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Clara Fernández-Vara et al. (2009: 258) have suggested that the field of digital game studies “is still in the process of defining itself as an academic discipline, formulating its relationship to other areas of study.” Video game theory is, like its focus of study, still in its adolescence, and is therefore still coming to terms with the complexities of its rich and diverse academic heritage. A central debate, for example, continues to rage as to whether digital game studies should take a ludological or a narratological approach. Quijano-Cruz (2008: 161) notes that there are those who suggest that literary theorists are opportunistically attempting to extend their narratological empire into the field of digital games studies – while, conversely, others have advanced and consolidated convincing arguments for the notion of the video game as a narrative form. As Mäyrä (2009: 313) argues, the theoretical framework for digital games research is thus progressing through a state of dynamic gestation as academic communities propagate the methodological foundations of the discipline.

This paper takes as its basis approaches derived from European cultural theory; but, in exploring the applicability of such theoretical perspectives, it does not purport to advance a position which might exclude other modes of analysis.

Virtual war

We have been experiencing, for half a century, a conflation of material history and its electronic mediation, and this phenomenon is perhaps at its most remarkable in the conduct and representation of military conflict.

Jean Baudrillard (1988: 49) wrote of Vietnam as a television war – but Vietnam also of course eventually became a cinematic war, a war primarily recalled in the popular imagination by such films as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Another postmodern conflict, Operation Restore Hope, America's vain attempt to bring order to Somalia in 1992-93, also began as an event staged for the TV cameras (even to the extent that the Pentagon consulted CNN on the scheduling of the U.S. landings in Mogadishu), and ended up as a film by Ridley Scott: a five-month military debacle immortalized as *Black Hawk Down* (2001).

The BBC's World Affairs Editor John Simpson's declaration of his personal liberation of Kabul (on 19 November 2001) and Donald Rumsfeld's announcement (on 17 February 2006) that newsrooms had become crucial battlefields in the War on Terror are two well-known examples of the convergence of media and military perspectives. As Baudrillard (2005: 77) wrote: “if we understand war for what it is today [...] namely a violent acculturation to the world order, then the media and images are part of the

Integral Reality of war.” Ronald Reagan’s abortive *Star Wars* programme stands as a landmark moment in this process, and that Hollywood President’s Tinseltown apocalypse was to be echoed in George W. Bush’s cowboy diplomacy and in his administration’s use of popular filmmakers as strategic imagineers.

It has often been pointed out that 9/11 itself looked like a Hollywood film. Slavoj Žižek (2002: 15) has suggested that the footage of the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center inevitably recalls the imagery of the disaster movie. Indeed, in an article published in *The Times* on 12 September 2001, Michael Gove compared the events of the previous day to the blockbuster cinema of Steven Spielberg.

Material history ebbs away, to be replaced by the virtualizing culture of the mass media. Jean Baudrillard used to argue that the simulacrum represented an alternative mode of reality; in his final works, however, he proposed that this virtuality had become so prevalent, so totalizing, that it was no longer virtual – that it had become real. We have thus come to inhabit an unequivocally mediated reality, what Baudrillard (2005: 34) has called “a world so real, hyperreal, operational and programmed that it no longer has any need to be true.” And yet, argues Baudrillard, this reality *is* true, in an absolute sense, insofar as it stands unopposed by any divergent perspective.

Jean Baudrillard’s sense of the slippage of the material beneath the mediated is most famously elaborated in his polemic of the early 1990s *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. It is not perhaps insignificant that the Gulf War’s emotionally sterile images of bombings – images captured by cameras mounted on warplanes, pictures which saturated the television coverage of that conflict – not only exposed a blurring of material-historical and electronically mediated perspectives, but also conspicuously translated acts of mass destruction into the visual idiom of the video game.

The virtual is the new real

Andrew Darley (2000: 31) has argued that the primary benchmark of success in digital game design is the game’s graphical verisimilitude, its representation’s approximation to external reality. Yet one is tempted to suggest that Darley’s argument might be inverted: that the verisimilitude of material reality may now conversely be judged by its approximation to the virtual world. Media texts do not merely reflect reality; as John Fiske (1987: 21) suggests, they construct it. Haven’t *Second Life* and *Half-Life* in this way come to represent for many people a first and a full life: a primary and comprehensive mode of existence against which we may now measure the verisimilitude of material reality?

David Nieborg (2006) proposes that – although war games may be founded upon material reality – it is the case that current design limitations prevent the full simulation of the battlefield experience in online multiplayer First Person Shooter games. Again, could we not invert this argument: could we not see that in our contemporary “society of [...] the simulacrum” (Jameson, 1991: 48) the digital game has become a crucial yardstick for the real? If, as Katherine Hayles (2000: 69) suggests, the citizens of postmodernity live increasingly virtualized lives, then could it not be expected that at the extremes of the real – in a time, for example, of totalizing

informational war, a war against an abstract concept, the most absurd of all possible wars – we might begin to witness a situation in which, in the words of Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2006: 200), “the distinction between reality and simulation might occasionally appear to blur, like something out of the pages of Jean Baudrillard”?

It is not just that the virtual and the non-virtual are becoming indistinguishable; what is significant is that the non-virtual is increasingly subordinated to the virtual. In, for example, a 2002 essay on *Counter-Strike*, Wright, Boria and Breidenbach tellingly refer to “the non-virtual world”. This phrase signals the prioritization of the virtual: the virtual is no longer the “non-real”; the virtual is not defined by its relation to the real – the real is defined by its relation to the virtual; the real is now merely the “non-virtual”, a category of secondary significance. The digital game, as today's most technologically sophisticated mode of popular virtuality, comes therefore to represent the primary version of reality. The apparent improvements in games graphics (the narrowing of the gap between representation and reality) are not merely a result of the virtual having become more real: they may also result from the real having become more virtual.

Jane McGonigal (2008) has announced that lessons learned from the development of digital games could usefully be applied to the material world – “to make real life work more like a game – not make our games more realistic and lifelike, but make our real life more game like.” It may in fact be that McGonigal's ambition is already being realized by these processes of cultural evolution.

One is reminded in this connection of that avatar of virtual existence, ‘FPS Doug’, the game-obsessed protagonist of the cult online mockumentary *Boom Headshot* (ROFLMAO Productions, 2004). Doug takes a knife with him when he goes jogging because he believes that in the non-virtual world, as in the virtual, one can run faster with a knife. Doug's primary reality is the virtual: “Sometimes I think maybe I want to join the army. I mean it's basically like FPS, except better graphics.”

War games

In 2008 the website for the popular First Person Shooter game *America's Army* (United States Government, 2002) promoted its latest edition, *America's Army: True Soldiers*, as “the only game based on the experiences of real U.S. Army soldiers.” This version of the game announced that it had been “created by soldiers, developed by gamers, tested by heroes”. It is notable that this promotional copy recognized no final distinction between soldiers and gamers: both are “heroes” – neither of them “play” the game; they both “test” it. This testing serves multiple functions: the reality of the simulation is tested by soldiers and gamers alike to temper and strengthen its military value as a training tool, while that simulated reality thereby becomes the dominant version of perceived reality, and thus serves as a tool both for propaganda and for (actual and ideological) military recruitment.

Zhan Li (2004: 137) suggests that *America's Army* represents an ambiguous space caught between the political, the military, the commercial and the material. This blurring of traditional generic, ontological and epistemological boundaries is perhaps best evidenced in *America's Army's* touring recruitment circus, a disconcertingly

physical roadshow – the chance to see some “real” U.S. military hardware, alongside videos of serving soldiers and, of course, at the forefront of all this (as the prioritized mode of reality), the gaming experience itself. According to its website, the Virtual Army Experience (VAE) “provides participants with a virtual test drive of the Army, with a focus on operations in the Global War on Terrorism.” It announces that its participants “enter the mission simulator area where they execute a simulated operation in the War on Terrorism.”

The *America’s Army* website offers a virtual tour of the VAE – a simulation of a simulation, one which leads the eye through a computer-graphic reconstruction of a room full of computers, their screens displaying scenes from the original game. This virtual tour does not allow the user any navigational control: like a gameplay video, it leads its impotent viewer through its environment – towards the inevitable end of interpellation and recruitment: to sign up to the U.S. military or at least to its ideological perspective.

The VAE’s virtual tour represents a meta-simulacrum – an electronic simulation (a virtual tour) of a physical simulation (the VAE touring event) of an electronic simulation (*America’s Army* – the game) of a military reality which is increasingly virtualized. War itself has, after all, begun to adopt the characteristics of the digital game. King and Krzywinska (2006: 199) point out that material warfare is increasingly mediated by digital technologies: “devices such as head-mounted displays can be worn by troops, projecting onto their field of vision data not dissimilar to some of that provided in games.” The gap between the soldier and the gamer is blurred, an effect of technological developments whose dissemination has been accelerated and intensified by the War on Terror. As Tumber and Webster (2006: 33-34) stress, game theory and digital simulations are essential elements in the conduct of contemporary warfare. While David Nieborg (2006) notes that the same military simulations are used by both soldiers and gamers, Edward Castronova’s analysis (2005: 234) goes somewhat further when he suggests that “the emergence of open-source military game-building tools has effectively turned the entire world into a giant military research lab.”

King and Krzywinska (2006: 199) suggest that gameplay may be used to train players in the techniques of realworld warfare. This facility is not only, of course, the province of the United States and its political, military and ideological allies. Such video games as *Under Ash* (Kasmiya, 2001), *Special Force* (Hezbollah, 2003) and *Under Siege* (Kasmiya, 2007) have promoted (and have been used to train) anti-Israeli paramilitary groups in the Middle East; while even such overwhelmingly neoconservative toys as *Counter-Strike* (Jeffe and Le, 1999) might also offer, as Castronova (2005: 231) suggests, a convenient tool for training terrorists.

Thus the violent extremes of *Ethnic Cleansing* (Resistance Records, 2002), *9-11 Survivor* (Kinematic, 2003), *September 12* (Frasca, 2003) or *Madrid* (Frasca, 2004) not only create a reality which reflects that of the-world-formerly-known-as-the-real: they also begin to challenge that external world’s ontological supremacy. For, if material history has been overtaken by the hyperreal – if the battle lines of contemporary conflict are being redrawn in cyberspace – then is not ideological subjectivity itself also becoming an increasingly virtual affair?

The First Person Shooter foregrounds the gun, both visually and linguistically. The first person (the ego) becomes identical to the “shooter” – both the person who shoots and the gun itself. Within that one word – *shooter* – the distinction between subject and weapon dissolves. The player is translated into an organ of war shooting forth its deadly seed to inseminate a new world order. *America's Army* has promoted itself beneath the slogan “empower yourself – defend freedom”; yet what it offers is disempowerment, a loss of freedom, a loss of self and even the player's actual death (it recruits you; it can get you killed). It therefore seems most significant that, as Lars Konzack (2009: 39) points out, the multi-player mode of *America's Army* deploys an extra level of illusion in order to sustain its players' ideological assimilation: each player sees themselves as the U.S. soldier and the other as the terrorist – though each is always also the terrorist from the other's perspective.

The illusion of agency

People turn video games into films, but not merely in the sense of such Hollywood blockbusters as *Super Mario Bros.* (1993) or the *Tomb Raider* films (2001, 2003). After all, those texts lack the true essence of the video game: the illusion of interactivity which re-envisages the immutable, impersonal edifice of the game as an extension of the gamer's own subjectivity – as if the player could somehow reconfigure the programmatic structure of the game, could escape its pre-programmed linearity (which is a multilinearity, but is still a linearity, and a finite one at that). This illusion cannot be recreated within the unilinear narrative constraints of the cinema film, and so, when we come to look for the most faithful filmic adaptations of digital games, we find them not in the cinema, but on the Internet.

Those familiar with the video-sharing website YouTube may be aware of the practice by which digital gamers have edited together clips of – or merely recorded extensive swaths of – their gameplay, added music or voiceovers and credits to it, and posted it online as a “movie”. This practice has (thus far) reached its most extreme expression in *Red vs. Blue* (2003-2007), a 100-part narrative reconfiguration of the video game *Halo* (Bungie Studios, 2001). The experience of watching one of these gameplay films is nauseating: not only in a physical sense (like being a passenger in a drunk driver's car) but also in existential terms. This is the Sartrean nausea which accompanies the realization of one's own lack of control, the revelation that one's feeling of self-determination was only ever an illusion – that the experience of playing the game and of watching the game being played are, in the end, the same.

The amateur gameplay video therein exposes the possibility that the digital game's defining sense of a player's agency may be illusory. Lars Schmeink (2008) has referred to the *sense* of agency afforded by the video game; for, as Tanya Krzywinska (2008) has suggested, “you are promised some kind of agency, but your agency is taken away from you.” This sense of agency is always, she adds, a fictive agency.

Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron (2009: 119-120) challenge the popular notion that the video game is a predominantly interactive medium. They argue that in fact players are not active but reactive – that players respond to pre-programmed structures within the game, structures designed to predict and react to the gamers'

responses. The illusion of interactivity sponsors a sense of agency – but this agency has been externally predetermined or pre-designed.

When the game becomes the film (the gameplay video), its inescapable parameters and its pre-programming become visible. The game's self-proclaimed interactivity is not a case of co-authorship: the gamer is funnelled through a limited and limiting series of preset positions. The simulacrum of the digital game constructs and delineates its citizen-user-consumers as avatars of its own subjectivity. The gaming subject is *interpellated*, in Althusser's sense, and, as this process is never without an ideological destination, the subject is posited within (or, in the case of *America's Army*, literally *recruited* to) a new reality. "Ideology," writes Althusser (2006: 118), "'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' individuals into subjects (it transforms them all)."

The subject of the game

King and Krzywinska (2006: 198) ask:

Are players, really, interpellated to any significant extent into the *particular kinds* of subjectivities offered by the in-game diegetic universe? [...] Plenty of markers exist that clearly announce the large gulf that exists between playing a game [...] and engaging in anything like the equivalent action in the real world. But there are, also, certain homologies. How far these come into play depends on a number of factors, including the [...] forms of realism [...] which can shape the extent to which the game experience approximates that of the real world.

Yet, as suggested above, the extent to which the world of the game approximates a prevalent notion of "the real world" may matter rather less than the degree to which the subsidiary, material world resembles the hegemonic gameworld. As the reality of the game becomes the dominant mode of being, King and Krzywinska's gamer is increasingly assimilated within the gameworld's subjectivity.

Edward Castronova (2005: 45) has proposed that the gaming avatar is no more than an extension of the player's body into a new kind of space – as though the assumption of a mask or a persona does not transform one's identity. Slavoj Žižek (2008: 83) adopts a rather more ontologically problematic perspective: "when I construct a 'false' image of myself which stands for me in a virtual community in which I participate [...] the emotions I feel and 'feign' as part of my onscreen persona are not simply false. Although what I experience as my 'true self' does not feel them, they are none the less in a sense 'true.'" Gameplay constructs an alternative but real subjectivity, and, insofar as the gamer increasingly experiences the virtual world as her primary reality, then that alternative subjectivity may come to represent the player's dominant sense of self.

David Myers (2009: 48) suggests that "when we play with self, that self is something other than what it is: an *anti-self*" – an alternative, and possibly overpowering, mode of being. Ian Bogost (2006: 136) recognizes the tensions between these subjectivities – at the point at which the reality of the game blurs with the material world. He diagnoses what he calls *simulation fever* as symptomatic of this conflict:

the nervous discomfort caused by the interaction of the game's unit-operational representations of a segment of the real world and the player's understanding of that representation [...] insinuates seriousness back into play and suggests that games help us expose and explore complicated human conditions, rather than offering mere [...] diversion.

Like Bertolt Brecht's theatrical alienation effect or Sergei Eisenstein's cinematic dialecticism, this self-conscious mode of play represents a strategy of disruption rather than of absorption or identification. This disruption might afford a space for the gamer's own interpretational strategies, the possibility of meaningful interactivity or co-authorship.

Theories of co-authorship

In his elaboration of his notions of hot and cool media, Marshall McLuhan (2001: 24) defines a hot medium as one which focuses upon a single sensory input. He proposes that, as a consequence of their sensory concentration, hot media are semantically saturated, and as such require and permit little in the way of audience participation (McLuhan, 2001: 24-5). By contrast, cool media (by virtue of being less focused or distilled) are more ventilated, more open to interpretation or participation. It is for this reason that McLuhan (2001: 340, 31) is able to argue, for example, that television promotes audience involvement and that "in reading a detective story the reader participates as co-author simply because so much has been left out of the narrative."

It seems clear, however, that the detective novel does not in fact allow the reader significant opportunities for interpretation or active participation: its clues draw its audience upon a predetermined path through its hermeneutic labyrinth. However often one reads Agatha Christie, one will never expose Hercule Poirot as the killer of Roger Ackroyd. The limits that the classic detective novel sets upon its interpretability are its author's; it imposes closure upon its audience; its ultimate narratological function is to implode its own ambiguities.

McLuhan's sense of a mode of textuality which invites co-authorship is very different from that advanced by Roland Barthes in his elucidation of the *scriptible* text in *S/Z* and in his celebration of 'The Death of the Author'. Barthes (1974: 4) writes:

Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader. The reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness – he is intransitive [...] instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*.

Barthes's traditional readerly texts are fixed, final and finite products, rather than evolving processes of production (Barthes 1974: 5). Barthes's antithesis to the classic readerly or *lisible* text is the writerly or *scriptible* text. Barthes's textual ideal is founded upon the premiss that the function of literature is to transform the reader from a passive consumer into an active producer of meaning (Barthes 1974: 4). The

writerly text invites, embodies and requires cooperation and co-authorship: it understands that meaning is an act of interpretation rather than of intention or expression. As Barthes (1977: 148) proposes, the intertextual polysemy of the work of art originates where it is destined to end: in the mind not of its author but of its audience.

Dumb and dumber

Shelia C. Murphy (2009: 197) has reminded us that when Mattel launched its home video game system in the late 1970s, it deployed the striking slogan: “This is intelligent television.” There are those, however, who question whether smart technologies beget smarter consumers. In contrast to Roland Barthes’s textual idealism, there is a school of critical thought which suggests that the political function of popular culture is to dumb us down and that new technologies intensify this process. Noam Chomsky (1989: 14), for example, has argued that “the media are vigilant guardians protecting privilege from the threat of public understanding and participation.”

There is nothing spectacularly new in this idea: in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer (1986: 120-167) complained that cinema’s homogeneous processes divested its audiences of the power of critical thought. Bertolt Brecht (1978: 187) meanwhile imagined the users of industrial culture as ideological zombies: “They scarcely communicate with each other, their relations are those of a lot of sleepers [...] their eyes are open, but they stare rather than see [...] as if in a trance [...] These people seem relieved of activity and like men to whom something is being done.”

Brecht’s image all too easily fits the stereotype of the TV addict or the video game junkie. Yet, rather more recently, the likes of John Fiske and Stuart Hall have argued against the absolutism of these hypodermic theories of mass-cultural influence: “I do not believe that ‘the people’ are ‘cultural dopes’; they are not a passive, helpless mass incapable of discrimination and thus at the economic, cultural and political mercy of the barons of the industry” (Fiske 1987: 309). Barthes’s *scriptibilité* anticipates Stuart Hall’s notion that the act of decoding a text may not be equivalent to the process of its encoding – but may encompass negotiation with, or opposition to, the dominant meanings privileged by the position of authorship.

Yet perhaps no texts are truly negotiable or interactive in themselves. Rather than Hall, Barthes or Fiske’s celebrations of the potential of audience co-authorship, it may be that Walter Benjamin’s ambivalence offers the most convincing theoretical stance. Walter Benjamin (1992: 234) describes the mass media audience as an absent-minded examiner. He proposes that “a man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it [but] the distracted mass absorb the work of art” (Benjamin, 1992: 232). The former state of immersion permits the survival of an integral subjectivity; the latter process incubates an ideological identity within the passive subject. We remain caught between these positions – between the liberal’s free-thinking citizen and the Marxists’ dope – or perhaps, rather, we are both (and neither) of these at the same time. We can only be the former when we believe we are the latter; when we believe we are the former, we become the latter.

The faux-scriptible

If those popular texts, technologies and practices which invite audience participation (detective stories, game shows, reality television, competitions and lotteries, phone-ins, teleshopping, electronic governance, citizen journalism, Facebook and YouTube, online gambling and digital games) in fact offer only an *illusion* of interactivity, then – rather than promoting participation – they may in fact serve entrenched structures of power by sublimating our desires for active, participatory citizenship.

It may be argued that the video game's illusion of *scriptibilité* seduces the player into neglecting the modes of critical negotiation which might prevent the states of ideological assimilation envisaged by Adorno and Brecht – that the game's demands for functional reactivity promote an illusion of agency which lulls the player into an interpretative passivity, and which thereby serves to posit its subject within a virtually invisible (and therefore virtually irresistible) ideological mould. This illusion is central to any process of textual interpellation, but the digital game reinforces it with an apparently unprecedented degree of influence. The video game is neither more nor less interactive than any other mode of textuality – yet the video game announces its interactivity more forcefully than perhaps any other medium.

We might therefore add a third category to Roland Barthes's classification of *scriptible* and *lisible* texts: the *faux-scriptible* text which proclaims its openness to interactivity, which gives its user the illusion of meaning, power and active participation, and which, in appearing to satisfy its audience's desire for agency, in fact sublimates and dilutes that desire. This process resembles a kind of textual karaoke: its audiences believe that their participation represents a form of activity, a mode of agency, but they are, in effect (and in consequence), mere puppets of the text. This *faux-scriptible* text is thus significantly more reactionary and compelling than the *lisible*.

Conclusion

Ernest W. Adams (2009) has suggested that “with video games it is so hard to create a really immersive experience that there's nothing to be gained by [...] destroying the fourth wall.” Video games, he has added, are like Victorian novels: despite its claims of interactivity, the digital game remains, in narratological terms, a classic realist construct which eschews the disruptive and liberating possibilities of a metatextual *scriptibilité*. The presence of that fourth wall sequesters the player against Ian Bogost's *simulation fever* – against a self-consciousness which might foster a reassertion of the self. The mass-market digital game's refusal to bare its aesthetic devices allows its ideological mechanisms to go unchallenged and unseen.

Adams (2009) has gone on to suggest that in multiplayer games “the author ceases to be an author”. There are convincing arguments that in multiplayer (and other) games the reader may become equivalent to an author (albeit for the most part an unread one) – but this is not the same as Roland Barthes's ideal of the reader-as-producer. Barthes dreamt of the death of the author; yet, by contrast, the multiplayer experience does not dissolve authorial authority, it disseminates it. The multiplayer game does not promote the interactivity of co-productive and dialogical readership so

much as it proliferates authorship as a set of parallel but solipsistic or monologicistic experiences.

There is, of course, the hope that the digital game, a media form still in its infancy, will mature into the modes of complexity and ambiguity, of *scriptibilité*, which cultural theorists have witnessed in the triumphs of Modernist and Postmodernist literature, painting and cinema. Ernest Adams (2009) has supposed that this may eventually happen, while another theorist and practitioner David Hayward (2008) has suggested that, despite the intellectual conservatism of the commercial games industry, truly inventive digital games may one day be recognized by wider audiences. Alexey Pajitnov's *Tetris* (1984) is of course the benchmark for intellectual innovation in games production; yet its refusal to inscribe its potential for interactivity within a narrative textuality and material context may suggest to some the eventual incompatibility of the ludological and narratological frameworks. The same reductive logic might lead one to identify Microsoft Word as the world's most popular and interactive digital game; but this perspective does not usefully advance so much as it deconstructs the discipline of digital game studies.

It may be such games as Gonzalo Frasca's *September 12* (2003) which, although as structurally simple as *Tetris*, suggest a route towards the textual sophistication of the digital game. *September 12* argues and enacts the futility of the War on Terror (the more terrorists you kill the more they multiply); it is a game which the player can only win by refusing to play. This arthouse game's mode of interactivity – its incitement to interpretation – takes place at the level of a philosophical and political argument which it does not articulate so much as it allows the player to explore and perform. This game, like Barthes's *scriptible* text or Benjamin's optimal artistic experience, does not permeate its player – instead, the player navigates, negotiates, translates and reconstructs the meanings offered by the game.

A similarly challenging game – a game as intellectually disturbing and controversial as any aspect of *scriptible* culture should be – is Danny Ledonne's *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* (2005), a game which, like *September 12*, offers a problematizing account of a prevalent culture of violence and its mass media representations, and of the nature and function of the digital game itself. It seems significant that these arthouse games overtly reject the aesthetic of graphical verisimilitude so prized by the commercial games industry: like the theatre of Bertolt Brecht, they bare their devices, distancing the player from an uncritical interpellation into the ideological worldview advanced by the game, and emphasizing the incoherent and paradoxical nature of that worldview.

There remain also, of course, possibilities that this *scriptibilité*, when not advanced by the game itself, can be seized by the player: not in the obedient gameplay videos posted on YouTube (which are no more than puppet theatre performances in which the designers pull the players' strings), but in gamers' interpretative and programmatic reconstructions of games. As Roland Barthes suggests in *S/Z* (1975) even the most conservatively *lisible* structure may be translated by radical reinterpretation into a subversively *scriptible* structuration. When Hezbollah employed Eclipse Entertainment's 3D engine to re-imagine the likes of *Counter-Strike* as the anti-Israeli war game *Special Force*, they were following an informal tradition of constructive mis-play by which digital games players have reinvented the meanings,

structures and functions of games in ways unforeseen by their designers. As Arsenault and Perron (2009: 124) point out, the processes of meaning imposed upon games by individual gamers can be profoundly different from those games' intended semantic systems. Indeed online gamers increasingly use multiplayer sites as media for communication entirely unrelated to the content of the game – as text-based social networking becomes for many users the primary function of these sites.

In 2006 al-Qaeda's Global Islamic Media Front published *Quest for Bush*, an anti-American modification of Jesse Petrilla and Bob Robinson's *Quest for Saddam* (2003), an FPS game whose absurdly propagandistic narrative and imagery almost (inadvertently) caricature its own xenophobia. Two years later the Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal produced *The Night of Bush Capturing: A Virtual Jihadi* (2008) – his own deconstructive reinterpretation of al-Qaeda's modification of Petrilla and Robinson's original game. There is both political and artistic scope within this hacking or hijacking of commercial digital games to sponsor new processes of meaning; and yet these radical misreadings (by producers or by users of games) remain relatively rare, just as the Postmodernist art game (despite its academic champions) continues to languish in commercial obscurity. While the potential remains for any gamer to reconstruct the meanings of a game, the ideological, economic and aesthetic principles of commercial games production tend to limit these heteroglossic possibilities.

It may not be the inherent nature of the digital game itself so much as the historical context of its development and popularization (the axes of late postmodernity, globalization and the War on Terror) which has prompted contemporary cultural philosophy to view it as the epitome of the superficial and the homogeneous, of the post-material hegemony of the simulacrum. There is, after all, nothing more virtual or immersive about the reality of *EverQuest* than that of *David Copperfield* or *Citizen Kane*. Nor is there anything extraordinary or unprecedented in the ways in which the economics of the digital games industry have inhibited the medium's creative and political potential and simultaneously exploited its revolutionary or liberatory reputation for interactivity. Yet this illusion of interactivity disguises the video game's actual USP: the potential for the gamer to assume a manufactured subjectivity – not for the self to interact with the game, but for that self to be subsumed to the game's constructed subject.

The video game remains an icon of its age, an emblem for the interpellation of ideological subjectivity, and a tool which continues (through its counter-claims of interactivity) ably to fulfil that function on behalf of capital, military and state. The commercial video games industry has put an extraordinary emphasis upon the significance of interactivity in its field of production; but while the digital game may be neither more nor less interactive than any other text, this emphasis itself seems not only to mislead its consumers but also to disempower them. When, then, Jane McGonigals's dreams of a world of *World of Warcraft* are eventually realized, this new reality may not represent the democratic cybertopia of which some have dreamt. W.H. Auden (1979: 81) suggested that "each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom" – yet when each individual is not *almost* but *absolutely* convinced by that illusion of self-determination, those who are interpellated by the dictatorship of the algorithm will not even dream of autonomy and liberation, because

(like all those sustained by the *faux-scriptible*, like the victims of *The Matrix* itself) they will mistakenly believe that they are already the authors of their own destinies.

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