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Social Realism

On March 21, 2003, a day into the second Iraq war, Sony filed a trade-mark application for the phrase "shock and awe," apparently for future use as a PlayStation game title. The phrase, and the American military strategy it describes, was in fact not such an unlikely candidate for the PlayStation. The console system has long flirted with game formats based in realistic scenarios, from Sony's own *SOCOM: U.S. Navy Seals* to Electronic Arts' *Madden NFL*. A month later, responding to criticism, Sony dropped the application, stating they did not intend to use the expression "shock and awe" in any upcoming games. But they have not dropped their fetish for realistic gaming scenarios. Indeed, reality is thriving today in many types of media, particularly gaming, where the polygon count continues to go up and up, or in cinema with the Wachowski brothers continuing to ruminate on the nature of "the real" (via Zizek, via Baudrillard, and back to Lacan, one presumes), or in television in the form of reality TV.

The conventional wisdom on realism in gaming is that, because life today is so computer mediated, gamers actually benefit from hours of realistic gameplay. The time spent playing games trains the gamer to be close to the machine, to be quick and responsive, to understand

interfaces, to be familiar with simulated worlds. This was Ronald Reagan's argument in the 1980s when he famously predicted that action video games were training a new generation of cyber-warriors ready to fight real foes on the real battlefield (itself computer enhanced). Today it is evident that he was right: flight simulators, *Doom,* and now *America's Army* are all realistic training tools at some level, be they skill builders in a utilitarian sense or simply instructive of a larger militaristic ideology.[1]

In scholarship thus far the discourse on realism in gaming has been limited mainly to talk of screen violence and its supposed deleterious effects on gamers. This talk has grown so loud that I can't help conjure up various equations and feedback loops tallying doses of violent intake measured against the gamer's future evildoing. Call this the "Columbine theory" of realism in gaming: games plus gore equals psychotic behavior, and around and around. The Columbine theory is not the only interesting debate, however, and, granting it due significance to social scientists and the like, I will politely sidestep it here and return to the debates around realism as cultural critics have engaged them to date in other media.

One of the central theoretical issues in video gaming is how and in what way one can make connections between the gaming world and the real world, both from the inside outward in the form of affective action, and from the outside inward in the form of realistic modeling. In previous theories of visual culture, this is generally referred to as the problematic of representation. But in gaming the concept of representation does not account for the full spectrum of issues at play. Representation refers to the creation of meaning about the world through images. So far, debates about representation have focused on whether images (or language, or what have you) are a faithful, mimetic mirror of reality thereby offering some unmediated truth about the world, or conversely whether images are a separate, constructed medium thereby standing apart from the world in a separate semantic zone. Games inherit this same debate. But because games are not merely watched but played, they supplement this debate with the phenomenon of action. It is no longer sufficient to talk about the visual or textual representation of meaning. Instead the game theorist must talk about actions, and the physical or game worlds in which they

transpire. One might call this a problematic of "correspondences" (rather than just "representation"), for thinking about correspondences lets one consider the kinetic, affective, and material dimensions in debates around meaning and representation.[2] One is prompted to return to Aristotle's notion of mimesis in the *Poetics*. And indeed this is crucial. But as Johan Huizinga reminded us many years ago in his writings on play, "It is *methectic* rather than *mimetic*."[3]

"Realisticness" versus Social Realism

In this chapter, I would like to describe how traditional theories of realism can be applied to video games, and then propose an expansion of the concept of realism to include new problems that games present.

Within the world of gaming, it is possible to divide games into two piles: those that have as their central conceit the mimetic reconstruction of real life, and those resigned to fantasy worlds of various kinds. Thus, *SOCOM* is about the real Navy Seals, *The Sims Hot Date* is about real dating (one assumes), and *Madden NFL* is about the real National Football League, while games like *Final Fantasy*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and *Unreal Tournament* transpire in fictional worlds with fictional characters and fictional narratives. Thus games are generally either realistic or fantastical. Expressing the perspective of game designers, Bruce Shelley writes that realism is a sort of tool that can be leveraged for greater effect in gameplay but is ultimately noncrucial: "Realism and historical information are resources or props we use to add interest, story, and character to the problems we are posing for the player. That is not to say that realism and historic fact have no importance, they are just not the highest priority."[4]

But realistic narrative and realistic representation are two different things. So these two piles start to blur. For instance, listening to music, ordering pizza, and so on in *The Sims* is most probably closer to the narratives of normal life than is storming an enemy base in *SOCOM*, despite the fact that the actual visual imagery in *SOCOM* is more realistically rendered than the simplistic avatars, isometric perspective, and nondiegetic wall cutaways in *The Sims*. Likewise *Unreal Tournament 2003* has a more photorealistic graphics engine

than *Grand Theft Auto III,* but the former narrative is sci-fi fluff at best, leaving it at a loss for realism. During the Cold War, games like *Missile Command* presented a protorealist anxiety narrative about living under the threat of nuclear annihilation, yet the game's interface remained highly unrealistic and abstract. The infamous 1988 game *NARC* presented a realist window on urban blight by depicting police violence and drug dealers, couching its gory imagery in an antidrug stance. John Dell's text simulation *Drug Wars* (1984) did something similar, explaining the drug trade through the economics of the market—buy low, sell high. Atari's *BattleZone,* one of the first games to feature a truly interactive three-dimensional environment, was deemed so realistic by the U.S. military that they hired Atari to build a special version used to train tank pilots. Yet the game's vector graphics are too sparse and abstract to qualify as truly realist.

If these games are any indication, it would seem that gaming is a purely expressionistic medium with no grounding in realism no matter how high the polygon counts or dots per inch, or perhaps that gaming is one of those media wherein an immense chasm stands between empirical reality and its representation in art.

But this is something of a straw man, for realisticness and realism are most certainly not the same thing. If they were the same, realism in gaming would simply be a mathematical process of counting the polygons and tracing the correspondences. Realisticness is a yardstick held up to representation. And so at the level of representation, *SOCOM* is no different from other games based in real life. That is to say, at the level of representation, it is a realistic game, just as *Tony Hawks Pro Skater 4* is realistic when it lets the gamer actually skate, albeit virtually, at the real Kona skatepark in Jacksonville, Florida. Realisticness is important, to be sure, but the more realisticness takes hold in gaming, the more removed from gaming it actually becomes, relegated instead to simulation or modeling. This is a contradiction articulated well by Fredric Jameson in his essay "The Existence of Italy":

> "Realism" is, however, a particularly unstable concept owing to its simultaneous, yet incompatible, aesthetic and epistemological claims, as the two terms of the slogan, "representation of reality," suggest.

These two claims then seem contradictory: the emphasis on this or that type of truth content will clearly be undermined by any intensified awareness of the technical means or representational artifice of the work itself. Meanwhile, the attempt to reinforce and to shore up the epistemological vocation of the work generally involves the suppression of the formal properties of the realistic "text" and promotes an increasingly naive and unmediated or reflective conception of aesthetic construction and reception. Thus, where the epistemological claim succeeds, it fails; and if realism validates its claim to being a correct or true representation of the world, it thereby ceases to be an *aesthetic* mode of representation and falls out of art altogether. If, on the other hand, the artistic devices and technological equipment whereby it captures that truth of the world are explored and stressed and foregrounded, "realism" will stand unmasked as a mere reality- or realism-*effect,* the reality it purported to deconceal falling at once into the sheerest representation and illusion. Yet no viable conception of realism is possible unless both these demands or claims are honored simultaneously, prolonging and preserving—rather than "resolving"—this constitutive tension and incommensurability.[5]

When one thinks solely in terms of realisticness—Jameson's "naive and unmediated or reflective conception of aesthetic construction"—one detracts from a larger understanding of realism. Put another way: realisticness and realism are two very different things.

André Bazin defined realism in the cinema as a technique to approximate the basic phenomenological qualities of the real world. And he knew well that "phenomenological qualities" did not simply mean realistic visual representation. It also means real life in all its dirty details, hopeful desires, and abysmal defeats. Because of this, realism often arrives in the guise of social critique. Realism in the cinema, dubbed "neorealism" at the time to distinguish it historically from its predecessors in literature and fine art, is defined by several formal techniques. These include the use of nonprofessional actors, the absence of histrionics, real-life scenery, amateur cinematography, grainy film stock, long takes, and minimal editing. But further, Bazin also associated neorealism with a certain type of *narrative,* not simply a certain type of form. So while Bazin acknowledges the formal tendencies of realism (long takes, amateur actors, and so on), and even

praises the mise-en-scène of filmmakers like Vittorio de Sica, he writes that "we would define as 'realist,' then, all *narrative* means tending to bring an added measure of reality to the screen."[6] Thus it is the story of the unemployed father that ultimately constitutes the realist core of de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief,* not its degraded style. Jameson follows this by reinforcing what Bazin knew to be obvious, that neorealism was fundamentally a *socialist* political practice, not merely a style of film focused on re-creating the "real." Jameson writes that "realism is to be conceived as the moment in which a 'restricted' code manages to become elaborated or universal."[7] The restricted code is, in this case, the code of the working class, what Raymond Williams would call their "structure of feeling." Elsewhere the philosopher Gilles Deleuze also recognized that neorealism was crucial, situating it at the conceptual turning point from the relatively reified and dominant "movement-image" to the emancipatory "time-image" in his work *Cinema 1 & 2.*

Here's how Bruno Reichlin recently described neorealism in Italian literature: "A surgical examination of matters of society, an almost documentary attention to the everyday, an adherence in thought and language to the social origins and personalities of the characters, a more-or-less direct criticism of current society and morals."[8] I suggest that game studies should follow these same arguments and not turn to a theory of realism in gaming as mere realistic representation, but define realist games as those games that reflect critically on the minutiae of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama, and injustice.

This theoretical project is already beginning in Gonzalo Frasca's work. His essay "Videogames of the Oppressed" examines how games are able to raise social and political issues.[9] As a game designer, Frasca is also interested in the genre he calls "newsgaming," that is, games based on actual news events. His game *September 12th, a Toy World* deals with the war on terrorism, although using the somewhat un-realistic visual idiom of a cartoon-drawn, Web-based bombing game. Other games such as *911 Survivor* and *Waco Resurrection* directly reference current geopolitical events. The game company Kuma refers to this genre as "reality games" and offers its own *Kuma\War* game with episodes ripped directly from firefights in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Congruence Requirement

The games discussed thus far all strive for a high level of realisticness. But as I have tried to show, social realism is an entirely different matter from mere realistic representation. How can one find true realism in gaming? Is social realism even possible in the medium of the video game, where each pixel is artificially created by the machine? What would it mean for the concept of "play," a word that connotes experimentation and creativity as much as it does infantilizing, apolitical trivialities? (In point of fact, play has started to become politically nontrivial in recent years. "We are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system," wrote Donna Haraway, "from all work to all play, a deadly game."[10] With the growing significance of immaterial labor, and the concomitant increase in cultivation and exploitation of play—creativity, innovation, the new, the singular, flexibility, the supplement—as a productive force, play will become more and more linked to broad social structures of control. Today we are no doubt witnessing the end of play as politically progressive, or even politically neutral.)

To find social realism in gaming, one must follow the telltale traits of social critique and through them uncover the beginnings of a realist gaming aesthetic. To be sure, there is not a realist game yet like de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* is to film. But there are games that begin to approximate the core aesthetic values of realism, and I will describe a few of them here. (Protorealism, not realism, might be a better title for these games.)

Forty years of electronic games have come and gone, and only now does one see the emergence of social realism. *State of Emergency,* the riot game from Rockstar Games, has some of these protorealist qualities. The game co-opts the spirit of violent social upheaval seen in events like the Rodney King rebellion in Los Angeles and transposes it into a participatory gaming environment. The game is rife with absurdities and excesses and in no way accurately depicts the brutal realities of urban violence. So in that sense, it fails miserably at realism. But it also retains a realist core. While the game is more or less realistically rendered, its connection to realism is seen primarily in the representation of marginalized communities (disenfranchised

State of Emergency, VIS Entertainment, 2001

youth, hackers, ethnic minorities, and so on), but also in the narra-
tive itself, a fantasy of unbridled, orgiastic anticorporate rebellion.
The game slices easily through the apathy found in much mass media
today, instructing players to "smash the corporation" and giving them
the weapons to do so.

The Swiss art group Etoy also achieved protorealism in gaming
with their online multiplayer game *Toywar.* Part artwork, part game,
and part political intervention, this massively multiplayer online
game was cobbled together in a few quick weeks of programming. The
goal of the game was to fight against the dot-com toy retailer eToys
.com by negatively affecting their stock price on the NASDAQ mar-
ket. The toy retailer had recently sent a lawsuit to Etoy for trademark
infringement due to the similarity of the two organizations' names.
Many considered the lawsuit bogus. But instead of battling their cor-
porate rivals in court, Etoy went public and turned the whole fiasco
into an online game, enlisting the public to fight the lawsuit on their
behalf.[11] The *Toywar* battlefield, which was online for only a few
months, is a complex, self-contained system, with its own internal
e-mail, its own monetary system, its own social actors, geography, haz-
ards, heroes, and martyrs. Players were able to launch "media bombs"

and other public relations stunts aimed at increasing public dissatisfaction toward eToys.com's lawsuit. In the first two weeks of *Toywar,* eToys.com's stock price on the NASDAQ plummeted by over 50 percent and continued to nose-dive. Of course, eToys.com's stock price was also crashing due to the general decline of the Internet economic bubble, but this economic fact only accentuated the excitement of gameplay. Eventually a few billion dollars of the company's stock value disappeared from the NASDAQ, and the toy retailer declared bankruptcy. Whereas *State of Emergency* prodded gamers to smash a hypothetical corporate thug, *Toywar* gave them a chance to battle a real one. And this is the crucial detail that makes *Toywar* a realist game, for, like a simulation or training game, *Toywar* constructed a meaningful relationship between the affective actions of gamers and the real social contexts in which they live. This is not to say that realism in gaming requires an instrumental cause and effect between the gamer's thumbs on the controller and some consequence in the so-called real world—not at all; that would return us to the trap of the Columbine theory. (The problem of the Columbine theory is, to put it bluntly, one of directionality. Realism in gaming is about the extension of one's own social life. The Columbine theory claims the reverse, that games can somehow exert "realistic" effects back onto the gamer.) Instead I suggest there must be some kind of congruence, some type of *fidelity of context* that transliterates itself from the social reality of the gamer, through one's thumbs, into the game environment and back again. This is what I call the "congruence requirement," and it is necessary for achieving realism in gaming. Without it there is no true realism.

Are Military Games Realist?

With the congruence requirement in mind, it is important to make a distinction between games that are modeled around real events and ones that actually claim to be an extension of real-life struggle (via virtual training sessions or politically utopian fantasies). This brings us to *America's Army,* the military shooter designed and published by the U.S. Army. What is interesting about *America's Army* is not the debate over whether it is thinly veiled propaganda or a legitimate

recruitment tool, for it is unabashedly and decisively both, but rather that the central conceit of the game is one of mimetic realism. *America's Army*, quite literally, is about the American army. Because it was developed by the American army and purports to model the experience of the American army, the game can claim a real material referent in ways that other military games—*Delta Force*, *SOCOM*, and so on—simply cannot. So one might think that *America's Army* is a realist game par excellence. But following the definition of realism stated earlier and my "congruence requirement," it is clear that *America's Army* does not achieve realism on either account. As Bruno Reichlin observed, realism requires "a more-or-less direct criticism of current society and morals," which *America's Army* does not do, nor does it aspire to do. In fact, the game can be viewed in exactly the opposite framework: as a bold and brutal reinforcement of current American society and its positive moral perspective on military intervention, be it the war on terrorism or "shock and awe" in Iraq. Further, as Jameson shows us, realism happens in certain moments when "a 'restricted' code" captured from out of the subjugated classes "manages to become elaborated or universal." Again *America's Army* does nothing of the sort. If the U.S. Army has a discursive code, it is certainly not restricted but well articulated and wide reaching. It needs no further assistance in its elaboration. It comes to us already expressed in everything from television recruitment advertisements to multi-billion-dollar procurement bills. And as for the congruence requirement, it fails too if not even a scrap of basic realism is achieved. But even so, one cannot claim there to be a fidelity of context between a civilian American teenager shooting enemies in *America's Army* and the everyday minutiae of that civilian teenager, the specificities of his or her social life in language, culture, and tradition. These war games may be fun, they may be well designed, but they are not realist.

By itself *America's Army* is not that successful as a realist text. However, when put in dialogue with two other games, *America's Army* may be seen in a new light as the realist fantasy or illusion it is. These two games are *Special Force*, released by the Lebanese organization Hizbullah, and *Under Ash*, released by the Syrian publisher Dar Al-Fikr.[12] The ideological opposite of *America's Army*, these two games are

America's Army, U.S. Army, 2002

first-person shooters played from the perspective of a young Palestin-
ian participating in the Islamic jihad. They are, in a sense, the same
militaristic narrative as American-made shooters, but seen instead
from the Islamic fighter's point of view, just as the narrative of *Oppos-
ing Force* reverses the perspective of its predecessor *Half-Life.* (The
obvious militaristic fantasy then, of course, is to network players in
Damascus against players in the Israel Defense Forces and battle this
thing out in virtual space.) These Palestinian first-person shooters
have roughly the look and feel of *America's Army,* albeit without the
virtuoso photorealism of detailed texturing, fog, and deep resolution
available in the army's commercially licensed graphics engine. What
differs is narrative, not representation. If one is to take the definition
of realism given earlier—a documentary-like attention to the every-
day struggles of the disenfranchised, leading to a direct criticism of
current social policy—then *Special Force* and *Under Ash* are among
the first truly realist games in existence.

Published by the Central Internet Bureau of Hizbullah, *Special Force*
is a first-person shooter based on the armed Islamic movement in
South Lebanon. The narrative of the game is delivered mostly through
text-based briefings presented at the beginning of each level, which
initiate the player character as a holy warrior fighting against Israeli

America's Army

occupation. The gameplay itself, however, does not carry a strong narrative message, except for sprinklings of pro-intifada and anti-Israeli iconography. The gameplay is based instead on combat scenarios common in first-person shooter games such as traversing minefields, killing enemies, and so on. So while the action in *Special Force* is quite militaristic, it feels like a simple role reversal, a transplant of its American counterparts, with Israelis as the enemies rather than Muslims. The realism of the game is simply its startling premise, that the Palestinian movement is in fact able to depict its own "restricted code" in a shooter game.

Under Ash, from Damascus, depicts a young Palestinian man during the intifada. The game turns the tables on Israeli occupation, letting the gamer fight back, as it were, first with stones, then with guns. The game is not fantasy escapism but instead takes on an almost documentary quality, depicting scenarios from the occupied territories such as the demolishing of Palestinian houses. Combat is central to the narrative, but killing civilians is penalized. In addition, the game is distinctly difficult to play, a sardonic instance of sociopolitical realism in a land fraught with bloodletting on both sides.

Whereas *Special Force* is unapologetically vehement in its depiction of anti-Israeli violence, *Under Ash* takes a more sober, almost

Special Force, Hizbullah Central Internet Bureau, 2003

educational tone. The game's designers describe *Under Ash* as acting in opposition to what they call "American style" power and violence. Realizing that Palestinian youths will most likely want to play shooter games one way or another, the designers of *Under Ash* aim to intervene in the gaming market with a homegrown alternative allowing those youths to play from their own perspective as Palestinians, not as surrogate Americans (as playing *SOCOM* would surreptitiously force them to do). *Under Ash* players, then, have a personal investment in the struggle depicted in the game, just as they have a personal investment in the struggle happening each day around them. This is something rarely seen in the consumer gaming market. The game does nothing to critique the formal qualities of the genre, however. Instead it is a cookie-cutter repurposing of an American-style shooter for the ideological needs of the Palestinian situation. The engine is the same, but the narrative is different.

Now, contrasted with these Palestinian games, *America's Army* does in fact achieve a sort of sinister realism, for it can't help but foreground its own social ideology. It is not a subjugated ideology, but it is indeed an expression of political realities as they exist today in

global military power struggles. Statistics on public opinion illustrate that the average American teenager playing *America's Army* quite possibly *does* harbor a strong nationalistic perspective on world events (even though he or she may be leery of actual war and might never fight in America's real army). The game articulates this perspective. Again, this is not true realism, but like it or not, it is a real articulation of the political advantage felt and desired by the majority of Americans. It takes a game like *Special Force*, with all of Hizbullah's terror in the background, to see the stark, gruesome reality of *America's Army* in the foreground.

The Affect of the Gamer

Now my congruence requirement becomes more clear. It boils down to the affect of the gamer and whether the game is a dreamy, fantastical diversion from that affect, or whether it is a figurative extension of it. With *Special Force* and *Under Ash*—and earlier, but in a more complicated fashion, with *America's Army*—there emerges a true congruence between the real political reality of the gamer and the ability of the game to mimic and extend that political reality, thereby satisfying the unrequited desires contained within it.

As I stress, games are an active medium that requires constant physical input by the player: action, doing, pressing buttons, controlling, and so on. Because of this, a realist game must be realist in doing, in action. And because the primary phenomenological reality of games is that of action (rather than looking, as it is with cinema in what Jameson described as "rapt, mindless fascination"), it follows in a structural sense that the player has a more intimate relationship with the apparatus itself, and therefore with the deployment of realism. The player is significantly more than a mere audience member, but significantly less than a diegetic character. It is the act of doing, of manipulating the controller, that imbricates the player with the game.

So it is because games are an active medium that realism in gaming requires a special congruence between the social reality depicted in the game and the social reality known and lived by the player. This is something never mandated in the history of realist film and may happen only occasionally in gaming depending on the game and

the social context of the player. If one is a Hollywood filmmaker, the challenge is simply to come up with a realistic representation of reality. Or if one is a realist filmmaker, the challenge is to capture the social realities, in some capacity, of the disadvantaged classes. But because of the congruence requirement in gaming, if one is a realist game designer, the challenge is not only to capture the social realities of the disenfranchised but also to inject the game back into the correct social milieu of available players where it rings true.

From this one may deduce that realism in gaming is about a relationship between the game and the player. Not a causal relationship, as the Columbine theory might suggest, but a relationship nonetheless. This is one of the primary reasons why video games absolutely cannot be excised from the social contexts in which they are played. To put it bluntly, a typical American youth playing *Special Force* is most likely not experiencing realism, whereas realism is indeed possible for a young Palestinian gamer playing *Special Force* in the occupied territories. This fidelity of context is key for realism in gaming.

Video games reside in a third moment of realism. The first two are realism in narrative (literature) and realism in images (painting, photography, film). For video games, it is realism in action. This brings us back to Aristotle and the *Poetics*, to be sure, but more particularly to Augusto Boal, for whom Aristotle was "coercive," and to Bertolt Brecht. Whereas the visual arts compel viewers to engage in the act of looking, video games, like a whole variety of digital media, compel players to perform acts. Any game that depicts the real world must grapple with this question of action. In this way, realism in gaming is fundamentally a process of revisiting the material substrate of the medium and establishing correspondences with specific activities existent in the social reality of the gamer. Indeed, in the next chapter, I hope to show how all video games may be interpreted in relation to the current information society, what Deleuze called the society of control.

4

Allegories of Control

Playing the Algorithm

With the progressive arrival of new forms of media over the last century or so and perhaps earlier there appears a sort of lag time, call it the "thirty-year rule," starting from the invention of a medium and ending at its ascent to proper and widespread functioning in culture at large. This can be said of film, from its birth at the end of the nineteenth century up to the blossoming of classical film form in the 1930s, or of the Internet with its long period of relatively hidden formation during the 1970s and 1980s only to erupt on the popular stage in the mid-1900s. And we can certainly say the same thing today about video games: what started as a primitive pastime in the 1960s has through the present day experienced its own evolution from a simple to a more sophisticated aesthetic logic, such that one might predict a coming golden age for video games into the next decade not unlike what film experienced in the late 1930s and 1940s.[1] Games like *Final Fantasy X* or *Grand Theft Auto III* signal the beginning of this new golden age. Still, video games reside today in a distinctly lowbrow corner of contemporary society and thus have yet to be held aloft as an art form on par with those of the highest cultural production.

This strikes me as particularly attractive, for one may approach video games today as a type of beautifully undisturbed processing of contemporary life, as yet unmarred by bourgeois exegeses of the format.

But how may one critically approach these video games, these uniquely *algorithmic* cultural objects? Certainly they would have something revealing to say about life inside today's global informatic networks. They might even suggest a new approach to critical interpretation itself, one that is as computercentric as its object of study. Philippe Sollers wrote in 1967 that interpretation concerns "The punctuation, the *scanning*, the spatialization of texts"; a year later Roland Barthes put it like this: "the space of writing is to be scanned, not pierced."[2] And a few years later, Jameson adopted a similar vocabulary: "Allegorical interpretation is a type of *scanning* that, *moving back and forth across the text*, readjusts its terms in constant modification of a type quite different from our stereotypes of some static or medieval or biblical decoding."[3] Not coincidentally, these three borrow vocabulary from the realm of electronic machines—the "scanning" of electrons inside a television's screen, or even the scanner/parser modules of a computer compiler—to describe a more contemporary, informatic mode of cultural analysis and interpretation.

Indeed, this same "digitization" of allegorical interpretation, if one may call it that, is evident in film criticism of the 1970s and 1980s, concurrent with the emergence of consumer video machines and the first personal computers. This discourse was inaugurated by the 1970 analysis of John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* written by the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*. Their reading is aimed at classical Hollywood films, so it has a certain critical relationship to ideology and formal hegemony. Yet they clearly state that their technique is neither an interpretation (getting out something already *in* the film) nor a demystification (digging through manifest meaning to get at latent meaning).

> We refuse to look for "depth," to go from the "literal meaning" to some "secret meaning"; we are not content with what it says (what it intends to say).... What will be attempted here through a rescansion of these films in a process of active reading, is to make them say what they have to say *within* what they leave unsaid, to reveal their constituent lacks; these are neither faults in the work . . . nor a deception on the part of the author.... They are *structuring absences*.[4]

The influence of computers and informatic networks, of what Gene Youngblood in the same year called the "intermedia network," on the *Cahiers* mentality is unmistakable. Their approach is not a commentary on the inner workings of the cinematic text—as an earlier mode of allegorical interpretation would have required—but a rereading, a rescanning, and ultimately a *word processing* of the film itself. The *Cahiers* style of analysis is what one might term a "horizontal" allegory. It scans the surfaces of texts looking for new interpretive patterns. These patterns are, in essence, allegorical, but they no longer observe the division between what Jameson called the negative hermeneutic of ideology critique on the one hand and the positive hermeneutic of utopian collectivism on the other.[5] This is the crucial point: scanning is wholly different from demystifying. And as two different techniques for interpretation, they are indicative of two very different political and social realities: computerized versus noncomputerized.

Some of Deleuze's later writings are helpful in understanding the division between these two realities. In his "Postscript on Control Societies," a short work from 1990, Deleuze defines two historical periods: first, the "disciplinary societies" of modernity, growing out of the rule of the sovereign, into the "vast spaces of enclosure," the social castings and bodily molds that Michel Foucault has described so well; and second, what Deleuze terms the "societies of control" that inhabit the late twentieth century—these are based around what he calls logics of "modulation" and the "ultrarapid forms of free-floating control."[6] While the disciplinary societies of high modernity were characterized by more physical semiotic constructs such as the signature and the document, today's societies of control are characterized by immaterial ones such as the password and the computer. These control societies are characterized by the networks of genetic science and computers, but also by much more conventional network forms. In each case, though, Deleuze points out how the principle of organization in computer networks has shifted away from confinement and enclosure toward a seemingly infinite extension of controlled mobility:

> A control is not a discipline. In making freeways, for example, you don't enclose people but instead multiply the means of control. I am not saying that this is the freeway's exclusive purpose, but that people

can drive infinitely and "freely" without being at all confined yet
while still being perfectly controlled. This is our future.[7]

Whether it is an information superhighway or a plain old freeway,
what Deleuze defines as control is key to understanding how comput-
erized information societies function. It is part of a larger shift in social
life, characterized by a movement away from central bureaucracies and
vertical hierarchies toward a broad network of autonomous social
actors. As the architect Branden Hookway writes:

> The shift is occurring across the spectrum of information technolo-
> gies as we move from models of the global application of intelligence,
> with their universality and frictionless dispersal, to one of local
> applications, where intelligence is site-specific and fluid.[8]

This shift toward a control society has also been documented in such
varied texts as those of sociologist Manuel Castells, Hakim Bey, and
the Italian autonomist political movement of the 1970s. Even harsh
critics of this shift, such as Nick Dyer-Witheford (author of *Cyber-
Marx*), surely admit that the shift is taking place. It is part of a larger
process of postmodernization that is happening the world over.

What are the symptoms of this social transformation? They are
seen whenever a company like Microsoft outsources a call center from
Redmond to Bangalore, or in the new medical surveillance networks
scanning global health databases for the next outbreak of SARS.
Even today's military has redefined itself around network- and com-
putercentric modes of operation: pilot interfaces for remotely oper-
ated Predator aircraft mimic computer game interfaces; captains in the
U.S. Army learn wartime tactics through video games like *Full Spec-
trum Command*, a training tool jointly developed by the American
and Singaporean militaries; in the military's Future Combat Systems
initiative, computer networks themselves are classified as weapons
systems.

But these symptoms are mere indices for deeper social maladies,
many of which fall outside the realm of the machine altogether—
even if they are ultimately exacerbated by it. For while Bangalore may
be booming, it is an island of exception inside a country still strug-
gling with the challenges of postcolonialism and unequal moderniza-
tion. Computers have a knack for accentuating social injustice, for

widening the gap between the rich and the poor (as the economists have well documented). Thus the claims I make here about the relationship between video games and the contemporary political situation refer specifically to the social imaginary of the wired world and how the various structures of organization and regulation within it are repurposed into the formal grammar of the medium.

As Jameson illustrates in *Signatures of the Visible,* the translation of political realities into film has a somewhat complicated track record, for mainstream cinema generally deals with the problem of politics not in fact by solving it but by sublimating it. Fifty years ago, Hitchcock showed the plodding, unfeeling machinations of the criminal justice system in his film *The Wrong Man.* Today the police are not removed from the crime film genre, far from it, but their micromovements of bureaucratic command and control are gone. The political sleight of hand of mainstream cinema is that the audience is rarely shown the boring minutiae of discipline and confinement that constitute the various apparatuses of control in contemporary societies. This is precisely why Jameson's interpretive method is so successful. Another example: in John Woo's *The Killer,* not only is the killer above the law (or, more precisely, outside it), but so is the cop, both literally in his final bloody act of extrajudicial vengeance and also figuratively in that one never sees the cuffings, the bookings, the indictments, the court appearances, and all the other details of modern criminality and confinement depicted in *The Wrong Man.* Films like *Bad Boys 2* or *Heat* do the same thing. In fact, most cop flicks eschew this type of representation, rising above the profession, as it were, to convey other things (justice, friendship, honor, or what have you). In other words, discipline and confinement, as a modern control apparatus, are rarely represented today, except when, in singular instances like the Rodney King tape, they erupt onto the screen in gory detail (having first erupted from the bounds of film itself and penetrated the altogether different medium of video). Instead, discipline and confinement are upstaged by other matters, sublimated into other representational forms. The accurate representation of political control is thus eclipsed in much of the cinema (requiring, Jameson teaches us, allegorical interpretation to bring it back to the fore), which is unfortunate, because despite its unsexy screen presence, informatic

Civilization III, Firaxis Games, 2001

control is precisely the most important thing to show on the screen if one wishes to allegorize political power today.

Now, what is so interesting about video games is that they essentially invert film's political conundrum, leading to almost exactly the opposite scenario. Video games don't attempt to hide informatic control; they flaunt it. Look to the auteur work of game designers like Hideo Kojima, Yu Suzuki, or Sid Meier. In the work of Meier, the gamer is not simply playing this or that historical simulation. The gamer is instead learning, internalizing, and becoming intimate with a massive, multipart, global algorithm. To play the game means to play
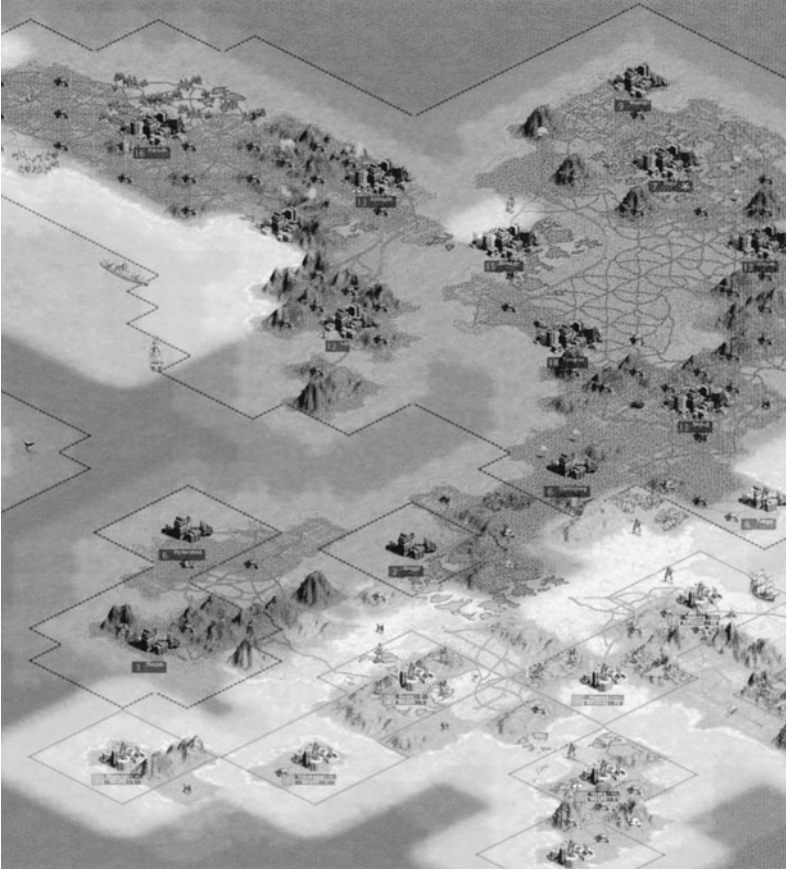
the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus to *interpret* a game means to interpret its algorithm (to discover its parallel "allegorithm").

So today there is a twin transformation: from the modern cinema to the contemporary video game, but also from traditional allegory to what I am calling horizontal or "control" allegory. I suggest that video games are, at their structural core, in direct synchronization with the political realities of the informatic age. If Meier's work is about anything, it is about information society itself. It is about knowing systems and knowing code, or, I should say, knowing *the* system and knowing *the* code. "The way computer games teach structures of thought,"

writes Ted Friedman on Meier's game series *Civilization*, "is by getting you to internalize the logic of the program. To win, you can't just do whatever you want. You have to figure out what will work within the rules of the game. You must learn to predict the consequences of each move, and anticipate the computer's response. Eventually, your decisions become intuitive, as smooth and rapid-fire as the computer's own machinations."[9] Meier makes no effort to hide this essential characteristic behind a veil, either, as would popular cinema. The massive electronic network of command and control that I have elsewhere called "protocol" is precisely the visible, active, essential, and core ingredient of Meier's work in particular and video games in general. You can't miss it. Lev Manovich agrees with Friedman: "[Games] demand that a player can execute an algorithm in order to win. As the player proceeds through the game, she gradually discovers the rules that operate in the universe constructed by this game. She learns its hidden logic—in short, its algorithm."[10] So while games have linear narratives that may appear in broad arcs from beginning to end, or may appear in cinematic segues and interludes, they also have nonlinear narratives that must unfold in algorithmic form during gameplay. In this sense, video games deliver to the player the power relationships of informatic media firsthand, choreographed into a multivalent cluster of play activities. In fact, in their very core, video games do nothing but present contemporary political realities in relatively unmediated form. They solve the problem of political control, not by sublimating it as does the cinema, but by *making it coterminous with the entire game*, and in this way video games achieve a unique type of political transparency.

Buckminster Fuller articulated the systemic, geopolitical characteristics of gaming decades before in his "World Game" and World Design Initiative of the 1960s. The World Game was to be played on a massive "stretched out football field sized world map." The game map was "wired throughout so that mini-bulbs, installed all over its surface, could be lighted by the computer at appropriate points to show various, accurately positioned, proportional data regarding world conditions, events, and resources." Fuller's game was a global resource management simulation, not unlike Meier's *Civilization*. But the object of Fuller's game was "to explore for ways to make it possible for

"City View," *Civilization III*

anybody and everybody in the human family to enjoy the total earth without any human interfering with any other human and without any human gaining advantage at the expense of another." While Fuller's game follows the same logic of *Civilization* or other global algorithm games, his political goals were decidedly more progressive, as he showed in a jab at the American mathematician John von Neumann: "In playing the game I propose that we set up a different system of games from that of Dr. John Von Neumann whose 'Theory of Games' was always predicated upon one side losing 100 percent. His game theory is called 'Drop Dead.' In our World Game we propose to explore and test by assimilated adoption various schemes of 'How to Make the World Work.' To win the World Game everybody must be made physically successful. Everybody must win."[11]

So, broadly speaking, there is an extramedium shift in which films about the absence of control have been replaced by games that fetishize control. But there is simultaneously an intermedium shift, happening predominantly within the cinema. What Jameson called the conspiracy film of the 1970s *(All the President's Men, The Parallax View)* became no longer emblematic at the start of the new millennium. Instead,

films of epistemological reversal have become prominent, mutating out of the old whodunit genre. David Fincher is the contemporary counterpart to Alan Pakula in this regard, with *The Game* and *Fight Club* as masterpieces of epistemological reversal, but one need only point to the preponderance of other films grounded in mind-bending trickery of reality and illusion (*Jagged Edge*, *The Usual Suspects*, *The Matrix*, *The Cell*, *eXistenZ*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Wild Things*, and so on, or even with games like Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear* series) to see how the cinema has been delivered from the oppression of unlocatable capitalism (as in Jameson's view) only to be sentenced to a new oppression of disingenuous informatics. For every moment that the conspiracy film rehashes the traumas of capitalism in the other-form of monumental modern architecture, as with the Space Needle at the start of *The Parallax View*, the knowledge-reversal film aims at doling out data to the audience, but only to show at the last minute how everything was otherwise. The digital can't exert control with architecture, so it does it with information. The genre offers a type of epistemological challenge to the audience: follow a roller coaster of reversals and revelations, and the viewer will eventually achieve informatic truth in the end. I see this fetishization of the "knowledge triumph" as a sort of informatization of the conspiracy film described by Jameson.

But back to video games and how exactly the operator "plays the algorithm." This happens most vividly in many console games, in which intricate combinations of buttons must be executed with precise timing to accomplish something in the game. Indeed, games like

Tekken Tag Tournament, Namco, 1994
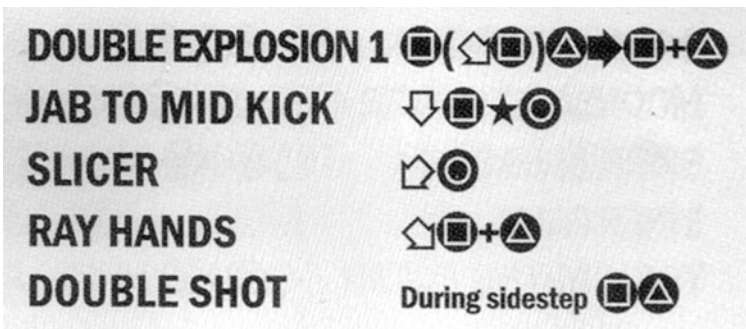
Tekken or *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* hinge on the operator's ability to motor-memorize button combinations for specific moves. The algorithms for such moves are usually documented in the game sleeve by using a coded notation similar to tablature for music ("Up + X-X-O" on a PlayStation controller, for example). Newcomers to such games are often derided as mere "button mashers." But in a broader sense, let us return to Sid Meier and see what it means to play the algorithm at the macro level.

Ideological Critique

After the initial experience of playing *Civilization* there are perhaps three successive phases that one passes through on the road to critiquing this particularly loaded cultural artifact. The first phase is often an immense chasm of pessimism arising from the fear that *Civilization* in particular and video games in general are somehow immune to meaningful interpretation, that they are somehow outside criticism. Yes, games are about algorithms, but what exactly does that matter when it comes to cultural critique? Perhaps video games *have* no politics? This was, most likely, the same sensation faced by others attempting to critique hitherto mystified artifacts of popular culture—Janice Radway with the romance novel, Dick Hebdige with punk style, or Roland Barthes with the striptease. Often it is precisely those places in culture that appear politically innocent that are at the end of the day the most politically charged. Step two, then, consists of the slow process of ideological critique using the telltale clues contained in the game to connect it with larger social processes. (Here is where Caillois, presented in chapter 1 as essentially apolitical, returns with a penetrative observation about the inherent political potential of games, vis-à-vis the question of demystification and institutional critique. Reacting to Huizinga, Caillois writes that "without doubt, secrecy, mystery, and even travesty can be transformed into play activity, but it must be immediately pointed out that this transformation is necessarily to the detriment of the secret and mysterious, which play exposes, publishes, and somehow *expends*. In a word, play tends to remove the very nature of the mysterious. On the other hand, when the secret, the mask, or the costume fulfills a sacramental function

one can be sure that not play, but an institution is involved.")[12] Cri-
tiquing the ideological content of video games is what Katie Salen
and Eric Zimmerman, following Brian Sutton-Smith on play, refer to
as the "cultural rhetoric" of games.[13] For *Civilization*, the political his-
tories of state and national powers coupled with the rise of the infor-
mation society seem particularly apropos. One might then construct
a vast ideological critique of the game, focusing on its explicit logo-
centrism, its nationalism and imperialism, its expansionist logic, as
well as its implicit racism and classism.

Just as medieval scholars used the existence of contradiction in a
text as indication of the existence of allegory, so *Civilization* has within
it many contradictions that suggest such an allegorical interpretation.
One example is the explicit mixing of ahistorical logic, such as the
founding of a market economy in a place called "London" in 4000
BC, with the historical logic of scientific knowledge accumulation or
cultural development. Another is the strange mixing of isometric
perspective for the foreground and traditional perspective for the
background in the "City View."

The expansionist logic of the game is signified both visually and
spatially. "At the beginning of the game," Friedman writes, "almost
all of the map is black; you don't get to learn what's out there until
one of your units has explored the area. Gradually, as you expand
your empire and send out scouting parties, the landscape is revealed."[14]
These specific conventions within both the narrative and the visual
signification of the game therefore reward expansionism, even require
it. Meier's *Alpha Centauri* mimics these semiotic conventions but ups
the ante by positioning the player in the ultimate expansionist haven,
outer space. This has the added bonus of eliminating concerns about
the politics of expansionist narratives, for, one assumes, it is easier to
rationalize killing anonymous alien life-forms in *Alpha Centauri* than
it is killing Zulus in *Civilization III*. Expansionism has, historically,
always had close links with racism; the expansionism of the colonial
period of modernity, for example, was rooted in a specific philosophy
about the superiority of European culture, religion, and so on, over
that of the Asiatic, African, and American native peoples. Again we
turn to Meier, who further developed his expansionist vision in 1994
with *Colonization*, a politically dubious game modeled on the software

Colonization, Micro Prose, 1995

engine used in *Civilization* and set in the period between the discovery of the New World and the American Revolution. The American Indians in this game follow a less-than-flattering historical stereotype, both in their onscreen depiction and in terms of the characteristics and abilities they are granted as part of the algorithm. Later, in *Civilization III,* Meier expanded his stereotyping to include sixteen historical identities, from the Aztecs and the Babylonians to the French and the Russians. In this game, one learns that the Aztecs are "religious" but not "industrious," characteristics that affect their various proclivities in the gamic algorithm, while the Romans are "militaristic" but, most curiously, not "expansionist." Of course, this sort of typing is but a few keystrokes away from a world in which blacks are "athletic" and women are "emotional." That the game tactfully avoids these more blatant offenses does not exempt it from endorsing a logic that prizes the classification of humans into types and the normative labeling of those types.

Worse than attributing a specific characteristic to a specific racial or national group is the fact that ideological models such as these ignore the complexity, variation, and rich diversity of human life at many
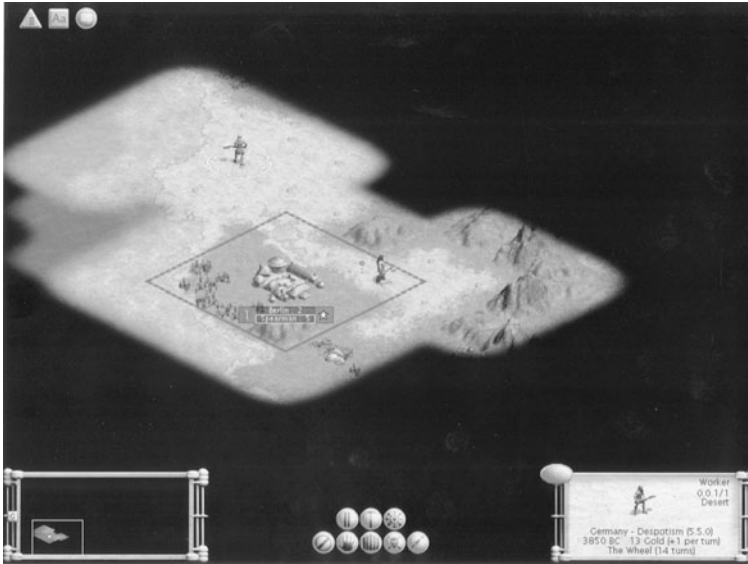
Civilization III

levels: the *Civilization III* algorithm ignores change over time (Tsarist Russia versus Soviet Russia); it erases any number of other peoples existing throughout history the Inuit, the Irish, and on and on; it conflates a civilization with a specific national or tribal identity and ignores questions of hybridity and diaspora such as those of African Americans or Jews. In short, it transposes the many-layered quality of social life to an inflexible, reductive algorithm for "civilization"—a process not dissimilar to what Marxists call reification, only updated for the digital age. (The reason for doing this is, of course, a practical one: to create balanced gameplay, game designers require an array of variables that can be tweaked and tuned across the various environments and characters.) And while one needs no further proof of the game's dubious political assumptions, I might point out that the game is also a folly of logocentrism; it is structured around a quest for knowledge, with all human thought broken down into neatly packaged discoveries that are arranged in a branching time line where one discovery is a precondition for the next. But so much for ideological scrutiny.

Civilization	Commercial	Expansionist	Industrious	Militaristic	Religious	Scientific
Americans		X	X			
Aztecs				X	X	
Babylonians					X	X
Chinese			X	X		
Egyptians			X		X	
English	X	X				
French	X		X			
Germans	X	X				
Greeks	X					X
Indians	X				X	
Iroquois		X			X	
Japanese				X	X	
Persians			X			X
Romans	X			X		
Russians		X				X
Zulus		X		X		

"Civilization Characteristics," *Civilization III*

Informatic Critique

In conjunction with these manifest political investigations, the third step is to elaborate a formal critique rooted in the core principles of informatics that serve as the foundation of the gaming format. The principles adopted by Manovich in *The Language of New Media* might be a good place to begin: numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding. But to state this would simply be to state the obvious, that *Civilization* is new media. The claim that *Civilization* is a control allegory is to say something different: that the game plays the very codes of informatic control today. So what are the core principles of informatic control? Beyond Manovich, I would supplement the discussion with an analysis of what are called the protocols of digital technology. The Internet protocols, for example, consist of approximately three thousand technical documents

published to date outlining the necessary design specifications for specific technologies like the Internet Protocol (IP) or Hypertext Markup Language (HTML). These documents are called RFCs (Request for Comments). The expression "request for comments" derives from a memorandum titled "Host Software" sent by Steve Crocker on April 7, 1969 (which is known today as RFC number 1) and is indicative of the collaborative, open nature of protocol authorship (one is reminded of Deleuze's "freeways"). Called "the primary documentation of the Internet,"[15] these technical memorandums detail the vast majority of standards and protocols used today on game consoles like the Xbox as well as other types of networked computers.[16]

Flexibility is one of the core political principles of informatic control, described both by Deleuze in his theorization of "control society" and by computer scientists like Crocker. The principle derives from the scientist Paul Baran's pioneering work on distributed networks, which prizes flexibility as a strategy for avoiding technical failure at the system level. Flexibility is still one of the core principles of Internet protocol design, perhaps best illustrated by the routing functionality of IP, which is able to move information through networks in an ad hoc, adaptable manner. The concept of flexibility is also central to the new information economies, powering innovations in fulfillment, customization, and other aspects of what is known as "flexible accumulation." While it might appear liberating or utopian, don't be fooled; flexibility is one of the founding principles of global informatic control. It is to the control society what discipline was to a previous one.

Flexibility is allegorically repurposed in *Civilization* via the use of various sliders and parameters to regulate flow and create systemic equilibrium. All elements in the game are put in quantitative, dynamic relationships with each other, such that a "Cultural Victory" conclusion of the game is differentiated from a "Conquest Victory" conclusion only through slight differences in the two algorithms for winning. The game is able to adjust and compensate for whatever outcome the operator pursues. Various coefficients and formulas (the delightfully named "Governor governor," for example) are tweaked to achieve balance in gameplay.

What flexibility allows for is universal standardization (another crucial principle of informatic control). If diverse technical systems

Civilization III

are *flexible* enough to accommodate massive contingency, then the
result is a more robust system that can subsume all comers under the
larger mantle of continuity and universalism. The Internet protocol
white papers say it all: "Be conservative in what you do, be liberal in
what you accept from others."[17] The goal of total subsumption goes
hand in hand with informatic control. The massive "making equiva-
lent" in *Civilization*—the making equivalent of different government
types (the most delicious detail in early versions of Meier's game is
the pull-down menu option for starting a revolution), of different
victory options, of formulaically equating *n* number of happy citizens
with the availability of luxuries, and so on—is, in this sense, an alle-
gorical reprocessing of the universal standardizations that go into the
creation of informatic networks today. In Meier, game studies looks
more like game theory.

In contrast to my previous ideological concerns, the point now is
not whether the *Civilization* algorithm embodies a specific ideology of
"soft" racism, or even whether it embodies the core principles of new
media adopted from Manovich, but whether it embodies the logic of
informatic control itself. Other simulations let the gamer play the

logic of a plane (*Flight Simulator,* or Meier's own flying games from the 1980s), the logic of a car *(Gran Turismo),* or what have you. But with *Civilization,* Meier has simulated the total logic of informatics itself.

But now we are at an impasse, for the more one allegorizes informatic control in *Civilization,* the more my previous comments about ideology start to unravel. And the more one tries to pin down the ideological critique, the more one sees that such a critique is undermined by the existence of something altogether different from ideology: informatic code. So where the ideological critique succeeds, it fails. Instead of offering better clues, the ideological critique (traditional allegory) is undermined by its own revelation of the protocological critique (control allegory). In video games, at least, one trumps the other. Consider my previous claims about Meier's construction of racial and national identity: the more one examines the actual construction of racial and national identity in the game, the more one sees that identity itself is an entirely codified affair within the logic of the software. Identity is a data type, a mathematical variable. The construction of identity in *Civilization* gains momentum from offline racial typing, to be sure, but then moves further to a specifically informatic mode of cybernetic typing: capture, transcoding, statistical analysis, quantitative profiling (behavioral or biological), keying attributes to specific numeric variables, and so on. This is similar to what Manovich calls the logic of selection—or what Lisa Nakamura calls "menu-driven identities"—only now Manovich's pick-and-choose, windowshopper logic of graphical interfaces governs a rather distinct set of human identity attributes. As Nakamura laments, "Who can—or wants to—claim a perfectly pure, legible identity that can be fully expressed by a decision tree designed by a corporation?"[18] So the skin tone parameters for player character construction in everything from *Sissyfight* to *World of Warcraft* are not an index for older, offline constructions of race and identity, although they are a direct extension of this larger social history, but instead an index for the very dominance of informatic organization and how it has entirely overhauled, revolutionized, and recolonized the function of identity. In *Civilization,* identity is modular, instrumental, typed, numerical, algorithmic. To use history as another example: the more one begins to think that *Civilization* is about a certain ideological interpretation of his-

tory (neoconservative, reactionary, or what have you), or even that it creates a computer-generated "history effect," the more one realizes that it is about the absence of history altogether, or rather, the transcoding of history into specific mathematical models. History is what hurts, wrote Jameson—history is the slow, negotiated struggle of individuals together with others in their material reality. The modeling of history in computer code, even using Meier's sophisticated algorithms, can only ever be a reductive exercise of capture and transcoding. So "history" in *Civilization* is precisely the opposite of history, not because the game fetishizes the imperial perspective, but because the diachronic details of lived life are replaced by the synchronic homogeneity of code pure and simple. It is a new sort of fetish altogether. (To be entirely clear: mine is an argument about informatic control, not about ideology; a politically progressive "*People's Civilization*" game, à la Howard Zinn, would beg the same critique.) Thus the logic of informatics and horizontality is privileged over the logic of ideology and verticality in this game, as it mostly likely is in all video games in varying degrees.

So this is not unique to *Civilization*. The other great simulation game that has risen above the limitations of the genre is *The Sims*, but instead of seizing on the totality of informatic control as a theme, this game does the reverse, diving down into the banality of technology, the muted horrors of a life lived as an algorithm. As I have alluded to in Jameson, the depth model in traditional allegorical interpretation is a sublimation of the separation felt by the viewer between his or her experience of consuming the media and the potentially liberating political value of that media. But video games abandon this dissatisfying model of deferral, epitomizing instead the flatness of control allegory by unifying the act of playing the game with an immediate political experience. In other words, *The Sims* is a game that delivers its own political critique up front as part of the gameplay. There is no need for the critic to unpack the game later. The boredom, the sterility, the uselessness, and the futility of contemporary life appear precisely through those things that represent them best: a middle-class suburban house, an Ikea catalog of personal possessions, crappy food and even less appetizing music, the same dozen mindless tasks over and over—how can one craft a better critique of contemporary

life? This is the politically dubious, but nonetheless revealing, quality of play identified by Adorno in the supplement to his *Aesthetic Theory:* "Playful forms are without exception forms of repetition"; "In art, play is from the outset disciplinary."[19]

As an entire genre, the first-person shooter also illustrates this type of allegorical interpretation of info-politics. Dash the naysayers, the shooter is an allegory of liberation pure and simple. This complicated genre is uncomplicated. There can be no better format for encoding and reprocessing the unvarnished exertion of affective force. I think of *Unreal Tournament* or *Counter-Strike* as the final realization of André Breton's dream of the purest surrealist act: the desire to burst into the street with a pistol, firing quickly and blindly at anyone complicit with what he called "the petty system of debasement and cretinization." The shooter as genre and the shooter as act are bound together in an intimate unity. The shooter is not a stand-in for activity. It *is* activity. (Just as the game is not a stand-in for informatics but *is* informatics.) The experience of the shooter is a "smooth" experience, to use Deleuze and Guattari's term, whereby its various components have yet to be stratified and differentiated, as text on one side and reading or looking on the other. In this sense, the aesthetics of gaming often lack any sort of deep representation (to the extent that representation requires both meaning and the encoding of meaning in material form). Allegory has collapsed back to a singularity in gaming. In fact, the redundancy in the vocabulary says it all: "the cultural logic of informatics." The activity of gaming, which, as I've stressed over and over, only ever comes into being when the game is actually played, is an *undivided* act wherein meaning and doing transpire in the same gamic gesture.

A Theory of Pretending

This last point may be recontextualized through a fundamental observation about video games made at the outset of this book, that games let one *act*. In fact, they require it; video games are actions. Now, following the definition of literary allegory as "other-speak,"[20] I must define the gamic allegory: it is "other-act." The interpretation of gamic acts, then, should be thought of as the creation of a secondary discourse

narrating a series of "other-acts." A century ago, Maurice Blondel suggested the word "allergy," following his theory of "coaction" or "another's action."[21] Blondel's use of the term assumes the existence of more than one individual, yet it is still an interesting influence because of his focus on parallel actions. Coaction proper in the context of video gaming would mean something like multiplayer action, which itself would need to be supplemented with a reading of the allegorical multiact. Either way, the interpretation of gamic acts is the process of understanding what it means to *do* something and mean something else. It is a science of the "as if." The customary definition of allegory as "extended metaphor" should, for games, be changed to "*enacted* metaphor." (In fact, for their active duality, zeugma or syllepsis are even more evocative figures of speech.) When one plays *Civilization,* there is one action taking place, but there is more than one significant action taking place. This is the parallelism necessitated by allegory. The first half of the parallelism is the actual playing of the game, but the other is the playing of informatics. For video games, one needs a *theory of pretending,* but only in the most positive sense of the term, as a theory of actions that have multiple meanings.

Again, Bateson: "The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite."[22] So the roll of control allegory is—methodologically but not structurally—to see the nip and process neither the nip nor the bite, but instead what the bite denotes. I say methodologically but not structurally because there is no camouflage here: the playful video game may metacommunicate "this is play," but it can never avoid also being informatic control.

In this sense, I suggest that the game critic should be concerned not only with the interpretation of linguistic signs, as in literary studies or film theory, but also with the interpretation of *polyvalent doing.* This has always been an exciting terrain for hermeneutics, albeit less well traveled, and in it one must interpret material action instead of keeping to the relatively safe haven of textual analysis.

The critical terrain has likewise shrunk in the age of interactive media from a two-way relationship involving the text and the reader-as-critic to a singular moment involving the gamer (the doer) in the act of gameplay. The game-as-text is now wholly subsumed within the category of the gamer, for he or she creates the gamic text by doing.

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."