CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY SAN MARCOS

THESIS SIGNATURE PAGE

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS IN

LITERATURE AND WRITING STUDIES

THESIS TITLE Interrupting Gameplay: A Study of Videogame Play as Reading and Producing Cybertext Literature

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DATE OF SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE: 27 April 2009

THE THESIS HAS BEEN ACCEPTED BY THE THESIS COMMITTEE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS IN LITERATURE AND WRITING STUDIES

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Every text is changeable, but digital texts and visuals mediums train the user to believe that all texts depend on constant interaction, updating, and defragging to keep them authentic. This discussion looks critically at how gameplay relates to the reading act and how the reading act is deepened, produced as a viewable text, and made expressive as a performative language within the structured effects of a videogame. To frame this discussion, I use Walter Benjamin’s aesthetic value of distraction and principal of interruption as a model for analysis, relying on Wolfgang Iser’s theory of aesthetic response and Espen Aarseth’s arguments on cybertext and ergodic literature—a critical theory specific to computer generated texts—to adapt this model to a study of gameplay (ludology). Developing this frame locates the videogame as an emergent, medium specific to the episteme of the computer but included within a literary history. It likewise locates the tropes by which a videogame seeks to reevaluate authorship of a narrative experience which has been called into question and crisis by the conditions of computer generated texts. Ultimately, the argument reveals how the process of playing a game engenders agency, a more manifest and penetrative action than aesthetic response and apperception.

Key Words: Video Game, Videogame, Ludology, Agency, Apperception, Walter Benjamin, Gameplay
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Nothing in this paper is “new” in the sense that I have fetched it free and independently from a darkness which I alone have explored. And nothing in this paper is “new” when we agree that “new” means something unexpected and detached from any lineage or dialectic, peeled off the wall like a shadow within a cave. This means that I alone am not responsible for following ideas. Ah now, that is a relief, but...

But I wrote the words—if that’s what you’re concerned about—, every single sound, slap, and syllable outside of quotes. And the words I didn’t write, the ones in quotes I mean, I selected. I found them where they weren’t doing anything pressed face-to-face like palm-to-palm hands between the bookends of cold pages or compressed like a deletion inside the vacuum of hard drives where no human eye can pry without calling through a search engine first. No I have no original claim to the words between quotes, but I chose them—just like I chose the words outside of quotes from my mind or the dictionary or thesaurus where they weren’t doing anything productive...well, maybe in my mind but—I placed all the words as language once again to give all the words life for a while. But...

But then I stopped writing. I had to. There was this thing, a deadline, a dead line, a dead thing that told me if I didn’t stop I wouldn’t graduate nor get a job nor earn enough money which bothered me because I need money to buy new videogames. I like videogames. So I stopped writing. And beyond the dead line, the delicate language I had selected to build up the ideas that aren’t “new” stopped moving: just like the words I had found in the library had grown still. So innocence...

I mean, so-in-a-sense, there is a strong case against my ideas, which aren’t “new”, cast here in a preset language, which cannot speak. What I mean to say is, these words say nothing nor mean anything until someone starts them moving again, until someone wafts a modifier back into description, dips in to draw out a line to place in quotes—wouldn’t that be fucking cool—, skims a page and ripples the lingo, or plunges bow deep with sails up in to thunder a precise manifesto. The point is...

The point is, if the ideas in these pages are not mine to claim as “new” and if I no longer supply the language that ensures the careful meaning of each word set inside and outside of quotes, then the author of these pages and its ideas and the words and the text (if there is one)... I say the author of these pages and maybe all pages that mean anything to anyone must be...

The author of these pages must be ...

... you.
At the center of [this] experiment stands the human being. Present-day man; a reduced man, therefore chilled in a chilly environment. But since this is the only one we have it is in our interest to know him. He is subjected to tests, examinations. What emerges is this: the events are alterable not at their climax, not by virtue and resolution, but only in their strict habitual course, by reason and practice...the train of thought which is about to be concluded presents the writer with only one demand: the demand to think, to reflect on his position in the process of production.

— Walter Benjamin
0.2.0 Introductions

It takes no great leap of the imagination to place videogames as an artistic, purposefully expressive medium. *Myst* can easily be described as a series of hyper-realistic paintings which a viewer can enter. *BioShock* is an invitation into Ann Rand’s Objectivist fiction to inhabit her utopia as it crumbles into horror at its teleological end. And *Fable II* simply advertises itself no further than “Welcome...Your story is waiting”. Whatever additional pleasure these games may offer, they attempt to move an audience through conflict to provoke an emotion and facilitate a consideration of the world from a newly constructed point of view. In other words, they attempt to tell a story. Videogames are, however, relatively new on the literary scene and young in their aesthetic development, and scholars and developers alike are unsure exactly what to do with them. The story element of the videogame implies an act of reception—reading—which leads scholars to point out the text designed to manipulate a reader. The game element of the videogame implies a more penetrative act of perception—gameplay—which designates the text designed to be manipulated itself. The layering of the interactive text and the rhetorical text together first appears to form a contradiction which, for some, constitutes a dichotomy of genres: certain games tell stories while other games are simply games. A closer consideration of the aesthetic of agency and immersion, however, unifies reception and perception as an act of apperception where the
reading act becomes tactile and the gamer is allowed to co-author the game-text and construct its meaning.

The following paper will look critically at how gameplay relates to the reading act and how the reading act is deepened, produced as a viewable text, and made expressive as a performative language within the structured effects of a videogame. To frame this discussion I will use Walter Benjamin’s aesthetic value of distraction as a model for analysis, relying on Wolfgang Iser’s theory of aesthetic response and Espen Aarseth’s arguments on cybertext and ergodic literature—a critical theory specific to computer generated texts—to adapt this model to a study of gameplay (ludology). Developing this frame will help locate the videogame as an emergent, medium specific to the episteme of the computer but included within a literary history. It will likewise locate the tropes by which a videogame seeks to reevaluate authorship of a narrative experience which has been called into question and crisis by the conditions of computer generated texts. Ultimately, this introduction will reveal how the process of gameplay comprises training in agency, a more manifest and penetrative action than aesthetic response and apperception.

0.3.0 Unusual Reception

In the most general sense, the pleasure of playing a game lies in distraction. The game itself is a distraction, a break from whatever about life has grown monotonous. The game-text becomes a representative piece of the world which can be mastered and controlled. The interruption is entertainment, but primarily, a form
of entertainment that requires innovative and consequential work. Because of this, the game can be assessed as an invitation to train a skill and assert a performance that is legitimizied by the way the game-text changes around it. Every videogame offers this common objective—complete a puzzle, “beat” the game—, but even this objective is constructed by continuous interruptions: bonus objectives, countdown timers, bombarding asteroids, “gameover” screens, accelerated speeds, flying ninjas, progressive difficulty, ending credits, and of course, hyper-realistic graphics, all distractions that orchestrate a learning curve for gameplay. This series of interruptions can be viewed as a system of consequences meant to encourage a user to refine gameplay such that gameplay more purposefully changes the text—and which immerse the user in a visceral, authorial experience. Distraction then makes the gamer aware of an ability to change the way the game is played and so change the puzzle (from a state of “incomplete” to “complete”) itself. Distraction trains the gamer in agency.

Gameplay then negotiates elements designed to interrupt the entertaining experience, not to take away from that experience but to deepen it. They constitute what Walter Benjamin formulates as the percussive, interruptive elements of a work of art, the “aesthetic value of distraction”, which shakes a user’s usual experience with art and facilitates a self-critical, reevaluation.

Benjamin firsts observes the aesthetic value of distraction in the offense and “anti-art” of Dadaism. He asserts that the Dada artist produced work that defied
"contemplative immersion"—the high-brow consideration of art which receives its value through a thorough contemplation of its form—by incorporating vulgarities and mechanical methods into their process. Examples of this is evident in Dada sound poems, readymades, fragments, and montage, all modes of art comprised of nonsense, toilet bowls, train tickets and buttons (Benjamin 39). By calling quotidian objects and argot language art, Dadaism interrupted the usual experience with art, creating what Benjamin considers a "vehement distraction" intended to offended the viewer away from the work in order to provoke the viewer into a dissociative, often offended response (39). It’s purpose was to “outrage the public” and put the viewer off balance in order to force a reevaluation of traditions like ‘art’, conventions like ‘contemplation’, and social values like ‘war’. In other words, the distracting element of Dadaism challenged the creative privilege of the artist by placing the responsibility of signifying the artwork (as well as morals and political realities) back upon the viewer.

For the layperson, however, the Dada experiment proved too extreme though discerning of the conditions of its zeitgeist. By its nature, the avant-garde precede the mediums and forms which will canonize its acuity, and so Benjamin observes that “Dadaism attempted to produce with the means of painting (or literature) the effects which the public today seeks in film” (38). Benjamin asserts that while the “Dadaist turned their art into a missile…the distracting element in film is also primarily tactile, being based on successive changes of scene and focus which have
a percussive effect on the spectator” (39). He elaborates by saying this “percussive effect” of montage in film restricts the viewer from concentrating on any single image. The effect of this convention informs the viewer that the value is not in the reception of the image but in how the viewer perceives the images and more importantly, how the viewer recognizes the self in the process. In other words, the value of the film is not received through contemplation but through interruptions that facilitate an evaluative response. Benjamin calls this aesthetic response “training in apperception”, and it is this training that is critical to his formulation of distraction. It is also precisely the value I recognize in reference to videogames.

Before I move on to develop apperception as a term and critical function of videogames, I want to anchor Benjamin formulation of the aesthetic value of distraction in the context of his seminal argument. Specifically, Benjamin sees the attack on contemplation affirming his claim that what was once valued and received through contemplation has been placed in crisis by a shift in productive forces. Benjamin argues that the ability to reproduce any work of art on a massive scale has forced the artwork out of its tradition of composition and reception. As a mechanically produced copy, the artwork is displaced from the reverence of the art-lover and is posited on postage stamps and soda bottles in the hands of the rough and ready masses. Its specific authenticity is threatened, and its aura and authority as an artifact of a historic tradition is jeopardized (Benjamin 22). Benjamin asserts that the artwork in this state of crisis requires a reevaluation in the context of its historic
episteme, and he recognizes this reevaluation process facilitated by the aesthetic of
distraction started in the art of Dadaism and later popularized in film. He writes,

What they [Dadaists] achieved by such means was a ruthless annihilation of
the aura in every object they produced, which they branded as a reproduction
through the very means of its production...Contemplative immersion—
which...became a breeding ground for asocial behavior—is here opposed by
distraction...as a variant of social behavior. (39)

Distraction addresses the crisis of technological reproduction by incorporating the
viewer into the production process. The shocked and jolted viewer becomes aware
of their perception of the work, is granted authority over the piece simply by
beholding it, and in this moment of transcendent offense, the “here and now” of the
toilet bowl, the art work, and the mechanically spliced montage is constructed
(and/or restored). Benjamin’s theory of aesthetic distraction therefore readdresses
the productive forces which have simultaneously democratized and displaced the
artwork in order to stimulate the viewer into active participation. Provoking the
viewer, then, constitutes a political action.

Recognizing that this purposeful and forceful centering of the viewer arises from
a historical shift in productive forces is highly relevant to my critical approach to
videogames. The productive forces of the computer have brought about an
equivalent crisis for the literary text. Espen Aarseth considers the advent of the
autonomous computer program demarcating a paradigm shift within which
cybernetics becomes the author of a text. Aaresth writes, “when a system is
sufficiently complex, it will, by intention, fault, or coincidence, inevitably produce
results that could not be predicted even by the system designer” and as such, will come to interpret data and produce texts (cybertexts) autonomously, beyond the intent of the original programmer and equally, the will of a user (Aarseth 27). This type of program behavior is called “emergent”, and Aarseth uses a chess program which can beat its programmer as an example.

Another, simple example of emergent heuristic behavior is evident in T9 software which expedites cell phone text messaging by suggesting words to the user as the user types an intended message. T9 adapts differently to each user by “learning” how to better make suggestion based on the history of user selections; however, the program often suggests words seemingly of its own consideration. It will, for example, suggest “book” while the user types the word “cool”, even after the user has finished typing. Strikingly, because this suggestion is so ubiquitous amongst users, the terms “book” and “cool” have become interchangeable. That’s pretty book, isn’t it! Well, from the position of literature, not really.

Aarseth argues that the emergent computer-as-author threatens the purpose and perspective authored into the text. Purpose and perspective, Aarseth views, constitute the basis of most literary criticism and comprise the crux of Aristotelian poetics, making both the production of “literary” cybertexts and criticism of cybertexts highly problematic. Aarseth asserts that the perspective of the cybertext is primarily that of a “material machine, a device capable of manipulating itself as well as the reader” which wholly lacks the interests of self-reflection, self-criticism, and
aesthetics (Aarseth 25, 131). The computer program concerns itself only with
heuristics and has no capacity to consider an audience nor transmit a lived, nuanced
experience beyond initial programming and user input. It is unaware of its aesthetics
informed by as well as in response to a tradition or movement. And in terms of
Benjamin’s argument, the generation of the cybertext not only threatens the
authenticity of the expression but the original existence of an aura within or about
the cybertext is highly uncertain.

Another way to see the severity by which the cybertext has been pushed outside
the literary tradition is to think of the cybertext as a product of arbitrary variables. A
good program, say for example, the Google search engine, must be designed for a
diverse user base and the code written such that even the most idiosyncratic user can
locate the information they’re searching for and not break the program in the
process. From an author’s perspective, the user is a free variable operating the
system, an observation which removes the (human) author from the production
process of the final text. To the user, the program heuristics which adapt and fortify
themselves against aggressive use are variable such that, for example, whatever the
user intends the search engine to produce, he will get back results that are surprising
and to an extent, unexpected. The cybertext predicates upon, not a well reasoned and
authorial process, but the prevailing influence of a random element. The cybertext
generated by the search engine then posses a fundamental contradiction to
Aristotelian poetics. The cybertext is primarily authored by random, unexpected forces, a condition which, given Google's ambition to scan and make available the world's library and collection of literature, plunges the artistic tradition into crisis (Google Books).

As we may expect, the new productive forces of the computer paradigm are incorporated into the composition of the art demarcating the cyber/information episteme of the postmodern age. Flarf poets, hypertext artists, and vidder culture all center random generators of material and text in their work in order to integrate the user in what Aarseth calls cyborg poetics (the symbiotic co-authorship of a cybernetic system and an organic, human, author) (28). The concept of cybertext, argues Aarseth, implies a human revision/interactive process to imbue the cybertext with a purposeful, lived perspective such that literary exchange with the cybertext becomes meaningful. And because of this, he argues that the cybertext "centers attention on the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure than even reader-response theorists claim" (1). This reason is two-fold. First, just as the Dadaist under Benjamin's critique maintained the productive elements of their time, so too the cyborg poets maintain the incompleteness, the anti-Aristotelian quality of the cybertext which demands a subsequent human user/author to complete the text. Second, because interaction with a cybertext is textual, the viewer's response to the work is produced within the work, meaning that in the moment of the viewing act

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1 "Further, to be fine both an animal and every thing which is constructed from some [parts] should not only have these [parts] in order, but also possess a magnitude that is not random" (Aristotle 96).
the text is completed, is purposed, contains an authentic perspective, and then the moment passes and the text deteriorates. Cyborg poetics then structure the user’s experience and response in such a way that the process of operating composes the text. Aarseth calls this phenomenological event “ergodic” (a term he coins using “the Greek words ergon and hodos, meaning ‘work’ and ‘path’”), and asserts that to truly embrace and explore this new literary form, complete dependence on a literary tradition should be suspended (Aarseth 1). He asserts that the computer should be considered an instrument and not pushed and progressively designed to produce more familiar literary modes. To do this, Aarseth suggests that “what we need...is not an automated playwright or narrator but simulated worlds with emergent intrigants, interesting enough to make real people want to spend time and creative energy there” (Aarseth 141). In short, what we need is a videogame.

My purpose for drawing these parallels between Benjamin’s assessment of technological reproduction and Aarseth’s treatment of cybertext and ergodic forms as demarcating a new, material episteme is to show a similar response in form within the nascent texts and mediums emergent of a new paradigm. It is not in the best interest of this paper to develop Aarseth’s full conception of ergodic literature as it relates specifically to the avant-garde movements listed above. But rather to acknowledge the presence and the spirit which drives their experiments to identify videogames as the current medium which carries the avant-garde re-assessment of art into a more immediately accessible and available venue.
Just as the “percussive effects” of film were used rhetorically to draw the viewer into an apperceptive production process, the nature of ‘game’ is purposed to interrupt the user’s usual experience with texts and draw attention to the user’s requisite role as an agent made responsible to manipulate randomly generated text into meaning. As I said in the beginning of this discussion, the nature of a good game is to teach the user how to play it better. When textuality and a representative experience are graphed onto the game, the stakes for that learning curve our raised. No longer does the honing of a skill end in the tautological binary of “win or lose”, but a text—a representation, a story, a constructed identity—is authored in the process. Benjamin’s model fits the videogame medium as it continually interrupts the experience of gameplay to remind the gamer of this process.

One thing remains absent from our revised model of Benjamin’s aesthetic value of distraction: a deeper critical analysis of apperception to better understanding how the mobilized viewer is included in the authentic production of the artwork.

I see two ways to read Benjamin’s emphasis on apperception. First, apperception denotes a political act. Benjamin ascribes political weight to the accessibility of productive means which democratizes composition. The shift in productive forces has lead to high literacy rates, a greater faculty in writing, and access to public forums as functions of composition practiced previously by the bourgeois. Mechanical reproduction has put the masses “irrevocably on the historic stage”, to

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2 Benjamin provides an example of this in the notes to the editor section in the newspaper, articulating its significance as “at any moment, the reader is ready to become a writer” (Benjamin 34).
use Stuart Hall’s wording, and to train the masses purposefully in re-evaluative
response is to provoke the individual into an awareness of an ability to act (Hall
goes as far to interpret Benjamin’s theory predating upon the democratization of
publication, saying “it isn’t only the new means of mechanical reproduction but the
historical presence of the masses which interrupts history”) (Hall 140).

In addition to its political nature, apperception draws the viewer into the
production process composing art. This suggests a phenomenological function but,
more specifically, a critical response, made so by its incorporation into the work by
the rhetoric of distraction. This compels me to bring Wolfgang Iser and his critical
structuring of the reading act into this discussion particularly to deepen our
understanding of apperception as an aesthetic, signifying response to the literary text
in crisis.³

Iser’s theory of aesthetic response describes a dialogic process by which the
“reality” of a text is actively composed between the reader’s perspective and the
“structured effects” of the text. Iser argues that every text implies a reader, not an
ideal reader to activate an ideal, objective reading, but a human consciousness to
dialogue with the perspectives of the text. This implicates the unread text as
incomplete, or rather unfulfilled, in the sense that what it hopes to actualize as a

³ Note to the reader: my sole purpose for incorporating Iser is to utilize his discussion on aesthetics
germane to ludology. It is not the purpose of this paper to designate specific reader types nor
problematicize varying readerly acts based on constructed identity politics (such as gender, social class,
and race) which is typically applied to Iser’s work. Such is a task for a further development of this
project.
reality requires a reader to supply the living, speaking, and vibrant world which the text can only guide towards.

Iser characterizes the process of this phenomenon by placing emphasis on the “viewpoint” of the reader which is made free to actively wander within a literary work by the immersive, rhetorical features of the text. Specifically, Iser draws critical attention to three perspectives present and active in the text—the perspective of the narrator, those of the characters, and that which is established by the plot (all of which reflect the perspective of the author)—which continuously pull at the reader’s viewpoint, forcing it to switch between and envisage each, which in turn forms a “standpoint” by which the reader’s participation effectively joins the text as a forth perspective (Iser 35). Iser writes,

By virtue of this standpoint, the reader is situated in such a position that he can assemble the meaning toward which the perspectives of the text have guided him. But since the meaning is neither a given external reality nor a copy of an intended reader’s own world, it is something that has to be ideated by the mind of the reader. A reality that has no existence of its own can only come into being by way of ideation, and so the structure of the text sets off a series of mental images which lead to the text translating itself into the reader’s consciousness. (Iser 38)

Iser claims the reader’s response to the a literary work is the text. While the reading act modifies isolated perspectives and rhetorical significance through a continual process of synthesis, Iser posits the reader as the recipient of the most significant change.

Iser’s critical structuring of the reading act legitimizes Benjamin’s centering of apperception in response to the authenticity (aura) placed in crisis by technological
reproduction and restored by active and participatory reading. Because all texts depend on the response of the reader to activate the perspectives and worlds waiting to be brought to life within their pages, the implied reader who is critically aware of this role and apperceptive to his authority has the ability to do more: to actively restructure the authenticity which has been compromised, to supply the aura which has been removed. In the case of the cybertext, this active participation is even more critically involving.

In a videogame, the moment of active apperception occurs within the moment of visceral connection between a gamer and his avatar where the gamer’s concentration is completely subsumed within the forced perspective of gameplay (a dialogue between the self and an ideated ethos); however, the gamer retains his choice to press a button which coincides with a free performance, the firing of a weapon or movement down a hallway. The interruptions of death, loading screens, and metatutorials prompts the gamer to continuous, critical evaluation of this performance. In other words, elements of the videogame consecutively immerse and interrupt the gamer to make her aware of and train her in apperception.

Recall, however, Aarseth’s assessment of the cybertext as fundamentally incomplete based on the arbitrary perspective of the computer-author which resist literary poetics, falls out of the human condition, and so fails to guide the reader towards a coalesced meaning. What is in crisis is not the aura of the text but the legitimacy of the text itself: its constituent features which qualify it as a text. This
suggests that the phenomenological response must be textually produced to structure the incomplete components which the random text generator has plunged into crisis. Faculty in apperception impelled by the cybertext, then, prompts the user to push beyond narrative guidelines to become an “agent” with the capacity to compose wholly new texts which are still phenomenological but which may be reconstituted as literature or may transcend literature altogether.

In a videogame, what is “read” is a cybertext. It is a dynamic, repeatable conflict that implies a configuration, solution, and performance. What is “read” is a game. The structure of the game, the aesthetic value of play—the “fun”—is in asserting the self over the computer, the designed space, or another human opponent. The fun is in inhabiting agency and beating the random element through skill and innovation. When a narrative is embedded within the game-text, the implied solution includes the configuration of a good story; however, the pleasure of asserting the self and beating the game-text permits the gamer to ignore the story, configured or not, and relish in play. The contradiction of the interactive text layered over the rhetorical text, then, can be resolved by the centering of choice. This demands both a training in agency and a reevaluation of reception and appreciation of a co-authored text.

The traditional model of the text/user relationship, which is the basis of Iser’s study, is somewhat inverted in videogames: whereas Iser locates the significance of the reading act in how the text has influenced the reader, the significance of gameplay lies in how the gamer has manipulated the text. Gameplay then is not
wholly different from the reading act, but rather it offers a deeper and potentially more effecting version, for while the game-text implies a gamer, gameplay does more than compose an ephemeral text which is transcendent of both the reader and written page, it completes the original structure (of narrative or game) and authors a wholly new one by constructing ethos, authoring lexis, and performing plot legitimized as a projection on screen.

In other words, gameplay that can be witnessed expresses itself singularly into the textual world that structures it. This textual phenomenological act expresses itself to the gamer responsible for it, constituting isolated, dialogic moments of self-reflection. Produced as text, these moments express themselves to other gamers present in the game world as well as to those crowded around the screen in the arcade. Gameplay as a signifier for apperception becomes a performative language which both completes the text and stimulates those witnessing the act to generate new performances. In other words, gameplay both constitutes a completed text and offers itself as new cybertext to be exchanged amongst user and the self, a phenomenon so peculiar in its transitory and dialogic nature that it begins to evoke the shape of an active and emerging oral tradition. This final observation implies the political consequence embedded in Benjamin’s model of the aesthetic value of distraction.

A study of play consequently deepens both the seminal arguments of Iser and Benjamin, and the aesthetic value of distraction inscribed about the game-text and
gameplay constitutes a greater matter of choice and trained agency. The following paper applies this appropriated version of Benjamin’s model to an analysis of videogames in order to center distraction as the rhetorical crux by which videogames produce gameplay as an assertive, discerning, and experiential language. My purpose is to show that videogames are the popularized medium that carries the avant-garde experiments and spirit of cyborg poets and ergodic forms into a medium more immediately accessible and availed to the general user. To do this, I will begin with an analysis of how videogame design interrupts the experience of play to train the user in both narrative and ludic agency specifically to structure a story. I will, then, look critically at the position of agency as it is preformed from a first-person and immersed point of view, to broaden the “genre” of ergodic literature produced by inhabiting a simultaneously incomplete and phenomenological space.
[Manifesto]

1.0.0 The following Manifesto must be read aloud, skimmed, skipped, or referenced in parts throughout the reading of this paper; can be accompanied by loud music; ought to be shared, distributed, changed, and appropriated as the reader sees fit; can be read concurrently with works of poetry and/or lengthy prose; should be annotated by the reader with a large sharpie pen; can be shouted over the soundtrack of both good and bad films; and must be revised to enable more exciting play.

1. Language in videogames occurs in the moment when reading becomes writing, watching becomes direction, solving becomes narration, consuming becomes subversive, destruction tells a story, game subverts video, and video becomes game.

2. The gamer’s language is visual, auditory, action, kinesthetic, oral, textual, transitory, digital, and “real”.

3. Gameplay is historical and political:
   • gameplay has everything to do with constructing, maintaining, and destroying teleologies, archetypes, and all other structures of power.
   • gameplay has everything to do with negotiating the projected self as a presence which has been made a foreign object within the computer.
   • gameplay has everything to do with a gamer’s history and location.
   • videogames may have been conceived in the halls of education, entertainment, news media, cognitive research, cultural studies, capitalism, and advertising, but gameplay does not fucking reside there.

4. Gamer culture is:
   • inclusive: gaming arenas offer open access and equal opportunity to any gamer wishing to contribute performance based on work and capital.
   • competitive: the lazy, the non-creative, and the unskilled are ostracized.

5. The arcade is (not dead but transplanted) hardcore-casual and casual-hardcore.
   • it is the domain of “the one” whose skill is canonized on leaderboards, sponsored by corporate merchants, and defined as the momentary standard of performance. The arcade is not a “second” but all consuming life.
   • it is the sandbox of the subversive where the standard of performance is under constant threat by those who play videogames for themselves and who are aware that the machine can be turned off, at any moment.

6. I am a scholar and a gamer; therefore, I speak in two languages:
   • first: I am a gamer.
   • second: [A compilation of lights, movement, and sounds articulating—from one perspective—a well armored soldier dancing in the flames of an exploded tank; from another perspective—an event manifested in darkened hands and illuminated blue fingers; from another—dilated pupils and a lopsided smirk. Message translates as, ‘I am a gamer’.]


The masses are criticized for seeking distraction...in the work of art, whereas the art lover supposedly approaches it with concentration...the person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work, just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his contemplated painting while beholding it. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide.

— Walter Benjamin

Rather than merely watching the actions of the main character, as we would in a film, with every outcome of events predetermined when we enter the theater, we are given a surrogate character (the player-character) through which we can participate in and alter the events in the game's diegetic world.

— Mark J. P. Wolf
1.1.0 The Game and The Story

There are several, salient aspects of the videogame medium which draw narrative games into a close comparison with more traditional literary forms. Technically, the videogame is text; every image, sound, sequence of events, and action exists as a function of the coded language and symbolic characters structuring the program. It is not such a stretch to say that microprocessors ideate the descriptions of binary code just as readers ideate upon the tropes of literature. More pertinently, the experience of playing a videogame is most like the experience of reading a book: a user can spend weeks engrossed in a book just as he can spend weeks exploring the ludic structures of a videogame; both the closed back cover and the ending credits often leaves the reader and gamer alike with a sense of regret that the book and the game have concluded; and likewise, the physical connection between the digital and the literary are made equally tactile and involving by the pages, which must be turned, and the controller, which must be operated. Even, the purpose of the videogame proclaims an ambition to achieve what most literary text’s intend in their devices: provoke an emotion, solicit a response, and transport an audience.

Perhaps the most distinguishing difference between the experience playing the narrative videogame and reading the literary text is the amount of time the user spends distracted from the story and concentrating on her own circumstances during the process. The ambition to tell a story which not only hinges upon but is constantly
interrupted by the demands of a game seems a strange and potentially futile design. Imagine if books required a reader to successfully race a librarian down the aisle, throw library cards at other readers, and push book-carts around the room to form a pre-designated pattern before turning to the next page and proceeding with a protagonist through a story. This action viewed from our third-person vantage point looks ridiculous, and possibly this is because we’ve formed habits dismissing non-pertinent distractions while reading. Those interruption which do penetrate a process of reading, such as a spilt cup of coffee or a smile caught from an attractive passerby, are quickly categorized and kept out of the text. We easily separate: this is the story which I am reading, and this is my story which I am living. In a videogame, these two separate narratives are made, purposefully, to meld.

An example of this phenomena is easiest identified in a game that doesn’t try to tell a story. *Tetris* for example, is a simple puzzle-game which tasks a user to sort and manipulate different shaped, falling blocks to form complete, horizontal rows. Every time the user completes a row it disappears, freeing up space to place the next block. If too many rows stack above a limit line, the session ends and the user must start over. There is nothing in the design nor structured by gameplay that suggests to a user they are engaging in a representative act; nothing in the design of the game immediately reflects any human condition, conflict, or theme which might structure the user’s external actions in any narrative form. And yet the user’s external world has immediate and consequential influence on the production of her performance.
The spilt coffee becomes a part of the historical moment of the mismanaged row. The “look” may coincide with the completion of a level. And if gameplay constitutes an especially significant session, every aspect of the experience will be included in the re-telling, because each was produced in the historic moment of play.

Gameplay is always about the business of making meaning, and whether a narrative is pre-structured or not, the whole process of play will come crashing in to contextualize it. For this reason, videogames have difficulty “telling” stories, or as Celia Pearce phrases it, “the authorial control, which is implicit in other genres, tends to undermine the quality of the user experience”, because the primacy of the prompted thought is always present and is itself authorial in every moment of gameplay (Pearce 146). For this reason, Pearce, along with Espen Aarseth, Jasper Juul, and other leading scholars of ludology, who are interested in the unique textuality of games and computer generated literature, call for a new evaluation of both the production and reception of texts. Many, such as Pearce and Aarseth, go as far to assert that the nature of games and hypertext literature require a process of reading so participatory and peculiar that the act of usual reception contradicts its very textuality. For this reason, the central ludological argument maintains that videogames cannot tell stories and that studying narrative ambitions in videogame design is a waste of time.

I agree with the ludic opinion of play; however, I find their argument too extreme and even limiting to the phenomena of gameplay which is always unique,
self-actuated, and often meaningful. Instead of seeing story contradicted by the participatory nature of games, I find the one merely a distraction which interrupts a usual contemplation of the other. This is the point illustrated earlier by the cup of spilled coffee. It is also the point formulated by Walter Benjamin in the quote that introduces this chapter. His and my further arguments reveal that through distraction a reader experiences the usefulness and pleasures of an unfamiliar text in such a way that she is trained to appreciate nuances and form habits in new processes of an authentic contemplation.

Thus, I find the peculiar difference between the analogue and digital located not in the ambitions, the idiosyncrasies, or the comparative similarities of literature and videogames but rather in how these aspects structure the process of “receiving” the text. In this chapter, I assert that the literary value of videogames cannot be located in how closely the design approximates traditional modes of telling stories but in how the narrative structure is made to interrupt usual experiences with stories to redress digital modes of production. To do this, I first demonstrate how videogame designers redresses the problematics of the cybertext by structuring a game-story as narrative fragments (called lexias) to be rearticulated and made complete by gameplay. As will be shown, these fragments construct continuous interruptions which make a user aware of her participatory role and which call her exploratory performance, her faculty to ideate what the game cannot supply, and her situational perspective into production specifically to tell a story.
1.2.0 A Song About Pieces

Videogames approach storytelling primarily by structuring encounters with lexias (narrative fragments) which are intended to be discovered and which, when synthesized, form the touchstones by which a user perceives a story. Lexias may be simple and mostly connotative, or they may be complex in form and more intentionally controlling. Early videogames, for example, structured lexia that primarily utilized the gamer’s prior knowledge and developed associations within the game to construct its narrative context. The 1980’s game *Super Mario Bros.* for example depends upon the user’s experience navigating through the levels to characterize its obstacles as “bad guys”. The most common threat to the avatar in this game are turtles which look innocent and act passive (they pace back and forth in predictable patterns) but which kill the user’s avatar whenever the two make contact and so gain the ethos of “bad guy”. A more purposed yet basic form of lexias in *Super Mario Bros.* is developed by the actions of Bowser, the game’s final boss, who kidnaps a princess at the game’s beginning. This event informs the user’s actions throughout the game as participating in a familiar “rescue the princess” plot-arch. In each of these examples, the narrative structure is suggested. The formation of the game object or event as lexias depends completely upon the ability of the gamer to recognize its function as a contextualizing trope. In the case of the save-the-girl plotline, a familiarity with an external narrative is required for the intended lexia to be received. In developing the game’s characters (turtles) and narrative
ecology, the gamer’s active imagination constructs the context by which a cute, meandering turtle becomes a formidable nemesis. In other words, lexia of this implied type involve a process of ideation which either invokes or provokes a narrative explanation supplied by the gamer which then becomes draped over the bare bone of the game-structure through gameplay.

Contemporary games, on the other hand, present lexia which are more fully developed and designed to structure a more discreet and intentional game-story. For example, the gamer playing *Gears of War* understands the heroism (and personality) of his avatar, Marcus, not simply because monsters are constantly shooting at him but because there are moments in the game which take control away from the gamer to demonstrate how Marcus talks, how he reacts to news, how he feels towards other characters in the game, and how he expresses signs of an internal struggle. To accomplish this, game developers record hours of voice-acted dialogue, pre-animate dramatic sequences (like short films called cut-scenes), and embed expository objects like newspapers and diaries (called easter-eggs) throughout the game’s spatial environment to be experienced as “micronarrative” texts (Jenkins 125). The function of micronarrative lexia is to provide the significance of a gamer’s performance more heavy handedly than an implied plot-arch. The act of defeating an especially difficult enemy in *Gears of War*, for example, is often rewarded by a cut-scene during which the user learns the history of the monster, why it is so hostile towards the characters in the game, and what exactly has been gained by defeating it.
Instead of merely moving onto the next level of the game, the gamer is transitioned back into gameplay with a prestructured sense of what his participation in the conflict, histories, and relationships of the game is supposed to mean.

The intention of micronarrative lexia, then, is to deepen the user’s sense of participation in the game-story. The knowledge that an act of gameplay uncovers new information about the digital world and forces new narrative events to transpire compels the gamer to search further and delve deeper into the game-text for lexia which will embellish upon the avatar’s ethos and reveal more about the histories being discovered. The gamer doesn’t actually “make” this form of lexia, as he does supply the narrative context for simpler games; instead, he moves from one prestructured event to the next until finally all the pieces of the game-text have been placed to form a completed story (Ryan 589). For this reason, we can observe that micronarrative lexia also function as a guide for the gamer and establish certain pathways for a user to follow which orchestrate situations in which particular emotional and expository lexia can achieve a greater dramatic effect.

While this heavy handed structure may indeed lead a gamer to experience a visceral, engrossing story, the mode of reception introduced by micronarrative lexia sharply juxtaposes the nature of gameplay and so constitutes an awkward tension between the reception of lexia through a cut-scene and the construction of lexia during gameplay. First of all, micronarrative lexia take the gamer out of his active role of agent and places him into the more traditional, “passive” role of receiver.
(Perlin 13, Jenkins 126). In the moments of the cut-scene, he becomes a reader, a viewer, and a listener. His previous role which centered his discretion to find, receive, and act upon lexia is contradicted by the moment within which this ability to act freely is revoked. Second, and more critical, the presence of micronarrative lexia does not, and in fact cannot, negate the free associative and extant narrative contexts developed through continuous gameplay. This is because first and foremost the story being constructed is fundamentally and structurally a game, and games need to appreciated for their sake and situations, or as Stuart Moulthrop puts it, “[l]et games be games” (Moulthrop 57).

Games, opposed to novels and other story telling mediums, offer a distinctly different role to the user. Moulthrop writes, “[g]ames—particularly computer games—appeal because they are configurative, offering the chance to manipulate complex systems within continuous loops of intervention, observation, and response” (63). In addition to this, the game itself demands immediate, interpretive action, which made continuous and coupled with the appeal of mutable spaces, inevitably fosters innovative and particular styles of play. This peculiar role of gameplay operating to piece together a story is disrupted by the intermittent presence of traditional modes of exposition. To say this another way, a videogame which forces its user to continuously experience traditional modes of reception informs the user that the story being played ought also to conform to traditional narrative modes as well. For example, the ethos established in micronarrative cut-scenes in *Gears of*
War informs the gamer he ought to conform his particular play style to this ethos if the story received in those moments is to be made continuous. To choose to run for cover and hide while computer-controlled teammates eliminate all the monsters in a level contradicts the machismo of Marcus's character, though in particular moments it may be the most strategic response. Operating the roll, jump, and spin key-functions such that Marcus appears to dance throughout all the levels makes for an even stranger transition between cutscenes. Derek Burill describes this potential inconsistency as the "dislocating nature of play" arguing that "while a particular game may have been envisioned by its producers as primarily a [story] experience...the player can force the experience to ‘jump ship’ categorically at any time" (496). The harsh contrast between the narrated story-moment and the moment the gamer resumes control suggests that micronarratives compose one story while gameplay composes another separately. One can conceivably ignore the discontinuity with suspended disbelief, but this too contradicts the purpose of micronarrative lexia to equip the user with a sense of participating in a story.

Furthermore, the tension between gameplay and usual modes of reception disrupt the story experience even for those users who wish to experience the prestructured story. Ken Perlin argues this point by observing the distance a user experiences with an avatar despite the visceral experience intended by narrative games. Perlin argues that direct participation in a game-text restricts the kind of vicarious relationship formed between an audience and the protagonist through by
reading a book or watching a film. According to Perlin, a novel has the ability to tell a story precisely because the reader has surrendered her “right to make choices” (which he qualifies as her agency) and as such allows the “agency of the protagonist to take over” (14). Comparing his experience own experiences of reading a Harry Potter novel with that of playing a videogame as Laura Croft (an aristocrat, action adventure heroine featured in all Tomb Raider games), he contrasts his connection to each protagonist. He writes,

I can easily sustain the pleasant fiction that there is an actual Harry Potter, with a continued sense of feelings and goals, living “offstage” somewhere. This is because to read Harry Potter is to experience his agency as he navigates the various difficult challenges that life presents him. In contrast, when I walk away from my computer screen, I cannot sustain the fiction that an actual Laura Croft continues to exist offstage, because I have not actually experienced her agency. All I have experienced is my agency. (15)

Perlin’s explanation for the disconnect he observes between his imagination and the avatar he puppets resonates with Moulthrop’s stated aesthetic for gameplay. The very locations of the game-text which most appeals to and engages gameplay are always outside micronarrative lexia. Controlled exposition may elucidate the plot or provide a character’s motivation, but it does so in a cut-scene or through dialogue which doesn’t come from the gamer or though gameplay. The gamer may experience these micronarratives traditionally and so glean the intended story designed to structure gameplay, but the jolt that occurs when the gamer takes back control threatens to undo that traditional reading.
One thing at least which supports this claim is that every time the user fails he is reminded that he not only falls short of the narrated abilities of his avatar but that he in fact actively diminishes them. This is noted in a feature article of *Game Informer* magazine which highlights the dialogue line “Snake? Snake!? SNAAKE!” spoken in the game *Metal Gear Solid* as falling out of the game-story because “it means you failed the mission and killed Snake. The real snake would never make your bush-league mistakes, so he’d never hear the escalating cries of his allies. It’s the game’s way of saying ‘You blew it. Try again’ (“The Top 10 Lines...” 11). To think back on an experience playing as Solid Snake or Laura Croft is to recall so many trial and error and break though events that narrate only the efforts, innovation, and developed skills invested by the gamer. The only connection micronarrative lexia has to these memories is if by chance their occurrence coincides with a particularly rewarding gameplay experience; but then this was true for the spilt cup of coffee discussed earlier. This suggests that however ambitious game designers may be and however controlling lexia may be designed, the productive forces of the game which center a free agent to assemble the pieces will always and consistently compromise the narrated story.

Perlin’s concluded thought—that a pleasurable connection to a dramatic character predicates upon an external agency enacting upon the reader’s consciousness—touches on another critical issue pertinent to this discussion, namely he places his finger on the basic difference between the active processes of reading
and the active processes of gameplay. Wolfgang Iser argues that when a reader engages a text, he does not abandon his agency completely but practices an active and assertive imagination dialogically throughout the reading act. The reader switches between the guiding perspectives authored into the text (those of the characters, the narrator, as well as that established by the plot) and also ideates what the literary text cannot supply, such as sensory images, atmospheric conditions, and emotion. This type of agency, however, is constantly checked by the striking choices of the author. Iser asserts that whatever the reader projects into the text is constantly challenged, forced to shift, and made to realign again, not by its own agency but by the active control of the author’s agency. The reader may be cited as the active agent who brings a living language to the novel which stirs the text back into a living ecology, but once language activates language, the potency of the author’s perspective(s) takes over the reader. The distinction, then, between reading and gaming is nuanced, but it is prevailing.

One way to illustrate the critical difference is by examining Wayne C. Booth’s identification of two selves present in the process of reading. Booth writes, “[i]t is only as I read that I become the self whose beliefs must coincide with the author’s. Regardless of my real beliefs and practices, I must subordinate my mind and heart to the book if I am to enjoy it to the full” (italics mine, qtd in Iser 37). According to Booth, the primary self in the reading act is one which devotes rapt attention to the author’s text. By committing to the guiding tropes of the text, the primary self
experiences the story for all that it has to offer. This self is the “reader”. The second self by contrast threatens the reading process by introducing an immediate situation and concerns about laundry, thesis writing, and getting kids to school into the text, which interrupts the voice and perspectives laid down in the literature by the author. Booth asserts these distractions must be held back otherwise the “fullness” of the reading act is spoiled. Iser qualifies Booth’s asserted need to quiet the distracted self by contending that, while the reader’s “role prescribed by the text will be the stronger...the reader’s own disposition will never disappear totally; it will tend instead to form the background to and frame of reference for the act of grasping and comprehending” (37). Iser’s positions sees the two selves operating in tandem. The primary self still surrenders to the tropes of narration controlled by an author, but the distracted self operates actively in the background, providing memories and associations that are grounded in real life and which “color” the visual and sensory world which the written text can only provoke and cannot provide.

In the narrative videogame, these roles prescribed to the reader-self and the distracted-self are reversed. The videogame provides the images perceived by the senses (all except smell) and leaves the tropes of narration (plot, ethos, and perspective which are each fragmented) for the gamer to cohere and complete (ideate) himself. This requires that the primary self in the act of narrative gameplay is the self who brings his immediate circumstances and experiences to fill in the gaps between micronarrative lexia. The self who surrenders to the narrative control
of the text also follows the performance of gameplay, suggesting that in addition to being guided towards the “fullness” of the story by micronarrative lexia, the gamer is also guided by his own performance.

It is possible to argue that the role taken on by the gamer to cohere fragmented lexia is little different than the role assumed by an actor who performs according to a script. The actor like the gamer is provided with the suggestion of an ethos which is both comprehended and brought to life by the way it resonates with the actor’s life experience. In this way the actor brings nuances to the character he performs though, primarily, the actor follows a script. Very well. If we, however, prescribe the stronger role to the devout reader and subordinate influence of the reader’s “own disposition” as Iser does, we contradict the purpose of the game. Videogames, like all games, require immediate decisions and the execution of developed skill sets to act authoritatively upon the circumstances of the game. Subordinating the gamer’s disposition limits an ability to perform this primary task. Espen Aarseth describes this contradiction in the following:

The dominant user function in literature, theater and film is interpretive, but in games it is configurative....in art we might have to configure in order to be able to interpret, whereas in games we have to interpret in order to be able to configure, and proceed from the beginning to the winning or some other situation. (qtd in Moulthrop 60)

Requiring the gamer to adhere with rapt attention to the ethos of his avatar or the ideal pathways of a plot structured by micronarratives distracts him from performing his primary task to interpret the immediate challenge and configure the game-text in
order to progress. If the challenges of the game cannot be adequately accessed and overcome then gameplay cannot progress and the story stagnates. Thus, the reader who approaches a game-story with usual contemplation finds himself the distracted self who cannot engage the peculiar appeal and the most appropriate mode of contemplation of videogames. The reader must reevaluate his suspended disbelief which is interrupted by the provision that an original disposition and immediate situation be present and active to change the game-text and effect a greater consequence and more pleasurable, narrative experience.

There is nothing about traditional expository forms that instructs a kind of reading act that produces the user's particular situation into a story, except perhaps those which illustrate a process of writing. If the reading act peculiar to videogames requires that the gamer supplies the motion and the coherence of the story—which we may articulate as ethos and plot—then the perspective of the gamer needs to be produced in such a way that it does not contradict nor is forced to mimic the behavior of a fragmented ethos and scripted plot. In other words, the narrative structure must not attempt to shift the productive forces of the cybernetic medium to conform with passed and shunted traditions; rather, narrative videogames must, as N. Katherin Hayles puts it, "initiate and demand cyborg reading practices" which produce the interpretative and configuring actions of gameplay coherently with the structural operations of the computer (Hayles 85). I would add to Hayles manifesto that, as the medium popularizing approaches to new modes of production within a
shifted paradigm, the videogame must also train its users in this process as well. The following section reviews two salient structural devices—sandbox narration and in-game tutorials—which initiate just such a peculiar reading process.

1.3.0 The Manual and the Diegetic Warp Pipe

The primary structure that interrupts usual modes of reception and trains a user in participatory reading integrates gameplay into all encounters with lexia. This more authentic narrative structure is labeled as “sandbox”, a term coined for its immediate denotations for play within a malleable yet structured space, and used for its neutral position to narrative (i.e. a child may build a sandcastle and cast over it a story wrought by Kings and soldiers besieged by dragons and orcs, or she may simply build a castle). In sandbox structure, all lexia designate the gamer’s primary role to assert his own, unique disposition into the text. Even, micronarrative lexia are subjected to being skipped. This surrendering of micronarrative control to the gamer dispels the awkward tension previously established, for even if the gamer chooses to watch a cut-scene his choice is present and produced in every second he decides not to press the button to skip ahead.

An example of a sandbox narrative structure is evidenced in the independently produced videogame, “The Path”. In “The Path”, the user is placed within the familiar territory of a Red-Riding Hood tale upon the beginnings of a dirt path hedged on either side by a darkened forest which leads the avatar eventually to
Grandma’s house. If the gamer follows the path, nothing extraordinary happens. She encounters no one on the road, and once the house is reached, the game ends. If, on the other hand, the user steers the avatar off the path, a complex, engrossing experience unfolds. Every tree may house some grotesque horror, every bush may hide a searchable body, and every decision the user makes has the potential to provoke the wolf that has begun to hunt her. The “story” in other words depends upon the gamer’s choice to find it. The environment the user explores comprises the lexia which have meaning, and the unexplored corners of the game, which may in fact house intriguing lexias, recede into darkness and remain unauthorized by gameplay. The argument presented by “The Path” is that a vicarious walk-about down a familiar or heavily structured, narrative path cannot produce the wholly unique, process of emotion and choices which is the function of all encounters with games and is the purpose of videogame literature.

Mark Wolf describes the origins of this aesthetic in the early development of spatial design as “diegetic”, a term which evokes a narrative purpose in the art, environment, characters, and bad guys intended to be discovered through gameplay. Wolf argues that diegetic space—opposed to narrative pathways—introduces an even more compelling motivation to explore and which rewarded innovative play with rich experiences. *Metroid* and *Super Mario Bros.* (NES), for example, featured spatial features that could be penetrated, exploited, and seemingly changed. A wall in *Metroid* might appear solid at first, but causing the avatar to jump and approach it
at a certain point and angle would allow the gamer to slip behind it and enter a new area of the level previously unknown. Likewise the bricks and pipes in *Super Mario Bros.* often concealed secrets. Moving Mario onto a pipe and pressing down or causing him to hit a brick from below would reveal one of these secrets which included extra lives, treasure troves of coins, and “warps” which allowed a player to skip several levels ahead. Finding one of these secrets compelled gamers to forgo any immediate objective of the game and spend hours squatting their avatar, Mario, over every pipe and jumping, even at the risk of losing the game, to reduce every brick ceiling to rubble.

This seemingly counter-productive gameplay, provoked by a compelling space, presents a similar argument expressed by “The Path”. Penetrating diegetic space prompts a knowledge that the game’s entire design predicates upon when the gamer chooses to move, which space the gamer chooses to explore, and how the gamer chooses to perform. Every motive of the imagination or of a critical stratagem is made relevant by this agency and constitutes the meaning of the experience to the gamer according to how the gamer plays. *Super Mario Bros.*, for example, can be completed after 8 levels or it can be made endless by slipping passed the stone wall at the end of level 1-2 and entering the warp pipe to return, points intact, to the beginning to play again. Despite knowing that the warp pipe must be part of the program and design of the game world, its placement off screen, outside of obvious,
accessible space, means its existence in a played game depends upon the gamer finding it.

The experience of discovering a warp pipe constructs a co-authoring relationship between gameplay and design. This visceral connection between the state of the game world and the gamer’s projected presence in it, legitimizes his preformed interpretation and/or subversion of the intended game experience. The co-authored game-story that is completed at the outset of the game constitutes the cyborg “reading practice” which Hayles and many ludologists call for.

To fully integrate the user into the diegetic sandbox of interactive, responsive space, the videogame further interrupts the usual processes of reading and reception by dismantling the literary barrier between narrator/narrative and reader with blatant instructions. Unlike most literary stories which seek to immerse the reader in a state of suspended disbelief such that the book held in the hand disappears, the videogame continuously reminds its user that she is participating from outside the reality of the story. Every time a gamer fails, accomplishes a goal, and discovers a new item or gains a new power-up ability, she is pulled out of the narrative continuity to be trained by tutorials, tips, and new directions for completing further objectives. These interruptions are practical, in the sense that for everything else a videogame hopes to be, it is primarily software. Strikingly, technical instruction about videogame play has almost always coincided with a narrative context.
The technical user manual which comes with every videogame and which primarily informs a user about unique button configurations, game dynamics, and other pragmatic tutorials, is one of the original sources of lexias contextualizing gameplay. Mark Wolf, in his discussion of diegetic space, writes “the manuals that came with cartridges [home videogames] and the boxes in which they were packaged were often adorned with colorful illustrations that suggested an experience far more complex and detailed than the games could offer” (102). He explains that this “extra-diegetic” narration supplemented for the technological limits that barred most early games from developing an internal story system. It presented a back story or a detailed illustration that was meant to hang in the back of the gamer’s mind where it could be deepened and brought to ideated fruition. He observes, even for simple puzzles and abstract maze games like *Super Breakout* (an action puzzle game, not unlike *Tetris*), this was consistently practiced. Locating the source of stories externally from gameplay executed a similar function of micronarrative lexia. It implied an ideal form of gameplay which the gamer, implicitly, should conform to; however, presenting lexia concurrently with technical information about gameplay fostered a convention of speaking directly to the user, a theatrical interruption which began to blur the line between the gamer’s active imagination (ideation) and the gamer’s simultaneous performance (textual perspective).

This interruption was brought to bear directly upon gameplay when videogames gained the technology to integrate the user manual into the game space. James Paul
Gee notes this during the tutorial level of *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation*. During this level, a character, Von Croy, instructs Gee’s avatar, Lara, how to navigate a series of obstacles, but instead of instructing Lara to jump, run, and walk within the narrative context of the game, Croy says “press jump” and “hold forward” in reference to the control keys which Gee operates outside the game. Gee observes,

Von Croy is talking to the virtual character Lara, a character who walks and jumps in the virtual world but has no computer whose keys she can press, or hold. However, the player who is playing as the character Lara does have a computer and must learn to manipulate its keys to make Lara come alive... Thus Van Croy’s remarks perfectly melds and integrates talk with Lara and talk to the player. This melding is part of what marries the player’s real-world identity as a player and his or her virtual identity as Lara.

The “real-world” identity is the primary subject of the tutorial. The tutorial instructs the gamer how to play by addressing what exists outside the game directly in order to focus what the gamer brings with her to the game based on previously developed experiences, habits, and strategies. The interruption confronts what is particular and/or unusual about *this* game and *this* story experience, allowing for a tactile opportunity to get the hang of play. It does not impose an ideal style; it hones what the gamer will execute regardless. The purpose of the tutorial is to enable agency such that further exploration into the game-space and game-story will be pleasurable and coherent. In other words, the tactile interruption permits simultaneous game and narrative immersion to be possible.

Furthermore, when a narrative context is introduced concurrently with practical instruction, the gamer receives training not just in the operations of the game but
also in how the peculiar nature of the game-story ought to be received. The consequence of diegetic characters speaking tutorial language is a continuously broken fourth wall, a penetrable interface, which resolves the separation of the gamer’s unique disposition and the narrated ethos of his avatar. The subordinate role of the gamer’s disposition switches with the primary role of the traditional reader, such that the gamer’s imagination takes precedent over lexia. The discontinuities of death and resurrection are easily resolved by the reception process which is integrated wholly with game. The narrative itself is a game, lexia, pieces of the puzzle. The ethos constructed within that system of peculiar, trial and error production permits the user’s agency to fully merge with the narrative exploits of the avatar. How to play and how to piece together a story become interrelated. How a game is played becomes lexias, contributed externally and uniquely by the gamer. The freedom to choose to mimic or perform strangely restores autonomy to either decision. The permeable interface permits the gamer’s humanity to enter the text, to be produced along with gameplay, to become the center of the game-story structured by a computer and made complete by a human consciousness. The gamer, however immersed in play, is made fully aware that he controls and manipulates the “life” of the diegetic world.

1.4.0 Ben Conclusion...get it.

Using architecture as an example, Walter Benjamin defends the instructive capacity of distraction by claiming that buildings are always best experienced first
for their utility and practical functions and through this tactile understanding of its purpose, the visitor becomes aware of the nuances which make these functions pleasurable. He reasons the user forms “habits” through tactile experience of appreciating its form which train the visitor in aesthetics and inform the viewer how to receive the form “optically” (Benjamin 40). Benjamin’s purpose is to illustrate how the new productive forces of mechanical reproduction have democratized the work of art, a phenomenon which effectively marries the perspective of the laymen with the aesthetics of the text. He writes by way of concluding, “For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points in history cannot be performed solely by optical means—that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit” (Benjamin 40).

Videogames serve as a literal manifestation of Benjamin’s argument. The unique elements of the medium which exist according to its cybernetic mode of production, problematize all literary ambitions we may hope to reconstruct in videogames. Not only does the tactile embrace of the game’s entertaining appeal train the user how to contemplate the game-story, but the metaphor of architecture manifest itself as the very mode facilitating this training. Henry Jenkins writes that “what games do best will almost certainly center around their ability to give concrete shape to our memories and imaginings of the story world”, and concludes by constructing a model that positions “game designers less as storytellers and more as narrative
architects” (Jenkins 121). The game-text is a building, a diegetic space, and a sandbox story. The game-story is the rooms, environments, the characters, the windows, the flare of the trim, the gargoyles on the rooftops, as well as the added color crayoned onto the walls during play. Each object and action reflects the gamer’s choices, savored and produced as the meaningful components completing the puzzle, possibly the story. The gamer is a reader but primarily an agent, and the tactile experience of reading as a producer imprints upon the user an agency which challenges all familiar modes of reception except that of an original imagination.
[Interlude]

2.0.0 In the following word puzzle, circle the words that describe your house, box those that start with your favorite letter, and put a star next to those that remind you of a song. Use what remains to write a recipe for what you’re most allergic to.

Think a thought a critical thought in your head but it doesn’t matter. Think a thought, a critical thought, in your head but it isn’t real. Think a thought that cannot be measured or assessed until you show the arcade your wit that beats the dungeon solve the puzzle and show your stratagem is sound. Think a thought but not the kind you think. Think the thought that troubles what you think to let new ways of showing and speaking in, but not new ways of thinking remember thoughts aren’t real, not real until you play. But, what? who says that?...

Christ’s followers asked him once if they were cool. Not cool like slick and drop down eloquence like slide a golden beverage across the bar to “that girl” cool but cool like in-with-Christ and approved-by-Father cool.

Christ said, “nope, ‘cuz you think thoughts like knives plunging and gone down roads to neighbors’ wives in your heart in your mind and it’s real, man. It’s real, there, in your mind”…

And doctors say “nah”, and can see that critical thought a blue line on the graph a green blob touching red on the edges like a thermal Doppler on the evening weather news. Think happily and science points to a picture of your brain and says, see its yellow. Think critically and science says see it’s shaped like a diploma. Think crazily and science slips you pills… Think thoughts critical thoughts to join a discourse and pitch into the game And stop asking are my thoughts real? cuz they are, man. they’re real. Ask instead, do I play like I think… or worst, do I think like I play?
There were not always novels in the past and there will not always have to be; there have not always been tragedies and great epics. Not always were the forms of commentary, translation, indeed even the so-called plagiarism playthings in the margins of literature...Rhetoric has not always been a minor form: in antiquity, it put its stamp on large provinces of literature. All this is to accustom you to the thought that we are in the midst of a mighty recasting of literary forms, a melting down in which many of the opposites in which we have been used to thinking may lose their force.

— Walter Benjamin

By playing the video game’s action within a detailed diegetic narrative context, the game’s diegetic world is given a greater illusion of depth... playing the game means participating in the story... rather than just the honing of an eye-hand coordination skill or solving of a puzzle.

— Mark Wolf
2.1.0 Enter Agency

In the last chapter I argued that the basic structuring of a narrative videogame as a piecemeal story (a cybertext) centers the user’s participatory action to both configure and supply its narrative components. I showed that because gameplay makes the user’s immediate circumstances relevant to the game being played, then the most pleasurable and authentic narrative structures are those which are made to respond to and reflect the unique decisions and desires of a user. This introduced the concept of agency specifically as it relates to an individual user operating freely and productively within a sandbox narrative structure.

The “attitude” behind this agency is both fostered and legitimized in all games, however, and not just by those that purposefully acknowledge it. Every game, for example, fosters a sense of agency within the user by virtue of the game’s dependence on the user’s participatory role which bring it into existence. Without the process of play, for example, chess is merely a board and scattered pieces, not a game. In a similar sense, the jigsaw puzzle is only in existence while the individual configures the pieces; once every piece is locked in place, the puzzle disappears. In a nutshell, this is why ludologists cannot bring themselves to call a game experience a story, because story marks the very moment when the process of seeking, performing, and producing lexia has been concluded and the game goes out of existence.
More than demonstrating that the reality of a game is phenomenological, these examples point to the process of their existence which has a unique effect on the user. Having invested significant time and critical attention to the components, system of rules, and playable space of a game, a user will inevitably be struck by how often participation in the game creates new situations, new ways of thinking about strategy, and even new significant experiences that transcend the immediate "meaning" prescribed by the context of the game. For example, anyone who has ever played a solitaire card game knows that the value is in how the cards draw randomly from the deck to present ever new and complex challenges and ways of solving them, and not in the four, ordered piles produced at the end. A player can have an exceptional experience playing the cards which produces an epiphany about strategy or an exciting situation, even in a session that results in a loss. Significant achievements in solitaire (and in most games), therefore, occur in moments. And in these moments the player develops a peculiar "attitude" towards the contextual structures of the game. Winning and losing are viewed as arbitrary when the player's participation in the process creates significant challenges and realizations transcendent of how the game ends. The process of play then becomes the most relevant signifying feature for locating the "meaning" of gameplay as well as for developing an attitude of agency within the game.

This experience within the process of playing a game produces what Espen Aarseth calls "ergodic" reading habits which he correlates with an aesthetic of
hypertext literature. Aarseth states that the purpose of hypertext literature is to center the user’s active participation which is both provoked and produced in the text by aporias and randomly generated fragments. Instead of looking to and relying on prestructured situation to produce the meaning of a user’s participation within a hypertext or game, Aarseth argues, “efforts in computer-generated literature should focus on the computer as a literary instrument: a machine for cybertext and ergodic modes” (Aarseth 89, 141). The game-text should be treated as an apparatus for production, such as a pen or a muse, which articulates language under the user’s control and not in spite of the user’s choices. Aarseth’s choice to name computer-generated texts and situations as a “machine for...ergodic modes” asserts that the focus of the users attention should be on the process of their participation, especially as it enables and produces the user’s unique understandings, approaches, and desires to reveal the text. An attitude is required, in other words, that sees the game structure servicing the gamer, rather than the gamer servicing the game structure.

Such a perspective which subordinates the devices of an original author in favor of a productive usefulness made apparent through the experimentations of a reader evokes Walter Benjamin’s criticism of a “literary quality” that fails to instruct a reader in the methods of textual production. Benjamin argues throughout “The Author as Producer” that the reproducibility of texts has displaced traditional assessments of literature, art, and rhetoric. It has given rise to textual mediums that seek to place participation in social and literary discourse within the grasp of the
masses. Benjamin indicates the newspaper as an example of such a form of writing, which makes access to political discourse available to the general public by reporting on events as well as providing space within the text for readers to contribute, i.e. the newspaper engages readers such that they become writers. He argues, however, that simply because the “content” of the written text has shifted to reflect public interests, this does not legitimately place modes of writing at the command of all individual users.

Benjamin argues that the writer must do more than represent the reader, he must “betray” his authority as an author. Benjamin argues that the writer who merely describes what his happening in the world to a reader in order to prescribe how the reader should feel about certain events and what action the reader should take is an “author who teaches writers nothing” (Benjamin 89). Instead, Benjamin challenges writers to embrace an attitude and manner of conduct which “transforms him from a supplier of the productive apparatus into an engineer who sees it as his task to adapt this apparatus to the purposes of the proletariat revolution” (Benjamin 93). In other words, the texts which target a greater audience must do more than represent the interests of democratization, they must actively foster and produce them.

This argument hasn’t directly developed a context of political class struggle and “proletariat revolution” as Benjamin has done and purposed as the crux of his argument. His formulations nonetheless reflects the aesthetic interests of ergodic literature and as such the interests of this paper to place videogames as a medium
which demonstrates such an act of authorial betrayal. Following in Benjamin’s line of reasoning, the critical assessment of agency which places the discursive value of gameplay only where it is signified by structural context teaches the user nothing relevant about the modes of production introduced by the computer. Isolating meaningful gameplay only to moments that hinge upon the structural tropes of design does not demonstrate the attitude of ergodic reading that produces the immediate imagination and circumstances of the user. It isolates agency within a usual mode of passive reception. The apparatus of play, therefore, must be assessed for its structural capacity to not only train users in effective, legitimate agency, but it must do so in such a way that the agency produced has the capacity to train other users as well. Otherwise, the videogame, that teaches gamers nothing, teaches no one.

As will be shown, the particular apparatus that enables gameplay in videogames, does indeed produce an attitude that further interrupts usual experiences in reception and as such fosters an attitude in the user to share and distribute freely the exploratory and self-invested agency of play.

2.2.0 Agency’s Apparatus

This discussion recognizes the videogame apparatus comprising three salient components: explorable space displayed by an interface, an array of electronic devices that connect the human body to the digital environment of the game, and a
critical perspective which aligns with the immediate and reactive events of the
game-text. The following discussion begins with a description of this perspective.

Most perception of game-space and decision making occur in the midst of
intense action, which creates immediate consequences, and which can constitute a
feeling of visceral immersion within the game-space. A person playing basketball
may experience this in the final moment of a championship game. Likewise, the
chess player who concentrates on the strategies of his moves will be conscious of
nothing else. And just as in basketball and chess, a visceral connection to the game-
space is established in videogames by this sense of immersion and the immediacy of
performance. Michael Mateas calls this feeling of immersion “telepresence, the
feeling of being physically present (from a first-person point of view) in a remote
environment” (21). This suggests that all games which seek to align a user’s
visceral, immediate, and responsive experience with the events occurring in the
game position the user within a first-person stand-point.

Furthermore, the trajectory of the technology which continues to develop and
shape the medium has always purposed to immerse the human mind, body, and
sensory array within the occurring moment of the game. The development of hyper-
realistic graphics may stand as the most easily identifiable evidence of this. In
addition, surround sound, intuitive controller designs, “rumble” feedback which
allows a user to physically feel what is happening in the game, and recently, the
development of a stereoscopic interface (which allow a user to perceive the game-
space in three-dimensions) all impact the user with some sensory output that coincides immediately with an action or event in the game. Voice and motion sensitive controllers, microphones, and foot-pads allow the user to incorporate the full expressive capacity of the body into gameplay—even breath, which registers as valid input in several games made for Nintendo’s DS system. More than a vicarious sense of presence experienced from a first-person standpoint, the apparatus of play places the human being into the events of the game as directly as the technology permits.

It is often at this point when the post-humanists begin to tremble in their virtual boots and begin tapping feverously at the spacebar to enact panic within the simulacra of Second Life. It is not in the interest of this study to engage the debates of such critical theorists as Jean Baudrillard and N. Katherin Hayles; however, by establishing the videogame as an apparatus that purposefully submits to the agency of the user, this argument will eventually come in contest with such claims that once a user slips into a copy of reality, there is little ability to emerge. I leave this debate to the inference of the reader, and at this point move forward.

One potential limitation to agency that operates from a position of immersion is that choices and interpretations of events and space will primarily be reactive and not analytic. When a user first explores new spaces or gains a level of the game previously unreached, she will face obstacles and trials which are beyond her skill and knowledge to overcome. There is a moment in the game BioShock, for example,
when all the lights shut off just after the user enters a previously inaccessible room after exploring a putrefied, zombie riddled hospital. The lights flicker once to reveal a sea of deformed monsters surrounding the user’s avatar which then begin to scream and attack from all directions in a renewed, total darkness. Needless to say, the first time this moment is played the performance consists primarily of a button-mashing fest wrought by pure desperation, anxiety, and fear. And this reaction is legitimate. A primary pleasure of playing the videogame apparatus is to experience the game world for all it has to offer. Therefore, if the game permitted the user a moment to breathe to assess the situation and then calmly perform her critical response, the aesthetic of hearing zombies clawing at her ears would be spoiled.

More importantly, games are supposed to kick the user’s ass every now and then. The challenge of the game and the reward of overcoming difficult obstacles is central to what makes videogames fun. Performative reactions that are consistently successful grow tedious just as the monotone, predictable experience they construct grows desperately unsatisfying. Losing from time to time actually fosters a desire to press harder, perform with greater skill, and to rise to the challenge of particularly difficult moments. The apparatus, then, which seems to only offer reactionary and not critically analytic response in fact designs a process of critical reflection. Every time the player fails he experiences a pause (death, loading screen, or lexia), an interruption in the action which facilitates critical reflection. Playing the hospital level in *BioShock* a second time, the user can prepare, equip the shotgun, set a few
landmines, and escape the situation easily. In other words, gameplay which executes gameplay from within the first-person apparatus impels revision.

Furthermore, reactive gameplay that is consistently in step with a desired, performative response constitutes a mastery of a particular, well-practiced skill which can only have been acquired through a history of trial and error. Is there any real difference, interims of mastery and critical understanding of a game moment, between the professional basketball player who, in an instant, extends his hand to block a final attempt at the hoop and the chess master who spends an hour deliberating a move? Therefore, all actions produced by the apparatus of play evidence a process of critical review and apperception.

I plan to argue that it is through these moments of immediate and visceral connection which constitute a continuous process of revision that an attitude of agency is engendered. Before I move further, however, I want to establish a definition of agency as it is most often used in the study of narrative videogames.

2.3.0 Definitions

Most definitions of agency found in videogame studies locate the term within the context of design. This limits the usefulness of the term as it can be applied within a critical study of gameplay. Michael Meteas, for example, defines agency as a “sense” of free movement and prescribes that “[a] player will experience agency when there is a balance between the material and formal constraints”, what we have
been calling the relationship between micronarrative lexia and gameplay (Meteas 26). Meteas argues that agency is revealed by lexia which guide a player towards meaningful experiences but which produce the player’s responses such that the narrative events seem to conform around gameplay. Agency described in this way does open up channels for the gamer to perform with more diversity, innovation, and a pleasurable sense of participation (as was shown in chapter one), but Meteas’s placement of agency solely as it is mirrored by the game-text makes its existence dependant upon design. The “degree” to which agency is experienced is defined by the results produced and not by the process of playing itself, suggesting that the degree to which a player’s agency is active and effective within the game-text will always be limited. Here, agency is structured as an illusion.

Like Meteas, Ian Bogost, in his book Persuasive Games, identifies agency existing within parameters, arguing that what gameplay can and/or is designed to “mean” is always dependent upon contextual design. He writes,

meaning in videogames is not constructed through a re-creation of the world, but through selectively modeling appropriate elements of that world...the total number and credibility of user actions is not necessarily important; rather, the relevance of the interaction in the context of the representational goals of the system is paramount. (Bogost 54)

Bogost’s premise is similar to my argument in chapter 1 in which I established that a commitment to mimicking or “modeling” the narrative elements established in the game’s design actually distracts the user from her primary role in gameplay and so displaces her from an authentic appreciation of this role in the game. The difference
between my argument and Bogost’s is that I focused on the peculiar production of narrative through gameplay, and Bogost focuses on how gameplay becomes endowed with rhetorical meaning by political/controversial contexts. Bogost asserts that the “relevance” of gameplay depends upon how it is contextualized by design. Here, Bogost concedes some autonomy of the gamer to perform as strangely and as repetitively as he may choose. The significance, however, demonstrated in this performance is assigned not by the gamer’s various motives, which are conceived outside the game, but by the design of the game and the original motivations behind its development. To illustrate his point, Bogost compares two games, *Doom* and *Waco Texas*, that feature the same style of gameplay. He argues, “*Doom* is about saving the world from hell-spawners; *Waco Texas* is about the politics of religious fanaticism” suggesting that the mere placement of an individual into an apparatus that allows him to move, explore, and shoot at monsters is meaningful only to citizens being threatened by Hell, but by making those monsters representative, the same exact activity acquires a capacity to say something more, i.e. an agency of expression (Bogost 243). Rather than the gamer’s action communicating meaning, Bogost asserts that it is the object of that action that signifies the message.

I will concede that an integrated rhetoric such as placing gameplay into a highly recognizable and representational situation will dramatize the user’s actions with a political or moral gravity. Playing through a game like “*JFK Reloaded*”, a highly controversial videogame which recreates John F. Kennedy’s assassination and puts
the gamer behind the rifle that kills him, for example, cannot help but take on the controversy that surrounds the actual historic event as well as the user’s individual choice to replay it. Games like these may even prompt the user to think, which is primarily Bogost’s argument. But can we rightly assign autonomy to actions that depend on prestructured contexts and events to do so? Furthermore, whose argument does gameplay represent? If we choose to look at gameplay as it generates unique circumstances and produces the authentic and immediate mind of the user in a continuous and shifting process, how can we possibly know this? The answer of course is, we can’t.

The subjective, ergodic nature of agency is precisely why Bogost states that he is uninterested in “the function of play” as a site for rhetoric and persuasive expression. He contends that to acknowledge the many unique individuals and modes of bringing the text to completion, establishes that a videogame can mean anything to any user. Such a “macroscopic” study of gameplay, he asserts, cannot be useful in a critical analysis of videogame design.

I disagree with Bogost. It is critical to broaden and locate user agency beyond illusion and contextual structures. First, my argument that videogames are the medium that popularizes the avant-garde reassessment of new productive forces demands evidence that the videogame enables its user unrestrained co-authorship of computer generated space and text. Furthermore, locating a productive agency that is fostered directly by videogames places ergodic reading practices in line with the
“productive apparatus” called for by Walter Benjamin and which he illustrates through an assessment of Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theater.

2.4.0 Emergence

Benjamin notes that the apparatus constructed by Epic Theater operates primarily on a principal of interruption which places the production of the performance in service to the audience. By breaking up the action being performed on stage, Benjamin argues that interruption “constantly counteracts illusion on the part of the audience” purposefully so that the audience may perceive the play as it is being actively constructed in its process (90). As a trope, it disrupts the receiver’s “suspended disbelief”, which most narrative mediums seek to achieve, and exposes the mechanisms of invention as they are being improvised and toyed with on stage. Benjamin asserts that the audience who watches such a performance is forced to share in its construction and because of this, Benjamin writes, “Epic Theater, therefore, does not reproduce situations, rather it discovers them... interruption here has the character not of a stimulant but of an organizing function. It arrests the action in its course, and thereby compels the listener to adopt an attitude vis-à-vis the process, the actor vis-à-vis his role” (90-91). These discovered moment resonate as the sites of process and most genuine experiences of playing videogames, which was established at the beginning of this chapter. Furthermore this attitude fostered
by the interruption of action facilitates a participatory role in the viewing not unlike ergodic reading practices as defined by Aarseth.

If we relate this criticism to the function of interruption in videogames, we realize a distinction in two critical roles that actively construct gameplay. Within the apparatus, the gamer perceives the game-space as an immersed audience perceives a play. The game-space is produced for him, the obstacles exist in designated spaces, enemies act as they have been programmed, and characters engage in heuristic and mechanical dialogue. Interrupted out of a state of immersion, the gamer becomes aware of the design as it exists is in process. The jolt of failing reveals the game to respond in one distinct way, and likewise, the rewarded pause (lexia, loading screen, access to a new area) shows gameplay generating new text and spaces in another. Pulled out of immersion, the gamer learns to perceive his performance within the game as a developing entity operating within the processes of configuring structures. The gamer is afforded a moment to consider his own performance and think reflectively, “What if I try this, then what would happen? What if I use such and such item? How would the game respond?” Seen through this lens, the results produced by gameplay do not signify what occurred during that moment and process of play, rather they reveal to the gamer the variety of circumstances which may occur. Ted Friedman identifies this saying that during the process of playing a game, “a series of unpredictable moments spins an idiosyncratic narrative, familiar in its shape yet different every time, thanks to the role of chance” (Friedman). Or as Eric
Hayot and Edward Wesp put it, "by virtue of training, personal temperament, or responses to the game situation itself, players discover ways to develop a valid relation to the game that may be quite different from their opponents’" (Hayot and Wesp 407). Within the framework of Benjamin’s analysis of Brecht’s Epic Theater, this “idiosyncratic narrative” and “valid relation to the game” point to meaning that has been “discovered” though a unique process and not assigned by structural components. It is this discovery that fosters an attitude of agency.

The gamer interrupted within the apparatus of play, then, occupies both the position of the audience privileged with an outside, third-person, critical point of view point and as the actor who executes his criticism through the mastered habits of his craft from within the text itself. Gameplay, which is primarily reactionary and immersed in the challenges of the game, facilitate opportunities for critical reflection upon the process of the game. The purpose of gameplay then is not to perfect a combination of actions in order to piece together an ideal sequence set forth by the game-design. Instead, the purpose becomes centered in the discovery of new and unique situations forced to occur by an attitude of improvisation, innovation, and disruption: i.e. gameplay that adopts an attitude “vis-à-vis the process” (Benjamin 91). Interruptions experienced within the videogame apparatus makes a user aware of her performance which is both an alterable and an altering action.

The best example of this attitude of play is evidenced in the phenomenon of “emergent play”. Emergent play consists of behaviors which seek to alter and
customize the elements of game design. Scholars and game designers alike will assert that emergent play is most often consistent with achieving prestructured objectives but will go about doing so in strange and unintended ways. Sometimes, however, emergent play addresses no strategic objective demand at all. There is no objective benefit gained, for example, by climbing to the top of the tower in the “Ascension” map in *Halo 2*. In fact, having reached that location, the only way to progress further into the game is to jump off, die, and start over. And yet, the practice of climbing this tower is a recognized achievement amongst gamers. The real reward for climbing outside the designated space of play is in the sheer pleasure of being able to do so. Having enacted a choice within the game-text that first originated outside the structures of the game, the asserted ability to access locations beyond the borders of the game-space essentially returns the game-text to the state and process of constructing it. It communicates a position of authority to the gamer who receives his own action as testament to his agency. This agency operating within the game opens up endless exploratory pathways to further exploit the game in process.

Other forms of emergent play seek to customize the aspects of the game design specifically to form expressive gestures. Again, citing *Halo 2*, gamers who wish to be crude will move their avatar over a recently dispatched opponent and consecutively press the “crouch” button, which causes his avatar to “dishonor” the other player’s corpse. A much more mature and intriguing example can be found in
the machinima (recorded and edited gameplay) presentation of the “Proudmoore Shaman Protest”. The video shows countless players operating shaman-class avatars in the massive multiplayer game, World of Warcraft, and committing suicide such that a trail of bodies leads from one end of the game-space to another. The purpose for this event (as stated by the individual who posted this video) describes the act of gameplay as, “[a] protest against the constant nerfs facing the Shaman class. We are gimped, underpowered, and not going to take it anymore” (ZacksEnder). In other words, choices made by the game designers to continually weaken unique in-game skills and abilities of the shaman class reached a point that users playing as shaman no longer enjoyed the game. To communicate their dissatisfaction, they (effectively) argued their position through gameplay.

Multi-player and massive multiplayer games by their nature draw gameplay into the presence of an audience and so position agency such that it constitutes expression. Antoinette LaFarge, writer and visual arts performer, notes this in an interview about her performance group, the Plain Text Players, who perform primarily in multi-user, digital spaces. LaFarge says, “we normally think of language as speech, and only in rare cases as action, as performative; but for the Players’ avatars, language is at all times a form of enactment” (LaFarge). She develops support for this claim by citing evidence of a dual-language emerging from users who speak to one another through a text bar and address one another as “users” while simultaneously gesturing to one another as agents of gameplay. She provides
an example, "say someone says, "I killed a troll last night but then I had to log off."
The first I is the avatar, the second the player" (LaFarge). The need to for dual
speech asserts that gameplay does not gain an expressive quality merely because it
can be witnessed; rather, it is the phenomenological event of multiple users
constructing, exchanging, and acting upon lexia that forces users to speak double
and reveals gameplay constituting a structural aspect akin to the design itself. To say
this another way, the gamer’s presence and active agency in a public game generates
a new context and a new process which other gamers must deal with just as they
must deal with any other objective and obstacle in play. Agency, then, has a capacity
to co-author game-space as language.

But does the ability to produce self-articulated language constitute with it an
agency that engenders critical apperception in the gameplay produced by others
users? The above two examples suggest so, but do ad lib plays and grassroots,
digital protests reflect the attitude called for by Benjamin’s productive apparatus?
After all, to identify gameplay that operates against forces seeking to control the
user’s action is to define gameplay as it occurs in all games. Every move in chess is
a move against the structural force designed by the opponent to pin down the user’s
range of motion and further choices produced within the game-space. Emergent
play, however, does not only challenge the forces structured by the game-text or an
opponent player, it imposes the user’s will and desires against these very structures
themselves.
A final example, then, of emergent play, that occurs in game-space designated specifically for player versus player games, presents the most striking evidence to support a claim that videogames produce an attitude akin to the effect of Benjamin’s “productive apparatus”. In Halo 3’s multiplayer games, two teams of up to eight players each enter a sandbox arena filled with weapons, vehicles, and cover location often with the intention to fight one another. Bungie, the production studio that makes Halo, keeps track of every gamer’s activity in these spaces and posts their achievements on public leader boards which inevitably fosters an atmosphere of high competition and a sense of glory knowing that any spectacular exploit will be canonized within a public forum. Just as in all videogames, however, which hand control of the avatar’s actions over to the user in gameplay, the user may perform in any way she chooses. For example, the gamer may choose to always stay to the rear of her teammates to avoid being shot, she may only go after opponents whose health is visibly low, she may avoid conflict until she acquires a particularly powerful weapon, she may even choose to only kill her own teammates, and in an encounter with an enemy vehicle, instead of destroying it, she may choose to climb aboard and strike up a chat with her enemies. In an atmosphere of fierce competition, the action of boarding an opponent’s warthog (the name of a combat vehicle in Halo) becomes highly subversive. It demonstrates that there is actually nothing structured by the game apparatus itself which forces two opposing teams to fight one another. The action exposes, to all witnesses participating in the game-space, the ideologue of
consensus instituted by Bungie's leader boards to construct a culture of competition. Choosing to expose the norms of a player versus player game asserts an attitude with the capacity to interrupt the instituted culture fostered by commercial enterprise. This attitude takes back control of the productive forces at work within the game-space to assert local and individual significance emergent of individual gameplay. What's more, it fosters an attitude in the witnesses of the act to do the same. It is through this mode of production that the user acquires agency.

Abstracted, emergent gameplay provides an exciting model for a critical agency structured and asserted from the first-person apparatus of play. Any performance from this position produces a critical perspective of the text from within the text itself. Opposed to the author's apparatus which may teach and instill an attitude in the reader to respond in kind to a text, the apparatus of play produces this response as text immediately such that the object of criticism is co-authored and shaped anew. Videogames may be conceived in the institutions of education, entertainment, news media, cognitive research, capitalism, advertisement, and here within cultural studies, but gameplay does not have to reside there. Gameplay immersed in the process of configuring and actualizing an immediate perception of space has the ability to move, shift, and assert ever transforming ways of meaning, perceiving, and expressing. Gameplay cannot be contained, it cannot be closed in, it cannot be

4 The ideas structuring the discussion in this paragraph come from Louis Althusser's arguments in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus". For the sake of time and space I choose not to engage Althusser's argument directly. A further and more Marxist based critical study structuring an apparatus of play and agency would do so.
signified and produced devoid of the user's motivations unless the user consents to allow it to do so. Videogames have the capacity to produce agents who not only perceive their skills and abilities as objects to be mastered and honed, but the space occupied by all other users as well is subject to the disruptions conceived of in the gamer's mind. To site Benjamin:

> An author who teaches writers nothing teaches no one. What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able, first, to induce other producers to produce, and, second, to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers—that is readers or spectators into collaborators. (Benjamin 89)

The task of the videogame designer set forth by this paper is to equip gamer's to produce gameplay which instructs fellow players. By building moral, narrative, and social content structured primarily in sandbox rather than didactic forms, videogames limit their control over the interpretation constructed and produced in the moment of gameplay. Videogame design that submits its own innovative, rhetorical, and creative personality to the use and innovation of another user instills agency within the user to perform wildly within the processes of its completion. Gameplay does this as well. Performed to the self, the production of gameplay generates interruption which impel revision and reveal both performance and space as symbiotic entities in process. Performed before others, gameplay performs the function of all other lexia and dynamics of design, which can be discovered, acted upon, or ignored. The gamer generates a text within the first person apparatus just as legitimately as the original developers of the game conceived of the story and the
coding and set up each for completion. Gameplay fosters agency; agency becomes
language; language reorganized and articulates design.

2.5.0  w007!

The rules governing a game-system are like those structuring a language. In
order for an individual to participate in dialogue, he must submit to the codes of
language so that he understands and is understood throughout the exchange. The
vibrancy of this dialogue and the unique and phenomenological circumstances that
are produced in the act of speaking, reading, listening, writing, etc., have the potency
to influencing the coding itself. Every act of language simultaneously structures and
is structured by its cultural coding. The same is often true for gameplay.

This chapter asserts that game design which props up agency to enact a
prestructured rhetorical or narrative text for the gamer is uninteresting. Such design
presents only the potentiality to confuse the purpose of cybertext experiences and
the pleasures of ergodic modes of comprehension. Videogames which structure
political, social, and moral situations that provoke process and engenders critical
thinking, on the other hand, is interesting and deserves the kind of criticism Bogost
constructs to deepen persuasive games and locate the ways rhetorical arguments can
be actively engaged in game-spaces. But in both situations, if the agency of the
gamer to enact contexts and motives particular to him is minimized or contained by
over-zealous, authorial devices, then no study or development of design can claim to produce rhetorical agency that is original and authentic to the user.

This chapter, which is titled “Puzzle Culture”, only suggests rather than proves empirically that a culture is shaped by the productive forces of puzzles and games exists. This chapter does, however, prove that gameplay evidences an unrestricted, performative language which is textual in the sense that it is produced by a visual, multimedia apparatus but because of its transitory nature and ergodic mode of reception, comprises a textual quality much closer a human voice than that of written words. By inferring the orality of gameplay, this discussion proposes that the agency acquired in a first-person apparatus of play demonstrates a capacity to reconstruct all videogame structures to produce rhetorical, social, and expressive language that is useful to the user in developing identity and community. The study of gameplay, therefore, does not distract from developing a critical discussion that analyzes and pushes the literary value of videogames, as Bogost argues it does. Instead it solidifies the ludology around the core aesthetics of the medium. These are and will always be the pleasure of engaging dynamic processes: the pleasure of training agency and discovering it produced as a free and expressive performance.
3.0.0 Conclusions

Every text is changeable, but digital texts and visuals mediums train the user to believe that all texts depend on constant interaction, updating, and defragging to keep them authentic. Most buyers and users aren’t satisfied with the copies they are given. They see the creative capacity of the bright red Record button on the VCR. They make the mouse and keyboard apparatus into crayons. They repurpose billboards as canvases. They delight in an arrogance of interpretive, productive making. They missed or repurposed the email subject-lined “established methods” and “traditional readings” delineating invention, creation, production, and making as verbs for viewing reserved for the artist alone. The common mythos that tv breeds inaction is clearly undone and the coup has been canonized in the medium of games.

Ultimately, my agenda in this argument has been to explore reading in a new form and to identify language that has been digitized and disguised as bosses, bazookas, and blocks. Cybertext readings, as Espen Aarseth concedes, are not original to the age of the computer and cybernetic texts. Modern authors writing stream of consciousness, poets interested in writing verses for the sound they compose more than their form or meaning, and movements within and through the surreal all generated texts that interrupted the reader’s usual experience with art and
placed the audience in a position to construct their significance. For this reason, Aarseth claims that “cybertext is more a perspective on textuality than a category of it” (Aarseth 24). Cybertext that are particular to digital mediums, however, foster a greater aptitude for critical evaluation in which all texts and spaces seem customizable and in service to the perceiver. Brian Kim Stefans states that here, in the production act of computer generated literature, the “heroic codes of the Modernist tradition become reversed”, arguing that no longer is the task of the poet to see how far language can be pushed over a literary horizon, but having found a language that is utterly random, utterly communal, and utterly inhabitable, the author’s exploration now lies in the play of conventions (Stefans). The heroic mythos suggested by the gamer’s role—who both constructs and coheres the fragmented text and performs as the isolated, protagonist of an existential drama—connects the modernist and cybertext epistemes. Videogames therefore, as an exciting and emerging medium, redress the productive forces of the computer in a way that not only challenges but bridges literary traditions.

I have argued in this paper that videogames both deepen Wolfgang Iser’s description of the reading act and fulfill both Walter Benjamin’s criticism of the reproducible artwork and his call for a productive apparatus. Gameplay, which produces the active mind and immediate circumstances of the user, require the user to do more than ideate upon the literary tropes of a text but to supply and cohere critical elements of narration. This active role not only restores the “here and now”
of the digital art, but it reveals a human agent actively generating the aura of the space. I demonstrated that gameplay is always interrupted and consequentially draws up the user’s attention to the malleability of the text as well as the self within it. The videogame design structures the experience, but the agent fluent in these systems of rules, boundaries, and narratives makes the design itself the object of the most interesting conflict. This phenomena instills an attitude that interrupts the text, and all witnesses to this performative agency become caught up and aware of the process itself. Having shown the videogame apparatus trains the gamer in an attitude of agency and equips him with an assertive, arbitrative language, I have demonstrated how videogames democratize public speech in digital realms. I have not, however, addressed how this agency can permeate the “real” world and its more “weighty” social discourses. Agency, however productive and influential in a digital space, remains virtual and dependent upon the system of the game. It resonates in the human body in a kinesthetic response, which, when considered through the French school of literary criticism (Deleuze, Baudrillard, and Lyotard) may be conceive of as jouissance, and in the mind as political attitude (inferred by my argument’s dependence on Benjamin but not fully developed in the last chapter). Any future developments of this project will till these fertile grounds.

The unique and transitory nature of gameplay maintains that its authentic existence is isolated to games and game-spaces only, suggesting a need for interlocution. This isolation speaks to a greater dilemma as well, as the nascent
medium of videogames strives for legitimization within the arts and humanities and the commercial sectors of industry as well. Developing methods to bridge the disconnect between a sub-culture whose experience within the apparatus has produced a sense of critical apperception and the greater culture who looks down upon this apparatus as a degenerative toy is the goal of many scholars and videogame designers alike. More interesting to this argument are the strides to translate the language of gameplay into a representative form that does not immediately negate the phenomena of the original performance. Some machinima and hypertext literature often succeed in such attempts. This paper, whether successful or not, has sought to accomplish this task as well. Videogame design is perhaps the best approximation, but “[n]o matter how hard I try to describe these texts to you, the reader, their essential difference will remain a mystery until they have been experienced first-hand” (Aarseth 2). More authentic than any representation is your presence in the game-text itself.

Go discover your agency. Go play a videogame.
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