3 | Aimlessness

In a 2009 essay for the *New York Times Magazine,* media critic Virginia Heffernan argues, "Where television critics lean back, video-game critics lean forward, working wrists and feet and eyes, inputting information and *advancing many, many levels in extremely hard games* in order to work up even the baseline authority to write a capsule review" (13; emphasis in original). Heffernan is quite right, and as a critic she understands well what reviewers need to do in order to capture in their prose the essence of a complex electronic artifact. Yet playing a game for review purposes is antimorphic; review runs counter to what computer game experiences are generally intended to be. At every step of development, computer games are created to entice, encourage, and especially coerce players into active engagement, and engagement in the right ways. When computer games are designed well, the results are "addictive" and make for a title that is "impossible to put down"; when designed poorly, a game will be pulled from store shelves in days, and its bad reputation will last for years (*John Romero's Daikatana*).

That computer games work to pressure players is not merely a design feature, nor is it simply a facet of the medium's interactivity. While deeply important to understanding the computer game medium (and indeed any medium), interactivity is only one quality among many when it comes to how computer games insist upon players' engagement. In this chapter we examine some of the primary channels through which the plasticity and potential of the computer game medium are harnessed and made accessible, both with and in spite of interactive components. Regardless of where these channels are found and which agents direct them, the significance of what computer games insist upon is clear: "You are who I say you are." Just as clear is the essential message of the medium itself: "Do what you will." Thus, while Heffernan understandably draws attention to the fact that computer game reviewers have a particularly difficult job, she overlooks a more important point: it is not just that reviewers must work their "wrists and feet and eyes,

inputting information"; they must also work intensely hard to inhabit the different subjectivities required by each individual game they review, knowing all the while that these subjectivities were meant for gamers not reviewers. Reviewers (and scholars, too, it is worth noting) *have* to play games—it is their job. Players, by contrast, have choices, the most powerful of which are to not play at all and to bad-mouth games they do not like to friends. And yet players do play games—even bad ones—and a lot of them. The question is why—what is it about the medium that encourages not only interaction but obedience and faithfulness as well?

Some of the reasons are perceptible at both the macro and micro scale. For example, even as the medium is able to rely on its design level (i.e., the micro scale) to hail a player into the pseudo subjectivity of a mystery-solving young woman from Casablanca (*Dreamfall: The Longest Journey*) or a space captain whose sexual and social identity is changed (*Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender*), it is also able to hail that same player through advertising and lobbying. This is because the player, in addition to being a player, is also an industrialized global consumer and political subject (i.e., the macro scale). Granted, these terms—micro, macro, design, advertising, and lobbying—are permeable descriptors, but they help reveal the extent to which the computer game medium embodies a set of insistent practices designed to evince participation in specific ways, none of which are necessarily democratic or desirable. Recognizing that computer games insist on a fairly narrow range of behaviors is critical to explicating the nature of the medium and its industry. More succinctly, how computer games insist on these behaviors directly affects which games get made, distributed, played, and studied.

What follows is a discussion of some of the key insistences at play in the computer game medium. We group these insistences by the kinds of invocations they make and the subjectivities they necessitate, as well as the impact each has on the medium and its lemmata.

INSISTENT INVOCATIONS

As computer game archivists, we are literally surrounded by reminders of the infinite variety of provocations that studios, publishers, memorabilia manufacturers, and others have produced since the earliest days of computer gaming. Pick any single artifact from our collection, though, and it will also show signs of at least one of the ways computer games impose on players. To be specific, computer games always insist that players let loose their present subjectivity (e.g., mother, student, soldier, teacher) and mold themselves into one proffered by the game at hand. These insistences vary in form, but

in general their invocatory mechanisms fall into three categories, each providing a particular though not exclusive method of understanding how computer games commandeer personal experience, private fantasy, and public opinion in order to become culturally viable.

The invocatory insistence with the broadest cultural play is advertising-related and illustrates how the computer game medium can be made to insist on particular consumer habits and behaviors. Insistent *advertising* invocations are found wherever games or game-related paraphernalia are baldly promoted for the sake of sales. On a more local level, insistent *design* invocations are useful for identifying how computer games work to hail players into particular roles and behaviors within a given game and its play context. Central to the techniques of design insistence are the ways computer games do not merely invite interaction but demand it. Insistent *lobbying* invocations are the most socially significant; they clarify how the computer game industry, along with the abstraction "computer game," is proven (i.e., it is insisted upon) to be helpful, harmless, advantageous, responsible, creative, artful, profitable, and so forth—as well as the opposites of all these proofs.

It is common for invocations such as these to overlap (e.g., advertising and design or advertising and lobbying), and when they do, different sets of insistences are revealed. For example, superhero games such as *Aquaman: Battle for Atlantis, Catwoman,* and *Impossimole* all get double duty out of their insistence that "you are different." In the advertising invocation, "you are different" calls out to the consumer who is considering purchasing the game: "You are different/unique/discerning and should thus buy this game." In the design invocation, "you are different" hails the player into adopting the identity of Aquaman, Catwoman, or Monty Mole: "This is not your average game, and the identity you assume in it is different from other games." But why does the computer game medium need to insist on anything at all?

A TRUTH ABOUT COMPUTER GAMES

Hard-core gamers often fail to recognize that the computer game medium curses players, demanding as it does their perpetual discomfort (tension, frustration, failure, and even physical pain) and a considerable amount of drudgery (most games require the same procedures to be repeated thousands of times during the full course of play). There is a reason for this toil: it creates history. The travails of gaming construct for players a kind of hibernaculum of ludic memories that both protects and circumscribes how players interpret game activities and the rationales for performing them. This is particularly important because the truth of the matter is that the computer

game medium—not specific games themselves—is fundamentally *aimless,* and an enormous amount of craft, talent, and luck is required to produce a game that deflects the boredom produced by this aimlessness.[1]

We do not use the term "boredom" offhandedly here, but rather employ it in the way psychologists William L. Mikulas and Stephen J. Vodanovich describe it in "The Essence of Boredom": "We define boredom as a state of relatively low arousal and dissatisfaction, which is attributed to an inadequately stimulating situation" (3). This is a useful way to think about boredom because it draws into relief several features related to the aimlessness of the computer game medium that ordinarily go unseen. First, Mikulas and Vodanovich's definition emphasizes that boredom is a "state"—that is, "a particular combination of perceptions, affect, cognitions, and attributions [that] are transitory; a person may be in a state of boredom in one instant and not in the next instant" (3). Second, this state is marked by "low arousal" (i.e., disinterestedness, a sense of tedium) and "dissatisfaction," which Mikulas and Vodanovich distill as "For it to be boredom, the person must not like it" (4). Finally, the definition acknowledges a basic cause of the state—"an inadequately stimulating situation"—which Mikulas and Vodanovich connect to stimuli that are captivating to a person in a particular moment. The import of this latter point bears clarification: in general, boredom researchers concur that any situation—from the most varied to the most repetitive—may be viewed as boring (or not) depending on the particular needs for stimulus a person has at a given time.[2] This explains why some people thrill at the sight of a double-entry financial ledger while others fight off fits of narcolepsy when faced with such a thing.[3] It also explains why computer game "cheats," inputtable code, symbiotic software, or peripherals that allow the player to alter the rules of the game; "walk-throughs," detailed descriptions of how to successfully navigate a game and its challenges; and "mods," modifications of a game environment using the tools used to develop the game, are popular. They allow bored or frustrated players the opportunity to move past or alter a boring or frustrating segment of a game.

Game theorist McKenzie Wark meditates extensively on the principle that computer games are both boring and a response to boredom (151–75), focusing in particular on the ubiquity of boredom in societies dominated by the "military entertainment complex." He suggests that computer games are one mechanism among many by which the "war on boredom" is waged. This war is endless, says Wark, because "The trick for the military entertainment complex is to collude in maintaining boredom, without having it turn upon it and bite the feed that powers all our distractions" (175). Thus, the response to boredom that computer games offer is not a contemplative

one, one able to ameliorate the overwhelming sameness of everyday life, the "one-dimensionality," as Frankfurt School sociologist Herbert Marcuse would term it. Rather, computer games' response to boredom is part of a broader ideological system in which boredom needs to be manufactured and then managed as part of a series of complex social control processes (162).[4] Wark does not pursue the particulars of how this feedback loop operates, but he does make several keen observations that begin to get at some of the phenomena we trace back to the computer game medium per se.

One of these observations is his recognition of the impelling process at the heart of the computer game medium. Wark notes: "What kind of being is a gamer? One who comes into existence through the act of targeting. To target is to isolate something against the dense, tense fibers of the network, maybe to destroy it, but always to assign it a unique value" (149). The idea that the computer game medium does something to people—Wark calls it targeting, we prefer *interpellation,* though not necessarily in the "weaponized" way Matt Garite does[5]—is significant because it gives the lie to the hegemony of interactivity that is so prevalent in trade and academic literature on computer games.

Despite their similarity, however, the difference between "targeting" and "interpellating" is considerable. While Wark clearly sees a dominant/submissive mechanism between game and gamer—he writes "'Open your senses' is the game's demand" (148) and "What characterizes the gamer is a relinquishing of a role that might have qualities beyond the game—as savior or soldier, priest or prophet, rector or revolutionary" (164)—he does not situate this mechanism within the complex relationship it has to the computer game medium, specific manifestations of the medium, gamers and other agents related to the industry, or to the public more generally. This is curious because it is in these locales where the difference between "targeting" and "interpellating" becomes clear: computer games do not work so discriminatingly, directly, nor as simply as the terms "targeting" (Wark) or "weaponized" (Garite) suggest. Instead, they impact people almost randomly, and often solicit as well as coerce. Recall that Louis Althusser's police officer shouts, "Hey, you there," and not, "Hey, dude, with the orange bike socks and brown bowler crossing the street near the lime green Karmann Ghia." Recall also that the officer is issuing something of an invitation, albeit an extremely forceful one. Interpellation is thus imprecise and scattershot in effect: because hearers think they might have been called to—and are inclined to respond as if this were indeed the case—they are. Compared to targeting and weaponization, interpellation (especially in computer games) is more nuanced, partnering coercion with coaxing, summons with wheedling, inquiry with agreement,

and hope with chance. Interpellation is also more in keeping with the manifold ways computer games call out to players, ways both invited and mandated by the medium's aimlessness.

This aimlessness stems in part from the fact that the computer game medium is extremely pliable and does not seem to have a particularly strong controlling feature beyond its quintessential and quintessentially vague defining characteristic of being "playful according to rules." Computer games may tell stories or not. They may be representational or abstract. They may be fun or stressful, lifelike or fantastic, noisy or quiet, logical or surreal, or any combination or ratio thereof. Indeed, any purpose that a specific computer game expresses, any aesthetic or political or commercial vision that it seems to be motivated by is imposed upon it by interested parties. Aimlessness is the medium's steady state, and undermining it requires considerable interference in the form of work, imagination, and luck. This is precisely where insistence comes in. In order to overcome the medium's many natural loci of tedium and aimlessness, computer game developers, advertisers (including retailers), and lobbyists relentlessly press upon gamers and society at large—via a prodigious assortment of suasive techniques—to forget that games are boring and instead perceive them as compelling, radical, funny, artful, dangerous, and so forth.

This is no mean or straightforward task. The medium's wearisome characteristics are considerable, and the most common ones are easily apprehended simply by consulting practicing game developers or the typical game development topoi found in how-to books. While neither developers nor the authors of how-to books will likely acknowledge that the computer game medium is aimless and thus quintessentially boring—it is their livelihood, after all—they do describe all manner of techniques by which to create a good game. The logic behind such helpful advisories is clear, even syllogistic: computer games are not naturally engaging and stimulating, they have to be made that way. Add to this the fact that there are vast numbers of poor and mediocre games but only a handful of really great ones, and the proposition that the computer game medium is essentially dull (albeit with the potential to be made otherwise) is hard to refute.

A close look at the basic elements of computer game design proves the point just as effectively. For example, the rules that govern most computer games insist that players discover a very few particular patterns in order to prolong the "interactive" experience. In effective computer games—that is, games that have successfully subverted the characteristic tedium and aimlessness of the medium—discovering these patterns is entertaining, no matter how simple or numerous the possibilities. Thus, even titles with stale

premises and limited victory patterns can still be fun (sometimes for years) because of other elements (*Incredible Shrinking Fireman*'s humor and *Xak: The Art of Visual Stage*'s innovative game audio). By the same token, games built on innovative ideas (for instance, *Yellow Peril* asks players to solve a mystery revolving around the disappearance of certain colors; *Zeal* has players search for layout errors in a fashion magazine) can be quite disappointing, which suggests an additional element of computer game tedium: not only is the medium magnificently malleable according to whatever sets of rules developers impose upon it and however players intuit and play with and within these rules, but all of this is subject to the vagaries of hardware capability, development time, learning curves, and other factors. For some, such liberty can seem the epitome of aimlessness and the perfect recipe for boredom.

Another problem with games is their predictability. Because computer games are accessed voluntarily and easily broken away from, they do not have the immersive authority that real life does. As a consequence, games that are perceived as too random—that is, they suffer from erratic plot development, unstable characters, inconsistent environments, and so on—tend to be shunned (or worse) by players and reviewers alike. In his review of *Land of the Dead: Road to Fiddler's Green,* for instance, Russ Fischer writes: "Supposedly, there's a location-specific hit system. And indeed, heads explode and limbs can be blown off. [. . .] But the location system is terribly broken. We've seen arms explode after head shots (point-blank) while several shots in the shin will fail to topple a walker, only to eventually kill them altogether. Apparently nothing is certain in this land of the dead. Not even physics" (par. 5). The opposite is just as true, however: computer games that are too predictable are judged equally harshly. Reviewing *Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure,* G. Christopher Williams comments:

> The manner in which this idea plays is both mundane and repetitious. The game consists of utilizing Trane's [the protagonist] artistic intuition (think spider-sense) to locate areas that are prime spots for tagging—be it with spray paint, magic markers, stickers, etc. [. . .] So basically the object of the game is to color in between the lines, which sounds more like child's play than rebellion. [. . .] Coloring in your tags consists of holding down a trigger and moving the analog stick up and down between the lines while trying not to spray any one area too much (which would cause drips, thus ruining your coloring page "masterpiece"). Indeed, the game doesn't even allow you to color outside the lines, as the paint appears only in prescriptive areas and colors. The end result is no more fun than watching paint dry. (n.p.)

Like rules, then, predictability clearly has an integral role in the computer game medium. It can rapidly undermine how a game connects with players if it is given too little or too much play in design. The medium's baseline is utter indifference to predictability, leaving it to the developer to introduce enough unpredictability to counteract the medium's prevailing and strangely dependable aimlessness and resultant boredom.[6]

There are numerous other indicators that the computer game medium is essentially aimless and boring. Games are frequently wearisome in their unyielding policing of players' actions (e.g., status reports, progress updates, performance statistics); they are typically tightly closed systems that permit little significant alteration by players; and they depend on certain basic logics—logics of style, affect, and narrative, for example—that discourage developer or player innovation. The medium also requires players to train in and then successfully implement an overwhelming range of skills: artistic, technical, organizational, financial, legal, and motivational. For these and countless other reasons, computer games depend on insistent mechanisms to force gamers to lose sight of the fact that the medium with which they are engaged is really not worth their time or trouble. Interestingly, these mechanisms are frequently noninteractive, or at least appear less interactive than other game-related elements: story lines, cinematics, taunts by a player's avatar that are hurled at the player directly, avatar death, control systems, random events, and so on are instances in which the will of developers is imposed on players, not negotiated with them. This is not accidental either; such elements are insistent shortcuts to interpellation, setting up (or sometimes side-stepping) the more gradual—and often more long-lasting—process by which players are drawn into a game's subjectivities. In the best computer games, there is a careful balance between quick and insistent interpellative devices and slower and deeper ones. Quick techniques such as cut scenes and predefined mission briefings hook players, though not necessarily deeply. Slower techniques—character and narrative development, complex reward structures, recurring themes that enhance the available subjectivities—build on these hooks, gradually naturalizing their artificiality and encouraging players to perceive the less interactive, immersive, and diegetic moments as integral to the game.

On the surface, our provocation about the aimlessness of the computer game medium might seem far from universally true, a point that would in turn suggest that aimlessness is not fundamental to the medium. After all, even we hedge our claims in the examples above, referring to "most computer games" or "games are frequently. . . ." These hedges are not exceptions, however, but rather proof that computer games that do not appear to be aimless

represent radically effective successes by developers—and the entire industrial apparatus that makes their work possible—to countervail and then exceed an essential quality of the medium. This dynamic is curious indeed; the computer game medium can be advanced as a mode of expression only when its steadiest moorings are first undermined. Unsurprisingly, examples of such games tend to fare poorly in the marketplace (*Desert Bus, Auditorium*). By the same token, a game does not have to be revolutionary to subvert the tendencies of the medium. Rather, its developers need only recognize the medium's inherent structures and then successfully negotiate them. This can be done with a franchise title as readily as with an art house game; *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* and *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* are not particularly innovative, yet most critics agree they are excellent precisely because the games are quite insistent in their design, as are the promotional and lobbying efforts of the industry on their behalf.

In an extended meditation on boredom, Walter Benjamin observes, "We are bored when we don't know what we are waiting for. That we do know, or think we know, is nearly always the expression of our superficiality or inattention" (*Arcades Project* 105). In light of this meditation, we now move to unpack the ways that the computer game medium provides a foundation upon which developers, advertisers, and industry lobbyists not only tell players what they are waiting for (superficial as it may be) but also insist that the waiting is over and the time for boredom has passed.

Insistent Design

Computer game development is a complex and challenging undertaking. The industry is oppressively competitive, has towering barriers to entry, and the medium on which it is built is, as we document above, aimless and boring. It is no exaggeration to say that the job of a computer game developer is to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse, to make something great out of something that in its natural state is undesirable and decidedly resistant to being otherwise. To meet this challenge, computer game designers deploy an array of techniques that insist players forget about the tedious medium they are engaged with and perceive it as quite the opposite: as addictive, thrilling, and fun. There are excellent books that detail these kinds of techniques, and spending time with virtually any computer game will reveal them in situ. Therefore, there is no need to address them here. What does need to be addressed, however, is how these techniques work generally to hail players into the kinds of subjectivities that allow them to be receptive to the various techniques developers ultimately use in games.

One such method of insistence is "remember this." In *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion,* the player interacts repeatedly with characters in the game world who, in the guise of discussing local "rumors," inform the player of missions that can be undertaken, provide hints about the characteristics and personality quirks of other in-game characters, and offer advice about which sorts of battle or mercantile tactics work best in which situations. Similarly, while the game is loading, players are given all manner of reminders, from information about the long-term effects of military clashes on armor to tips on how game characters are influenced by their astrological signs. Moreover, the reticle in the game is context-sensitive, meaning if it is placed on a plant, information about the plant and the option to harvest it appear. Likewise, if the reticle is placed on an alchemy teacher, the player is given the option to study with that person. Character interactions, load screens, and context-sensitive cursors are all ways of telling the player: "Remember this. Remember who you are and what you are supposed to be doing." They are ways of insisting that players forget about the fact that they do not know what they are doing or why, that they must repeatedly sit and wait for the software to load, and that there are so many features in the game that, without help, it would be easy to become overwhelmed by its details.

Two related design insistences are "go here" and "do this." While each can take innumerable forms ("Your mission begins here," "Take your position at the starting line," "Bake a cake using these ingredients," "Play with your puppy," and so on), both give the player direction and a prompt with the unspoken meaning "If you do not obey, the game will be over." Some games are more overt than others about these types of insistences. Any game with a "career mode," for instance, will be explicit about such demands: in *Rock Band 2,* players make their way together through a mostly predefined set of gigs, from tiny basement stage to massive outdoor arena; in *WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2009,* the game's career mode—called "the road to Wrestlemania"—is built around the pro-wrestling season, with major matches each week against a preselected lineup of partners and opponents. To be sure, both *Rock Band 2* and *WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2009* are interactive, but they are also indisputably insistent, telling players to go where directed and to do as they are told.

More subtle versions of "go here" and "do this" are so common that they are not always easy to see. For example, *1893: A World's Fair Mystery* places gamers in the middle of a diamond theft and murder investigation located in and around the Chicago World's Fair. In *1893,* as in virtually all computer games, the developers have made numerous impositions that the player must accept in order to interact with the game. For example, there is no room to

play a food vendor at the fair instead of a detective, nor does the player have the option to conduct research in locales other than in predetermined ones. Such insistences are taken for granted, the price of admission for playing the game. This is precisely what makes interpellation so powerful, and developers everywhere know that for a little while at least they can coast on it in any title they might produce. Gamers know that playing a game requires them to heed and respond to whatever hails are initiated. Be a tank driver (*3D Seiddab*)? No problem. A psychiatrist (*7 Days a Skeptic*)? Sure thing. How about a crazy squirrel (*Zero the Kamikaze Squirrel*)? Why not. Because there is no game without the player's submission to the game's hail, developers have a strong starting point from which to launch their subversion of the medium's aimlessness. Unfortunately for developers, most gamers—like people generally—can be enticed by novelty for only a relatively short time, after which the potency of the insistence needs to be strong and varied if play is to continue. This is simply part of the challenge of creating an adequately stimulating situation—that is, of taking the aimlessness of the computer game medium and transforming it into a highly directed and entertaining experience.

Another notable design-based insistence is in-game player assessment: "You're doing great!" or "You're a loser!" Again, hails such as these can be both obvious and subtle. In *Rock Band,* performance feedback is delivered via crowd response: perform well and the audience shouts encouragingly and sings along; perform poorly and the band will have its equipment smashed and be booed off the stage. *Olimpiadas 92: Gimnasia Deportiva,* by contrast, is much more quantitative: assessment is delivered via a competitive numerical system based on the traditional ten-point Olympic scoring protocol. One of the most common assessment-oriented insistence techniques deploys time as a pressure. *Exit, Scene It? Lights, Camera, Action,* and *Cisco Heat: All American Police Car Chase* all use countdown timers, while *Pure* exerts time pressure by tracking laps. These sorts of time-based techniques—as well as the standard race timers found in thousands of other games (*NASCAR 09, Downhill Domination, Pole Position*)—produce particular subjectivities for players to inhabit, thereby attempting to overcome the medium's aimlessness through the imposition of novel ideologies.

The interpellation at work in these situations is intriguing. By design, computer games try to capture player attention and hold it for extended periods of time. This is not like the subjectivity of "criminal" into which one is likely to be interpellated when a police officer calls out "Hey, you there!" Instead, when a computer game hails a player, it is (a) only into a play sub-

jectivity, (b) primarily focused on interpellating the player more deeply into the player subjectivity, and (c) always already an inauthentic hail. To clarify: With few exceptions, players know they are pretending when they sit down to play *Earl Bobby Is Looking for His Balls* and are insistently told to act like a forgetful Scottish earl, or when they pick up the Wii remote, pop in *Wii Music,* and, in order for the game to commence, are "forced" to become orchestral conductors of Christian Petzold's Minuet in G Major.

Moreover, even brief contemplation over which subjectivity is being opened up for player habitation reveals that it is not a fantasy one—an NFL quarterback or an airline crash survivor in a secret undersea dystopia—but a very real one: a consumer of computer games. This becomes instantly evident when one considers what sort of interface would likely be most appreciated by someone who actually met the criteria for the interpellative acts. An MI6 agent is unlikely to find *007: Nightfire* deeply resonant with her field experience, for example. To resonate, the game would need to be far more politically, culturally, and practically detailed, again recalling the fact that computer games insist that players (a) forget about the medium's aimlessness (which almost all computer gamers know about firsthand, although they might not immediately recognize it as such), and (b) respond to the game's insistent call to be a gamer, particularly a gamer for a specific title.

Finally, a computer game's call and the player's response are always inauthentic, because the source of the hail is not genuine. When a game insists that a player "remember this" or "go here" or "do this," or when it provides some sort of reassuring or condemnatory feedback, the game is playing the role of a ventriloquist's dummy: Charlie McCarthy may have been fun to watch and listen to, but ultimately it was Edgar Bergen who gave the character its vitality. The distance between puppet and master is far greater in a computer game than in a vaudeville act. As a result, the puppet master is soon forgotten (if he or she was ever recognized in the first place), and the player is drawn to the puppet medium, believing it to be approximately genuine. Computer games from *X²: The Threat* to *Ian Botham's Cricket* are thus simulacra, though not of intergalactic trading, cricket bowling, or other experiences, nor even of simulations of these experiences (i.e., they are not what Jean Baudrillard calls "second order simulations"). Computer games are simulacra of the computer game medium itself, which is to say they are wholly invented representations of something that has no established reality. Put another way, one reason the computer game medium is inherently aimless and boring—and thus so reliant on its developers insisting to the contrary—is that it barely exists as an organized form in the first place.

Insistent Advertising

For all the means by which computer game developers hail players into subjectivities, these means are for nothing if players (a) do not know about the existence of the game, (b) do not have a desire to play it, and (c) are not willing to do what is necessary to obtain it (e.g., download it, buy it, steal it, and so forth). To this end, marketers are put to work deploying a multitude of techniques that insist on consumers' attentions in a multitude of ways. Note that we say "consumers" here rather than "gamers" or "players." Prior to playing a game, the subjectivity that is primarily available to marketers to use is that of consumer, not only because many units are purchased by people who do not play games themselves (e.g., relatives and friends of gamers), but also because the techniques that work best for obtaining players' commitment to gameplay differ substantially from those that work best to obtain consumers' guarded resources (e.g., money, storage space).

Apart from all the techniques that the marketing sciences have developed to connect consumers to specific products and brands—product placement, market research, brand management, and so on—there are the techniques for specifically hailing consumers into a purchase-oriented subjectivity. One common technique, for example, is the testimonial, which works through processes of trust and identification to cement desire for a particular title. Understood in terms of techniques that insist on players forgetting that the computer game medium is inherently aimless and boring, the testimonial—located in such phrases as "This game was great," "I couldn't put it down," or symbolically as "☆☆☆☆☆"—promises a particular kind of experience in exchange for (usually) money. Compounding these testimonials facilitates the process and, when combined with other techniques, can prove extremely effective at boosting sales. For example, an ad campaign that mixes cross-media saturation (e.g., showing screenshots or actual gameplay in television spots, full-color magazine ads, downloadable demos, and in-store posters) with testimonials from gaming magazines printed on game packaging stands an excellent chance of selling a sizable number of units when the game is first released. If consumer buzz—another way that advertising insists on consumer attention—is subsequently strong, the title could eventually become a blockbuster.

Insistent advertising also hails consumers into a buying mood through flattery and challenge: "You work hard, so you should play hard and play with the best" or "Are you smart enough to solve this puzzle?" These interpellations call consumers into a subjectivity that requires them to prove their

worth, to say, "Yes, I should play with the best," or, "Of course I can solve this puzzle." To prove it, they must buy the game. Similarly, much computer game advertising interpellates consumers by playing on their gaming history and preferences. For example, it is common for game packaging to say something akin to "If survival horror is your cup of tea, then don't miss this latest *Silent Hill* title." This technique works in two ways: if the consumer is a survival horror fan, then the purchase of the particular game is a necessary confirmation of this fact; if the consumer is not a fan of the genre, the advertising interpellates that person into a subjectivity that further cements his or her identity as a discriminating gamer. In either case, the industry, if not a particular studio or publisher, wins. When the industry wins, the medium is strengthened via boosted consumer desire for its instantiations.

Obviously, consumer and player subjectivities can and do intertwine, and in many cases are even cocreated. When, for example, game packaging is written as if the reader is already committed to the game (e.g., *Fable II*'s packaging reads, "Beginning as a penniless street-urchin, your destiny is to become Albion's greatest Hero."), consumer and gamer subjectivities are conjoined. In such cases, the consumer assents to the heroic hail with "Yes, I am that person," and does so even before the game's security sticker has been peeled away. Before we take up this issue of combinative insistences in more detail, however, we need to comment briefly on one other way that the computer game medium is made to seem desirable rather than aimless: insistent lobbying, or the suite of techniques that emphasize the value of computer games generally.

Insistent Lobbying

The computer game medium has weathered social criticism and corporate hardships almost since its inception. Early on, computer games were often seen as a waste of valuable CPU cycles, which were time-shared among military installations, government labs, and research universities.[7] Later, the medium was perceived as a harbinger of moral decay, an anxiety born not of the medium itself necessarily but out of the places games tended to be installed when they were first commercialized: bowling alleys, taverns, and the most desolate wings of neighborhood shopping malls. This was countered in part by the initial success of the home console market, though that success was muted by consumer backlash catalyzed by the public's realization that the medium was not only surprisingly boring but also an inroad into the family room for interactive filth and violence. Following a now legend-

ary industry collapse in the early 1980s, the medium was brought back from consumer exile to become one of the fastest growing and most robust high-technology industries in history.

The computer game medium likely could not have survived and ultimately flourished without scores of bargains, threats, collective actions, and acts of industrial espionage and terrorism, many of which have been documented by corporate tell-alls, Listserv and blog posts, industry reportage, and water-cooler whisperings (e.g., Takahashi; Shippy and Phipps; Metcalf; Sheff; Kushner; Campbell-Kelly; Asakura; Cohen). The common thread among all these instances of industrial advocacy is that each gave direction to the industry and the medium that spawned it. Some of this direction was more forcefully given than others; Nintendo, for instance, was the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the post-collapse era and is widely known to have ruled the industry for years with an iron fist.[8] In any case, the computer game medium has survived and thrived not only because developers and marketers have interpellated gamers and consumers into subjectivities that facilitate a kind of lassitude toward the nature of the medium, but also because a network of lobbyists became empowered (mostly by the industry itself) and set out to counter unfriendly governmental attention and quell critical popular opinion.[9]

These actions, sometimes coordinated and sometimes not, drew people into subject positions that would be amenable to the kinds of corporate direction that the most powerful companies in the industry found advantageous, which is to say profitable. Thus, while the practice of censorship is often (if weakly) resisted by the general public, in the case of the computer game industry self-censorship has generally been welcomed as responsible corporate citizenship and a sign of the industry's emerging respectability. Answering this hail, numerous developers swallowed the bitter pill of censorship in order to lay claim to the appellation "game designer," while thousands—perhaps millions—of gamers who under other circumstances would have energetically protested the censorship of an expressive medium instead ignored this imposition in order that the subjectivity "gamer" not be disturbed.

Other insistent techniques deployed effectively for the sake of elevating the medium to something other than "pointless computer-based entertainment" include the perpetually revivified debate over whether or not computer games are art, the extent of the industry's cultural power, and the medium's ostensibly inviolable economic surety. Each of these techniques instantly positions and often polarizes lawmakers, business owners, content developers, players, politicians, and consumers so that they lose sight of the daunting complexity of the medium; fail to understand the social, cultural, and eco-

nomic importance of its natively aimless state; and instead fit themselves into ideologically determined subjectivities that encourage predictable, and thus profitable, innovations in the medium. From the perspective of the insistent invocations of lobbying, the computer game medium's aimlessness—that is, its lack of a tendency toward any particular style, aesthetic, or narratological experience—has led to the invention of a host of impellent techniques aimed primarily at securing the continued stability of the commercial superstructure that rests on what remains an unstable and unpredictable foundation. One of the chief ways this is effected is through the construction of networks of insistence that tightly integrate design, advertising, and lobbying into an almost seamless fabric that, when draped over the computer game medium, makes it look like something it most assuredly is not: a sure thing.

COMBINATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The computer game medium is not easy to work with. It is so plastic and free of established technological, ideological, artistic, educational, and narratological aims that when faced with doing something cogent and interesting with all of this potential, most developers fail. Many of these failures still make it into the hands of consumers, however, though they do not necessarily take the form of *broken* software—applications that crash systems, corrupt data, or simply do not run properly. Rather, they are instances of Mikulas and Vodanovich's "inadequately stimulating situation"—that is, they are games that fail to overcome the medium's tendency to be uninteresting, unattractive, and boring. Although there is certainly a degree of subjectivity to such assessments (e.g., some players enjoy side-scrolling platformers while others find them insufferable), there is also considerable public agreement regarding which games are well executed and which are not. Such agreement is not commensurate with a universal appreciation of particular titles, but rather is recognition that whatever the play style, platform, content, and so forth, there are certain qualities that make some computer games seem better or worse than others. In this chapter we have called these qualities "insistences," a slightly awkward term perhaps, but one that highlights the fact that developers, advertisers, and lobbyists all have techniques by which they insist to players that a particular game is going to be engaging, captivating, intriguing, pleasurable, and otherwise worthwhile. "Insistence" also emphasizes the idea that there is complex coercion at work and that interpellation is an essential means by which a tedious medium is given a vitality and direction that it does not come by naturally.

We have tried to use this chapter to explain how design, advertising, and

lobbying each have distinctive techniques—organized into what we term "insistent invocations"—by which players may be interpellated into subjectivities that affirm the value (one way or another) of the computer game medium. While it is easy enough to locate particular examples of a design or lobbying insistence, it is not uncommon for several insistences to work together symbiotically to create highly ornate subjectivities into which gamers, consumers, and concerned citizens can step simultaneously. Consider, for example, a print ad for *Empire: Total War* in *Game Informer* magazine. Understandably, the predominant insistences at work interpellate readers as consumers: in addition to a half-dozen different corporate logos, readers are tempted with the offer "Pre-order *Empire: Total War* at GameStop and get a downloadable copy of *Rome: Total War Gold* for free!" (*Empire: Total War* 15). However, the ad also hails readers as gamers, insisting on their participation in the game even before it has been purchased and loaded: "Lead your men in massive land battles featuring thousands of troops" (15). Lastly, the ad insists on viewers' attention to the industry's concern for making and selling games responsibly; the ad not only contains a large Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rating (repeated three times) but also the logo of the History Channel, which has officially endorsed the game. In mere seconds, readers are hailed into all of these subjectivities, multiplying the chances that this game will be psychologically elevated from bore to big top, whether the reader is a consumer, player, concerned parent, media watchdog, or scholar.

In this and countless other game-related materials, insistent invocations merge, perhaps through hails to "pay attention," as in *Sonic the Hedgehog*'s taunting avatar (design/advertising); to "play differently," as in *Resident Evil 5*'s co-op mode (design/advertising/lobbying); or to "be a different kind of gamer," as propounded in the advertising and lobbying insistences of *Crayon Physics Deluxe.* Combinative hails such as these create opportunities for the computer game medium to be shaped into something that appears new, specific, memorable, and desirable, and they do this by insisting on attention and a willingness to both give and receive direction—especially the latter. The resistant player is no player at all, because even the best games are not compelling to someone who refuses to be coaxed or coerced. So profound is the medium's aimlessness that even when "Hey, you there, gamer!" elicits the gamer's attention, there is still no promise that the interpellating game will be entertaining or its tediousness overcome.

Ironically, it is the profundity of the boredom that computer game aimlessness produces that makes possible the endless variety of aesthetics, play mechanics, and motivations of the many thousands of titles that have been created over the years, each of which represents what the medium can be-

come. The unpredictability of this becoming, not only to consumers and players but also to developers themselves, suggests a strange but believable answer to the question "How does the industry survive when it is glutted by so much bad product?" Like a dedicated lotto player or gambler, computer game developers, players, lobbyists, and consumers keep on theorizing patterns for what works and what does not. Insistence is what keeps these repetitive failures dim in the memory, replacing them at every opportunity and from every conceivable angle with irresistible calls to pay attention, to be someone else, to forget the overwhelming complexity of the medium, and to take solace in a given game's limits, directives, and vivifying subjectivities.