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In "Digital Seriality: On the Serial Aesthetics and Practice of Digital Games," Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann call for "a serious consideration of both the specificities of game-based serialities *and* the common ground they share with other media-cultural practices and aesthetic forms" (Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013, p. 21). They hope to catalyze research into the serial nature of digital gaming by drawing attention to affinities between seriality and play: "Play itself, we must recall, is an essentially serial activity, characterized by ritualistic practices of repetition and variation" (Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013, p. 8). This essay heeds Denson and Jahn-Sudmann's call, albeit in reverse. If the concept of play can illuminate serial qualities of digital games, then perhaps earlier, analog serial forms should be regarded in terms of their ludic potentials. Where the storied debate over "ludological" and "narratological" approaches to digital gaming signalled the desire to distinguish games from previous media, my aim here is to return to the history of a narrative form equipped with ludic awareness and cast it as part of a continuum to which digital gaming may also belong. In particular, concepts derived from the study of video games can significantly broaden our understanding of sound serials, youth-oriented films produced in Hollywood from the 1930s to the mid 1950s. In turn, this can give us a new vantage on continuities between old and new serial forms, and shed light on digital gaming's pre-history.

The sound serial was a marginal but resilient production trend in studio-era Hollywood. Mid-size and small studios like Columbia, Universal, Republic, and tiny houses like Mascot, Regal, and Principle Pictures produced over 200 twelve to fifteen-part chapter plays between 1930 and 1956. Each episode ran between 15 and 20 minutes (first episodes were longer), and they were shown in conjunction with cheap "B" features. Cliffhanger endings, which left heroes facing seemingly inescapable perils, helped exhibitors regularize attendance at these cut-rate programs by encouraging curious viewers to return. During the 1940s the three largest producers each released about four serials a year, enough to supply independent neighborhood and rural theaters with an episode a week (Moak 1940). Serials were aimed at children who populated Saturday matinees, but adults, who might sneak in to early shows or see serials attached to a program on Friday night, followed them as well (see Barefoot 2011).

The relevance of a film genre that ceased production fifty years ago to digital gaming may at first blush seem slim. Certainly, there does not appear to be any direct connection between the two forms, beyond their predilection for sci-fi, and the coincidence that both have produced painfully inadequate superhero franchise adaptations. The sound serial's relationship to gaming is one of pre-history; it presents an early example of ludic storytelling, or the practice of constructing visual narratives to facilitate play. Serial studios refined a formula for the quick and efficient

production of situational stories that support modular action sequences based on physical problem solving. Long-range serial narratives meander incomprehensibly, but their main purpose is to provide a set of premises and a world within which each episode stages weekly chases, fights, and perils. In generating these plots, serial screenwriters tapped into the much older tradition of situational dramaturgy, which originated in 19th century melodramatic theater. In this mode, story creators conceived their task as assembling readymade pieces, of recombining proven elements rather than crafting original wholes. Melodramatic "situations" provided serials with pre-formed, immediately legible, dramatic units that they could stitch together into different chapters (see Brewster and Jacobs 1997). The serial's catalogue of situations revolves around the taking and liberation of hostages, races against time, and physical confrontation of hero and villain. Elsewhere, I've argued that situations continue to thrive in contemporary forms of cinema like the action film because they set vivid and familiar stakes, and tend to culminate in spectacle (see Higgins 2008). There is some evidence to suggest that such situations crop up in digital gaming as well. In 1999, for example, gamedev.net posted a synopsis of Georges Polti's text *The 36 Dramatic Situations*, an 1895 manual for melodramatists, to help "fire the imagination of the writer" (Lawrence 1999). Perhaps the sound serial's greatest innovation and legacy was the adaptation of situational dramaturgy to the culture of child's play.

Some scholars have studied the institutional, if not formal and aesthetic, connections between serials and child culture. Rafael Vela, for instance, links the sound serial to the rhetoric of the early 20th century Playground Movement, which, under the sway of G. Stanley Hall's popular "Recapitulation Theory," aimed to channel urban juvenile energies into safe spaces (Vela 2000). Hall helped replace an ideology of childhood restraint by claiming that children pass through natural stages of primitive barbarism, and that vigorous play should direct the juvenile nerve-force (Cross 2008). In his largely contextual study of serials, Vela demonstrates that, between 1927 and 1934, producers successfully wooed reformers with a commercialized version of recapitulation theory, built bridges with youth organizations like the Boy Scouts of America, and, in his words, "turned theater space into a combination of clubhouse and department store" (Vela 2000: 261). Intermediality and merchandising abetted this rhetorical campaign, embedding serials in juvenile culture. Viewers followed their heroes from comic books and radio adventures to the neighborhood cinema, while the sale of *Flash Gordon*, *Lone Ranger* and other toys reinforced imagined communities. Serials were part of a para-ludic network that incorporated other media texts and character-themed toys (on the concept of para-ludism, see Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013, p. 11).

The Serial as Game: Space, Rules, World

The importance of play to the sound serial is more than a matter of context. Sound serials deploy textual and aesthetic strategies for transforming story into ludic potential. Specifically, I argue that we think of the sound serial as not (only) a kind of storytelling, but as a kind of fictional framework or world designed to constitute and enable play. Concepts from digital game theory like Henry Jenkins's idea of "narrative architecture" and Jesper Juul's observation that rules and fiction are

separable give us a way of prying serial worlds apart from the stories they contain. Meanwhile, Jennifer Barker and Lisa Purse's interventions in the phenomenology of action films offer a bridge between the cinema seat and the playground. Synthesizing these approaches helps stake out the sound serial's intersection with play and, in so doing, its place in a history of ludic seriality.

In his foundational inquiry, Huizinga proposes that play is non-practical, circumscribed, self-aware, and pleasurable: "a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" (Huizinga 1950, p. 28). Associated with risk, danger, and rapid movement, play occurs on a "playground [...] isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain," and gives rise to "play communities" (Huizinga 1950, p. 11, 12, 36, 38, 40). In Huizinga's terms, we might ask how serials define tensions, fix limits, and designate play space, that is, how they encourage ludic engagement. This engagement is necessarily distinct from that in digital gaming in which story world and playground can be coterminous. Jenkins and Juul provide two apposite, if distinct, conceptual frameworks for thinking through possible connections between the serial matinee and the place and time of play. Jenkins suggests that games can embody stories in spaces explored by players, what he calls narrative architecture. Juul conceives of fiction as an optional adjunct to a game's rules of play. Both ideas distinguish fiction from the linear experience of narrative.

Jenkins suggests that we examine role-playing computer games "less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility" (Jenkins 2004, p. 119). For Jenkins, "game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces" (Jenkins 2004, p. 121). The concept of narrative architecture relates games, stories, and spaces in multiple ways. Spaces might evoke stories with which we are already familiar. Videogames based on movies, for instance, work by "translating events in the film into environments within the game," giving "concrete shape to our memories and imaginings of the storyworld, creating an immersive environment we can wander through and interact with" (Jenkins 2004, p. 122). Other times, a game designer might build "spatial stories," which are highly episodic, "privilege spatial exploration over plot development," and "are held together by broadly defined goals and conflicts pushed forward by the character's movement across the map" (Jenkins 2004, pp. 123-24). Moving through space might reveal a pre-arranged narrative, or designers might set rules for items and actors within a space so that narratives appear to emerge from the player's interaction with them (Jenkins 2004).

The concept of narrative architecture sheds light on the sound serial's on-going cinematic world. In an era when feature films disappeared from the neighborhood theater within a week, the twelve-to-fifteen-chapter format guaranteed an extended stay, a chance for viewers to revisit characters, spaces, challenges, and spectacles over a three-month period. Sound serials used this time to build procedural worlds with physically demarcated obstacles and goals. Like Jenkins's "spatial stories," sound serials generate engaging maps and recycle ritualized settings in which characters and viewers can anticipate and discover narrative situations. Serials rarely reward attention to the grand story; instead they proceed moment-by-moment, drawing one spatially delimited challenge at a time like levels in a computer game.

The countless infernal machines that trap and apparently obliterate heroes in the final moments of each chapter literalize the notion of narrative architecture. Cliffhangers are "problem spaces" in narratologist Richard Gerrig's sense; they are participatory structures in which viewers search for information that will allow one to achieve a goal (Gerrig 1993, p. 82). Serial screenwriting teams began their work by laying out the devices and snares that would climax each chapter, a method that privileged design as a component of storytelling. Rope bridges, fiery pits, buzz saws, crushing rooms, flooding shafts, and sacrificial altars are physical traps with clear procedural boundaries: story potential is embedded within concrete space. The best cliffhangers achieved such visual and spatial clarity that viewers might feel something like the game player's sense of agency, tracing out potential outcomes, or playing through the puzzle in the intervening week. Thinking of serial storytelling as the practice of designing and combining vivid architectures helps us reconceive spectatorship as the experience and exploration of space, a more obviously ludic process than the following of a causal narrative chain.

Cliffhangers illustrate another play-like quality of serials: the disjunction between story and formula. When heroes fall into inescapable deathtraps at chapter's end, the traps work, giving viewers operational satisfaction at the price of the hero's apparent death. To take a routine example, when the villains of *The Great Alaskan Mystery* (Taylor and Collins 1944) cut through cables on a suspension bridge in the path of hero Jim Hudson's (Milburn Stone) truck at the climax of chapter 5, viewers are treated to a tense sequence that alternates between the thieves sawing away at the bridge and the hero steadily approaching his doom. The final shot is a spectacular, if recycled, crash in which an apparently full-scale bridge collapses and the truck plummets down the canyon. Convention requires, however, that heroes endure, and the story must reverse itself to accommodate. At the start of chapter 6, we learn that Hudson leapt from his truck moments before it reached the bridge. This uninspired solution, or take out, was common to lesser cliffhangers, and *The Great Alaskan Mystery* uses it several times. True to form, the filmmakers offer no explanation of why Hudson suddenly decided to jump from his cab. His friends' efforts to warn him fail, and he does not appear to discover the trap. He leaps simply because the game requires it. The rule of survival entails arbitrary fiction.

Juul draws a useful distinction between fiction and rule. He notes: "Games have their roots in rules and play time, and this allows them to define their worlds much more loosely and less coherently than we would accept in most other cultural forms" (Juul 2005, p. 162). For Juul, fiction is an optional component of gaming that tends to be created in a "tentative and flickering way: the hero dies and is respawned moments later; […] the player dies and loads a *save game* in order to continue just before he or she died […]" (Juul 2005, p. 6). Narrative is more fundamental to the sound serial than to the videogame as Juul describes it, but they both bend story to ensure that play will continue. Film conventions differ from game rules in that they tend to be optional rather than constitutive. Because it is profoundly formulaic, however, the sound serial narrows this gap. The hero's survival across a cliffhanger amounts to an extrinsic prerequisite, and like a game's rules, it enables viewers to accept, or at least overlook, reversals in the story. Our engagement appears rooted in something other than causal logic and internal consistency: something similar to the pleasure of play.

Chapter climaxes deliver regular breaks in the serial world's coherence, and it is here that seriality functions as a ludic transformer of story. No viewer expects that the hero's death (sometimes depicted more explicitly than in *The Great Alaskan Mystery*) is final. Sound serials are notoriously deceptive, and anyone who has witnessed more than a single episode knows this. Take outs usually involve the introduction of a previously suppressed piece of information, and at the next chapter's start we witness heroes dodging falling elevators, or escaping from exploding, collapsing, and burning rooms. At their baldest, serials are outright cheats, restaging events from the previous week in less-catastrophic terms. In chapter 9 of Republic's *Undersea Kingdom* (Eason and Kane 1936), for example, hero Crash Corrigan (Ray Corrigan), strapped to the front of a battle tank, is smashed into a gate, complete with a plume of debris and horrified expressions from onlookers. In chapter 10, the tank passes unobstructed through an open door. Unlike Jim Hudson's timely leap, Crash Corrigan's escape depends on simple, irreconcilable contradiction, a complete disjunction between narrative architecture and story. Sometimes no explanation within the world allows a character to respawn, but for the serial to advance to the next challenge, the next level, it must be so. In this, serials follow a play-like logic, but equally important, the cliffhanger discontinuity opens onto play (cf. Denson 2014).

Thinking about time can help us capture this dynamic. In their interruptions, revisions, and reversals, cliffhangers entail a distinctive temporal articulation akin to digital gaming's collapse of story and plot time (see Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013, p. 6). Serial perils are intensively linear: burning fuses, fraying ropes, ticking time bombs, and speeding trucks follow a narrow and visibly inevitable path. As suspense structures, they focus viewer attention on swiftly depleting story time. By interrupting this flow of events, plot intervenes, freezing the story for a week. The plot's mastery, however, is momentary, because with the episode's conclusion serial narration relinquishes its power over the viewer's attentional pulse. Having built the problem space and shown it in action, cliffhangers eject spectators for a week leaving them with the irreconcilable tension between operational clarity and continuation of the story. Instead of closure, serial chapters proffer a set of parameters, roles, and stakes: architecture and puzzle. Moreover, in solving the previous week's peril, serial narration models playful revision. Like a backyard session of cops and robbers in which a player's capture or demise can be reversed in the name of keeping the game going, serial storytelling treats narrative as a flexible framework for delivering challenge and sensation. For engaged viewers, the period between peril and escape exists as an elongated present, an a-temporal problem space in which to play out alternative eventualities, with the knowledge that the actual solution will itself undo and rewrite time. Cliffhangers introduce ludic ruptures, converting linear story into open scenarios, and training viewers in their creative navigation. In this sense, "to be continued" evokes game time, an invitation to dwell within a highly structured situation and fill it with rounds of play (see Denson 2014 for a parallel discussion of discontinuity in silent serials). If sound serials in this way anticipate digital gaming's temporal collapse, they nonetheless require regulated access to the story. Synchronicity, the digital's other temporal signature, would short-circuit the enforced break between episodes and ameliorate the play space. In this sense, serials straddle digital and analog time, bridging pre and post digital forms.

Juul's distinction bears on the sound serial in a more general way as well. Casting story as separable from the rules suggests why fictional worlds can travel between

cinema and playground. Videogames, Juul argues, cue players to construct fictions around the rules. Items like game boxes and manuals facilitate "projection of the game world." The title *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978), he explains, "is by itself sufficient to describe a science fiction with battling spaceships" (Juul 2005, p. 135). This process is abundantly clear in early home videogames with severely limited graphics. The instruction booklet for Imagic's 1982 Atari 2600 game cartridge *Demon Attack,* for instance, features a picture of silver space lizards zooming around with rockets strapped to their backs and a brief description worthy of a serial recap:

> Marooned on the ice planet Krybor, you watch legions of eerie creatures scream overhead. They hover ominously. They give you no quarter. Attack and destroy them – or be destroyed! Armed with your Laser Cannon, you confront the ultimate challenge: Survive!

The game itself, a scaled-down imitation of the arcade hit *Galaxian* (Namco 1979), is a representationally impoverished shoot-em-up in which the "ice planet Krybor" appears as a blue bar at the bottom of the screen. Players familiar with *Space Invaders* and *Galaxian* can immediately enjoy *Demon Attack* without reference to its fictional world, just as children can play tag without pretending they are cops or robbers. The manual's evocative graphic and sketchy dramatic situation encourage players to project a full-scale demonic onslaught onto the screen's field of flickering pixels, to imagine the fight for survival while engaging in a simple game constructed around a few well-defined rules and affordances. Serials resemble textually rich, multipurpose game manuals: they furnish worlds to be projected onto the playground. If, as Juul suggests, minimal cues can launch a game's world, serials are cornucopias of fictional possibilities. Adventure stories, radio dramas, and comics surely furnished projectable worlds as well, but only the sound serial combined cinematic storytelling and long-term engagement. In this way too, cliffhanger interruption opens onto a ludic arena. Beyond waiting a week to buy a ticket, viewers are primed to continue active and conscious engagement with the serial world by fitting it to standing rule sets of schoolyard games.

Playground Practice and Playing Movies

Denson and Jahn-Sudmann emphasize that because play is a social-cultural practice with its own material history, we should be wary of reducing its study to textual analysis (Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013). Unfortunately we have few accounts of how the target audience engaged with serials in the studio era, though reform-oriented literature of the late 1920s and early 1930s provides a tantalizing glimpse. Film's impact on children's play emerged as a point of concern in sociological discourse shortly before the advent of sound serials. In her pioneering work *Children and Movies*, published in 1929, Alice Miller Mitchell describes the phenomenon of "playing movies": "The movie has become a new back yard for the after-school-hours child […]. Not only is it a better and a more interesting playground to the child, but it makes more attractive to him his own playland, for when he returns from the movie to his 'back-yard' he has new ideas of what to play and how to play it. He and his little companions congregate and begin to re-enact the film they have seen" (Mitchell 1929, pp. 75-76). In Mitchell's estimation, motion pictures were both a replacement for the traditional play space, and a force for reconfiguring that space.

Public concern over Hollywood's influence in the early 1930s prompted a flurry of sociological activity on the issue of film and play. The most famous of these efforts are the Payne Fund Studies on Motion Pictures and Youth, conducted between 1929 and 1932. The twelve publications that resulted largely concern feature films, but Herbert Blumer's *Movies and Conduct* touches on serials as well. Blumer, a University of Chicago sociology professor, contends "the most casual survey of the form and content of childhood play reveals motion pictures as a very important source" and specifies that "common to all groups of children regardless of social status is the fascination of combat and mystery themes" which appear in "most of the patterns of play taken from the movies" (Blumer 1933, p. 13, 21). The sound serial's formula of regular combat embedded in an overarching mystery would seem tailored to children's preferences, perhaps because they occupy story and play's shared territory of contest and the puzzle (see Murray 2004).

Not surprisingly, Blumer's attention to the serial centers on their cliffhanger endings:

> Instead of leading the excited feelings of the child to a state of quiescence of satisfaction, the serial ends at the point where they are keyed up to the highest pitch. The result is to put the youthful spectator under the spell of suspense, sometimes of frenzy or panic, which persists for a week, only to be renewed at the next installment […]. Some of the less ultimate effects on the mind are obvious, such as the preoccupation of the child with the precarious situation in which his favorites have been left at the end of an installment; his anxiety over their safety; his curiosity and reflection as to how they will escape; his excited conversation during the week with his companions on how the escape will occur – in short the difficulty he has of freeing his mind from the thoughts of the picture. (Blumer 1933, p. 121)

Blumer, who uses the term "emotional possession" to describe viewer response, observes that during a serial matinee "one gets undisguised expressions of intense emotions, requiring no refined instruments for their detection" (Blumer 1933, p. 117). Because they deny closure, he believes that cliffhangers amplify and extend "collective excitement" (Blumer 1933, p. 117). If cinema walls separated the space of story from that of play, the serial's "spell of suspense" persisted across borders, or so Blumer feared.

The evidence in *Movies and Conduct* consists primarily of personal recollections of young serial goers, and, though imbricated in a biased study, they remain our best access to the cultural practice of serial play. One subject, identified as "male, 20, white, college sophomore" recalls:

> Perhaps the earliest type of motion picture I can remember is the serial […]. All the children of the district used to attend and then followed one glorious week during which each scene of the episode was enacted in our backyards. We had grand times playing "lion men" and Tarzans. During the showing of the picture itself we used to be worked up to a terrific high state of emotion, yelling at the hero when danger was near, hissing at the villain, and heaving sighs of relief when the danger was past. The serial was nearly the sole object for going to the movies for me and most of the children in the good old days when I was seven or eight years old. (Blumer 1933, p. 120)[1]

Another boy recalls his friends fashioning blow darts from needles in imitation of the Hooded Terror from *The House of Hate* (George Seitz 1918), and another remembers playing "natives of Africa" in an overgrown prairie, using "wash-boiler tops for shields, and sticks for spears," based on a serial he followed one summer (Blumer 1933, p. 19, 26).

Blumer's testimonials give weight to our speculation, based on textual characteristics, that serials engendered play. The nature of the interaction between serial game and player/viewer must remain notional. Surely serials set broad terms for play. As one of Blumer's subjects recalled, backyard games would change with the neighborhood marquee: "Our play was always influenced by the current type of serial we were inhaling. If it had to do with cowboys and Indians we played cowboy and Indian, if it had to do with cops and robbers then we played cop and robber" (Blumer 1996, p. 177). "Cowboy and Indian" and "cop and robber" imply very general worlds, which players might fit around almost any physical contest. Serials make use of these broad categories, but also provide an array of specific concrete playable roles and scenarios. In following familiar characters and types through weekly chases, fights, and entrapments, viewers could quickly gain fluency in the world's procedures and anticipate its permutations. Formulaic repetition, a production necessity, probably helped serials merge with the routines of child's play. But unlike a digital game in which player interaction is essential, structured, and observable, matinee audiences first watched and then played.

Mastering Space: Phenomenology and Serial Play

The resources of film phenomenology offer one way of approaching the ludic activity that serials may have prompted. Phenomenology considers film viewing a physically engaged, embodied activity, and so helps conceptualize the overlap between serials and physical play. Vivian Sobchack, one of the approach's founders, argues that "film experience is meaningful […] *because of our bodies*," and that the spectator "fills in the gap in its sensual grasp of the figural world onscreen […] to reciprocally (albeit not sufficiently) 'flesh it out' into literal physicalized sense" (Sobchack 2004, p. 60, 82). Film viewing, on this model, is a kind of active, bodily interchange. Theorists claim that all films elicit embodied engagement, but action genres provide the most compelling examples. In the case of sound serials, we might consider how their physically defined problems and solutions involve viewers in a corporeal understanding of their worlds, further narrowing the distance between watching and play.

Jennifer Barker describes the viewer's relationship to action films as one of "muscular empathy" (Barker 2009, p. 74). At its most affective, Barker observes:

> the empathy between the film's and viewer's bodies goes so deeply that we can feel the film's body, live vicariously through it, and experience its movements to such an extent that we ourselves become momentarily as graceful or powerful as the film's body, and we leave the theater feeling invigorated or exhausted, though we ourselves have hardly moved a muscle. (Barker 2009, p. 83)

The most incessantly physical of all studio-era genres, sound serials involve the viewer in following, anticipating, contemplating, and perhaps imitating action. Similarities between the on-screen exploits and backyard play likely intensified muscular empathy for young spectators. Characters navigate the serial world by running, climbing, tumbling, and fighting, all familiar sensations that were within reach just outside the theater.

Fights, chases, and physical entrapment, form the sound serial's spine. These actions provide a kinetic experience of character and space that piggybacks on established folk games like tag, base games, and hide and seek. This is brilliantly demonstrated in William Witney and John English's *Daredevils of the Red Circle,* released by Republic in 1939. The three Daredevils play for a living. They are professional stuntmen, each with a specialty that aligns character and body. Tiny (Herman Brix) packs a wallop, Gene (Charles Quigley) climbs and dives with ease, and Bert (David Sharpe) effortlessly launches himself into space and at his enemies. The serial collapses the distance between stunting and storytelling; action constitutes character. These are fully physical roles, parallel to game characters defined by the movements and actions afforded them.

Daredevils' chases and fights draw from the reservoir of "the golden age of unstructured play," that historian Howard Chudacoff locates in the early 20th century. Chudacoff notes that before the 1950s, children "adapted formal games and created new ones, incorporating the built environment and the objects they found there" (Chudacoff 2007, p. 131). Empty lots, sidewalks, and construction sites were more appealing than supervised parks and playgrounds, and "urban structures were an essential and challenging component of hide and chase games" (Chudacoff 2007, pp. 131-34). *Daredevils*' industrial landscape is compatible with the recreation space of many 1930s urban youth, and with the world of physical play more generally. In pursuit of justice, the heroes scale, swing, and leap among catwalks, steel towers, and refinery tanks. Caverns of piping and multi-level cement blocks form an all-purpose playground and obstacle course. Characters and viewers occupy analogous ludic architectures.

The serial's connection to the playground is clearest in the repeated chases through factories, chemical plants, and the like. A standard scene has the henchmen getting the Daredevils' attention (usually by dropping things on them) and then running away, initiating a wide-ranging game of tag. In chapter 6, the evil Professor Seldon (Stanley Price) combines tag with hide and seek to gain an advantage. He hides from the heroes after dropping a metal chest on them and lures them into a trap. Creativity comes from mixing games together in an industrialized playground. But it is through action itself, the physical exertions within dynamic space, that serials invite the "passionate investment" in movement identified by Barker. In chapter 2, for instance, Bert climbs across machinery, vaults over railings, and swings himself up to a catwalk to catch a henchman who opted to take the sensible, but slower, route via the staircase. In a single shot, Bert's command of space contrasts the henchman's confinement to convention: an embodied lesson in cutting an unanticipated path, converting obstacles into implements for traversing space. The moment resembles a player's elegant navigation through a game level, it treats story as an occasion for demonstrating spatial proficiency. Serial action is a primer in problem solving on the corporeal level.

One of the serial world's enduring charms is that enemies are conquered and obstacles surmounted via the resources of physical play. Lisa Purse identifies a similar attraction in one of the serial's descendants, the contemporary Hollywood action film. Drawing on phenomenology, she connects the popularity of action to our desire to transcend material restrictions in a "physicalised narrative of becoming" (Purse 2011, p. 45). Each action movie we see, according to Purse, returns us to an on-going fantasy of physical mastery:

> Action bodies, with their capacity to escape physical constraints […] offer fantasies of empowerment that allow us to rehearse our own dreamed-of escapes, our own becoming-masterful, in a fantasy context, allow us to 'feel' this mastery for ourselves through our sensorial connection with the body of the hero. […] Where action narratives come and go, end and begin again, the fantasy of overcoming […] can exist in perpetuity […] always present in action cinema's fictional universe, waiting to be accessed and experienced once more. (Purse 2011, p. 45, 48)

This characterization, which might refer to a digital game, suits the serial well. Audiences, child and adult, return each week to rehearse scenarios of empowerment and escape, scenarios which have as much to do with bodily experience and spatial navigation as with following a story.

Sound serial producers understood this fantasy and made it explicit in the many releases that featured juvenile characters who joined the ranks of adult adventurers, but Purse and Barker help us capture something more fundamental: the sound serial's continual modeling of and invitation to embodied play. By emphasizing the physical aspects of film spectatorship, phenomenology makes visible the union between watching and participating. The serial world, compatible with the spaces and practices of children's play, could be "fleshed out" with ludic sensations and projected back onto the schoolyard.

Prehistory, or just History

Speculating about the nature of play, theorist Brian Sutton-Smith observes: "the primary motive of players is the stylized performance of existential themes that mimic or mock the uncertainties and risks of survival and, in so doing, engage […] in exciting forms of arousal." He continues that play might be viewed "as a lifelong simulation of the key neonatal characteristics of unrealistic optimism, egocentricity, and reactivity, all of which are guarantors of persistence in the face of adversity" (Sutton-Smith 2001, p. 231). Without fully endorsing Sutton-Smith's a-cultural frame, we can nonetheless recognize that the sound serial's foundation, like that of a game of tag or *Super Mario Bros.*, rests on persistence in the face of unremitting difficulties. Serials are virtual domains for confronting and mastering uncertainty—domains experienced corporeally in the cinema and explored as fictional components of gameplay. Like digital games, they address our desire to inhabit fictions and run imaginary gauntlets. My claim is not that sound serials *are* games, but that they shadow and assist play. In their design of narrative space, their repetitive cycling through a narrow situational lexis, and their obsession with physical process, they may also prefigure the fully ludic architectures of digital games.

This sketch of the sound serials' consonance with the playground might tempt us to cast them as proto-digital, or analog precursors to the digital age: the magic lantern shows of computer gaming's cinema. It is more appropriate, though, to think of both as embedded in a larger and continuing history of seriality. By its nature, seriality rides against containment and coherence, and this is advantageous to play. When measured against standards of studio-era feature films, sound serials are painfully redundant, incoherent, and narratively inadequate. The very qualities that seem an affront to Hollywood classicism (discontinuity, un-psychologized characters, bare-bones motivations) support the possibilities of narrative architecture, the regular return to a perpetual world of pursuits fights, and escapes (for classical Hollywood cinema see Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson 1985).

Sound serials strike me as an important but not singular point on a spectrum that encompasses digital games. Other forms of serial media also occupy the nexus of narrative and play. In a past issue of *Eludamos*, for instance, Jason Mittell brought game studies and television studies together to address "a mode of ludic storytelling that transcends the false dichotomy between game and narrative" (Mittell 2006, p. 5). It is hard to imagine a kind of story more different from the sound serials than the complex, expansionist transmedial world of *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010), which Mittell uses as a case study. Producers employed *Lost*'s labyrinthine mythology to launch transmedia extensions including ARGs where participants could solve puzzles and explore the story world. Sound serials, by contrast, are supremely knowable and cyclical; what you see is what you get, again and again. Where *Lost* is populated with emotionally rich and developing characters, serials offer one-note types who behave predictably from start to finish. What the two share, though, is the unfolding of a sometimes incoherent story through repeated spaces with continuing characters and in vividly situational episodes. Both stage regular, ludic breaks in their stories through which curious viewers could take up the world, on the playground or in the ARG. These continuities should embolden those of us studying pre-digital media forms to take the lessons of ludology seriously, and to recognize the ludic potential of episodic narrative. Huizinga points out, "in nearly all higher forms of play the elements of repetition and alternation […] are like the warp and woof of a fabric" (Huizinga 1950, p.10). Seriality makes stories playable.

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Notes

[1] The author's use of the plural "Tarzans" recalls Denson and Mayer's distinction between serial characters and serial figures. For them, Tarzan is a serial figure, moving across media and forms, rather than a singular character contained within a series. In this case, the serial figure's freedom from narrative continuity, its generalization as an icon, coincides with its appropriation to play (see Denson and Mayer 2012, and Mayer 2014).