Performing the Social Text: Or, What I Learned From Playing *Spore*

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The final chapter of my book *The Meaning of Video Games* was originally meant to be about the long-anticipated *Spore*, by *Sims* creator Will Wright.[1] But the rolling release dates of the game came and went, and it eventually became clear that it was not going to be out by the time I finished the book. So instead I wrote a chapter on anticipating *Spore*, on the extensive prerelease marketing campaign and what it did to construct the social, paratextual reception of the game itself. Even more closely than I had originally anticipated, *Spore*'s take on the problem of building a content-creation and content-sharing system aligned the game with the most important trends in digital humanities and textual studies today. I would compare texts and video games not in terms of their supposedly shared narrative content (not in terms of their content at all, really) but formally—in terms of how they model complex systems, how they construct networked environments for the (re)production, transmission, reception, and continual reediting of their respective content-objects. In this sense, both texts and video games are best understood as systems of prompts for various possible performances.

Today, many textual scholars understand the objects of their attention not

1. Steven E. Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies* (New York: Routledge, 2008); *Spore* (Redwood City, CA: Maxis/Electronic Arts, 2008).

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as discrete verbal artifacts but as effects of overlapping social systems; they view a text as a field of possibilities extending beyond its linguistic signs and any individual documentary witness. D. F. McKenzie famously argues for a sociology of texts, proposing that bibliography should study texts in any material form—not only books but any kind of "verbal, visual, oral, numeric data, in the form of maps, prints, and music, of archives of recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information."[2] Following McKenzie, Jerome McGann argues for the importance of dynamic social relations when it comes to textual meaning. Textual studies, McGann suggests, should aim to model those social relations, and existing models of this kind "descend to us through our culture in games and role-playing environments."[3] McKenzie's capacious notion of textuality opens the door to the study of digital media, including video games, which are at the moment the most popular form of digital media in our culture. If we plot a trajectory through the positions of McKenzie and McGann, I would argue, it takes us to today's digital environments—including virtual worlds and video games—as potential models for digital scholarship.

Like texts (only in more obvious and extreme forms), video games are social objects. Their meanings emerge only in their playing, through improvisational performances. In a game, the scripted rules are constraints within which the player's moves are freely performed, parameters that give meaning to improvisational acts. In a game, you make moves in response to the environment, often using programs known as "editors." You repeatedly reconfigure and reposition your character or avatar and inventoried objects (weapons, tools, vehicles) in the game world, each time invoking the procedures of the underlying code and thus altering the game world as you are experiencing it. Then you respond in turn to the new conditions of the altered environment. Although you do not edit the underlying code directly (unless you are a game "modder"—someone who creates levels or new games by doing precisely that), these higher-level reconfigurative acts can legitimately be understood as an editorial intervention, not unlike the act of imposing annotation or "markup" on a text, for example, and thus creating a mediating and interpretive layer between text and reader. Playing a video game is improvisational in precisely this sense: it is a series of performances involving adjustments and reconfigurations in response to feedback.

Consider theatrical improvisation. Premises shouted from the audience, pulled out of a hat, or "offered" by other players, as well as predefined roles or props, serve as generative constraints, the boundaries within which improv actors exercise varying degrees of freedom to alter or add or veer away: "Yes, and . . . ," improv actors are taught to say (in contrast to "No, but . . ."), and therein lies the

2. Donald Francis McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (London: British Library, 1986).

3. Jerome J. McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

play. It is no accident that the tradition of improvisational theater has developed what are called "theater games" (Viola Spolin's guidebook and compilation is the best known). These games of make-believe action and reaction are training exercises as well as prompts for performance—rules-based constraints on performance that are at the same time spurs to action.[4]

Around the time *Spore* was first announced in 2005, *Façade* appeared, an independent PC game by Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern, explicitly based on improvisational theater, and also on the situation of Edward Albee's 1962 play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*[5] Albee's drama is about mostly unpleasant social games performed by a dysfunctional couple for the captive audience of their guests. *Façade* makes you, the player, the captive guest at an awkward dinner party in the high-rise apartment of your old friends Grace and Trip. To play, you type text in response to audio performances by animated NPCs (nonplayer characters) whose voices were recorded by experienced Chicago improvisational theater actors. Thus bits of dialogue are produced procedurally by the computer according to what happens while the game is being played—all of it governed by several layers of artificial intelligence. One telling and self-referential "easter egg" in the game (a kind of hidden toy for players to discover) is a playable fortune-telling Magic Eight Ball, which is an analog random-response generator, a simpler version of the complex digital programs running the game's character interactions and Aristotelian story arc. *Façade* only more explicitly explores the improvisational nature of almost all video game playing—it is performed in competitive cooperation with other intelligences, with various traces of human intelligence as mediated by the computer and thus rendered artificial, manifest as rules-based or algorithmic machine behaviors, even when originally programmed by game designers or recorded by human actors. Game "AI" is only distantly related to advanced artificial-intelligence research in computer science. It is a much more pragmatic use of the term to describe the appearance of intelligence as a desired effect: the emergence of complex and meaningful situations arising from fairly simple sets of rules in interplay with the decisions and responses by the human player. Other intelligences discovered in the game world are always more or less "artificial" (even when they are merely masked human players encountered as avatars in live online play).

All games consist in seeking out and competitively and cooperatively engaging with signs of other agents, other intelligences, whether in the form of overall game AI, nonplayer characters, programmed robots in the tradition of "Eliza" (including helper or navigation characters), or the other players and game designers who ultimately stand behind all the machine forms—the stories,

4. Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1963).

5. *Façade* (2005), interactivestory.net.

maps, puzzles, and rules of the game universe they have created. This search for other intelligences is what an explicitly theatrical game like *Façade* shares with Wright's *Spore*, a simulation game in a very different genre. In *Spore* you play the evolutionary levels of the game—Cell, Creature, Tribal, Civilization, and Space—by moving in and out of three different but integrated interfaces: (1) the mapped virtual geographies of the game world proper, (2) the content-creation tools (the creature-building- and vehicle-editors), and (3) a browser for accessing a shared database of content objects. The relationship among these interfaces is best apprehended by observing that a creature you build in the creature-editor, for example, is procedurally animated in the game world. The creature is shared through a Portable Network Graphics image file (represented by a digital trading card) in the Sporepedia database. A creature is made by starting with graphical "primitives," blobs or cell shapes and various add-ons, limbs and features and markers of qualities such as stealth or speed, all encoded and compressed into the file represented by the card; and then the game engine animates the results, depending on your choices. So each object you edit exists in a highly compressed data file that can easily be uploaded and downloaded, stored, shared, and used to populate other people's games, since the animating program—which brings the object to life and tells it how to walk or dance or cry out—resides in the game rather than the creature file.[6] The creature is thus made to perform by the separately located "standoff" program.

Wright has said that he wants players of *Spore* to feel more like George Lucas than Luke Skywalker, like J. R. R. Tolkien rather than Frodo Baggins.[7] Lucas is a good example, since he has increasingly become a new-model digital-era director, less auteur and more master editor of media effects as well as of human performances. Likewise, the *Spore* player is part director and part metaeditor in multiple interfaces, someone who produces by imagining possibilities within a fictive universe and then structuring and restructuring content objects in order to enable those possibilities to emerge, at every stage combining human and machine intelligence to produce a string of improvised performances. You may navigate the landscape in search of food, for instance, battle and kill another creature, eat it to gain "DNA points," move into the creature-editor to add features and reconfigure the body of your creature before returning it to the game world. With a click you can upload the revised version of the creature to the database for other players to find and select for their games. In the browser, you can flip through images of content created by other players in search of something intriguing to download

6. Caryl Shaw, "Building Community around Pollinated Content in *Spore*" (Game Developers Conference Radio, CMP Media, May 23, 2006).

7. Will Wright and Mark Saltzman, "The Game of Life: Will Wright Gives Us an Early Look at *Spore*," *Austin Chronicle*, March 2, 2007, www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid:451615.

to your own game, a creature or building that looks as though it has intelligence behind it, someone else's created object with which to improvise.

Spore has what its creators refer to as a T-shaped structure: you work your way through the levels vertically in order to arrive at the branching possibilities of the Space level, where a potentially endless search for new worlds and new life forms with which to interact awaits you. Beneath its cartoon exterior, the deep mystique of space exploration is at the heart of the game. Will Wright was born in 1960, the year the first modern SETI (Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence) experiment was performed at Cornell University, using a giant radio telescope to listen for signs of intelligent life amid the general noise of outer space. With SETI, space exploration became less remote for many people, but at the same time it became more computational and abstract, since what SETI explores is the information grid, signals sent out from among distant stars. (In recent years, the SETI network has been moved to thousands of voluntarily linked personal computers.) Wright has said that SETI was an early inspiration for *Spore* and that the Space level was the first one he imagined when he began to plan the game.[8] A goofy image of his own head in space, representing the higher intelligence of his "god game," appeared as an easter egg in the creature-editor software when it was released before the game was. It is a funny, self-referential gesture, apparently indicating that to play *Spore* is ultimately to search for signs of Wright's creative intelligence behind the game universe. In actual practice, however, there are many signs of intelligence to seek out in *Spore*. It is ultimately a game played in a proliferation of parallel universes—copies on individual players' computers—all of which are potentially shaped and populated with content made by massive numbers of other players, like SETI signals uploaded by them to the *Spore* servers to be intercepted and downloaded by any player. Distributed and time-shifted content creation and content sharing, potential social interactions that the developers refer to as the "pollination process," provide the true infrastructure of the game.[9]

As I play *Spore*, I encounter other players' creatures, cities, and planets, as well as objects made by the professional game designers, and I can interact with them in my game—cooperating with them, destroying them, whatever—without altering the other players' own "original copies" of their creatures, objects, and worlds. In turn, I can pollinate the *Spore* universe with my own creations. The central database supplies constantly updated statistics via the Sporepedia, telling me, for example, that my planet in a particular galaxy has been blown up by another player, or many other players; but this destruction is visited only on other players' copies of my planet (it will still be there in my own game the next time

8. Wright and Saltzman, "Game of Life."

9. Shaw, "Building Community."

I play). Wright has said that this hybrid model was designed to offer the benefits of playing online—"all the people building the world collectively together—but without the drawback that the fourteen-year-old can kill you or that you've invested all this time in your planet and somebody comes along and blows it up."[10] Such things happen all the time in a Massively Multiplayer Online game such as *World of Warcraft*, which is one reason *Spore* was designed not as an MMO but as what Wright calls a Massively *Single* Player Online game. In the summer of 2008, well before the game was released, over 2 million player-made creatures, built in the creature-editor, were already uploaded into the public database. As of spring 2009, you can browse the Sporepedia for new creations on your iPhone or iPod via a third-party application. (An official mobile game for iPhone, a simplified version of the first Cell level of *Spore*, has been available for some time.) As I create and upload content, the original root copy of my prized creature remains as I edit it, while at the same time, via its copies or clones, it is being shared with the world—and often being destroyed in rather violent encounters. But with this system I can use those encounters as environmental feedback to prompt and determine my repeated reediting of the creature. The game defines this process as "evolution," but really it is a time-lapse improvisational performance. *Spore* is perhaps best understood as a continually reedited universe of content-objects, a system within which those objects may be used to perform new meanings.

Textual scholarship has itself been evolving in something like the same direction for years now. Willard McCarty has argued that the digital humanities should engage in "the heuristic process of constructing and manipulating models" as its core activity; and Jerome McGann's interest in modeling the social text as a critical-discourse field led him to develop *Ivanhoe*, a gamelike space for dynamic digital simulations of the ongoing reception histories of literary works, a visualization of the critical "moves" a group of players make in interpreting or rewriting a selected literary text.[11] This form of modeling—mapping the moves of avatar-characters in relation to one another in a shared space, visualizing the results as a set of feedback loops—is what video games already do, and at a more sophisticated level, just in terms of their computational power and the power of their visualizations. The convergence of game systems and textual systems becomes clearer when you consider that the central interface tools for *Spore* are conceived of as content *editors*. Now obviously, scholarly editing is a very different set of intellectual practices when it comes to sorting among, emending, and pro-

10. Wright and Saltzman, "Game of Life."

11. Willard McCarty, "Modeling: A Study in Words and Meanings," in *A Companion to Digital Humanities*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Raymond George Siemens, and John M. Unsworth (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 254–70, at 255; McGann and Johanna Drucker, with Speculative Computing Laboratory, University of Virginia, *Ivanhoe*.

ducing texts, whether classical, biblical, modern-era print texts or, more recently, film, images, and born-digital texts and media of various kinds. But editing as a way of producing game content bears a structural resemblance to what many textual scholars do with texts in the digital era. Playing *Spore* involves editing objects in complex social environments—improvisational play, further reediting, sharing, analysis, more play—which is actually closer to what textual scholars usually do. Of course scholars resist thinking of the texts they study (especially literary texts) as "content objects"; but "content management," despite its bureaucratic ring, is not so different, really, from the traditional sorting of documentary witnesses, editions, and versions in an evolving textual field.

Better digital environments in which to edit and study texts are needed, a general "cyberinfrastructure" for humanities, social sciences, and all text-based research.[12] Rather than merely extending fiber optics and adding newer machines, this infrastructure must be imagined as having interpretive consequences, as a set of constraints and affordances within which to perform textual meanings. It needs to be both a social and a structuring space, a complex grid of possibilities—less like the telephone communications network and more like a space for complex, collaborative modeling or, as McCarty describes it, "a continual process of coming to know by manipulating representations."[13] It is in this sense that textual and digital humanities cyberinfrastructure needs to be more like games. What we can learn from a game such as *Spore* is how to imagine a research infrastructure that encourages asynchronous content-creation and -sharing by many users on different schedules, with different agendas—one that allows for the continual reediting of content objects, which can be experienced as if they existed in parallel universes but at the same time remained entangled and linked together for collaborative activity. The goal is not for a team of editors to labor for years to make a unique and carefully crafted textual object, edited in only one way and fixed in one form. The goal is to build open environments within which to manage and track the continuous reediting of many seed texts by loosely or temporarily affiliated collaborators, texts that can be vetted and can remain protected and persistent, yet simultaneously remain open, shared, and infinitely alterable. A number of recent projects have worked toward something like this infrastructure for textual studies and digital humanities, including the aggregating environment of NINES at the University of Virginia, European projects such as Interedition and TextGrid, and Paul Eggert's now-defunct Australian project called Just In Time Markup (which attempted to employ a system

12. See John Unsworth et al., "Our Cultural Commonwealth: The Report of the American Council of Learned Societies Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences," Fall 2006, www.acls.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/Programs/Our_Cultural_Commonwealth.pdf (accessed November 10, 2009).

13. McCarty, "Modeling," 265.

of "standoff markup"—remotely stored annotation—to achieve the goals I have been outlining here).[14]

Eggert is now among those consulting with an interdisciplinary team at Loyola University Chicago as work begins on a model for an open-source infrastructure that emphasizes collaborative text editing (rather than aggregation or analytics). Under the aegis of the multidisciplinary Center for Textual Studies and Digital Humanities at Loyola, this project is tentatively being called HRIT (Humanities Research Infrastructure and Tools), and its first tool is a standoff-markup editor referred to as CaTT (Collaborative Tagging Tool). The idea is for an expandable collection of source texts—vetted, proofed, indexed, and uploaded—to be made available for the application of any number of different markup or annotation schemes, with the annotation stored separately and applied as needed to produce any number of desired outputs. (Or, to use the relevant jargon: the model will employ standoff markup in the service of markup-agnostic results.) Like a *Spore* creature, then, each automatically verified and protected source text will remain essentially unaltered by the operations performed on it, whether they take the form of competing markup schemes, annotation, metadata, links, or in-line markup.[15]

The advanced content-creation and content-management systems of video games such as *Spore* provide compelling models for this kind of modeling, since they are designed to treat their objects as (I quote Peter Shillingsburg) "both spoor and spur"—both the trace left by authors and a prompt for "readers to perform meanings."[16] Spoors and pollination are mere metaphors, but they may help us to imagine textuality beyond the limits of the traditional metaphors of stemmatics or family trees (or the fall from one source into a world of "corruption"). We may think of pollination, for example, as a bee doing the work of reproduction, carrying (genetic) information from flower to flower. But, of course, robust pollination actually functions best within a larger context, a more complex environment where there are many bees and other pollinators, and many flowers, thus allowing unexpected cross-pollination in the service of propagation. Likewise with digital text-editing systems: the desired outcome is intellectual fecundity, increasing the odds that a collaborator will have fruitful encounters with other intelligences in the system—by way of their textual traces—and with whom new meanings may be improvised. These meanings are new not in the sense that they

14. NINES is the Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-Century Electronic Scholarship. See www.nines.org.

15. A TEI-compliant XML version of a text, for example, could be produced and made available to the editor who produces it but also to anyone else who cares to download it (and perhaps to alter it and upload the results as yet another new layer). The same would hold for any markup schema, or for any locally and pragmatically designed semantic annotations.

16. Peter L. Shillingsburg, *From Gutenberg to Google* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 50, 75.

are generated out of nothing. Rather they are brought to life from existing spores or seeds distributed by other intelligences, and they contribute to the overall system over time. The ultimate goal of new digital text-editing systems is shared by game designers. Both seek to encourage collaborative work in a shared field, to propagate a vital diversity of editorial and interpretive performances.