

Wooden Reels and the Maintenance of Virtual Life: Gaming and the Death Drive in a Digital Age

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IN HIS 1996 ESSAY “Zen and the Art of Mario Maintenance: Cycles of Death and Rebirth in Video Games and Children’s Subliterature,” Gary Westfahl begins an examination of the compulsion to repeat the pixelated experience of simulated death with reference to what he calls “an impressive work of prediction” (211). That impressive work is Algis Budrys’s *Rogue Moon*, published in 1960, which revolves around a plot where scientists, who discover a strange, deathtrap-filled alien structure on the moon, “employ a machine to create duplicates of a man” in order to navigate and successfully complete the “maze” constructed by what is most certainly a race of sadistic extraterrestrials. The rationale suggested for such an elaborate solution to the deathtrap quandary, as Westfahl explains, is that each “duplicate”—indeed, avatar—is linked to a human-controlled machine which “experiences what [the duplicate] is experiencing” as it negotiates the deadly terrain. Because they are controlled by an external overseer, these duplicates are disposable, and “When the duplicate inevitably dies, the man learns what should not be done, and the next duplicate can avoid that trap and move farther inside” (211). Apart from Budrys’s novel sounding like a satire on the expendability of infantry in the all-too-real game of war, what *Rogue Moon* offers is a precursory exemplum of early video

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gaming experiences, the now proverbial “three lives” with which to navigate deadly simulated topography, where the emulated experience of death becomes a game of mastery—and of death defiance. Connecting Budrys’s novel to the *Super Mario Bros.* experience and the compulsion to traverse the space of death in order to return with the knowledge of its enigmas, Westfahl adds that “Literally, the more often Mario dies, the better the player becomes; in a true Zen paradox, players must repeatedly kill their Marios in order to better maintain their lives in future games” (213). In essence, one dies so that one may live.

But “live” is a relative term. Rather, what is important about Westfahl’s paradox is that one simulates death in order to “better maintain,” to master the unknown while bettering or improving one’s circumstances for “future games.” In other words, games that simulate the experience of death do so as an act of amelioration projected into the future, as means of mollifying a negation, the omnipresent threat of life’s absence upon which the digital gaming experience is premised. If it is truly the case that there is a brand of amelioration—dare I say, *pleasure*—that accompanies the idea of symbolically conquering the reaper, another paradox emerges concerning the derivation of pleasure from an unpleasurable scenario: “Noting that in these games young people are continually experiencing symbolic death, and that the games seem like repetitious and futile cycles, one might see them as psychologically damaging, as encouraging only a sense of despair” (213). Granted, interaction with virtual worlds can elicit emotional responses akin to “despair” or existential angst. For evidence of the significant pressures that accompany Mario maintenance, one need look no further than YouTube to note the anguish and intense emotion cathected when engaging virtual worlds. Thanks to the Internet we can view at a whim a highlight reel of the top video game freak-outs,¹ along with strategy videos on the best ways to survive a game and the best ways to die.²

1 One of the more widely-viewed online videos depicting a gaming-induced temper tantrum is entitled “German Kid Flips Out” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2MV3DD5pFc), which, staying true to its moniker, is a video of an adolescent shouting German expletives at a computer screen as he grows impatient with the digital world with which he is interfacing. There have been some online murmurings concerning the authenticity of this spectacle, and yet the very existence of the video and the commentary it generates corroborates the emotive investment some place in virtual things.

2 There are several videos that can be viewed on YouTube that compile and/or analyze some of the more sensationalized, ironic, or interesting digital deaths

Yet video games have evolved significantly from the time Westfahl was writing and have long since incorporated goal-oriented narratives (in the form of endings, for example) that destabilize his claim that video games are simply despair-inducing “repetitious and futile cycles.” Some of the more repetitive and futile games to which Westfahl might be referring are products of the Atari era (approximately 1972 to the mid 1980s), which operate according to what is arguably an existential game design. As a colleague of mine once put it, Atari games are the simulacral paradigm of existential life models: they get harder and harder until you die. Because Atari-era games were based more on a point system than on any sense of closure, it could be argued that post-Atari-era game designs adopt a teleological, reward-based—even apocalyptic (in the etymological sense of the word)—model predicated on beating or concluding the game with varying degrees of success, where a sought-after article of knowledge is unveiled in the form of an ending. The rather graphically impoverished and memory-limited Atari-era games represent a more Sisyphean task with their lack of goal orientation, where the only identifiable objective is to maintain one’s avatar in the face of “futile and hopeless labor” (Camus 375). Interestingly, existentialist philosopher Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* identified this eponymous “absurd hero” as the representative of our modern age (376), and although video games were roughly three decades removed to the future from the time his book first appeared (1942), Camus’s *Myth*, like Budrys’s *Rogue Moon*, represents a startling work of prediction in that the drive to compulsively repeat an unpleasurable scenario, predicated on a desire to subdue death (Sisyphus was condemned to his task in part for having “put Death in chains”), is a “torment” that also has its moments of “joy” or “happiness,” a sense of pleasure generated by becoming conscious of the absurdity of one’s self-perpetuated torment (377–78). Just as Sisyphus is programmed to sustain his futile task, Atari-era gamers are predisposed to follow the symbolic boulder to the foot of the digital hill once they have reached the limit of their skill. The task can certainly represent one of despair; yet, as Camus summarizes in his conclusion to *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “One always finds one’s burden again.... One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (378).

of the video game canon. One of these is a three-part series called “Video Game Deaths,” which may be viewed via the following: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycOpj8hMEjc.

Despite the shift in game design from futile labour to goal orientation, many modern video games *do* still necessitate (and gratify) a compulsion to repeat as the template for interaction with the game matrix, and this compulsion is predicated on the simultaneous joy and misery of mastering one's burden as represented by the simulated threat of life's absence. In the gaming community the compulsion to repeat, otherwise known as "replay value," is openly acknowledged as desirable criteria for a game's construct, even for games that operate according to a teleological design. So as modern Sisyphi, digital gamers, in search of the best way to find pleasure in torment, follow the boulder to the bottom of the cyber hill and (re) enact the symbolic clash with mastery of the interminable. In what would appear to be a series of simulacral removals from the thing itself, gamers sometimes record videos of the clash. The existence and circulation of such amateur films capturing what might be regarded as the sublimated desire to replicate the experience of death points to a larger collective experience by which engagement with virtual worlds has become an acceptable form of expressing a particular psychological impulse. The lesson that seems to emerge with respect to the maintenance of virtual life, then, is that rather than "encouraging only a sense of despair," as Westfahl puts it, there exists a sense of pleasure conflated with emulating the mastery of an unpleasurable experience, and the sense of pleasure generated by symbolically engaging death is predicated on that intuitive sense of despair one might feel in facing finality. Having published his essay at the pinnacle of the 2-D gaming era, some of Westfahl's insights into game design might seem antiquated when contextualized within today's more sophisticated hyperdigital gaming worlds, and yet his investigation offers an important first look into digital gaming as an extension of Sigmund Freud's theories surrounding the death drive and the compulsion to repeat simulations of death *as* a game. Although Westfahl's essay does not refer to Freud or the death drive specifically, such investigations into the pleasure derived from symbolically mastering unpleasure via virtual interfaces reveal that infantile engagement with the death drive is alive and thriving in modern digital gaming experiences.

Before launching into an analysis of how the Freudian death drive pervades the experience of simulated death vis-à-vis the world of digital gaming, it would be beneficial to revisit how death-as-representation has evolved as a necessary simulation and what symptom is being manifested through the need to interact with simulations of death. Historically, the spectatorial representation of death and violence has been no stranger to the formative years of youth. One need only refer to Grimms' tales

like “How Some Children Played at Slaughtering” to verify how emulated violent spectacles persist from childhood through to adulthood as part of cultural memory. In the story, two children, upon witnessing their father slaughtering a pig, decide to play or emulate the role of butcher, whereupon the older brother, seemingly ignorant of the reality of his actions, uses a knife to “slit his little brother’s throat” (600). The narrative accordingly spirals into an extravagant burlesque of fatality. The boys’ mother, who was upstairs in a room bathing another child, hears the cries of her son, runs downstairs, and, upon seeing what has occurred, is so incensed that she takes the knife out of the younger son’s throat and stabs the heart of her son who had been playing the butcher. The baby drowns in the tub, the mother hangs herself, and when her husband comes back from the fields and encounters this orgy of obliteration he becomes so distraught that he dies soon after. Although this is, admittedly, a rather extreme example of the violent nature of what was to become children’s literature, such sensationalized depictions of death reveal more than their seemingly uncomplicated cautionary tale structure might exhibit on the surface. “How Some Children Played at Slaughtering” is essentially about a child’s wish to experience death by emulating his father’s apparent mastery of the concept. Death is a spectacle that becomes repeated not only by the characters in the tale but also through the medium (the story) the spectator consumes; only, the spectator stands at a safe distance, able to experience a mediated version of a horrific reality while deriving, in a seemingly perverse way, pleasure by consuming the spectacle. In other words, the emulation of death-as-a-game in the story works as an allegory for the consumption of death-as-a-game by the reader.

In spite of what some theorists have called the Disneyfication of reality—the pacification and mediation of more authentic forms of experience (at least in Western culture)—hardcore or explicit simulations of death have endured in mediums meant for, or eventually adapted to, child audiences. Speaking of the “endless regime of representations and commodities that conjure up a nostalgic view of the United States as the ‘magic kingdom’” (28), cultural theorist Henry A. Giroux in *Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture* claims that the “Disney Company has become synonymous with a notion of innocence which aggressively rewrites the historical and collective identity of the American past” (28–29). The argument that Disney, an ostensibly child-targeted media dynasty, has rewritten, reoriented, and refurbished sordid realities has become a cliché among those knowledgeable of the industry. What is more relevant in terms of the Freudian death impulse is how this “construction

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of popular memory," whose purpose, according to Giroux, is to sanitize or "purge" American history of its "seamy side" (29), coincides with Jean Baudrillard's suggestion in *Simulacra and Simulation* that theme parks like Disneyland strategically manufacture a view of reality that is "embalmed and pacified" (12) but which nonetheless exhibits aestheticized traces of the seamy, violent histories it attempts to mollify. Baudrillard's language of pacification through embalming is particularly appropriate in terms of how simulacra and simulation relate to the death drive and the symbolic relations generated by reproducing stimuli associated with death. In many ways the various exaggerated spectacles and thrill-producing rides experienced at theme parks are meant to simulate a brand of excitement and/or danger that emulates an encounter with the space of death while keeping the subject removed from, and in control of, the actual danger, and such spectacles become internalized as symbols for fabricated mastery. In relation to the experience of digital gaming, these mediated removals from a posteriori realities are what Ian Bogost in *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* calls the "magic circle" of the simulated experience, a buffer between mind and reality that generates "a safe place of play" (134). Both the children's story in its sometimes cautionary design and the theme park ride can be placed not only within the realm of simulated reality but also within the realm of gaming: the spectator is meant to take something real from something that is unreal and make it applicable to everyday life in order to avoid the unmitigated reality. As game designer Chris Crawford suggests of the digital gaming experience, "a game is an artifice for providing the psychological experiences of conflict and danger while excluding their physical realizations" (quoted in Bogost 134).³ Pacified or mediated death spectacles like the Grimms' "How Some Children Played at Slaughtering" and those of the digital gaming experience operate within the dynamics of this magic circle as a safe space of play where one might not only emulate through repetition the mastery (that is, avoidance) of death but also derive an affective or aesthetic enjoyment from the experience. "In short," Crawford goes on to say, "a game is a safe way to experience reality" (quoted in Bogost 134), even though that reality is one that is mediated.

³ "Simulation" and "game" are not necessarily synonymous here, but they do operate according to the same principle of avoidance: in the case of the game, the avoidance of an unpleasurable scenario from a safe place of play; in the case of simulation, the avoidance of "physical relations" or referential stimuli that might prove to be unpleasurable.

Admittedly, there is a difference, at least on an interactive level, between representations of death appropriated from the imaginative worlds of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century folk culture and simulations of death-as-a-game in today's virtual and emulative mediums. However, what the historical persistence of death mediation tells us is that the desire for spectacles of death, no matter how pacified those spectacles become from period to period, ebb and flow in graphic intensity, arguably as authentic death spectacles recede and advance in everyday life. To bring the focus back to (roughly) present day: those who vociferously object to the increase in depictions of violence in children's media might long for the quaintness of the Atari era when, as Steven Kirsh says in *Children, Adolescents, and Media Violence*, "state of the art' meant abstract blips, stick figures, and crudely rendered space craft," when "Video games such as *Missile Command* and *Asteroids* were considered to be 'violent' because they portrayed smaller blips destroying larger blips" (229). The idea that any Atari 2600 game might be deemed violent at all demonstrates the amount of imagination that is involved in the spectacle of death, as it is certainly a stretch in a post-*Grand Theft Auto* world to see violence, except symbolically, in the demise of a pixelated stick figure. In what appears to be a (psycho) logical progression gesturing for authenticity, the Nintendo era, as Kirsh adds, would bring increasing realism, the "spilling of virtual blood" (229), the *Mortal Kombat* "Finish Him" (or Her), and the Sony era would usher in even more lifelike violence, allowing one to simulate various exaggerated (and aestheticized) forms of death in first or third person. The development toward hyperbole in digital death spectacles—although presumably the interactive facsimile of colourful death sequences in film—appears to be an exercise in creating an interface more real than reality. Presently the experience of consciously dispensing death to other human-controlled players becomes a hyperreality where one may compulsively repeat the sadistic enjoyment of mastery or enjoy dying in the avatar who is dying (but who is, at the same time, immune to actual death). As Jeffrey Goldstein explains in "Immortal Kombat: War Toys and Violent Video Games," the desire for greater levels of violence in digital gaming seems to be an irrevocable developmental tendency validated in the early 1990s:

Nineteen ninety-three ... saw two versions of the video game *Mortal Kombat* in the shops: the original version, sold by Sega, with its notorious decapitations and blood-dripping spinal cords, and a sanitized version in which the violence was toned down, offered by Nintendo. Although there were more Nin-

tendo than Sega game systems present in U.S. households, the bloody Sega version of *Mortal Kombat* outsold the less violent version by about 7 to 1.

There appears to be a ready market for violent entertainment. Perhaps there always has been. Playing at and with images of war and violence is nothing new. (53)

Goldstein's observations compel the question of why in our purportedly pacified, enlightened, and rational modern age the demand for interactive death-oriented simulations, and the drive to make those simulations as "real" as possible, have come to dominate the output of some of our finest representational mediums (namely, digital technology). Why have simulations oriented around the mastery of death become such a saleable commodity? The short answer is buried in Goldstein's claim that, because there "always has been" an interest in death, the removal of oneself from the authentic spectacle, particularly in modern times, becomes sublimated by the most interactive representations—the gorier the better. Vicki Goldberg in "Death Takes a Holiday, Sort Of" accounts for the correlation between the recession of actual death in everyday life and the proliferation of depictions of simulated death in media and virtual spaces. "In eighteenth-century Europe and England," she explains, "death was everyone's intimate acquaintance, constantly on view. Child mortality rates were hideously high" and "executions were also public. Well into the nineteenth century, an execution day was a holiday, and schools were let out" (27).⁴ A consequence to this ebbing of death from daily life, Goldberg suggests, is that "it roughly coincided with a long increase in *depictions* of death, some driven by new technologies.... History and psychology indicate that representation rapidly supplanted actual experience as a new and newly anxious audience sought novel ways to cope with its fears" (28). In other words, in the absence left by death's recession, an innate fascination with that absence becomes supplanted by simulation as a coping mechanism, and "as the mortal coil gets shuffled off in isolation wards and eventually in faraway nursing homes, the new reproductive media offer more and more realistic or exaggerated visions of how we die" (29).

It seems counterintuitive that the disappearance of actual death from daily life coincides with the increasing depiction and aestheticization of

4 Further contextualizing the ubiquity of, and public fascination with, visual death spectacles, Goldberg explains that when "enlightenment voices declared public torture and execution an 'atrocious' ... the people felt entitled to their theater and complained loudly when the guillotine replaced the gallows because they could not see as well" (33–34).

death in media. If civilization wants to sanitize itself of such spectacles, why would it usher in new and more sensationalized exhibitions to replace the real ones? If the response to the recession of death from daily life is indeed the symbolic mediation of death, of what is this desire to experience such realities via virtual worlds a symptom? This is where Freud provides some answers concerning how the replication (symbolic duplicate) of a scene of loss generates the fantasy of mastery or control over unwieldy reality. Freud's oft-quoted 1920 text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* offers what might be considered *the* modern precursory example of how a virtual object—predicated on an absence or loss that links back to an original referent—is supplemented for reality at the period of language acquisition in early childhood. Recounting a curious observation noted upon the absence of an infant's mother—what Michel De Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* calls the “matrix-experience” of the “game played by [Freud's] eighteen-month-old grandson” (109)—Freud examines how a child's repetition of a distressing experience (the mother's absence) “as a game” becomes a pleasurable experience derived from revisiting symbolically a traumatic scene of loss. The now-legendary wooden reel scenario functions as a prototype for the appropriation and manipulation of symbols that not only stimulates language acquisition but that also prompts the type of symbolic mastery inspired by virtual worlds. What the child did, Freud explains,

was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it.... He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful “*da*.” This, then, was the complete game—disappearance and return. As a rule one only witnessed its first act, which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act. (284)

While one might be hard put to analogize the *fort/da* game to a digital game, the principles of each operate according to the same paradigm. Aside from the string of the wooden reel game perhaps reminding one of the controller that connects to a gaming console (presently being eliminated by wireless controllers), there is a certain degree of skill called upon to toss the reel into unknown space (the cot is “curtained” and therefore simulates unknowable terrain) and then have it return successfully—a brand of skill emulated when sending a digital avatar into unknown topography in order to navigate an encounter with the space of death. The significance of the game in either case is the ability to simulate control of that

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great unknown. Freud observes that at the initial stage of loss prompting the simulation the child “was in a *passive* situation—he was overpowered by the experience” of the mother’s absence; “but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took an *active* part” (285). Classified as “an instinct for mastery” of “hostile impulses” associated to the death drive, by “throwing away objects instead of persons” (285–86), Freud’s grandson is moving into the realm of the symbolic, the virtual, where the illusion of the mastery of absence—indicated by the linguistic quantifiers *fort* (gone) and *da* (there)—decreases the traumatic components of absence by the subject’s taking “an *active* part.” In other words, the approach to unpleasure precipitated by an absence or lack (the mother’s absence in the case of Freud’s study) is mediated by the instinct to create virtual supplements in order to master that which one cannot. One derives pleasure from this mastery by defying through simulation what cannot be defied in reality. If we apply Freud’s theory specifically to gaming, and to digital gaming in particular, the drive to experience *the real* through matrixes and virtual worlds is a symptom of our desire to confront and master loss without actually having to confront that loss—that is, from a safe distance. In the game of “disappearance and return,” sending the wooden reel out into the world is, as in modern digital games, an anxiety-fraught action where emotion is cathected into a symbol or avatar; its return, the “second act” to which “the greater pleasure was attached,” is the reward for navigating that negation, for symbolically conquering the unknown. Death is ultimately linked to this game of mastery in at least two ways: through its affiliation with the unknown and through the concept of mourning that which is missing. The absence signifies and emulates the space of death, the void created by the child’s detachment/separation from the mother, and by the unknown frontiers with which a child must learn to cope in the face of that loss. Death is the quintessential unpleasure to be mastered in any symbolic game of mourning and loss; just as Freud proposes that “The pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts” (338), the impulse toward death is subordinate to the game, the pleasurable simulation of absence and return. The game is essentially the manifestation of the “dualistic” drive that co-depends on both the “life instincts *and* death instincts” (emphasis added 326). Life is maintained through the fabricated mastery of its negation. One dies (symbolically) so that one may live.

Another approach to this topic would be to interrogate what the absent mother signifies in the compulsion to experience death, loss, and mourning via simulated mediums. But rather than analyze how modern gamers might suffer from maternal separation anxiety more than your average

person, it would be more relevant for the purposes of this argument to explore how the acquisition of the building blocks of language through the experience of mourning and loss—indeed, through traversing the space of death—has significant implications for how humans are predisposed to engage with virtual worlds. The significance of the game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that it prepares human beings for what is ultimately a virtual existence, one that is filled with floating signifiers and signs detached from real-world referents. This is where we begin to enter what Baudrillard calls the “*desert of the real*,” a “hyperreal” where the word or representation takes primacy over the referent in an endless chain of unanchored signification, where simulation “is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance” (1). Rather, “It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” where “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory” (1). The death drive is caught up in this rage for *things* removed from *substance*, this endeavour to wrest control from the actual thing through its constitution in a virtual medium. It is in its fixation with the virtual that the death drive somewhat becomes a misnomer: it is not merely concerned with the mastery of death but with the mastery of absences, of referents via their symbolic relations. As humans, through language acquisition, come to accept a virtual object as more real than the material referent, it seems that we are predisposed to (d)evolve into a further symbolic realm, one whose chain of signification is a series of endless removals predicated on the removal before it. The idea that this symbolic realm is established in childhood on the principles of mourning, loss, absence, and therefore on the abstraction of death, has startling implications for our present-day interaction with virtual mediums that go well beyond the mastery of finality. As William Watkin argues in *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, in a sub-chapter entitled “Fort/Da or a Child’s Elegy,” “We all know by now that language, as Saussure ... and Derrida have been at pains to point out, is a game.... Does this not suggest that the formation of the subject is also a game? Freud never says so ... yet his most important work on loss [*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*] is all about gaming” (162). If Watkin is correct in thinking that subject formation, predicated on loss, is “all about gaming,” then the illusion of immortality and mastery produced by digital gaming seems to be a logical evolutionary step. Our interface with digital worlds is the (pseudo)substantiation of the virtual referents we have constructed via language acquisition, just as most digital gaming is the virtual substantiation of the innate drive to simulate the mastery of

death. Ultimately, if language itself is a game of mastery, and if the death drive is linked specifically to the creation of virtual supplements in order to conjure positive stimuli from subduing unpleasure, then it is fitting that digital mediums have come to represent a template through which to play out the game of subject formation and that digital games manifest the interactive symptom of the ultimate subject-forming fantasy: the symbolic grapple with life's absence. Language itself is a matrix through which to simulate control. It appears that rather than being subordinate to the symbolic order of language acquisition the emulated mastery of death and (un)pleasure is the founding principle.

It seems, then, that language, while purporting a mastery over referents and abstract concepts, is simply an extension of the “magic circle” to which Bogost refers, where virtual things are tempered in an arena of wish fulfilment. Language, through its power to conjure that which is missing into a virtual existence, presents a space where, as Freud says is the motive of dreaming, “*I should like to get some enjoyment without cost*” (*On Dreams* 153). As a testament to our tendency to indulge in such magic circles predicated on the sublimated mastery of loss, Bogost cites a curious example of an online freeware response to the attacks of September 11: a game called *September 12*, a virtual (albeit 2-D) space where players can take simulated revenge on terrorists of indiscriminate Middle Eastern origin (it doesn't really matter which particular region in the Middle East; all that is required for the fantasy to work is sand and people attired in the garb representative of a Western conception of a terrorist). The game received, to put it euphemistically, mixed reviews. As Bogost notes of some of the online criticisms of *September 12*: “There are no victory conditions [in the game]. Essentially, you continue until everyone is dead and the city is a smouldering pile of rubble—or you don't, and everyone just toddles about the city until you become bored and go play Nethack or something” (quoted in Bogost 131). Such criticisms, Bogost claims, “stem from ... discomfort with this representation; terrorists, after all, don't just ‘toddle about’ innocently. But the simulation's model excludes actual terrorist activity, to focus instead on the response to terrorism” (131)—that is, a poorly simulated revenge fantasy. Again, quoting some of the criticism of the game offered from the online community, “to call this a ‘simulation,’ as the creators do, is fucking obscene. Simulation of what? Where's the research? What systems are simulated? What intellectual depth is brought to the consideration? What is the point—” (quoted in Bogost 132). The idea that one would feel compelled to interrogate the “point” of a simulation of this sort is significant for a few reasons. First, there exists coded

in the expletives and flabbergasted interrogatives a tangible anxiety that *September 12*, although operating as a virtual space where one may play out the fantasy of revenge and therefore emulate a pseudo-mastery of the unmasterable, is *not* a simulation owing to its unrealistic portrayal of terrorism. What is obscene, then, is that the above censure of *September 12* is not necessarily criticizing the game's existence but, rather, the unrealistic portrayal which fails to provide an adequate fantasy of revenge. There is no intellectual depth, no meticulous research—no *game*, essentially, as the only objective (to kill toddling terrorists) reminds one that the matrix the player engages is inauthentic. The magic circle, in order to be effective, needs at least to emulate a sense of danger to draw the player into the fantasy that they are mastering an unmasterable situation. The flaw in *September 12* is that there is nothing to master.

The difficult irony accompanying this drive to master death through its symbolic relation is that when “the real” actually occurs, it becomes displaced onto the category of fantasy. In his 2002 essay “Welcome to the Desert of the Real!” Slavoj Žižek offers a critique of the hyperreality of American media culture with an analogy to *The Truman Show*, a post-modern touchstone of a societally directed avatar whose life is nothing less than a game of mastering a reality fabricated to replicate the mundane of the everyday. This “ultimate American paranoid fantasy” involves one Truman Burbank “who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he lives in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he lives in a real world, while all the people around him are effectively actors and extras in a gigantic show” (384). After assessing the prevalence of this “paranoid fantasy” in connection to the 1999 film *The Matrix*—where Žižek derives the title for his essay from Morpheus’s ironic greeting when Neo (Keanu Reeves) awakens to a world in ruins—Žižek applies the principles of this “staged reality” to the 9/11 twin tower attacks:

Was [fantasized or staged reality] not something of the similar order that took place in New York on September 11? Its citizens were introduced to the “desert of the real”—to us, corrupted by Hollywood, the landscape and the shots we saw of the collapsing towers could not but remind us of the most breathtaking scenes in the catastrophe big productions. (385)

This interface with virtual catastrophe as an aesthetically driven fantasy, Žižek is suggesting, has its roots in the will to control the real-world referent via virtual supplements; yet when the referent once controlled by fantasy manifests itself, the reality becomes too real to be authentic. The

spectator immediately gauges the real against the fantasy and maps one onto the other. Žižek goes on to offer a rather controversial estimation of how the collapse of the towers and the attacks themselves were “obviously libidinally invested,” how, like the *Titanic*, “it was also a shock, but the space for [its destruction] was already prepared in ideological fantasizing” (385). In other words, “The unthinkable that happened was thus the object of fantasy: in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and this was the greatest surprise” (386). What Žižek appears to be arguing is that it wasn’t the act of terrorism Americans were shocked about; it was that America, through its repetition of the fantasy, was able to bring the virtual into existence—to bring the signified into the signifier—and complete the desire for a sort of eroticized invasion portended in films like *Red Dawn*, *War of the Worlds*, *Escape from New York*, or *Independence Day* (the list could go on). On that day America’s “holiday from history” as Žižek calls it was found to be a fake (387), and the simulation gap, the magic circle created by Hollywood film, closed in on the spectator.

To say that filmic spectacles of war and invasion are manifestations of a libidinal drive to bring those fantasies into reality deserves some commentary. Because the death instinct is predicated on an erotic impulse to create matrixes through which one might modify—or sublimate—the instinctual threat perceived, where one can, while excluding the physical consequences, transform into pleasure the stimulation afforded from the danger associated with death, it seems all too easy to argue that representation is equal to impulse and that there is always something libidinal buried beneath the portrayal of invasion or subjugation. After all, Freud famously argues in a footnote in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* that just about any artistic representation is libidinally driven, for there is “no doubt that the concept of the ‘beautiful’” in relation to aesthetic theory “has its roots in sexual excitation and that its original meaning was ‘sexually stimulating’” (69). With respect to filmic representations of death and invasion, the potential for repetitive viewing that mediates the spectatorial engagement with the death drive has more relevance than speciously disinterring sexual tropes. As Goldberg suggests, “There is ... a ritual aspect to repetitive viewing of moving pictures” (39), perhaps not unlike the drive for mastery in the death instinct that has presently culminated with digital gaming: “Knowing when the violence and death will turn up allows a certain monitoring of one’s own emotions. And since everyone dies only once, watching the same people die over and over tends to erect one poor barricade against the reality of death.” Yet poor as this barricade may be, like the avatars of video games “the stars are truly immortal...

Film stars go on to make another film, perhaps to die again” (39); film stars, like the digital cast of video games, offer the illusion of death that is removed even from its psychological consequences, as the idea that they proceed into an afterlife of new roles, new characters, new deaths, provides a safe space for the spectator who wishes to consume without consequence. Arguably, the interactive evolution of film viewing—in which the spectator could take a more active part—came about with the advent of home video technology: pause and rewind buttons allowed spectators to have greater control over the spectacle they consumed. Although the illusion of mastery facilitated by home theatre technology, as opposed to that facilitated by digital gaming, is admittedly less oriented to the death drive *specifically*, the capacity for repetitive viewing, as well as the public demand for devices that wield more control over the consumption of fantasy worlds, certainly sets the stage for the development of the drive into more interactive virtual mediums.

So while film offers a representation or simulation that is, for the most part, removed from the spectator who absorbs the spectacle passively, it is the adaptation of such passive spectacles into interactive media—games like *September 12*—that offers a more direct model of death mastery in situating the spectator as one who may take an active part. As I have alluded to in this essay, it can even be contended that narratological evolution as it pertains to playing with death has presently culminated in digital gaming worlds where the reader-as-gamer becomes involved in the narrative play of creation. Players are complicit in the narrative construction of interactive digital games; by way of repetition and mastery they co-author, through the ability to infiltrate and manipulate the linearity of the plot, a narrative an architect has pre-designed. Whereas at one time it was the creators of literature and the visual arts who took that active part to a greater degree, who embodied the desire of the masses through the media they created, the development of more ubiquitous forms of interactive media represents the evolutionary bridge linking the imaginative to the real through the nexus of emulation. In his assertion that “art demands that one play with death,” Maurice Blanchot suggests that representational media perhaps “introduces a game, a bit of play in the situation that no longer allows for tactics or mastery” (92). Blanchot transcribes a passage from Franz Kafka’s *Diaries* to exemplify that bit of play in relation to the (pro)creative fascination with death narratives and the ability to find satisfaction in a facsimile of “the situation that no longer allows for tactics or mastery” (a euphemism for death). Kafka says of his writing,

To return to
the magic circle
theory ...

All the good passages, the strongly convincing ones, are about someone who is dying and who finds it very hard and sees in it an injustice.... But for me ... such descriptions are secretly a game. I even enjoy dying in the character who is dying. Thus I calculatingly exploit the reader's attention which I have concentrated upon death; I keep a much clearer head than he. (quoted in Blanchot 90)

Here we return to the curtained cot and the wooden reel, to an ostensibly adult version of “How Some Children Played at Slaughtering,” an example of childish fascination sublimated into a proper and more socially acceptable aesthetic medium—literature. Whereas Kafka as creator claims that *he* keeps a much clearer head than the reader as he works through the description of death as a game, the ability to take up that authorial role in working through the narrative design transfers the same composure or control to the reader (indeed, gamer)—and although there exists emotional investment in the objectives, or even avatars, of the narrative, from a safe distance one can “enjoy dying in the character who is dying.” The safe distance generated by the buffer between gamer and media is, essentially, a facsimile of the reality principle at work, the psychological interlocutor that modifies the pursuit of pleasure for the sake of self-preservation (*BTPP* 278). To return to the magic circle theory: just as Crawford argues that “a game is an artifice for providing the psychological experiences of conflict and danger while excluding their physical realizations” (quoted in Bogost 134), the symbolic surrogates suggested in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* aspire to the same paradigm. A magic circle is instituted through the mediation of “danger” by the symbiotic relationship of the pleasure and reality principles, as the “reaction to ... instinctual demands and threats of danger” can “be directed in a correct manner by the pleasure principle or the reality principle by which the former is modified” (280). The disjunction between the game and the reality, the pleasure created out of emulating and subduing the unmasterable, is the desired ability to keep one's composure while facing the realities of unpleasure. In other words, the simulation of death as a game offers a way for one to rationally work through the stages of death curiosity—to keep a clear head while approaching an abstraction, an unknown. In this sense, the magic circle simply appears to be the present-day alias of the reality principle that restricts one to that safe place of play and that modifies indulgence in the death drive so that one may get some enjoyment without too heavy a cost. Ultimately, we might trace a line from the simulation of death in the space of literature to the simulation of death in the space of digital

gaming; digital gaming exists as a supplemental death-oriented text that has refined the drive to its (virtual) essence.

Yet the alleged composure propagated by death emulation comes, counterintuitively, at the cost of intense emotional expenditure in the case of digital gaming worlds. The idea that video games have an emotional import beyond the controller smashing frustration they may induce is a topic that has become the subject matter of serious scholarly pursuits in the past decade or so. Referring to the artistic merits of digital worlds championed by enthusiastic high-school and college students across the United States, Henry Jenkins in *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture* reports how generations raised under the auspices of digital media discuss “games with the same passions with which earlier generations debated the merits of the New American Cinema or the French New Wave” (21). (In Jenkins’s study, the central question is not necessarily if video games have reached a point of aesthetic valuation—they have. Rather, the question is whether or not video games might reach the category of fine art, of being comparable to the old masters deserving of scholarly scrutiny—not unlike how film was once an academic distraction, or a way to dodge the draft, a fringe discipline pursued in those all-too-liberal institutions like UCLA.) The notion that there exists in that emotional investment supreme satisfaction in replaying a scene of dissatisfaction might sound like the abreaction of collective repression of mass-pathological proportions (in terms of how ubiquitous digital gaming has become). Freud’s 1914 essay “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II)” depicts behaviour in neurotics that sounds eerily familiar to indulgences of the digital gaming generation in its emphasis on *acting out* psychological trauma or repressed instinctual desire: while the patient re-engages that trauma “not as a memory but as an action” (150), “paying attention to their illness [becomes] a welcome excuse for luxuriating in their symptoms” (153). In fact, the mastery of a digital game is an exercise in remembering, repeating, and working through not unlike Westfahl’s description of Budrys’s *Rogue Moon* or Mario maintenance. The game itself acts as the manifested symptom of desire for control and composure, a symptom which becomes a source of pleasure rather than contempt as one is able to subdue trauma, or stimulate instinctual repression, through (re) play. As Žižek explains in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, “The symptom is not only a cyphered message” representing unconscious desire or trauma; “it is at the same time a way for the subject to organize his enjoyment” (74). This is why, says Freud, the patient’s symptom over time

no longer seem[s] to him contemptible, but must become an enemy worthy of his mettle, a piece of his personality, which has solid ground for its existence and out of which things of value for his future life have been derived. The way is thus paved from the beginning for a reconciliation with the repressed material which is coming to expression in his symptoms, while at the same time place is found for a certain tolerance for the state of being ill. (“Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through” 152)

Although it is debatable whether or not the intense personal investment in digital gaming worlds evinces an illness, digital worlds with interactive narrative structure represent the recent lengths we have gone to “organize” traumatic enjoyment, to direct the symptom of instinctual forbearance into the next level of interactive matrixes where repressed drives might be repeated and stimulated but never relinquished. In Freud’s symptomatology is couched the language of emulated battle, a projection of the neurotic self into the future (another quasi-virtual space accessible only to the imagination), and a particular goal orientation that avows reconciliation while it merely craves repetition (replay value). Of note is that this repetitious game of simulated trauma is part of the subject formation of the neurotic; it becomes a piece of his personality or brings his personality to the surface. In short, Freudian psychoanalysis is heavily invested in the fabrication of virtual spaces of play where one may simultaneously conjure and relegate the symptom to a realm of simulation, not unlike how the analyst becomes an emulative space for the analysand, a surrogate body or avatar, via transference.⁵ This capacity to stand outside oneself through the creation of surrogates, to conjure trauma into the space of emulation, is the foundation upon which the practice of psychotherapeutic methodology

⁵ In his 1905 *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (otherwise metonymically known as “Dora”), Freud offers a somewhat mystical summation of the performative aspects of psychotherapy known as “transference” that can be applied to theories of the virtual. Defining the term as “facsimiles of the tendencies and phantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the progress of analysis,” Freud explains that these facsimiles (that is, simulations)—usually rooted in a traumatic experience—“replace some earlier person by the person of the physician” (106). “To put it another way,” Freud goes on to say, “a whole series of psychological experiences are revived, not as belonging to the past, but as applying to the person of the physician at the present moment” (106). In essence, the role of the analyst while administering psychotherapy is to stand in as a surrogate body—an avatar of sorts—into which a traumatic memory might be objectified and cathected (transferred); it is owing to this ability to metamorphose into whatever anxiety a patient might conjure that the analyst

is built. If digital gaming substantiates a particular neurosis concerning the human desire to enjoy trauma through surrogates, it appears that interactive digital media is working to supplant the subject supposed to know and that presently we have found “a certain tolerance for the state of being ill” in the not-so-ciphered symptom that digital gaming manifests.

For those acquainted with, or who subscribe to, the dictums of psychoanalytic theory, the developmental trend of digital gaming technology toward the invocation of both *Thanatos* and *Eros*—the interrelated death and libidinal instincts—might be heralded as a vindicating event in that Freud had it right all along. There *is*, after all, something fundamentally Freudian about the neuroses, especially surrounding death curiosity, manifested in, and exploited by, video game technology—neuroses that have led, through a compulsion to replicate the real, to a reality further removed from its referent to the realm of the virtual, a realm whose material is the immaterial digital object. In his 2006 article “Freud Lives!” (alternately titled “Irma’s Injection”) Žižek, responding to the criticism that “In recent years, it’s often been said that psychoanalysis is dead,” considers how “New advances in the brain sciences have” placed psychoanalysis “alongside religious confessors and dream-readers in the lumber-room of pre-scientific obscurantist searches for hidden meaning” (32). Yet in spite of the charge that psychoanalysis replaced one obscurantist doctrine with another more secular, Žižek resuscitates the desiccated corpse of Freud through a reading of video game culture:

In our “society of the spectacle,” in which what we experience as everyday reality more and more takes the form of the lie made real, Freud’s insights show their true value. Consider the interactive computer games some of us play compulsively, games which enable a neurotic weakling to adopt the screen persona of a macho aggressor, beating up other men and violently enjoying women. It’s all too easy to assume that this weakling takes refuge in cyberspace in order to escape from a dull, impotent reality. But perhaps the games are more telling than that. What if, in playing them, I articulate the perverse core of my personality which, because of ethico-social constraints, I am not able to act out in real life? Isn’t my virtual

is simultaneously present yet absent, exists as a blank on which to transcribe, and through which to simulate, the neuroses of the analysand. While Freud’s description of transference might sound to some like a lot of hocus-pocus, such procedures are prototypes for the externalization of virtual space in order to bring to the surface the trauma precipitating the symptom.

There *is*, after all, something fundamentally Freudian about the neuroses, especially surrounding death curiosity, manifested in, and exploited by, video game technology.

persona in a way “more real than reality”? Isn’t it precisely because I am aware that this is “just a game” that in it I can do what I would never be able to in the real world? In this precise sense, as Lacan put it, the Truth has the structure of a fiction: what appears in the guise of dreaming, or even daydreaming, is sometimes the truth on whose repression social reality itself is founded. (32)

Certainly the video game, especially the more graphically enhanced role-playing adventure or first-person shooter of recent years, inhabits the realm of fantasy or daydreaming in that both are a space of simulation where desire, whim, and instinct have free play, where drives may be stimulated without direct social cost (that is, until the fantasy is displaced onto reality, at which point the will to master becomes psychosis). The prurient drive to subdue death hides itself in fictive worlds just as, according to Freud in “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” the progressive renunciation of play and socially shameful simulations conceals itself in “a substitute or surrogate,” and as the child enters adulthood, “instead of *playing*, he now *phantasies*” (438). What we get with video games is the extension of the infantile compulsion to play—to satisfy drives that progressively become shameful to display openly—into adulthood; video games with their interactive nature conflate play with fantasy, a simulation predicated on a fascination with death that borders on prurience. On a very basic level, because curiosity regarding its enigmas appears to be part of our blueprints, death acts as a universal reference point from which digital gaming has adapted its fundamental structure. Even if Freud’s theories surrounding the death drive are too speculative and conjectural to explain viably why the sublimation of death anxiety is prompting the refinement of the real within virtual spaces, one must be prepared to answer the question of why simulated death mastery, the compulsion to repeat, the enjoyment of that compulsion (the pleasure principle), and the magic circle (the reality principle) appear to be the rudimentary design and *raison d’être* of digital gaming.

Indeed, it seems palpable that games like *September 12*, no matter how much they fail as so-called simulations, are the manifestation of a desire for mastery after the fact—fantasy reverting to play. Again, this is why *September 12* is a failure: its unreality in the wake of hard fact does not offer the suspension of disbelief enough to make players feel that they are genuinely taking an active part in controlling anything of significant consequence. There are no proverbial three lives at stake, no winning conditions, no mastery of mazes or deathtraps set in place by a race of

sadistic extraterrestrials. There is not even a safe space required to destroy passive digitized terrorists who merely toddle about with not so much as a gesture toward retaliation. Even the antiquated game that Freud's grandson played had more at stake than *September 12*. He still had to make the wooden reel return to him, and in throwing it away and out of sight there was a chance, however slight, that it might not. While we might regard Freud's grandson's game as something quaint, as something inapplicable to a desire to master death in a hyper-digitized world, the idea that Freud's insights into the death drive might be pervasively applied to the majority of digital gaming experiences—where, as Westfahl puts it, “the skillful player ... must embrace the experience of death to be successful” (212)—makes it seem as though Freud's theory has been packaged and marketed to an audience of the willing.

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