

Electronic Mediations

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Gaming

Essays on Algorithmic Culture

Alexander R. Galloway

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This explains the tendency toward control allegory in informatic culture. The primary authors are missing from this formula not because I wish to debase the growing auteur status of game designers, nothing of the sort, but simply because they are no longer directly involved in the moment of interpretation—but this has been the case in interpretive studies for many decades now.

Here, then, are the two allegorical modes compared side by side. Traditional or “deep” allegory seems to have its center of gravity in the early to mid-twentieth century and particularly in the cinematic form (à la Jameson), while control allegory finds its proper consummation in new media in general and video games in particular.

	Deep allegory	Control allegory
Emblematic medium	Cinema	Video games
Political expression	Class struggle	Informatic control
Hermeneutic	Reading	Processing
Parallelism	Other-speak	Other-act

Video games are allegories for our contemporary life under the protocological network of continuous informatic control. In fact, the more emancipating games seem to be as a medium, substituting activity for passivity or a branching narrative for a linear one, the more they are in fact hiding the fundamental social transformation into informatics that has affected the globe during recent decades. In modernity, ideology was an instrument of power, but in postmodernity ideology is a decoy, as I hope to have shown with the game *Civilization*. So a game's revealing is also a rewriting (a lateral step, not a forward one). A game's celebration of the end of ideological manipulation is also a new manipulation, only this time using wholly different diagrams of command and control.

In sum, with the appearance of informatic reprocessing as text—in the style of Sid Meier, but also in everything from turntablism to net.art—allegory no longer consists of a text and another text, but of an enacted text and another enacted text, such that we must now say: to do allegory means to playact, not, as Frye wrote, to allegorize means to write commentary. And hence Deleuze: “The philosopher creates. He doesn't reflect.”

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Counter gaming

Artist-Made Game Mods

Artist-made video game mods are an unusual thing, for they seem to contradict their very existence: when the mod rises to the level of art, rather than a gesture of fandom—as *Counter-Strike* was to *Half-Life*—then, more often than not, the game loses its rule set completely and ceases to be a game after all.¹ Jodi's *untitled game* follows this contradictory logic when it ignores all possibility of gameplay in *Quake* and propels the game into fits of abstract modernism. Brody Condon's *Adam Killer* does something similar, transforming what was once fluid gameplay into the brute art of red blood on white clothes and shotgun shells soaring in the air. So if gameplay is part of the core definition of a video game, how can one start to think about mods that usurp gameplay or eliminate it entirely?

What is a video game “mod”? It is a video game that has been modified or otherwise hacked by a user or group of users. A video game may be modified in three basic ways: (1) at the level of its visual design, substituting new level maps, new artwork, new character models, and so on; (2) at the level of the rules of the game, changing how

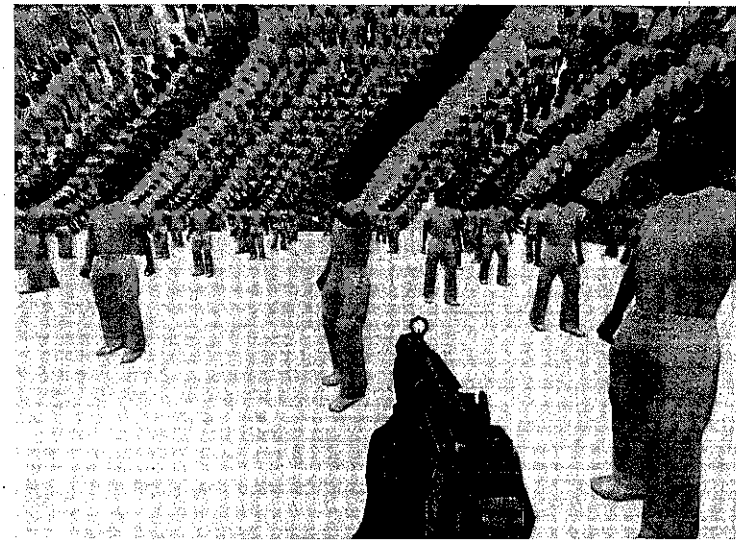
gameplay unfolds—who wins, who loses, and what the repercussions of various gamic acts are; or (3) at the level of its software technology, changing character behavior, game physics, lighting techniques, and so on. But as I suggest, artist mods tend to consider video games as nothing more than game *technologies*, and thus most artist-made video game mods to date are mods of game technologies (whether at the visual level or the physics level), not mods of actual gameplay. Katie Salen describes the situation quite clearly:

Many artist mods, like Jodi's, are more mods of game engine technology than they are of the games themselves. The interest is not in modifying game play, but in modifying the representational space. Spaces once designed for player interaction, in fact spaces that only gained meaning through interaction, are transformed into spaces to be seen and watched, rather than played.²

In other words, contemporary artist-made game mods tend to approach either the visual design of the game (option 1) or the underlying game engine (option 3). Mods of actual gameplay (option 2) are less common, and in fact gameplay is often neglected to the point of disappearance in most artist game mods.

Some mods like *Adam Killer* change only a few key aspects of the game, presenting an unusual scenario and a single visual trick, while others like *r/c* by retroYou (Joan Leandre) contradict the source game almost entirely, changing the core interactivity of the game as well as its visual aesthetic. (When a game is modified in such a wholesale fashion, it is often called a game “conversion” or a “total conversion.”) Tilman Baumgärtel writes: “The possibility of making modifications to computer games (‘mods’ for short) has inspired [media artists] to create their own versions of games that, in some cases, take the premises of the games further and think them through to their logical conclusion and, in others, explicitly contradict them.”³ Indeed, artist-made game mods tend to conflict violently with the mainstream gaming industry's expectations for how games should be designed. They often defy the industry's design style point-for-point, with the goal of disrupting the intuitive flow of gameplay.

Several years ago, Peter Wollen said a similar thing about Jean-Luc Godard and the countercinema of the 1960s. “There are a number of reasons why Godard has broken with narrative transitivity,” Wollen

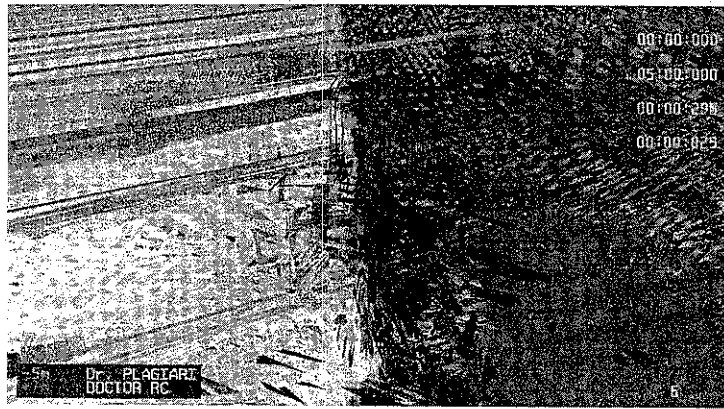


Brody Condon, *Adam Killer*, 1999–2001. Reproduced with permission.

wrote. “Perhaps the most important is that he can disrupt the emotional spell of the narrative and thus force the spectator, by interrupting the narrative flow, to reconcentrate and refocus his attention.”⁴ The same type of disruption appears in artist-made game mods. For this reason, some have suggested that today there exists a new avant-garde, a “countergaming” movement gravitating around the work of Jodi, Anne-Marie Schleiner, Brody Condon, retroYou, Cory Arcangel, Tom Betts, and others. This movement exists in opposition to and outside the gaming mainstream, and it is this movement that I would like to examine here.

Let me start, then, with Peter Wollen's seven theses on countercinema, for they should offer some direction for thinking about the formal grammar of oppositional cultural production. Here he opposes each of the seven “values of the old cinema” (the left-hand term) with those from Godard (the right-hand term):

1. *Narrative Transitivity v. Narrative Intransitivity*. (One thing following another v. gaps and interruptions, episodic construction, undigested digression.)



RetroYou, *R/C 100*, 2001. RetroYou *R/C* series 1999–2002.

2. *Identification v. Estrangement*. (Empathy, emotional involvement with a character v. direct address, multiple and divided characters, commentary.)
3. *Transparency v. Foregrounding*. ("Language wants to be overlooked"—Siertsema v. making the mechanics of the film/text visible and explicit.)
4. *Single Diegesis v. Multiple Diegesis*. (A unitary homogeneous world v. heterogeneous worlds. Rupture between different codes and different channels.)
5. *Closure v. Aperture*. (A self-contained object, harmonized within its own bounds v. open-endedness, overspill, intertextuality—allusion, quotation, and parody.)
6. *Pleasure v. Unpleasure*. (Entertainment, aiming to satisfy the spectator v. provocation, aiming to dissatisfy and hence change the spectator.)
7. *Fiction v. Reality*. (Actors wearing makeup, acting a story v. real life, the breakdown of representation, truth.)⁵

These seven points map out a division between classical Hollywood film form and the more experimental techniques practiced in art film. So, for example, to apply Wollen's theoretical framework, when Godard sends his couple out to the country in *Weekend* only for them to be stymied by an excruciatingly long traffic jam (mirrored formally

via an excruciatingly long camera shot), he is experimenting with "unpleasure" and "narrative intransitivity." Or when the Italian director Luchino Visconti casts nonprofessional actors for his fishermen in *La terra trema*, he is grappling directly with "reality" and the breakdown of representation, not simply with the "fiction" realism of a Hollywood film like *Sullivan's Travels*, though both depict the hardship of the poor at some level. Or today, in independent films like *Run Lola Run* or *Timecode*, when directors mix and overlay difference spaces and different times, they are engaging the countercinema technique of "multiple diegesis," something rarely seen in the more mainstream narrative cinema. What is so fascinating about countercinema is not simply the identification of alternate formal strategies but the active employment and gleeful exploration of those strategies. Classical film form certainly borrows from the countercinema here and there. So it is a question of commitment to certain techniques, not simply dipping into them from time to time. This parallel universe of formal experimentation, at once divorced from, and supplementary to, mainstream cinema, is what Wollen finds so fascinating in the work of Godard, and it is an arrangement that also exists today in video games.

I said in the beginning that artist-made video game mods undercut themselves to such a degree that they almost cease being games. Of course, this is not altogether true, for important links remain between countergaming and the gaming industry, between mods and their sources. While the countercinema movement described by Wollen existed largely outside Hollywood's commercial machine, game mods are actually promoted by the commercial sector. This is what Brody Condon calls "industry-sanctioned hacking." Since hacking is generally unloved in other sectors (the music industry, the film industry), the fact that the gaming industry allows such activities is quite significant. Anne-Marie Schleiner describes how, at least for PC gaming, the industry has long promoted hacking, patching, and modding by their own consumers:

In 1994 ID software released the source code for *Doom*, a 3-d tunnel networkable shooter game, (one year after their release of the game commercially.) Avid players of *Doom* got their hand on this source code and created editors for making custom *Doom* levels or what were



Alphaville, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, 1965

referred to as “wads.” In 1996 Bungie software bundled the *Marathon* series games with Forge and Anvil, game editing software for map making and inserting new textures, character (sprite) animations, sounds and physic properties.⁶

Today games continue to be released with level editors and other mod tools included. Modifying games is almost as natural as playing them. Indeed, video games lend themselves to the practice of modding in ways not seen in other media like film or literature. This is primarily due to the technical distinction between the core game engine and the specific game design and narrative contained within it. A single game engine may facilitate a wide variety of individual games. The game engine is a type of abstract core technology that, while it may exert its own personality through telltale traces of its various abilities and features (the “machinic embodiments” of nondiegetic machine acts I discuss in chapter 1), is mostly unlinked from the gameplay layered within it. The game, like all other digital objects, is but a vast clustering of variables, ready to be altered and modified. Visual design and gameplay are variables like any other. The gaming

industry has recognized this as a key characteristic of gaming. In fact, the industry's magnanimity has worked to its advantage. After the release of the source code for the successful game *Half-Life*, a group of enterprising fans of the game modified the code and released the multiplayer game mod *Counter-Strike*. The mod was so successful that Valve, the company who had originally released the code, licensed the mod, sold it commercially, and it too became commercially successful. In essence, Valve outsourced development to its fan base.

Valve benefited by cultivating the game mod community. But the reverse relationship is also crucial: game modders benefit from, and in fact require, commercial games, game engines, and hardware to make their work. Few new-media artists build their own game engines from the ground up, and practically none of them build their own computers. So, ignoring physical hardware for a moment, there exists a symbiotic relationship between mod artists and the industry in a way not seen in previous avant-garde movements. In fact, an overview of artist-made game mods reads like a laundry list of commercial game engines: SOD (*Wolfenstein 3D*), untitled game (*Quake*), *Adam Killer* (*Half-Life*), QQQ (*Quake*), 911 *Survivor* (*Unreal*), *Bio-tek Kitchen* (*Marathon Infinity*), and so on. Counterexamples exist, of course, including the artist Paul Johnson, who creates his own game systems (not to mention his own hardware), or ROM hacking and classic gaming mods, whereby artists like Cory Arcangel code all their software from scratch with little reliance on any existing commercial game. Nevertheless, at the technical level there remains a close relationship between mod artists and the industry.

Having acknowledged this, I would like to continue by pointing out a series of differences between, on the one hand, the formal poetics of gaming, loosely adopted from the gaming industry, and on the other hand, the various formal conventions used in a variety of artist-made game mods. By “formal poetics of gaming,” I mean the total system of gameplay experienced by the gamer. This includes the design techniques and aesthetic approaches practiced widely in the gaming industry and detailed in books like *Rules of Play*.⁷ Granted, the differences between any two commercial games can be quite significant (compare, for example, *Rez* to *SSX*, or *Riven* to *Mario Kart*), while the differences between a commercial game and a mod can be as superficial

as *Tomb Raider* and *Nude Raider*. So while it is clear that neither side of my albeit artificial aesthetic division is easily massed together in a single category of "commercial" versus "avant-garde," nevertheless grant me my crude classification scheme so that we may try to rummage through the various formal distinctions separating the ever-growing pile of blockbuster games churned out by the industry on the one hand and the somewhat smaller list of artist mods on the other.

A Formal Grammar

Transparency versus Foregrounding

This principle, adopted from Wollen, is particularly apt for understanding the video game avant-garde. In the cinema, this principle refers to the apparatus of filmmaking and whether or not that apparatus—microphones, lights, the film strip, the director and crew—is removed from the image, making the apparatus *transparent*, or included within the image, thereby *foregrounding* the apparatus. Hollywood almost universally removes the apparatus from the image, while art or avant-garde filmmaking is often unafraid to include it in any number of visual experiments. In gaming, this same division is evident: mainstream games almost never reveal the guts of the apparatus, while artist-made game mods do so quite often. Because the technical apparatus of gaming is quite different from film, so too the status and quality of foregrounding is different. The gaming apparatus may be foregrounded through image or through code.

An apt analogue to Godard in contemporary computer art is the European duo known as Jodi (a name formed by joining the first names of the group's two members, Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans). I have already mentioned their work in passing but have yet to examine them in any detail. The fresh, formalist radicalism of Jodi's work occupies a similar position today as Godard's films did in the sixties, albeit without his militant politics.⁸ They are an excellent example of the counter gaming technique of "foregrounding." Jodi works with computers in the same way that Dan Sandin works with video or Raymond Queneau worked with words—irreverently manipulating a medium at its most fundamental level. The centerpiece of their first American exhibition, "INSTALL.EXE," was % *My Desktop*, a large

four-channel projection with a simple pretext: screw with the icons on a typical computer desktop so violently that they become interesting to watch. The chaotic desktop-as-medium engendered half repulsion, half rapt fascination. Florian Cramer calls their work "a clever simulation of unpredictability performed in software."⁹ Jodi has made work in a variety of formats, particularly on the Internet, and they have also created a series of computer games. With the work *SOD* in 1999, Jodi established the standard for today's artist's game mod. Since then they continue to make games, crafting the ultraretro *JET SET WILLY Variations @ 1984*, and the ultramodern *untitled game*. This last work, *untitled game*, foregrounds the gaming apparatus both through the use of visual material and through code. The work often lapses into pure data, streaming real-time code up the screen with little or no representational imagery at all (see the sections "A-X," "M-W," and "V-Y"). This is a way of foregrounding the apparatus of the game's source code. But at other times, the code is ignored, and the image apparatus is foregrounded purely through the kaleidoscopic interplay of images.

The glitch effects of *r/c* or *QQQ* (nullpointer/Tom Betts) also illustrate this image-based method of foregrounding. And in still other instances, the two methods of foregrounding are mixed, as shown with Vuk Cosic's *ASCII Unreal*, which both elevates the status of pure code and projects that code into a three-dimensional visual environment, or in Lonnie Flickinger's *Pencil Whipped*, which foregrounds the constructedness of character models, levels, and sounds by crafting them anew via a low-fi cartoon aesthetic.

Gameplay versus Aestheticism

The tendency to privilege foregrounding over transparency runs in tandem with another principle of counter gaming: aesthetics are elevated over gameplay. This is certainly not a necessary quality of counter gaming, yet current work tends in this direction. Conventional gamic form relies on a notion of purposeful interactivity based on a coherent set of game rules. Narrative and form are smoothly joined. But counter gaming often has no interactive narrative at all and little gameplay supported by few game rules, if any. In this sense, counter gaming replaces play with aesthetics, or perhaps something like

the play of signification. This is the same move from Caillois to Derrida described in chapter 1. A common outcome of having no gameplay is having no explicit narrative. Mods like *Adam Killer*, *Super Mario Clouds* (Cory Arcangel), and most of Jodi's work follow this tendency—Pit Schultz refers to this as “aestheticizing the technical error.”¹⁰ In all these works, any conventional sense of gameplay is obscured. The game engine persists (albeit often stripped down and dissected to near death), but it is repurposed to serve the same sort of modernist formal experiments that the avant-garde has pursued for decades. A slightly different approach to the use of unintended narratives is seen in *Velvet Strike* (Anne-Marie Schleiner, Brody Condon, and Joan Leandre), or in Condon's in-game performance titled *Worship*. While not technically mods, these works still attack conventional gamic form by creating unintended scenarios and narratives inside the game. They create conditions of estrangement and unpleasure, to use Wollen's terminology. Consider also the example of machinima (like *Red vs. Blue* [Rooster Teeth Productions], Jim Munroe's *My Trip to Liberty City*, or Eddo Stern's *Sheik Attack*) where artists remove gameplay altogether, substituting it with the rote choreography of a noninteractive video. All these examples show how, in counter gaming, aesthetic experimentation often trumps interactive gameplay. Now, this doesn't seem to hinder avant-garde gaming at all. It merely serves to focus its attention on a few key areas while excluding others. Specifically, the three aesthetic realms most often modified in artist game mods are space, visuality, and physics. Modding the flow of gameplay itself is less common.

Representational Modeling versus Visual Artifacts

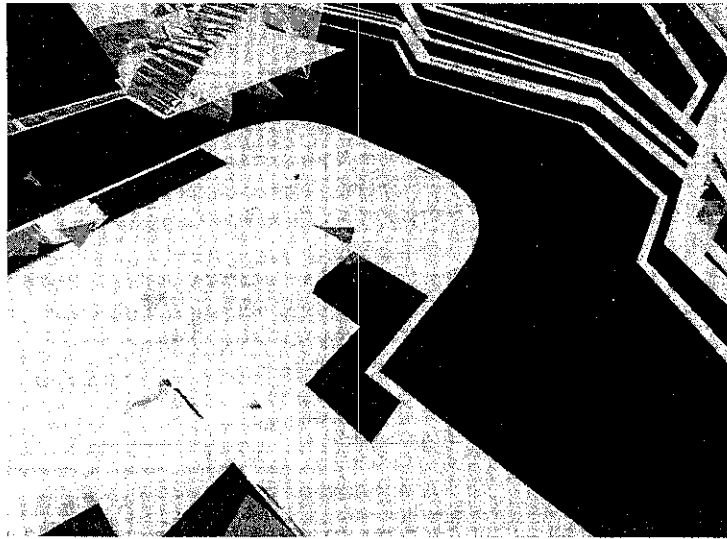
Conventional gamic form is based on a visual principle of representational modeling. This means that volumes are constructed so that they closely resemble the plastic shaping of real forms, be they fictional or not. Following this approach, a well-designed game has a high level of representational fidelity: objects in the game may be entirely imaginary and have no real-world referent, but they must always be cohesive and represented as objects with an actual relationship to gameplay. Glitches in the graphics engine break the illusion of representational modeling. Eddo Stern calls these glitches “artifacts”:

I am borrowing the term artifact from computer science where the term is used in reference to undesired cosmetic disturbances such as jagged edges or dirty patches in an image file (common in compressed digital video or jpeg images for example), excess noise or hiss in a sound stream, or unpredictable ASCII characters in a text file. Artifacts differ from bugs, which are usually caused by programming mistakes; artifacts don't prevent functionality per se, but cause an unperfected aesthetic disturbance.¹¹

The existence of visual artifacts in a game tends to diminish the effects of representational modeling. The latter tends to cleanse the image of any problematic pixels, while the former highlights the misplaced textures, broken lighting effects, and other mistakes that might exist in a game's graphics engine. This heuristic is similar to the concept of “foregrounding” mentioned previously. However, the actual technology being foregrounded is much more subtle in the case of visual artifacts. Artifacts don't necessarily call attention to themselves as such, whereas foregrounding the gamic apparatus in the form of code can be quite surprising indeed. For example, the op art visual effects of Jodi's *SOD* or *untitled game* (particularly the sections “Ctrl-9,” “Ctrl-F6,” “Ctrl-Space,” “O-O,” “Slipgate,” and “V-Y”) are visual artifacts resulting from both the lack of anti-aliasing in the game's graphics engine and a baseline screen resolution of seventy-two dots per inch, but the streaming onscreen code in the work (“A-X,” “M-W,” and “V-Y”) is a deliberate effort to foreground the real-time data of the game software. The results are similar, even if the techniques are different.

Natural Physics versus Invented Physics

Conventional gamic form tends to mimic the simple laws of Newtonian physics. Even when these laws are bent or broken in a game, the physical properties and behaviors of objects usually remain inside some type of plausible logic. Thus the “bullet time” effect in *Max Payne* or *Enter the Matrix* or *Tony Hawk's Underground 2* or any number of other games breaks Newton's laws but still follows a somewhat coherent idea of material physics. Bullet time simply slows down motion and suspends this or that object in ways that are still intelligible. *Untitled game* (particularly the sections “E1M1AP,” “I-N,” and “Q-L”), on the other hand, introduces a set of entirely counterintuitive



Tom Betts, QQQ, 2002. Reproduced with permission.

physical laws, wherein space warps and spins for no reason at all. The physical laws of the work are not predictable or intelligible. They are entirely invented.

The current heuristic also pertains to the physics of visibility. The glitch effect known as “trailing” (or “hall of mirrors”), where the background image is not refreshed as objects pass across it, resulting in an iterative smear effect, is often used in artist-made game mods, as in *r/c*, *Adam Killer*, or *QQQ*. This effect is, in essence, an invented physics of visibility. In this new optics, visual images persist and diminish in ways unfamiliar to human eyes. They linger and mix according to the artist’s rules, not the rules of physiology. More to the point, they explicitly defy conventional design techniques for optics in gaming, techniques that try to mimic the visual physiology of human sight as best they can.

Interactivity versus Noncorrespondence

Conventional games privilege the faithful, one-to-one relationship between user actions on the controller and resultant actions in gameplay. A jump results in a jump, a rightward motion results in a right-



Tom Betts, QQQ, 2002. Reproduced with permission.

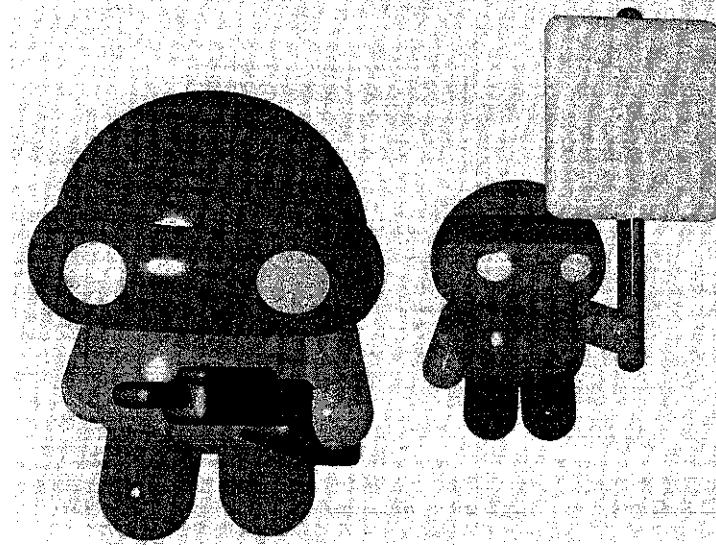
ward motion, and so on. This player-game relationship is crucial for constructing diegetic space and creating a feeling of interactivity during gameplay. The gamer must be able to effect change in the game using the controller and see those changes instantly reflected in the game. But, to comment again on Jodi’s *untitled game*, in artist mods the keyboard and mouse often become uncoupled from the physical space of the game entirely, leaving the player at a loss for any type of faithful interactivity. Anne-Marie Schleiner recounts her experience viewing the work:

Unlike ID Software, the original designers of Quake, JODI search for beautiful bugs in the system, to make glitches happen that weren’t supposed to, to tweak the game, even to demolish it. When I push the spacebar to jump in E1M1AP instead the world rotates uncontrollably. In G-R the screen refreshes non-stop with bright RGB colors, (no navigation at all). In Ctrl-9 and Ctrl-Space, navigation and looking about generate undulating black and white moire patterns. . . . In E1M1AP, when I hit the space bar to jump, I summer-sault into an extended disorienting twirl. Output far exceeds input. Or the program becomes the performer, I am no longer player god in control—I must concede some of my agency to the code.¹²

So while user input in mainstream gaming is matched moment by moment with a subsequent response inside the game engine, in counter gaming there may not be such a one-to-one relationship, and in fact some user input may be completely ignored or interpreted in radically unexpected ways. "The moment a system crashes, the moment in which a user can no longer test the effects of his or her work, the moment control is lost and the system takes on its own materiality, all these moments are appreciated and examined in all their detail by Jodi," writes Pit Schultz.¹³ (This is why, in chapter 1, I referred to Jodi in the context of nondiegetic machine acts.) Many artist game mods are completely noninteractive, not unlike watching a game play by itself in demo mode. *Super Mario Clouds* is a good example of this. Or consider Eddo Stern's *Fort Paladin: America's Army*, which celebrates the removal of interactivity entirely by robotically automating the act of gameplay. The work is less game than sculpture.

Radical Action

Some of the remaining heuristics from Wollen are less applicable for counter gaming. At first glance, the "fiction versus reality" pairing appears appropriate. Mongrel's game *BlackLash* lets players fight against swastika-bearing spiders and hooded Ku Klux Klan members. Part video game, part social commentary, *BlackLash* illustrates the drama of political activism in a gaming format. "Here is your chance to kick some arse and annihilate the powers that be and smack them into the next millennium," writes Mongrel.¹⁴ There are also other mods and conversions that deal with social reality: *The Great Game* by John Klima; Natalie Bookchin's *AgoraXchange* design initiative; *Antiwargame* by Josh On/Futurefarmers; *Escape from Woomera*, staged in the Woomera immigration detention camp in Australia; *911 Survivor*, a restaging of the World Trade Center attacks of 2001; and C-level's *Endgames: Waco Resurrection*, which reworks David Koresh's 1993 last stand at the Branch Davidian compound—the game is based, they write, on "alternative utopias and apocalyptic moments." These are all artist-made games that reject traditional notions of fictional narrative in favor of real-life scenarios (and, interestingly enough, these are not mods per se but entirely new games unto themselves). Yet the conceit of real-life simulation has been a staple of



Josh On/Futurefarmers, *Antiwargame*, 2002. Reproduced with permission.

commercial gaming since Ralph Baer modeled tennis, hockey, and skiing in the early 1970s.

Today games like *Gran Turismo*, *The Getaway*, or *True Crime* are based on real-world maps with high degrees of verisimilitude. So gaming's use of reality is entirely different from Godard's use of reality. It doesn't have the same political import, a subject I explore in chapter 3. Further, the privileged status of reality in both film and television has changed greatly since Godard's heyday, moving into the mainstream with reality television programming like *Survivor* or (pseudo)reality filmmaking like *The Blair Witch Project*. So perhaps "fiction versus reality" is not a useful classification scheme for gaming (or cinema anymore, for that matter). Likewise, Wollen's first pairing, "narrative transitivity versus narrative intransitivity," also appears inappropriate for video gaming, owing to the necessarily open-ended structure of most gameric narrative.

Mainstream games like *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* or *Grand Theft Auto* or *Ultima Online* succeed partly on the strength of their huge, unobstructed narrative spaces. In fact, the very concept of play precludes



Anne-Marie Schleiner, Brody Condon, and Joan Leandre, *Velvet Strike*, 2002. Reproduced with permission.

"one thing following another" in any strict, linear fashion. Instead, these games thrive on repetition, rewinding and backtracking, story-on-a-rail episodic structures, digressions into minigames, and other nonlinear techniques. Finally one is prompted also to scrap Wollen's "single diegesis versus multiple diegesis." Games greatly complicate the concept of diegesis. As I suggest in chapter 1, the nondiegetic in gaming is often on equal footing with the diegetic, whereas in classical narrative cinema the nondiegetic is rarely foregrounded as such. Thus games constantly "rupture between different codes and different channels," to use Wollen's words, transitioning fluidly from the (mostly) nondiegetic HUD to diegetic weapons, or from configuration menus to normal gameplay.

Here is a summary, then, of the formal differences between conventional video gaming and countergaming:

1. *Transparency versus foregrounding.* (Removing the apparatus from the image versus pure interplay of graphics apparatus or code displayed without representational imagery.)

2. *Gameplay versus aestheticism.* (Narrative gameplay based on a coherent rule set versus modernist formal experiments.)
3. *Representational modeling versus visual artifacts.* (Mimetic modeling of objects versus glitches and other unexpected products of the graphics engine.)
4. *Natural physics versus invented physics.* (Newtonian laws of motion, ray tracing, collisions, etc., versus incoherent physical laws and relationships.)
5. *Interactivity versus noncorrespondence.* (Instant, predictable linkage between controller input and gameplay versus barriers between controller input and gameplay.)

Looking at this list, one may conclude that there exists no true avant-garde of gamic action today. In other words, countergaming is essentially progressive in visual form but reactionary in actional form. It serves to hinder gameplay, not advance it. It eclipses the game as a game and rewrites it as a sort of primitive animation lacking any of the virtues of game design. This is essentially the reason why Jodi's work is apolitical, while Godard's was hyperpolitical: Jodi aims to create better abstraction, not to create better (or different) gameplay. We need an avant-garde of video gaming not just in visual form but also in actional form. We need radical gameplay, not just radical graphics. So here is another principle, which I hope will further develop the as yet unrealized potential of art gaming:

6. *Gamic action versus radical action.* (Conventional gaming poetics versus alternative modes of gameplay.)

By radical action, I mean a critique of gameplay itself. Visual imagery is not what makes video games special. Any game mod focusing primarily on tweaking the visual components of a game is missing the point, at least as far as gaming is concerned. Artists should create new grammars of action, not simply new grammars of visibility. They should create alternative algorithms. They should reinvent the architectural flow of play and the game's position in the world, not just its maps and characters. Ruth Catlow's *Activate: 3 Player Chess* does this; the Etoy *Toywar* did this; the "everybody must win" philosophy of Fuller's "World Game" also shows the way—an evocative idea when

one considers that these works exhibit almost none of the given counter gaming principles. Other examples are few and far between.

So counter gaming is an unrealized project. An independent gaming movement has yet to flourish, something that comes as no surprise, since it took decades for one to appear in the cinema. But when it does, there will appear a whole language of play, radical and new, that will transform the counter gaming movement, just as Godard did to the cinema, or Deleuze did to philosophy, or Duchamp did to the art object. And more importantly, artist-made game mods will be able to resolve the essential contradiction of their existence thus far: that they have sought largely to remove their own gameplay and lapse back to other media entirely (animation, video, painting). This will be a realization of counter gaming *as* gaming, just as Godard was a realization of counter cinema *as* cinema. The New Wave was new once, and so were new media, but as Godard wrote in 1965, after having made a half dozen of his best films, "I await the end of Cinema with optimism." The counter gaming movement should aspire to a similar goal, redefining play itself and thereby realizing its true potential as a political and cultural avant-garde.

Notes

1. Gamic Action, Four Moments

1. I use the term "video game" with some inaccuracy. To be precise, a video game refers to a game played on a console using a video monitor. In such a specific definition, the term would exclude arcade games, games played on personal computers, those played on mobile devices, and so on. It is for simplicity's sake that I use "video game" in its colloquial sense as an umbrella term for all sorts of interactive electronic games.

2. Some suggest, and I partially agree, that "player" is a better overall term than "operator." My goal in avoiding the term "player" is not to eliminate the importance of play, as will be evident later, but instead, by using "operator," to underscore the machinic, almost industrial, and certainly cybernetic aspect of much of human-computer interaction, of which gaming is a key part. Additionally, "operator" tames, if only slightly, the anthropomorphic myth of the distinctly and uniquely human gamer, and that can only be a good thing in my mind. Operators are, in a majority of instances, organic human players, but they may also be any type of intelligent play agent such as a bot or script. Hence the greater neutrality of the term "operator" appears fitting. Readers who are resistant should mentally cut and paste "player" for "operator" in the present chapter; the switch is entirely tolerable.

3. Espen Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies, Year One," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (July 2001). Aarseth uses the term "ergodic" to describe action in

Contemplation amid Wars of Push-Button Glare," *Game Studies* 3, no. 2 (December 2003).

10. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 161.

11. For more on *Toywar*, see Adam Wishart and Regula Bochsler, *Leaving Reality Behind: Etoy vs EToys.com and Other Battles to Control Cyberspace* (New York: Ecco, 2003). The global nature of *Toywar* is interesting to compare to Buckminster Fuller's "World Game," mentioned in chapter 4. Fuller's game is a very early example of a global asset management simulation game.

12. I first learned of *Special Force* through a March 2003 e-mail post to *Rhizome Raw* from Jennifer and Kevin McCoy. *Under Ash* is being followed by another, similar game called *Under Siege*.

4. Allegories of Control

1. On this point, Markku Eskelinen writes: "Historically speaking this is a bit like the 1910s in film studies; there were attractions, practices and very little understanding of what was actually going on, not to mention lots of money to be made and lost." See Eskelinen, "The Gaming Situation," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (July 2001).

2. See Philippe Sollers, "Programme," *Tel Quel*, no. 31 (Fall 1967): 3–7, (italics mine); and Roland Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur," in *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), 66 (italics mine).

3. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 168 (italics mine).

4. The editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*, "John Ford's Young Mr. Lincoln," in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 496.

5. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), 291–92.

6. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 178.

7. Gilles Deleuze, "Having an Idea in Cinema," in *Deleuze and Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Eleanor Kaufman and Kevin Jon Heller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 18 (translation modified by the author).

8. Branden Hookway, *Pandemonium: The Rise of Predatory Locales in the Postwar World* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 23–24.

9. Ted Friedman, "Civilization and Its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity, and Space," <http://www.duke.edu/~tlove/civ.htm> (accessed August 14, 2003). I will use *Civilization* to refer to the entire game series. When talking about a particular installment in the series, I will specify, as in *Civilization III*.

10. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 222.

11. R. Buckminster Fuller, *Your Private Sky: The Art of Design Science* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 1999), 473, 479. For more on the globalistic and synergistic philosophy of the World Design Initiative, see also Fuller, *Your Private Sky: Discourse* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2001), 247–78.

12. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 4.

13. See Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 515–34; and Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

14. Friedman, "Civilization and Its Discontents."

15. Pete Loshin, *Big Book of FYI RFCs* (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2000), xiv.

16. For a technical overview of network protocols, see Eric Hall, *Internet Core Protocols: The Definitive Guide* (Sebastopol, Calif.: O'Reilly, 2000); or for a more interpretive approach, see my book *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

17. Jonathan Postel, "Transmission Control Protocol," RFC 793 (September 1981), <http://www.faqs.org/rfcs/rfc793.html> (accessed April 15, 2005).

18. Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 114.

19. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 317. See also Stallabrass's essay "Just Gaming," a brilliant critique of play no doubt inspired by Adorno's commentary on Schiller and Huizinga.

20. Fletcher gives a succinct etymology of the term: "Allegory from *allos* + *agoreuein* (other + speak openly, speak in the assembly or market). *Agoreuein* connotes public, open, declarative speech. This sense is inverted by the prefix *allos*. Thus allegory is often called 'inversion.'" See Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1964), 2.

21. Blondel, *Action* (1893), 207.

22. Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," 180.

5. Countergaming

1. Game mods have been exhibited in a fine art context for several years. See particularly "Cracking the Maze" (online, 1999); "Game Show" at MASS MoCA (2002); "Killer Instinct" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York (2003); and "Games: Computergames by Artists" in Dortmund, Germany (2003).

2. Katie Salen, personal correspondence, September 27, 2004.

3. Tilman Baumgärtel, "Games-Modifications by Artists," *Nettime*, October 27, 2003.
4. Peter Wollen, *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 80–81.
5. *Ibid.*, 80–89.
6. Anne-Marie Schleiner, "Parasitic Interventions: Game Patches and Hacker Art," <http://www.opensorcery.net/patchnew.html> (accessed April 15, 2005).
7. See Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, an invaluable resource on game design.
8. While Jodi's work is devoid of political messages, the creators do exhibit a blanket political disgust toward all things commercial or mainstream, as a famous incident in California illustrates, recounted here by Josephine Bosma: "When [Jodi] received the 'Webby Award,' a kind of Internet-Oscar, in the category 'Art' in 1999, they stayed true to their bad reputation: During the ceremony in San Francisco, the acceptance speech of every winner must not contain more than five words. Jodi addressed the audience that consisted mainly of new-economy-people with: 'Ugly-commercial-sons-of-bitches.'" See Bosma, "Jodi and the Cargo Cult," in the exhibition catalog *INSTALL.EXE-JODI* (Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2002), 95.
9. Florian Cramer, "Discordia Concors: www.jodi.org," in *INSTALL.EXE-JODI*, 71.
10. Pit Schultz, "Jodi as Software Culture," in *INSTALL.EXE-JODI*, 84.
11. Stern, "A Touch of Medieval."
12. Anne-Marie Schleiner, "2 Reviews—*Untitled Game* and *Ego Image Shooter*," *Rhizome*, March 12, 2002.
13. Schultz, "Jodi as Software Culture," 83–84.
14. See <http://www.mongrel.org.uk/Natural/BlackLash> (accessed April 15, 2005).

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