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

Notes

4. I have never been happy with the word “interactivity.” “I find the concept to be too broad to be truly useful,” Lev Manovich writes. Because it is too broad, the concept is not included as a central principle of new media by Manovich. Most so-called old media are also interactive, he goes on to claim: “All classical, and even moreso modern, art is ‘interactive’ in a number of ways. Ellipses in literary narration, missing details of objects in visual art, and other representational ‘shortcuts’ require the user to fill in missing information.” See Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 55–56. This echoes what Umberto Eco calls the lazy machine: “Every text, after all, is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work.” See Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3. It is my contention, though, that traditional “texts” are not machines at all, at least not in the way that a computer is a machine. Thus I make a distinction between those art forms that require the physical action of both the user and the work for the work to exist, and those that do not. In the end, of course, such distinctions are largely strategic, aiming to elevate a new medium by laying claim to some space of aesthetic specificity, a pursuit repeated over and over in the various avant-gardes and artistic zigzags of the modern era.


8. Gérard Genette uses “extradiegetic” (instead of “nondiegetic”) to designate the narrating instance itself, as opposed to the actual narration: “Any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed. M. de Renoncourt’s writing of his fictive Mémoires is a (literary) act carried out at a first level, which we will call extradiegetic; the events told in those Mémoires (including Des Grieux’s narrating act) are inside this first narrative, so we will describe them as diegetic, or intradiegetic.” See Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 228.

The question of narrative is somewhat controversial in game studies: the narratologists claim that video games are simply interactive narratives, while the ludologists claim that games must be defined separately from the concept of narrative. At the end of the day, I side with the ludologists, but I find that the diegetic-nondiegetic split, despite being rooted in a theory of narrative, is
still useful for understanding the different types of gamic action. For a good analysis of how narrative fits into gameplay, see Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, chapter 26 of Rules of Play (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 377–419.

9. My distinction here is similar to the one made by Nick Montfort in his analysis of interactive fiction. His “commands” are my diegetic operator acts; “directives” are nondiegetic operator acts; “replies” are diegetic machine acts; and “reports” are nondiegetic machine acts. See Montfort, Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 25–28.

10. This phrase was suggested by Katie Salen.


12. The purest form of this is probably found in Maurice Blondel, Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). James Somerville’s Total Commitment: Blondel’s “L’Action” (Washington, D.C.: Corpus, 1968) is a useful secondary source on Blondel’s text. Blondel’s interest is the irreducibility of action. Today the word “interactive” is often invoked to describe the coupling of user and machine, but Blondel’s concept of action is more singular, more oriented around the individual life, or what he called the whole of man. “Yes or no, does human life make sense, and does man have a destiny?”—this query begins what is perhaps the most extensive and uncompromising consideration of action in the history of philosophy. “It is into action that we shall have to transport the center of philosophy” is his premise, “because there is also to be found the center of life” (3, 13). And so I take Blondel as inspiration, but not for the motivations of action, and not the consequences of action, nor the moral foundations of this or that action. Those related debates in the analytic philosophy tradition try to derail a study of pure action by reducing it to other topics, as if a study of causes and effects could shed any light on the actual phenomenon of doing. Blondel’s book aims to answer, not unlike Descartes, a foundational question for human destiny. “In my acts,” he wrote, “in the world, inside of me, outside of me, I know not where or what, there is something” (52). Indeed, the same theme has reoccurred often in philosophy, from Epicurus’s “swerve” of atoms as they fall through space to Deleuze and Guattari’s “refrain” abetting the forces of chaos.


14. Ibid., 436. The seeming irrationality of “deep play” in cockfighting goes against the source of the expression, which is found in Jeremy Bentham: “Take away from a man the fourth part of his fortune, and you take away the fourth part of his happiness, and so on. . . . It is to this head that the evils
of deep play ought to be referred. Though the chances, so far as relates to money, are equal, in regard to pleasure, they are always unfavourable. I have a thousand pounds. The stake is five hundred. If I lose, my fortune is diminished one-half; if I gain, it is increased only by a third. Suppose the stake to be a thousand pounds. If I gain, my happiness is not doubled with my fortune; if I lose, my happiness is destroyed; I am reduced to indigence.” See Bentham, Theory of Legislation (London: Trubner, 1871), 106.

15. Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 444.
16. Ibid., 446.
18. Indeed, for Schiller the play-drive is synonymous with man’s moral freedom and his aesthetic experience. See, in particular, letters 14 and 15 of Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).
19. Huizinga, Homo Ludens, 28. A slightly more detailed summary of the concept appears earlier in the book: “Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means” (13).
22. “All these [objectionable] hypotheses have one thing in common: they all start from the assumption that play must serve something which is not play.” Huizinga, Homo Ludens, 2.
23. Caillois, Man, Play and Games, 10, 11.
24. Vilém Flusser, in a nod to Huizinga’s own simple periodization from Homo sapiens to Homo faber to Homo ludens, underscores the eventual transformation of play into algorithmic terms by using the word “program”: “The new human being is not a man of action anymore but a player: homo ludens as opposed to homo faber. Life is no longer a drama for him but a performance. It is no longer a question of action but of sensation. The new human being does not wish to do or to have but to experience. He wishes to experience, to know and, above all, to enjoy. As he is no longer concerned with things, he has no problems. Instead, he has programs.” Flusser, The Shape of Things (London: Reaktion, 1999), 89.


29. “If one takes the line of thought that runs from Heraclitus via Nietzsche to Deleuze and Derrida,” McKenzie Wark writes, “one might rather say that play is a free movement that can engender more rigid structures. It is not the game that is the preconditions of play, in other words, but play that is the condition of possibility of the game. Brian Massumi argues this most cogently in his book *Parables of the Virtual.*” See Wark, “Designer Playtime,” *Rhizome Digest*, January 5, 2004.


35. This same machinic logic of image making is evoked in John Simon’s 1997 Internet artwork *Every Icon*. The work draws every image that is combinatorially possible within a $32 \times 32$ pixel square by sequentially turning on and off pixels. In essence, the work is binary mathematics turned into image.


2. Origins of the First-Person Shooter


8. Bonitzer continues: “There is a misinterpretation [in the film] which fails to understand that it is not at the place of the subject that the camera operates, but at the place of the Other.” Bonitzer, “Partial Vision: Film and the Labyrinth,” *Wide Angle* 4, no. 4 (1981): 58.


11. A much deeper discussion of dream sequences should, ideally, be included in this section. For more on this area, see R. T. Eberwein, “The Filmic Dream and Point of View,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1980). I avoid analyzing these types of scenes primarily because dream sequences, while often employing the subjective camera, generally remain in an extradiegetic, imaginary narrative zone within the mind of the character. Dream sequences are indeed subjective, but they are not actual and therefore are not constrained by the same formal logic as are other types of scenes. The reader should, for the time being, bundle dream sequences under my heading “Mental Affect.”


3. Social Realism


2. Because cinema has the image as its central material form, it follows that representation would be the primary problematic around which many debates turn, with the politically progressive solutions of, on the one hand, realism with its removal of the apparatus or, on the other, countercinema with its revelation of the apparatus. But being based on actions rather than images, games quite naturally would turn around a different problematic, something like message sending or “correspondences” where the core issue is not about mimesis or realistic depiction but about the fidelity of action to image, of motion to outcome.


9. See also Shuen-shing Lee’s “‘I Lose, Therefore I Think’: A Search for


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 Buckmister 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).


10. Manovich, The Language of New Media, 222.
12. Caillois, Man, Play and Games, 4.
15. Pete Loshin, Big Book of FYI RFCs (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2000), xiv.
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.

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).


5. Ibid., 80–89.


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.


