets out to find two friends he has become separated from, and to discover why his and other worlds are disappearing. Sora is joined on his quest by two non-player characters, Donald Duck and Goofy, who are searching for their missing leader, King Mickey. Along the way, Sora and his friends battle the Heartless, shadowy evil creatures, and they also battle various game level bosses, many of whom are from the roster of animated Disney evildoers. The different worlds that Sora and friends attempt to save in the game are the worlds of Disney animated films. *The Little Mermaid, Tarzan, Hercules, Aladdin, The*

Nightmare Before Christmas and *Bambi* are all represented within the game, as are characters from the *Final Fantasy* games. While this might seem schizophrenic, most reviews of *Kingdom Hearts* praise the developers for infusing Disney animation and graphics (considered the best animation) with the 'darkness' of *Final Fantasy*'s mystical storytelling and anime-style graphics; see Herold (2002) and Lash (2002: 33). *Kingdom Hearts* presents an incredibly hypermediated quest (if one isn't familiar with recent Disney animated films, the game is much harder to play) shared by the characters in the gamers themselves.

By playing *Kingdom Hearts* gamers actually enter into and play in their own version of Disney's Magic Kingdom. While characters – both player-characters and non-player characters – and the game's role-playing structure and cinematics speak to the SquareSoft style, the game's worlds are nearly all comprised of elements from Disney's diegetic universe. One level or world finds Sora, Donald, and Goofy facing off against Ursula the Sea Witch from *The Little Mermaid*, while in another world Sora must defeat Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards the gates to the Underworld in the Roman myth of Hercules in a Coliseum modeled after the Disney animated film *Hercules* (1997). As I play Sora, I literally feel some echo of the repercussions from my fight: when my weapon lands a hard blow, my game controller registers this by 'rumbling' in my hands. Likewise, when the dog crushes me, the rumble continues for an extended period of time, deepening my identification with my (now deceased) player-character.

Playing *Kingdom Hearts* allows one to explore what Manovich (2001) has called the 'new aesthetic form' of 'navigable space' in which narrative action and exploration are closely linked (pp. 244–7). In the 'navigable space' of an action-oriented game like *Kingdom Hearts* 'looking and acting are ... the key activities performed by a player' (p. 247). Yet the use of cinematics in *Kingdom Hearts* creates a tension between looking and acting, narrative and action. I find as I play that I often cannot explore spaces that are temporarily locked off to my avatar (presumably I need to 'level up' and gain experience in the game in order to unlock those areas). Even more frustrating is when my avatar Sora is portrayed in a cinematic sequence acting in ways that I find distracting and (surprise) juvenile, as in an early cinematic sequence where Sora discusses merging his destiny with a female non-player character, Kairi, by eating a magic fruit in a tiresome pre-teen romantic subplot. It is at these moments I find that my identification with Sora breaks down – he is no longer *my* avatar but is instead *a* character. Despite the beautifully rendered graphics in these scenes, they can sometimes interrupt one's identification with an avatar and immersion in the game itself. This disruption of identification is amplified by the visual differences between the high-resolution and more photorealistic pre-visualized cinematic sequences and the rendered-on-the-fly game segments in which gamers control their avatar's movements through the game. When playing *Kingdom Hearts*, as is the case with many contemporary video games, the relationship between the kinds of images on screen (a cinematic that is passively viewed and interactive game-play sequences), the mapping of controls on my analog controller

and the Dualshock effects combine for an entertainment experience that intentionally befuddles the differences between passive viewing and active play.

I called this article '"Live in Your World, Play in Ours": The Spaces of Video Game Identity' in order to foreground the ways identity is often discussed in digital media culture – the discussions of how one's 'real' self is deleted or altered, seemingly left behind but always present in the digital media realm. Cyberspace theorists have commented on the phenomena of computer cross-dressing, virtual identity tourism, and their ramifications for altering identity (see Nakamura, 2001; Stone, 2001). Within the 'closed' virtual worlds of most video games, occupying an avatar is a different experience from going online and representing one's identity as a different race or gender. It is instead an investment in creating a character that exists solely within the televisual space of a game, even if that space is extended by a network connection to other gamers and their player-characters.

While playing a game, gamers enter into a complicated play with not only their identity but also with their body and its McLuhanesque 'extensions'. When one engages with digital media, these kind of modifications certainly take place – although no one 'true' identity is uncovered *or* left behind in the process. In the case of video games, identity is most substantially modified by the ways that gamers can *control* their digital characters – and also in the ways that gamers *surrender* control over themselves and their characters in order to play.[11]

As a new gamer, I wanted to go right to the source to develop my research on video games, game space and game identity. This took me to southern California, one of the geographical areas in which both game software and hardware are developed. Within the United States the other major area for game development is the Pacific Northwest, especially Redmond, Washington, the site of other major software corporations. When I visited the gaming studio I had very broad expectations – I wanted to understand the game production process. What I discovered – including the surreal realization that very few women work in the gaming industry – helped me realize that, for game designers, programming game space involves imagining that space as a multisensory zone of experience.

'Meanwhile, back in the real world …'

It was a sunny and clear southern California autumn day when I walked into RockStar San Diego, the West Coast offices and design studio of Rock Star Games, the current leading company in the international video-game software industry. Rock Star's work is known among gamers for its open-ended and interactive game spaces that allow the gamer to explore the space infinitely. In the mainstream media, Rock Star is known for the adult content of games like the *Grand Theft Auto* series. The most recent games in that series, *Grand Theft Auto 3* and *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, claimed the top two sales spots in the video game market for 2002, while horrifying critics of the industry with their violence (one plays a master car thief and murderer)

and optional game treats like the ability to screw a hooker and then murder her instead of paying for her services.[12]

But, after a year of teaching and debating these games with my students, I visited Rock Star with an open mind because, as Jenkins (2002) has pointed out, whatever you think of the content of these games, they are intelligent and artistic, and they make the most of current game system technology. Jenkins writes: 'This isn't a virtual shooting gallery. Unlike earlier video games that give you no way forward except to slaughter everything that moves, this game offers an enormously expansive and responsive landscape'. I went to Rock Star to better understand the video game design and production process. In particular I wanted to understand how the parts of video games I've discussed in this article – the spatiality of game worlds and their televisual framings, the bodily experience of gaming – are thought of by the designers, programmers, graphic artists and producers who make them.

To my surprise, I found that the elements I am most interested in – the force feedback controller 'reaction' jolts – are typically one of the last elements incorporated into a game and are almost considered afterthoughts by most game programmers. This is because game worlds and code are designed to maximize the sensory experience of the gamer based upon how much sensory information can be conveyed in each sensory 'channel' – the visual, aural, and finally, tactical sensory 'channels'. Because humans can take in the most information visually, those aspects of game design are given the most attention. Sound design – from the soundscape and soundtrack of a game to its special sound effects – is the second most important of this sensory channels. And tactile sensations like those stimulated by force feedback mechanisms in a game controller are incorporated into games near the completion of the production cycle. This priority of sensations is also in accordance with the relative technological developments in the game system platforms (Sony's Playstation 2, Microsoft's X-box, and Nintendo's GameCube). Current game controller technology is relatively limited – the force feedback motors in a controller only have eight pins, while a greater portion of game hardware is dedicated to image processing and sound.

In Cronenberg's nightmarish video game opus, *eXistenZ*, the film's characters and spectators must navigate a dizzying array of game worlds and storylines, leading one character to proclaim, at the very end of the film, 'Hey, tell me the truth ... are we still in the game?' In the world of *eXistenZ*, this is a valid question. The game worlds are connected to the real world in a multitude of physical (spinal) connections between human bodies and bio-port gaming consoles that plug into one's body, infecting it with the virus of gaming. Once a body has been ported and opened up to the game, it, as in many of Cronenberg's films, also opens up to new realities, ones in which the boundaries between bodies and technologies are thoroughly blurred. This filmic remediation of video games as simulated reality-shifting devices foregrounds how game spaces are increasingly embodied spaces – even if only in the fictional realm (see Bolter and Grusin, 1999). But, as I have shown, contemporary games also perform a similar shift: making the virtual space of the game – of the television set itself – into an embodied space.

When Sony suggests that its customers 'Live in your world, play in ours', this is not an either/or suggestion. One *both* lives in his or her world while also playing in Sony's *Playstation* world. These spaces overlap one another and are literally linked through the screen and the console of the gaming system. The in-game structures that enable the identification of the gamer with the onscreen character – perspectival modes, narration, cinematics, audio cues, force feedback, densely orchestrated game levels and worlds – all serve to deepen the connection between the game world and the real world. And this is exactly what makes gaming so appealing to gamers and so dangerous in the eyes of media reformers and censors. For if a game works to undermine the distinctions between the game world and the Real, it is dangerous because the ability to make such distinctions is a necessary aspect of media literacy. Pundits fear that gamers lack the ability to distinguish between the game and the Real (hence Columbine and a number of other school shootings in the late 1990s, many of which were linked to games in the media and legal battles that surrounded them).

Conclusion

Gamer identification fuses – or to borrow a term from film theory – *sutures* the gamer to the game. In doing so, the gamer and the game being played become intertwined. Meanwhile, many of the claims made about digital identity and identification can be re-evaluated with this mode of identification in mind. While this identification might be more fluid than filmic or televisual spectatorship allows for, it is also grounded in interactivity (instead of passivity), in a combination of simulated and actual movement, and in a fundamentally different relation to media – as user, inter-actor and not spectator or consumer. It is surely the case that the ways in which gamers interact with video games and the phenomenological and philosophical ramifications of that process are very complex; this article can only begin to speculate on these issues. As with all inquiries into the very new field of game studies, mine is only a first attempt to lay the groundwork for future work in this field. Perhaps, as I continue my exploration of games, I will want to re-live or re-examine my claims, just as gamers continually do-over game levels, worlds and battles. But it remains true that it is time to incorporate video games into our analyses of televisual space, for games expansively and continually remap that space, extending it beyond the screen.

Returning to *Tony Hawk Pro Skater* and the other game titles I've discussed here, the overlap between the game world and the Real is a positive aspect of the game and one that makes for a good gaming experience. When I thrash and ollie my way through *Tony Hawk Pro Skater*, I am able to experience the way that the space of the game has bled into my own space in front of the television set. Furthermore, this is exactly the kind of interactive experience that produces real 'game urges' – where my character controls me more than I control him.

Spatially, this is also what video games were originally intended to do: to expand the functionality of the television set. Games remake the space of the screen and the space of representations shown on the screen as interactive, three-dimensional worlds. These worlds maximize the technological apparatus of television as Ralph Baer hoped that they would. They truly make televisual space do and be more.

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Notes

1. 'Live in your world, play in ours' is a television advertising slogan for the Sony Playstation 2 home video game system. This tagline appears on advertisements for games designed by third-party companies for the Sony gaming platform.
2. Of course one of the major skeptical arguments against video games as a detrimental social force is that games are too immersive for gamers, who, once they are involved in the pull of a game's interactive and stereotypically violent narrative action, are unable to discern between the world of the game and reality outside of the game. I think games do in fact 'leak' out into the non-game Real, but the way in which they do so is fundamentally different from the stereotype of a gamer phantasmatically becoming a 'lone gunman'.
3. The first GTA game was released by Rockstar Games in 1998.
4. Even in the naming of game play elements, video games linguistically borrow cinematic terminology. A gamer's point-of-view can often shift between first person, second person and the cinematic perspective setting. These point-of-view settings are referred to as camera settings, even though there is no camera involved.
5. *GTA: Vice City* made the Lion and the Lamb Project's 'Dirty Dozen' of dangerous toys for 2002–3, along with five other video games, even though it is rated M for mature (voluntary rating) and ostensibly not marketed to children. Exceptions that are critical studies of video games are Wolf (2001), Jenkins and Cassell (1998) and Kinder (1991).
6. The first FPS was Wolfenstein 3D in 1992, Doom was released later that year. In 1996, Quake was the first 3D FPS.
7. All of these figures are from the IDSA website [http://www.idsa.com/fastfacts.html].
8. See [http://www.nintendo.com/systems/n64/n64_acc_rumbler.jsp].
9. See [http://www.xbox.com/system/xboxholidayoffer.htm].
10. Andrew Simchik, personal electronic correspondence with the author, 30 October 2002.
11. Bukatman (1993) theorizes how subjectivity is formed in front of the computer screen or terminal. This work offers interesting parallels to video games, which often are situated within science fiction frameworks.
12. According to industry trendwatcher NPD Funworld, *Grand Theft Auto 3* was the number one selling game of 2001, with over 4.2. million units sold; see Moran (2003).

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