Ethical Interactivity: An Aesthetics of Intervention in Videogames

By

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Student Declaration

I, Michael Ryan Skolnik, declare that the examinable outcome:

Contains no material which has been accepted for the award to the candidate of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text of the examinable outcome.

To the best of my knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the examinable outcome; and

Where the work is based on joint research or publications, discloses the relative contributions of the respective workers or authors.

Signed:

February 19, 2014
Abstract

This thesis isolates and describes a set of conditions in which ethical activity can fully develop through interventionist video game design and play, which the author terms “ethical interactivity.” While it is increasingly argued that videogames have the power to effect positive social change because of the affordances of the videogame medium (Bogost 2007; Flanagan 2009; McGonigal 2011), concepts for how this process of social change works and justifications for particular designs for interventionist works are comparably sparse (Frasca 2001b; Frasca 2007). This thesis focuses on aesthetics, both as a branch of philosophy dealing with beauty and artfulness, and as the set of creative/design decisions that are a part of the process of creating a specific cultural artefact, or art work. It adopts an instrumentalist approach to interventionist aesthetics, which is to say that it axiomatically takes aesthetic value to be “the capacity to produce an aesthetic experience of some magnitude” (Beardsley 1969, p. 318). In the case of interventionist art works, the work is aesthetically valuable in so far as it has the capacity to “‘play’ with the audience’s fundamental beliefs, and to provoke a potential crisis in those beliefs, without producing immediate rejection” (Kershaw 1992, p.28). This thesis also advocates for certain creative/design decisions which it argues are more conducive to ethical interactivity, which it refers to as “an aesthetics of intervention” for videogames.

Methodologically, this thesis conducts deep readings of relevant interdisciplinary areas of scholarship: game studies, performance theory, Alain Badiou’s Event ethics, theories of deliberative democracy and public sphere theory from a constructivist perspective. It also examines case studies of interventionist game design and play. It covers these topics in order to propose a coherent aesthetics for videogame intervention in the sense of an aggregate of desirable creative and design decisions; detailing a persistent ethical process by which participatory gameplay can lead to shifts in the fundamental belief structures of the participants and spread throughout societies at large through participatory democratic deliberation. To that end, it examines the nature and structure of participation and engagement in games, arguing against an immersive framework for understanding the videogame medium (Murray 1997; Grau 2003) in favour of a performative framework based on different framings for the range of actions that a player undertakes in relation to his/her multiple roles as social actor, player, and player-character (Goffman 1974; Fine 1983; Mackay 2001; Skolnik 2008b; Sicart 2011). This anti-immersive framework is linked to 20th Century anti-immersive interventionist theatre aesthetics (Meyerhold 1967; Artaud 1974; Brecht 1974; Boal 1979).
2002; Feltham 2006) in order to propose adapting these aesthetics to the videogame medium in order to make politically efficacious interventions using videogames.
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Introduction

Research Questions

This thesis’ primary goal is to isolate and describe a set of conditions in which ethical activity can develop in relation to games. Ethical activity can manifest itself in the act of playing, watching, or otherwise participating in the game and its surrounding culture, and it is central to the idea that games can be an interventionist medium. To that end, it addresses the following, related, central research questions:

1) What baseline conditions are necessary for ethical activity to occur?
2) How is ethical activity characterised philosophically?
3) How can ethical activity be designed for?
4) How does ethical activity relate to the experience of gameplay?
5) How does ethical activity during gameplay translate to change in everyday social life?

Epistemological Position

This research is grounded in a constructivist epistemology; that is, the notion that knowledge, or meaning, is socially and culturally negotiated:

>[Constructivism] is the view that **all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent on human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.**

(Crotty 1998, p. 42)

Along these lines, constructivist epistemology’s main tenet is that meaning “[comes] out of an interplay between subject and object” (Crotty 1998, p. 9), in contrast to objectivist epistemology’s view that meaning is inherent in objects “apart from any operation of consciousness” (Crotty 1998, p. 8), and to subjectivist epistemology’s view that meaning “is imposed on the object by the subject,” but comes from “anything but an interaction between the subject and the object to which it is ascribed” (Crotty 1998 p. 9).
The main reason that the thesis adopts this epistemological position is that the idea of an object’s meaning arising from the interplay between a subject and the object is directly relevant to current debates about the ways that games have meaning. In Chapter 5, the thesis mounts a critique of the procedural approach to videogame studies, which holds that the objectivist epistemological position that the meaning of a game is inherent in its rules and is a reflection of the designer’s intent (Bogost 2007). While interventionist videogames hinge on a deliberate intervention by the designer into a given social or political situation, the designer does not get to decide whether the intervention is efficacious or not, the player does after experiencing the game and evaluating it in relation to their socially and culturally contingent vantage point.

This epistemological position relates directly to some of the thesis’ key research questions and the answers to them that it proposes. Designing for ethical interactivity becomes a matter of how to craft a player experience that engages the player in reflecting on both the game as an aesthetic object and on their sociocultural position in relation to the issue that is the topic of the intervention. In effect, this thesis positions interventionist games as a form of constructivist learning environment: “a place where people can draw upon resources to make sense out of things and construct meaningful solutions to problems. Adding ‘constructivist’... emphasiz[es] the importance of meaningful, authentic activities” (Wilson 1996, p. 3). Constructivist learning environments are held to be useful because “all principles, by themselves are abstract. They become concrete only in the consequences which result from their application” (Dewey 1997, p. 20). Constructivist learning environments emphasize students applying abstract principles to their experience, making these principles concrete.

This positioning fits with the thesis’ advocacy for particular interventionist aesthetics, most notably Augusto Boal’s Aesthetics of the Oppressed, in which the creators of aesthetic objects “concentrate [their] efforts and focus [their] attention on the creation of condition in which the oppressed can develop fully their metaphoric world” (Boal 2006, p. 40).

Theoretical Perspectives

As Luke Feast and Gavin Melles, discussing tertiary design research, describe, the constructivist epistemological position favours particular theoretical perspectives, research methodologies and methods that align with the way constructivism holds that knowledge is produced and spread: “[T]here are three main positions which in turn build on theories of
designing as either, direct making, reflective practice or rational problem-solving and which broadly correspond with subjectivist, constructionist and objectivist epistemologies” (Feast and Melles 2010, p. 1).

Citing Michael Crotty (1998, p.5), Feast and Melles point to a range of interpretivist theoretical perspectives that develop from the constructivist premise, such as symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics (Feast and Melles 2010, p. 2). This thesis draws on all three of these interpretivist theoretical perspectives, as well as literature issuing from them, at different points.

Centrally, the symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective is used extensively in the sociological and ethnographic study of games, particularly in Erving Goffman’s frame-analytic approach to social life and gameplay (1974), which this thesis uses and adapts extensively, especially in Chapters 3 and 4.

Discussions of the experience of gameplay involve dealing with the participant’s experience of the spatial, temporal and sensory qualities of the game, which the phenomenological theoretical perspective is particularly well suited to examining. This theoretical perspective is used throughout the thesis.

This thesis emphasizes games as a medium for social intervention through communicating or facilitating the interpretation of meanings in players, spectators, and participants. As digital games are programmed, designed objects, mass-produced copies of sets of rules and assemblages of computer code that are ostensibly the same for everyone who consumes them, this opens up questions of authorship and intentionality with respect to a game’s meaning. Among other questions, this is the domain of hermeneutics, and this theoretical perspective is particularly evident in the discussions of interventionist Events in Chapter 1 and procedurality in Chapter 5.

In addition to these interpretivist perspectives, Crotty lists “critical inquiry” and “feminism” (1998, p. 5) as other constructivist theoretical perspectives, and it is safe to assume that other identity-based approached to inquiry and meaning-making also apply here. This thesis uses critical inquiry in general, and identity-focused critical inquiry specifically, as both a theoretical perspective and as a method for generating knowledge from existing literature. Feminist critiques inform the way that this research positions interventionist events, in games or otherwise (Chapter 1), and the ethical deliberations that arise out of them in the public sphere (Chapter 6).
Methods and Methodological Justification

The main method by which this thesis develops new knowledge is through conducting deep and critical readings of existing literature on a range of topics related to games and interventions for social impact: notions of intervention in general, political theatre, the role of space, ethnographic frame analyses, authorship, and deliberative democracy, in order to synthesize new knowledge from reading this literature critically against underexplored backgrounds of knowledge. Additionally, it examines case studies of instances of interventionist, subversive, and unconventional gameplay in the wider context of the game in which these kinds of play take place, and gaming culture in order to provide specific, localized, examples of successful, and unsuccessful, interventionist game design and play.

A note on how “Aesthetics” is used as a term

This thesis engages with two notions of aesthetics - aesthetics in general as a branch of philosophy dealing with the study and appreciation of beauty and artfulness, and localized aesthetics in terms of the set of creative decisions applied in the design and making of specific art objects. The thesis offers an aesthetics for videogame interventions in this latter sense that is informed by, and extends, Boal’s Aesthetics of the Oppressed.

When discussing aesthetics in general, this thesis aligns with instrumentalist aesthetics, the notion that aesthetic value lies in the art work’s “capacity to produce an aesthetic experience of some magnitude” (Beardsley 1969, p. 318). This project deals with the subset of interventionist art objects that are made with the purpose of inducing ethical reflection and action as a specific kind of aesthetic experience, while acknowledging the myriad other avenues for appreciating art works in general (appreciation of beauty or form, subjective association, expression of truth, the creator’s intentionality, and so on).

Instrumentalist aesthetics also align with John Dewey’s notion of pragmatic aesthetics, which this thesis uses in Chapter 4 to discuss videogame puzzles. Pragmatic aesthetics position art as the experience of an object, “aesthetic experiences that take the place of artwork” (Dewey 1934, p. 222).
Context: The aesthetic and political problem of spectacular interactivity

In “The New Global Culture: Between Corporate Multiculturalism and the Mainstream Bizarre (a border perspective),” performance theorist and artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña raises two related critiques of cultural shifts arising from interactive media, among others. First, he argues that in a wider political context, interactivity has led to a condition in which we are under the illusion of being able to talk back to power, which precludes us from taking back power. There are ample venues for the apparent act of talking back to take place, but the nature and effects of this talk are both always already co-opted by those in power:

> Our new culture encourages everyone to have an opinion and express it (not an informed opinion). Not to act upon it, just to express it, as a kind of placebo or substitute for action. No matter how bombastic or “transgressive” our views may be, hey, if they make for good spectacle they will always be welcome – and forgotten immediately. Citizen participation is encouraged, but not in any significant decision-making process that may effect social change, just in the construction and staging of spectacle.
>
> (Gomez-Peña 2001, p. 15)

This is a potentially harmful state of affairs because democratic deliberation and public opinion-formation are ongoing processes. The way that media outlets package opinions for consumption and forgetting constitute, in the worst case, a silencing tactic, shunting opinions about social and political issues into a separate sphere that is isolated from decision-making power. This kind of spectacular interactivity is at the root of Guy Debord’s cultural critique in *The Society of the Spectacle*, in which he argues that a false consciousness that he terms “the spectacle” serves as a ground for all social experience in industrial and post-industrial societies. In more pessimistic interpretations, it serves as the ground for social experience:

> The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that was once directly lived has become mere representation. [...] [The spectacle] is the very heart of society’s real unreality. In all its specific manifestations – news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment – the
spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice. In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system. It further ensures the permanent presence of that justification, for it governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself. 

(Debord 2008, pp. 12-13)

Simply stated, Gomez-Peña mounts a Debordian argument that since embracing modern conditions of production, meaningful citizen participation in decision-making has been increasingly replaced by the interactive illusion of such to the benefit of elites in positions of power and to the detriment of everyone else – precisely the problem that democracy is meant to avoid.

Jean Baudrillard, in “The Precession of Simulacra,” goes even further than Debord, arguing that social reality is an inescapable web of representations that cannot be differentiated from the reality that is supposed to underpin those representations – meaning that the spectacular false consciousness, which Baudrillard calls hyperreality, is not just a social construct (as per Debord) but an epistemological given (Baudrillard 2006, p. 454). This tradition of media criticism, branching off from the concerns of the Frankfurt School, points to the problem of spectacular interactivity, even though Baudrillard explicitly avoids making any claims about how people should live their lives in a hyperreal world.

Gomez-Peña’s critique dovetails with Baudrillard and Habermas’ respective critiques of opinion polls. Baudrillard argues that participating in opinion polls is a simulacral political involvement, as well as a part of an exercise that constructs a notion of “the masses” and public opinion rather than reflecting reality (Butler 1999, pp. 131-6). Habermas links statistical polling to the decline of the public sphere and rational-critical debate as polls disassociate public opinion from reasons and justifications for said opinion, in favour of mass-media construction of public opinion through statistical polling (1989, pp. 211-222).

With this problematic situation of spectacular interactivity established, Gomez-Peña asks how interventionist performance art can function in a society where spectacular interactivity is widespread. On one level, this is about how to differentiate the interactivity in the performance events from this spectacular interactivity on an aesthetic level. Gomez-Peña argues that artists are struggling to find new aesthetic techniques to engage their audiences as techniques that were once in the domain of avant-garde artists, such as audience
participation, have become mainstream and less effective as interventionist tools due to their increasing prevalence of other interactive media:

The illusion of interactivity and citizen participation has definitely changed the relationship between live art and its audience. Audiences are increasingly having a harder time just sitting and passively watching a performance, especially younger audiences. [...] To them there is nothing esoteric about art. Therefore, when attending a live art event, they wish to be included in the process, talk back to the artist, and if possible become part of the actual performance. They are always ready to walk onstage at any invitation from the artist and do something, whatever. It’s karaoke time. It’s a live computer game with the added excitement that people are watching. Given this dramatic epistemological shift, artists and art institutions are pressured to redefine their epistemological relationship with their public.

(Gomez-Peña 2001, p. 15)

Gomez-Peña is concerned with this question on a political level as well as the aesthetic level where performing to audiences that are used to interactivity diminishes interactivity’s interventionist impact. Following Gomez-Peña’s set of concerns about interactivity, this thesis is specifically interested in examining how interactive, interventionist games and performance art events can foster deliberative processes, genuine citizen participation, and effect social change rather than merely be a spectacle. This is partly a matter of the design of the interventionist object, and partly a matter of the player experience of it. This thesis examines both of these sides of intervention as central research questions: “What constitutes efficacious interventions?”, “How can they be designed for?”, and “How do players experience and interpret interventionist works such that social change might occur as a result of them?” Social change is a goal of interventions, though it is not necessarily an immediate goal. Sometimes, interventions are slow-burning fuses. If immediate social change is not a realistic goal for a given intervention, or simply is not the decided-upon goal, how is the performance able to create conditions in which social change can happen over time?

One way to summarize these questions is as follows: “How are spectators/players/participants engaged in the intervention?” and “Once they are, how is the intervention made efficacious in changing the wider social context in which it is intervening?”
Gomez-Peña’s critique of spectacular interactivity does not discount the possibility of interactivity being able to lead to positive social change, but seems to require some rethinking of interactivity in general, the formulation of some kind of ethical interactivity, as a theoretical and practical counterpoint or alternative. His description of his struggles with interactive interventionist performance art suggests that he neither finds his efforts at crafting ethically interactive performance art to be adequately successful nor does he characterize exactly what this different interactivity is or should involve. This is in line with his Debordian critique of consumer culture, but does not fit with Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality because it posits no escape from that epistemological condition, should it exist. On one hand, given Gomez-Peña’s interventionist artistic oeuvre, it seems that intervention would play an important role in an aesthetics grounded in ethical interactivity. Performances like “The Couple in the Cage,” in which Gomez-Peña and Coco Fusco toured several museums and around the United States, posing (poorly) as primitives from an isolated island of Mexico in a caged exhibit, intervened in an everyday situation (people visiting a museum or zoo) in order to “create a satirical commentary on Western concepts of the exotic, primitive Other” (Fusco 1994, p. 143), as well as to interrogate the cultural effects of “the history of ethnographic exhibition of human beings that has taken place in the West over the past five centuries” (ibid). On the other hand, if his deliberate attempts at making artistic interventions are not succeeding to his satisfaction, then it seems that there needs to be more to it than just intervening. Particularly, the aesthetics of intervention need to take into account the particularities of the digital media landscape in which they take place and in which their audiences live, something Gomez-Peña flags as a point of struggle (2001, p. 15).

Stuart Moulthrop examines the connection between intervention and interactive digital media particularly in relation to scholarship, higher education, and pedagogy in “After the Last Generation: Rethinking Scholarship in the days of Serious Play” (2005). Moulthrop suggests that the development of interactive media technologies (the Internet, semantic web, etc.) create particular social conditions as well as a need for new ways to study and create writing/text(uality)/media objects created in those conditions. To encapsulate these changes, Moulthrop argues that, “we experience a major shift in ‘user function’ from the interpretative in writing to the configurative in cybernetic media” (Moulthrop 2005, p. 3). Moulthrop draws on Espen Aarseth’s work on cybertext and videogames to emphasize the need for a different kind of more practical engagement with these interactive media objects. Aarseth argues that:
Games are both object and process; they can’t be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played. Playing is integral, not coincidental like the appreciative listener or reader. The creative involvement is a necessary ingredient in the uses of games.

(Aarseth 2001: online)

In relation to games/new media scholarship, this creative involvement could be argued to require only an engagement with games and new media on these more configurative terms. Simply put, you need to play a game or engage in the feedback-driven act of configuring an interactive cybertext in order to be able to talk about the experience of these media objects. To look only at the representational content of either is to miss the experiential character of these interactive new media objects. Moulthrop argues that there is a need to expand this creative involvement with new media beyond just playing or experiencing the media object, to a notion of creative involvement that includes a substantial productive engagement with code, either directly or at a minimal remove. To put this very simply, an alternation of play and reflection is not enough. We must also play on a higher level, which means that we must build.

(Moulthrop 2005, p. 5)

All of this builds up to Moulthrop proposing a new mode of scholarly engagement around videogames and interactive texts that centres on the scholar making interventions, which he defines as “practical contribution[s] to a media system (e.g., some product, tool, or method) intended to challenge underlying assumptions or reveal new methods of proceeding” (ibid).

Moulthrop proposes four characteristics of interventions:

1) An intervention should belong in the domain of cybertext, constituted as an interface to a database and including a feedback structure and generative logic to accommodate active engagement.

2) It should be a work of production crafted with commonly available media and tools.
3) It should depart discernibly from previous practice and be informed by some overt critical stance, satirical impulse, or polemical commitment, possibly laid out in an argument or a manifesto.

4) It should have provocative, pedagogic or exemplary value, and be freely or widely distributed through some channel that maximizes this value, such as Creative Commons or open-source licensing. Ideally, the infrastructure of the work should either be available to the receiver or documented in sufficient detail to permit productive imitation (Moulthrop 2005, pp. 5-6).

This notion of scholarly interventionist praxis both diverges from and overlaps with Gomez-Peña’s ideal for an ethically interactive, artistic interventionist praxis. The preoccupations with engagement at the level of code, the media and tools with which the intervention is constructed, and the distribution of the intervention do not mesh particularly well with live performance art interventions. However, the emphasis on production methods and materials, active audience engagement involving a feedback process, and a clear political position are central to an interventionist performance project.

While Moulthrop de-emphasizes the representational content and interpretive processes at work in cybertexts, removing these from the equation would hinder any attempt at intervention as well by stifling the political impulse of the interventionist work and by limiting the ways in which the medium would provide feedback for the participants experiencing it.

While Moulthrop’s definition of intervention in scholarship, pedagogy, and artistic production is useful in the context of digital media artefacts, the main definition of intervention that is used throughout this thesis is a less medium-specific one. In *The politics of performance: radical theatre as cultural intervention*, Baz Kershaw defines intervention in general as an act whose purpose is “[to play] with the audience’s fundamental beliefs, and [provoke] a potential crisis in those beliefs without producing immediate rejection” (Kershaw 1992, p. 28). This definition of intervention reflects three very important features of interventionist works; that the choice as to whether the intervention is efficacious,¹ or not lies with the viewer/participant in the intervention, that the intervention can be efficacious in terms of fostering deliberation or more tangible change, and that the intervention’s subject matter and staging has to have high enough stakes to provoke a potential crisis in the viewer/participant’s beliefs for the intervention to be efficacious.

¹ Kershaw uses the words efficacious/efficacy when evaluating interventions and I do the same out of...
Along those lines, I propose three very general features of ethical interactivity in a given medium (including cybertexts per Moulthrop and Aarseth, but also including non-digital interactive media, particularly performance works). Ethical interactivity occurs when:

1) The interactors have editorial control over the medium’s representational content.
2) The medium’s representational content deals with ethical issues and situations, either on an individual level or on a wider social and political one.
3) The medium implicates the interactors in the given ethical/social/political issue by giving them information and choices to make based on that information and by providing open-ended feedback based on those choices.

Taking televised news as an example (one that both Gomez-Peña and Debord cite, though it is one of the less interactive of media forms) the interactivity afforded the news viewership (calling in, for example) would not be considered ethical interactivity because the viewership as interactors do not have meaningful control over the medium's content. In this instance, meaningful control means editorial control. Phone calls, emails, website comments and other attempted interactions are screened by network staff to ensure that interactive involvement stays “on message.” Editorial control is not needed for a media experience to be ethically engaging, but some measure of it is necessary for the media experience to be ethically interactive.

Editorial control deals with the medium’s content, and in order to complete an ethically interactive media experience, the medium’s content would have to deal with ethical situations. Hypothetically, simply giving editorial control of a local network affiliate’s news programming to its viewership would not suffice to make the viewing experience ethically interactive if the presented media product’s content, as determined by that viewership, consisted of nothing but news stories about the cuteness of puppies, for example. For ethical interactivity, the content of the interactive medium clearly matters, which is something that Gomez-Peña hints at, if somewhat bleakly when he states that

“[p]ublic intellectuals [and artists …] must now attempt to speak to students or write for readers who may regard Bill Maher or the performative polemicists of Crossfire as actual public intellectuals. I know. You know. The difference is obvious: ‘content,’ but since content stricto sensu no longer matters, difference makes no difference. In this new convoluted logic, Subcommandate Marcos and Tim McVeigh will be granted equal
status and media coverage, as will Mother Teresa and Princess Diana. The media
invests the banal opinions of Gloria Estefan or Antonio Banderas about Elian, Prop.
227, or Latino electoral politics with greater weight than those of Carlos Fuentes,
Richard Rodrigues, or Ana Castillo.
(Gomez-Peña 2001, pp. 13-4)

This emphasis on celebrity opinion is part of the problem of spectacular interactivity,
but the particular sort of content that ethical interactivity needs in order to operate is not
limited to the views of public intellectuals (although perhaps those ought to be more
welcome). Ethical interactivity requires the content to deal with ethical situations, as
previously mentioned, but also to deal with them in a meaningful, ethical, and interactive
manner. Tentatively, I would suggest that one key way in which this 'meaningfulness'
manifests is in giving interactors information and choices to make with that information that
implicate them in the given represented ethical situation. Ethical interactivity is an
intervention.
Thesis structure

Following this introduction, a literature review is conducted with the particular aim of singling out the most relevant literature and arguments across the main disciplines that this thesis engages with. As the research project that the thesis arises out of is highly interdisciplinary, the literature review aims to provide context for the thesis and situate the interventions that it makes, while demonstrating the judicious selection of relevant and appropriate texts, ideas, arguments, and connections that the thesis explores in relation to the research question. The literature review deals with five such fields:

1) Game studies, particularly game ontology:

As the thesis’ main question is about how intervention can be conceptualized in relation to games, the thesis engages primarily with the field of game studies. The literature review provides an overview of the modern history of the game studies field and then focuses on key contextual issues and questions surrounding the possibilities of efficacious intervention in game spaces: What does it mean to play? How do players experience gameplay? Are players immersed in game worlds, and if so, are there political consequences to relating to a game in that way? Is the meaning of a game embedded in the rules or constructed by the player? How can we design games to maximize their efficacy as interventions?

2) Intervention in theatre and interventionist theatre aesthetics:

This section of the literature review examines the history of Western theatre as a medium for intervention with particular emphasis on the ideological and immersive character of Aristotelian tragedy and the development of anti-immersive theatre aesthetics for different interventionist purposes in the 20th century. The connections between theatre and games as media forms are then elaborated on through an examination of relevant literature from theatre/performance studies, game studies, and critical theory. This section provides context for one of the thesis’ major arguments; that immersion is a politically problematic design goal, players do not engage with games on the level of being immersed, and that anti-immersive aesthetics have the greatest potential for efficacious intervention in the game milieu.

3) Intervention and Badiou’s notion of interventionist ethics:

By Kershaw’s definition, an efficacious intervention involves some kind of ethical deliberation on the part of the spectator/participant. A crisis in that person’s belief system is provoked, and they must resolve this crisis, ideally changing their beliefs for the better in the intervention’s wake. Drawing on Alain Badiou’s Event ethics and critiques thereof, the thesis explores some possibilities for intervention to function as a persistent ethical process by which
this takes place. This section of the literature review contextualizes some of the thesis’ arguments around this point: On an individual subjective level, interventions can function as a Badiouian Event, instigating an ethical truth-process in the spectator/participant, but at an inter-subjective/social level, Badiou’s Event ethics begins to break down. Rather than individuals purely experiencing a subject-constituting Event and an objective Truth that grounds their ethical decisions, as per Badiou, some deliberative norms need to be imposed in order to navigate conflicting views of the same Event and its consequences.

4) Theories of deliberation, democracy, and the public sphere:

Given the importance of the intersubjectivity of interventions and the need to deliberate the meaning and particular ethical value of an intervention, the literature review engages with existing theories of deliberative democracy and of the public sphere in which these deliberations take place. The thesis examines questions such as: What norms govern these deliberations? What norms should govern these deliberations? How do we move from deliberation to change if an intervention turns out to be efficacious?

These fields and sets of questions that the thesis engages with allow for the development of aesthetics of intervention from start to finish, taking into account the series of steps that must be traversed before change can occur. The intervention must be conceived, designed, and staged. It must provoke a crisis in the spectator/participant’s beliefs without producing immediate rejection, it must resonate with that person and cause an internal ethical process to unfold and lead to changed beliefs or justifications for said beliefs, and the inter-subjective character of the intervention and the application of the spectator/participant’s beliefs to the wider society must be deliberated in society at large, where they can gain currency and translate to changes in group behaviour and/or policy.

5) The spatial character of theatre/game interventions:

Interventions in theatre and in games involve a different relationship with space than the everyday one for the spectators and participants. The space in which activities in general and interventions in particular occur structure the spectator/player/participant’s expectations and provide possibilities to subvert, destabilise, and undermine these expectations for interventionist effect. Whether an intervention takes place in a theatre in the round, a black box, a proscenium, a physical game space encapsulated within an ideal (as opposed to strictly material) “magic circle” (Huizinga 1955, p. 8), or a digital game space, players deal with a horizon of expected practices within that space (De Certeau 1984). To complement the general aesthetics of intervention that the thesis provides, a chapter on the spatial quality of interventions and spatial interventionist tactics is included, and this section of the literature
review contextualizes this chapter in particular as well as some overlapping areas throughout the thesis. Intervention in games involves shifts in the relationships between the player and the game’s action, which is tied to the configuration of the space that the action takes place in.

Chapter Structure and Arguments

The literature review is followed by six theoretical chapters that deal with the five fields that the literature review deals with, in an overlapping fashion.

The first chapter, “Intervention as Persistent Ethical Practice,” elaborates on intervention through media, drawing on Kershaw’s definition of intervention, and subsequently exploring the use of 20th century anti-immersive theatre aesthetics as means to create interventions. The chapter concludes with an examination of Alain Badiou’s Ethics of Event as a possible way to explain interventions in relation to a persistent ethical process that the spectators/participants/witnesses to an intervention can employ to account for changes in their behaviour and the wider society’s in the case of exceptionally successful interventions.

The second chapter, “Spatial Intervention Tactics and the Social Construction of Game Space,” further develops this notion of intervention in relation to sociological theories of space and spatial practice. As intervention involves playing with the audience’s beliefs and expectations by manipulating the conventions of the medium, the spatial conventions of the medium and the use of scenographic tactics are central to intervention. Using Joseph DeLappe’s *dead-in-iraq* (2006-present), Blast Theory’s *Desert Rain* (1999), and Brody Condon’s *Sonsbeek Live* (2008) as case studies, this chapter extends the first and second chapter’s arguments about anti-immersive aesthetics and the spectator-action relationship based on De Certeau’s notion of space as social construct.

The third chapter, “Breaking Immersion: Engrossment-based Game Aesthetics,” offers a history of immersion in media, and particularly games, in order to argue that immersion is neither an accurate nor useful concept to describe the experience of intense involvement with games. Using an analysis of analog and digital role-playing games, a game genre viewed as one of the most immersive game genres due to the player’s identification with a character-avatar and decision-making agency, this chapter problematizes immersion as a critical concept for the gameplay experience. As a constructive alternative, this chapter proposes adopting an aesthetics based on Erving Goffman’s notion of *engrossment*, a condition involving the player oscillating between several different referential frames constantly, rather than identifying with the character in the game-world exclusively. This chapter also argues that adopting these
aesthetics leads to more refined and detailed criticism and analysis of games based on how these shifts in frame are designed and accommodated for, as well as how players respond subjectively to these shifts.

The fourth chapter, “Code-breaking and Videogame Engrossment,” extends this analysis of player involvement in order to make aesthetic claims about how to design gameplay sequences in order to foster an experience of engrossment. Examining the relationship between work and reward in videogames, as well as four paradigms of player involvement in games; immersion, engagement, engrossment, and the gamification paradigm, this chapter argues that gameplay that removes the player from immersion in the fictional world of a videogame can be more engaging, enjoyable, and effective for intervention. This chapter also examines two case studies of gameplay sequences; the “Truth” segments of Assassin’s Creed II (Ubisoft 2009), and the core gameplay of Foldit (University of Washington 2008).

The fifth chapter, “Strong and Weak Procedurality,” engages with the notion of intervention in relation to a disputed area of videogame ontology and game studies; the Game-Player Problem. As the literature review touches on in more detail, a major question that the game studies discipline is grappling with at the time of writing is whether to privilege the rule system of games over the player as an object of analysis because of the disputed notion that rules are more objective and therefore more real (Juul 2005; Bogost 2009; Björk & Juul 2012). One particular debate that has flared up around this topic recently is over the idea of proceduralism or procedurality – defined as “the computer’s defining ability to execute a series of rules” (Murray 1997, p. 71). Procedurality is positioned as a central part of digital games as communicative artefacts in the way that the computer crunches the numbers to match output to input (Ibid) as well as being a central site of the game’s objective interpretive meaning – the rules themselves mount rhetorical claims and arguments using “procedural rhetoric,” that is, “a practice of using [computational] processes persuasively” (Bogost 2007, p. 3). On the other side of the debate, most recently and significantly exemplified by Miguel Sicart in “Against Procedurality” (2011: online), the central claim is that players construct meaning through semiotic interpretation of the game’s content that is derived through a performative process of gameplay, which can be viewed as veering toward a subjectivist epistemological approach to games. This chapter aims to reconcile these positions by reconceptualising procedurality as a continuum rather than an on/off binary concept, coining the terms “strong procedurality” and “weak procedurality” to describe the poles of this continuum and linking these concepts to design decisions and modes of player engagement.
through constructivism. Based on two case studies of interventionist game design and gameplay, Gonzalo Frasca's *September 12th* (2003) and Joseph DeLappe's *dead-in-iraq* (2006-ongoing), this chapter argues in favour of adding nuance to game analysis and criticism by looking at the degree of procedurality behind design decisions and their relative interventionist efficacy.

The sixth chapter, “Procedural Rhetoric and the Rhetorical Public Sphere,” extends Bogost’s notion of procedural rhetoric by linking it to models of democratic deliberation, particularly models of the public sphere as an open deliberative space. This chapter offers a historical overview of the public sphere as a concept and three models thereof: Jürgen Habermas’ *bourgeois* model, Nancy Fraser and Selya Benhabib’s model of *sub-altern counterpublics*, and Gerard Hauser’s *rhetorical* model. It examines the sets of norms governing these models of the public sphere and argues that the sub-altern counter-public model and rhetorical model are not mutually exclusive in terms of their norms. It then extends Bogost’s notion of procedural rhetoric to the rhetorical model of the public sphere, highlighting points of convergence and conflict between these theories of rhetorical deliberation.

Over the course of these six chapters, the thesis presents and argues for a coherent aesthetics of intervention in games in terms of a sequence through which interventions can foster social change, with a particular emphasis on the performative character of gameplay. First, the intervention is conceived and designed, including its staging and the way it positions the player/participant/spectator in relation to the action. Based on the strength of the intervention’s procedurality, the player/participant/spectator interprets the intervention’s content in relation to how the rules of the game mounted the intervention’s argument, or through semiotic interpretation of the intervention’s representational content, as appropriate. This can be followed by the player/participant/spectator determining whether the intervention constituted an Event in the sense the Badiou uses the term – whether the crisis provoked by the intervention will result in changes of behaviour spurred on by fidelity to a truth-process derived from the intervention. The intervention can then be dealt with inter-subjectively through the formation of a rhetorical public sphere as different players/participants/spectators can deliberate the meaning of the intervention, which changes to implement, if any, and how so, on a group or wider social policy level.

The thesis also presents secondary arguments for nuanced and holistic modes of game criticism that take into account the many different ways in which games are experienced. These arguments deal with both the political consequences of interventionist game design and play, and with game studies, analyses, and critiques in general. It proposes looking at games
not as procedural or non-procedural, but rather in terms of a spectrum of procedurality that accounts for changes in the gameplay over time. A similar approach is proposed to immersion through engrossment-based aesthetics, where one can look at how specific points in games at which the player’s frame of reference shifts and what purpose, effect, or aesthetic value these shifts can have.

The thesis then concludes with a summary of its major arguments, and a section highlighting areas and avenues for future research along these lines.
In order to discuss what the aesthetic possibilities are for games as an efficacious medium for social or political intervention, it is crucial to define games and the activity of play that they involve, and to engage with traditions in thought that inform our understanding of games as cultural artefacts and phenomena. The questions of what games are, what they do, and how we engage with them are intensely debated and debatable, and the answers to those questions carry implications beyond the disciplinary sphere of games. Far from being ideologically neutral cultural products, games are products of the cultures in which they are produced and received, and products of the ideologies of those cultures. Games and game players construct norms and horizons of expectation with respect to the medium and culture that can enable, stifle, or privilege certain uses of the medium, values, politics, ethics, and people over others.

The field of contemporary game studies traces its roots to interdisciplinary, anthropological and sociological studies of games and their cultural value that were among the dominant approaches to the topic of games and play from the 1930s to the 1990s. Chronologically, Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture* (1938) is often cited as the first antecedent for the contemporary field. Huizinga’s anthropological study of play positions the phenomenon of play as the foundational building block of human civilization and culture: “[In myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primeval soil of play” (Huizinga 1955, p. 5). Examining each of the following cultural phenomena in some depth, Huizinga argues that play is at the foundation of law, war, poetry, art, contemporary (Western) civilization and culture in general. Marshall McLuhan expands upon Huizinga’s idea of play as a foundational building-block of culture in “Games: The Extensions of Man,” a chapter in his landmark book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964). McLuhan argues that different types of societies favour different games based on the orientation of the given society toward either individualism, in which case gambling is a more prevalent game-form, or collectivism, in which case team sports are favoured. Consequently, McLuhan suggests that in order to understand a given culture, one approach is

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2 Psychological studies of play were also prevalent, but did not inform contemporary game studies as much as the anthropological/sociological ones. Sutton-Smith (1997) provides a useful summary of these studies.
to examine the games that they play. This analysis, while interesting, does not capture the full nuance of societies oscillating between these societal orientations. For example, the tension in the United States surrounding online gambling might hint at a shift from a more individualist to a more collectivist orientation, while the emphasis on star players in American team sports might simultaneously suggest the opposite shift.

The connections between play and society were also explored in this interdisciplinary fashion from the 1960s through the mid-1990s, with different disciplinary approaches and concerns commingling. These approaches and the products thereof included analyses and theorizations of the developmental psychology of play (Groos 1898; Piaget 1962; Winnicott 1971), anthropological approaches to the cultural significance of play (McLuhan 1964; Turner 1982; Geertz 1993), and social-dramaturgical approaches to the play-element in ritual, myth, and performance in social and cultural life, among others (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1961; Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974; Schechner 1974; Turner 1982; Fine 1983; Schechner 1988). A brief summary of the history of the social-dramaturgical view will be offered here, though it will be discussed in more depth in a section of the literature review pertaining to immersion.

Erving Goffman positions everyday social life as a series of performances that people undertake to extract the maximum advantage out of interactions (1959), though each different kind of social interaction entails different kinds of performances and different cues to alert the participants to what is going on (a joking tone to symbolize joking, a delineated space for gameplay to symbolize that a game is occurring, and so forth). Drawing on Gregory Bateson (1972), Goffman refers to these sets of cues as frames, which can be thought of as referential frameworks for the activity that shift as the constituent social cues (keys) surrounding them do (Goffman 1974). Victor Turner takes an anthropological approach to the study of ritual in general, highlighting the ways in which rituals and the performance thereof create a “liminal” (in-between) state that serves as a ground for communitas, the essence of community spirit, or an ideally egalitarian social arrangement. (1969, based partly on van Gennep 1909) Van Gennep identified three stages in rites of passage in particular, which he extended to rituals involving transition in general; “separation, margin (or limen [my note: from which ‘liminal’ is derived]), and aggregation” (Turner 1993, p. 94):

Van Gennep has shown that all rites of transition are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or limen), and aggregation. The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of
cultural conditions (a "state); during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the "passenger") is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state; in the third phase, the passage is consummated.

(Ibid.)

One example of this kind of ritual liminality on a group scale is the Bakhtinian notion of Carnival (Bakhtin 1965), where for the duration of the Renaissance Carnival, people adopted masks and new identities and roles, while always being in-between periods of everyday life. While the Carnival was on, social structures broke down temporarily in order for them to be subverted or reaffirmed after the ritual event. Turner extends the performative nature of social life in an anthropological sense, arguing that play is a force underpinning ritual, which creates a liminal space/field where *communitas* manifests, and in which there is the possibility of social affirmation or upheaval leading to new institutions, norms, and customs (1974, pp. 80-83).

On the basis of these very different approaches to games and play, the early history of game studies, before its institutionalisation as a discipline, was highly interdisciplinary and centred on ontologies of games, which can make its products hard to track. One particularly useful summary of the myriad approaches applied to play and games, and the insights that came out of them, is Brian Sutton-Smith’s *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997), which positions these disciplinary approaches as rhetorics through which the topic of games and play have been approached, rhetorics that position play as related to one (or more) overlapping fields:

- Progress: play as a driver of physical and/or mental development for an individual.
- Power: play as a method of building and maintaining social hierarchies and abstracting conflict.
- Identity: play as a method of developing and maintaining individual and collective sociocultural identity.
- The Imaginary: play as the interpretation and assimilation of reality and root of creativity and mental flexibility.
- The Rhetoric of Self: play as indulgence in leisure activities for the positive feedback to the self.
The Rhetoric of Fate: play as an arbiter of fortune primarily through the medium of games of chance.

[...] Frivolity: play as deliberate meaninglessness, as protest and counter-pressure against establishment, authority and rationality (Sutton-Smith 1997, cited in Barton-Ross 2011, pp. 9-10).

Huizinga makes a second major contribution to contemporary game studies through the introduction of the concept of play taking place within a “magic circle” (Huizinga 1955, p. 57), a space separated from everyday social life as the rules of the game are privileged over everyday social norms within it, a separate “sphere of activity [from everyday life] with a disposition of its own” (Huizinga 1955, p. 8). This idea has been particularly generative for game studies because it does not enter into an extended discussion of the myriad different possible ways that players can enter these magic circles and engage with the game’s content, rules, norms, and expectations, depending on how that entry and engagement is structured, which is not within the purview of Huizinga’s project. This has particular relevance in relation to videogames, where different avenues of entry into the magic circle have been theorized to lead to optimal experiences of games in different ways.

One particularly pertinent example of a theory of entry into the magic circle and engagement with games for this research is Janet Murray’s “narratological” work on videogames, in which she argues that entry into the magic circle through developing a sense of immersion in a virtual world is the optimal way to experience the thrills of videogames as narrative objects (1997, p. 82). While I will further elaborate on Murray’s immersive aesthetics in relation to anti-immersive aesthetics and politics in a later section of this review, I am flagging this as particularly important at this stage because it is a controversial point in game ontology as far as the political possibilities of games are concerned. Broadly speaking, I argue that the immersed audience is politically problematic due to the surrender of critical distance that is central to immersion: “[Immersion] is characterized by diminishing critical distance to what is shown and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening” (Grau 2003, p. 13). With no critical vantage point for game players who are swept up in the emotions generated by the unfolding game narrative that their play drives, the ideological content of games is more likely to be normalized subconsciously in a background process.

The dominant tendency in media and cultural studies is to assert that the audience is always actively constructing meaning rather than passively receiving it in the tradition of Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” (1980). Hall argues that media producers encode meaning into the
media texts that audiences encounter and engage with, which these audiences then decode through a semiotic process. This is potentially inadequate in regard to potentially immersive media because being immersed in the framework of a game limits a player’s subjectivity and privileges the producer’s intended decoding process. This would not be a problem if media texts were ideologically neutral, but they are not – they are always reflective of the system of norms and relations in the individual or group that produces them, which are socialized in the wider culture and society that these producers find themselves in and produce their work from.

The second antecedent figure for contemporary game studies is Roger Caillois, a French sociologist whose book, *Man, Play and Games* (1961), focused on the definition and classification of play and games while outlining their social functions. Caillois’ definition of play builds on the characteristics of play offered by Huizinga (1955, pp. 7-12), arriving at the following contested but generative definition of play as an activity which is:

1. **Free**: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion;
2. **Separate**: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;
3. **Uncertain**: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result obtained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player’s initiative;
4. **Unproductive**: creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game;
5. **Governed by rules**: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts;
6. **Make-believe**: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life.

(Caillois 1961, pp. 9-10)

Alongside this definition, Caillois proposes a typology of play and games. Specifically, Caillois proposes four distinct types of games, games of *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), mimicry, and *ilinx* (sensory destabilization) (Caillois 1961, p. 12). These different types of
games have a different degree of reliance on rules. For example, rules ensure a level playing field in games of competition such that the competitive aspect of the game, and, by extension, the act of playing it, can be meaningful as tests of prowess. On the other hand, games of sensory destabilization, such as two people counterbalancing each other while spinning around until they are dizzy, are not concerned with rules. As such, Caillois identifies two types of play that exist on a spectrum; rule-driven play, which he terms *ludus*, and an unstructured play-activity he terms *paidia* (Caillois 1961, p.13).

There are two significant questions that arise out of Caillois’ definition of play in relation to a possible aesthetics of interventionist play and games. First, if play is held to be unproductive in a material sense, should we also hold the activity and the games and playful activities in which play takes place to be sites that are removed from social concerns? If no new objects of material value are produced in the act of play and the situation at the end of play is identical to the situation at the start, then it would follow that no new persistent social relations are formed in the act of play. It would also follow that existing social relations are not reinforced through the act of play, but, as cultural products, games are also not immune to the influence of the dominant hegemonic ideology of the culture in which they are produced. This is not the only reason that Caillois’ definition of play might be flawed in this regard, as networked digital games, particularly massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) feature in-game economies in which players participate, as well as secondary economies in which they buy and sell game characters and items for hard currency (Dibbell 2006). In these situations, gameplay does produce tangible material value, part of the core gameplay mechanics of a game like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) or *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011) is that in the course of gameplay player-characters will acquire items that have value in the game’s internal economy but also in these grey-market secondary economies. This aspect of Caillois’ definition is further blurred by the phenomenon of gamification; the superimposition of game-like frameworks over non-game-like tasks in order to give these tasks the motivational appeal of games (McGonigal 2011). This can produce outcomes with no-material value, for example, *Chore Wars* is a game-like framework that is superimposed over the routine task of doing household chores. Completing chores is rewarded by the player having a cleaner household, but also with points and status markers denoting the fact that they have done these chores, visible to other people “playing.” Other gamification approaches do deal in material rewards and the creation of material value from a set of behaviours. Frequent shopper discounts and rewards are one example of this kind of gamification framework. Buying your coffee from one place can earn you more “coffee points”
to redeem for free coffee in the future. We would not normally think of our daily coffee consumption as play in the same way that we would not think of doing household chores as such, but the concept of play as a non-productive activity is complicated by these recent developments.

Second: if play, particularly in ludus-heavy games, is held to be governed by rules which establish player behaviours and set the tone for play, is the system of rules privileged over the experience of the activity of play to the point where the rules are more important in determining the content and experience of a game or play-activity than the experience of play itself? In other words, do we privilege the content or the form of the medium? While this is hardly a new debate in terms of aesthetics in general, it does take on a particular resonance with regard to games specifically, as they are commonly regarded as objects made to be played by somebody, with the implication that each somebody will play the game differently, and have a different experience of the game as an artefact. One excellent summary of this debate is found in Staffan Björk and Jesper Juul’s conference paper “Zero-Player Games: or: What we talk about when we talk about players,” (2012, online) which features a list of selected references to this line of argumentation, some of which are used in this thesis (Abt 1970; Costikyan 1994; Klabbers 2003; Salen & Zimmerman 2003; Juul 2005; Calleja 2011; Ermi and Mäyrä 2005; Consalvo 2009; and Sicart 2011: cited in Björk & Juul 2012, online). Björk and Juul argue against this “nominally player-centric approach” on the basis that it “downplays central aspects of player behavior and experience in order to promote a specific type of theoretical description” particularly in the way that an ideal player is proposed whose goals in play coincide with the designers’ goals for players rather than taking into account the ways that players can play with and against those expectations that are afforded by the game (2012, online). While this thesis values such subversive play, and agrees with Björk and Juul’s conclusion that holistic approaches to game criticism based on the sum of player experiences are needed, the premise that game criticism is willfully blind to the range of available play styles is contestable.

Debates over the ontology of games, particularly with respect to the prioritization of form or content in the game studies discipline extend at least as far back as the debates over ludological and narratological approaches to games in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Ian Bogost’s 2009 Digital Games Research Association conference keynote, “Videogames Are a Mess,” provides a particularly detailed history and critique of these debates and the ontological positions that accompany them. The first set of debates centred on whether games are (primarily) play experiences (the ludological approach) or narrative experiences (the
narratological one). While these debates were a central part of establishing the discipline and influencing it to the present day, they are generally looked back upon with the benefit of hindsight as a waste of time, a debate that never really occurred, (Frasca 2003), or driven by the intersection of institutional and disciplinary politics rather than the most rigorous examination of games available (Pearce 2005; Murray 2005; Bogost 2009). Janet Murray’s 2005 DiGRA keynote preface “The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology in Game Studies,” emphasizes these points, though particularly the latter, which occurred in the sense that some of the more strident ludologists (Eskelinen, in particular, Aarseth to a lesser degree) viewed narrative-based or player-experience studies of games as other disciplines colonizing the territory of games which were held to be uniquely formalist artefacts; assemblages of rule systems to which these other disciplinary approaches did not fully apply (Eskelinen 2001; Frasca 2003; Aarseth 2004; Murray 2005; Bogost 2009). Murray argues: “Narratology is a category of interest to the computer game formalists. It represents the authority against which they have rebelled, the thing that must be repudiated in order for their own interpretation to have meaning” (Murray 2005). Thomas Malaby and Timothy Burke (2009), introducing an issue of *Games and Culture* on interdisciplinarity in game studies, also noted the disciplinary and politicized nature of the ludology-narratology debate:

> [M]any of the scholars identified with the formalist methods of ludology have also argued for the disciplinary formalization of the field, and many of the scholars indifferent or opposed to ludological criticism have tended to be more interested in ‘permanent interdisciplinarity’.
> (Malaby & Burke 2009, p. 326)

It seems obvious now (and probably did to most people involved then,) that each game is an amalgam of narrative elements and gameplay elements mixed in different proportions, depending on the particular genre and features of the given game. This fact was haunting the background of these early debates as well, though it took a few years to cut through to the point where the game studies discipline could generally agree on this, in part because of the politicization of the debate that Murray alludes to.

Bogost views this initial “ontology” as a rhetorical strategy rather than an ontology:

> I belabor this point to draw attention to the real goals underlying the so-called ludology vs. narratology debate. By pitting one kind of formalism against
another, the result became a foregone conclusion: formalism wins. Really, it
doesn’t even matter which one, since the underlying assumptions are so
similar. The ludology/narratology question may have appeared to look like
this:

Is a game a system of rules, or is a game a kind of narrative?

But it really amounted to something more like this:

Is a game a system of rules, like a story is a system of narration?

The disjunction is gone, and the answer is implied (yes). [...] The first ontology
of games is really a rhetoric, not an ontology at all.

(Bogost 2009: online)

Christian McCrea, game scholar and game design program director at RMIT University,
asserted in a recent Twitter posting that “[t]he most aggressive, awful thing I ever did to students
was teach them any part of the ludology / narratology thing. BEYOND USELESS.” (McCrea 2012,
online) For McCrea, who is particularly interested in holistic game criticism and design as an
artisanal craft process, even legitimizing the debate by mentioning it is a violently
counterproductive enterprise. Compartmentalized/overly disciplinary thinking is an obstacle to be
overcome in pursuit of good criticism and design. This is neither a unique approach nor one that
originates with McCrea in particular; as far back as 1943, film critic and theorist André Bazin argued
for a holistic film criticism that took into account all of the film’s constitutive parts in relation to the

Bogost positions the move away from the ludology/narratology debate mainly in
Jesper Juul’s Half-Real, which proposes a syncretism between the two poles that is game
studies’ “second ontology”:

Video games are two rather different things at the same time: video games are
real in that they are made of real rules that players actually interact with; that
winning or losing a game is a real event. However, when winning a game by
slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon, but a fictional one. To play a
videogame is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional
world and a videogame is a set of rules as well as a fictional world.
(Juul 2005, p. 1, cited in Bogost 2009, online)

While game studies has generally come to agree with this position of games being a mixture of
rules and narrative elements, there is an issue of valuation that Bogost makes note of when he
frames Juul’s position as setting up a conflict between idealism and realism:

For Aarseth and Frasca, narration, character, and other story-derived elements exist in games, but the firmament of the thing is formal: a system of rules underlying them. When all else is stripped away from a game, says Aarseth, “the rules remain.” For Juul, the matter is slightly more nuanced, but nevertheless we see the prow of an ontological pecking order emerging over the horizon. [...] *Whatever a game is, some part of it is more real than another.* (Bogost 2009, online)

This sets up game studies’ third ontology, in Bogost’s history. If we value the objective, authorially intentional rules above the player experience as being more real, then it seems that game studies should focus on studying the game object as an assemblage of these real rules rather than the player, while games have also become increasingly seen as static artefacts completed by players interacting with them as previously mentioned. This is both an ontological as well as an epistemological and political problem; how we define games affects how we interpret them and what we look for in our study of them. Game studies as a discipline is currently grappling with this “Game/Player Problem” (Juul 2008, Bogost 2009).

Debates over the Game/Player Problem extend to the meaning of individual games as well as games-as-a-medium and games-as-a-discipline. Since the publication of Miguel Sicart’s “Against Procedurality” (2011), there has been a renewed debate within game studies over whether the meaning of a videogame is inherent in the game’s rule set and technological affordances (Bogost 2007), or constructed by players through the performative process of gameplay (Sicart 2011, online). The former position is based on the argument of proceduralism, that is, that the videogame’s expressive and communicative potential comes from its affordances as a medium, which include procedurality; the computer’s “defining ability to execute a series of rules” (Murray 1997, p. 71). Bogost’s 2007 book *Persuasive Games*, extending on his 2006 book *Unit Operations*, advances the notion that games communicate through “procedural rhetoric” (Bogost 2007, p. 3), that is, “a practice of using [computational] processes persuasively” (Ibid). In this framework games mount rhetorical arguments and claims through their rules, which the players then encounter through play, and are persuaded by, or not. By contrast, Sicart holds that the interpretation of the game is based on the players’ subjective associations, and interpretations of the game’s semiotic content (2011). Chapter Five of this thesis, a version of which is forthcoming as a stand-alone article in
the Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds (Skolnik 2013), deals with this dichotomy in relation to interventionist games and gameplay, though it also deals with the wider context of the game studies discipline.

The Game/Player Problem is one of game studies’ key pre-occupations at present, and it shapes the current ontological state of the field, though it too is being contested at present. Bogost proposes, and is at the forefront arguing for, a possible fourth ontology of game studies, a flat or object-oriented ontology (2009, online). The notion that games are objects completed by their use by (human) players reflects a particular philosophical approach to the subject-object relationship in general. The starting point for this is Martin Heidegger’s examination of subject-object relations in Being and Time (1962). Using the example of a hammer, Heidegger argues that a hammer as an object is incomprehensible except when contextualized in relation to its purpose (and a related network of other objects), driving nails into wooden planks, for example (at which point the object is ready-at-hand, or zuhanden) (Heidegger 1962, p. 98). When we pick up the hammer and start hammering nails with it, using the hammer as an extension of our self, we understand the hammer in an embodied, “more primordial” fashion that is the basis for our understanding of objects, particularly the ones we use as tools. When the hammer breaks, or something prevents us from using the hammer in this fashion, we view the hammer differently – we are distanced from the hammer, and only able to understand it in an abstract sense: we understand that we could use it to hammer nails because of our prior experiences of and with hammers, but the hammer is not ready-at-hand, merely present-at-hand (vorhanden) (Heidegger 1962, pp. 102-3). The hammer is useless in that state, but it still exists, and we understand the hammer in terms of what it can do for us or allow us to do. The distinction that Heidegger makes (or, is interpreted as making, per Harman 1997, p. 26) is that Dasein or conscious, human, capital-B Being-in-the-World, is irreducible to the present-at-hand whereas inanimate objects are reducible to the present-at-hand. People are subjects, agents and determinants of uses, and not able to be reduced or instrumentalized in the same way that objects can. This affords humanity a privileged position in subject-object relations (Heidegger 1962, p. 67).

Bogost critiques the player-centric approach to game studies using Graham Harman’s reading of Heidegger’s tool-analysis. Harman argues that rather than proposing readiness-at-hand and presence-at-hand as two categories of objects, technological and natural, purposive and purposeless, “Heidegger’s vorhanden and zuhanden describe a universal dualism found in all entities, a reversal that occurs in human beings and dogs every bit as much as in inanimate matter” (Harman 1997, p. 27). Consequently, Dasein’s privileged position dissolves: “[E]very
entity is ready-to-hand: not in the derivative sense of ‘means to an end’, but in the primary sense of ‘in the act of being’, of unleashing itself upon the environment. [...] [E]quipment is global; beings are tool-beings” (Ibid.). Humanity is afforded no more ontological weight than anything else because their existence is not distinguishable from any other object in terms of readiness-at-hand or presence-at-hand. “The human/world relation is just a special case of the relation between any two entities whatsoever.” (Harman 2009, cited in Bogost 2009, online, where Bogost notes that “special” is used in the sense of particular rather than extraordinary.) Extending this idea to videogames, Bogost argues that:

If we accept Harman and Bryant’s invitation to flatten the ontological field, such that all objects are on equal footing, the result is a plane of indiscriminate differences, in which all aspects of a game’s existence have the same potential to matter. The question we can then pose is, for a particular game in a particular circumstance, which units matter? Such a strategy frees us from seeking grounds upon which game-objects rest incontrovertibly, prevents us from making short-sighted essentialisms about computer hardware or human experience (or anything in between), and forces us to ask more specific questions about particular analytical situations. It should no longer be satisfactory to seek one answer to the question, “what is a game?” (Bogost 2009, online)

Bogost is particularly interested in integrating the computational side of videogames into game studies. Videogames are software artefacts run on hardware platforms, which Bogost and Nick Montfort argue are important and neglected aspects of analyses of videogame production, circulation, and reception that should no longer be dismissed (Montfort & Bogost 2009).

Game studies as a field is still navigating this fourth, flat, object-oriented ontology. A significant question that will play a large part in determining how game studies integrates this ontology or not is whether a commitment to object-oriented ontology is necessary in order to discuss the computational aspects of videogames in a holistic fashion. Answering that question is beyond the purview of this literature review, and thesis.
Immersion, Engrossment, and Anti-Immersive Aesthetics

This thesis deals with the notion of immersion in two stages. First, in Chapter 1, it examines the concept in Aristotelian drama and 20th-century anti-immersive theatre aesthetics. Then, it examines immersion in relation to games in Chapter 3. This examination of immersion is done in order to argue that immersion is a politically problematic idea that does not describe the experience of intense involvement in a medium (theatre, videogame, or otherwise) accurately, as well as to argue that anti-immersive aesthetics are powerful interventionist tools. The political problem of immersion is that it presupposes diminishing critical distance and increasing emotional involvement with what is being presented, leading to issues around the audience/participants in terms of choice, agency, and propaganda/ideological interpellation in media (Grau 2003, p. 3; Althusser 2008). These political problems are explored through theoretical analysis of immersion and models thereof, as well as alternative models of player involvement in games.

The concept of immersion is a blurry one in general for reasons that will be elaborated upon in the discussion of immersion in games, but one immediate distinction will help contextualize the rest of this section. Much of the confusion surrounding the term is that it is used interchangeably to refer to two different phenomena: first, to a media participant’s sense of absorption in the activity of watching or participating in said medium, and second, as the participant’s sense of being transported to a fictional or physically distant place by the medium (Calleja 2011: pp. 25-28, 32-33).

In contemporary media and game studies, the latter concept of immersion is prioritized, in a tradition derived from Marvin Minsky’s research into, and neologism, “telepresence,” – the sense of being transported to another place by interactions with media/technology (Minsky 1980). Chronologically, issues involving immersion date much further back than this, at least as far back as Ancient Greece, in relation to arguments surrounding mimesis (representation) in poetry, which also included epic storytelling and theatre. Even as far back as Plato, issues relating to immersion cropped up without the term ever being explicitly labelled as such, with theatre providing the clearest example for Plato’s argument.
Immersion in Theatre

In the Republic, Plato argues that poets (including epic storytellers and playwrights) should be banished from the ideal society of the titular republic unless they confined their poetry to the subject of hymns to the gods and odes to great men, with a minimum of embellishment. The idea behind this fairly blatant propagandisation of art was that the listeners would be unable to determine the real from the representational and the narrative, and that poetic works would stir up emotional states that were not conducive to civil society. (Plato 1974, p. 437-8) In a sense, this mirrors the idea of immersion as a sense of transportation into a fiction; with heightened emotional responses and decreased critical distance that are characteristic of immersion (Grau 2003, p. 13). For Plato, a rationalist, this would not work.

Plato’s student, Aristotle, disagreed, and to some degree his Poetics (1973), upon which dramatic aesthetics were largely based until the late 19th/early 20th century, acts as a repudiation of Plato’s view. Aristotle argues that the build-up and purge of anti-social emotions (catharsis) through well-crafted theatre, and poetry more generally, is instrumental to civic society. This catharsis is achieved by the play building up immersion so that the spectator identifies with the protagonist (sensing transportation into the fictional world) and the protagonist’s situation, so that they can experience this heightened emotional state leading to the catharsis (Aristotle 1973). Rather than argue that the spectator would not be deceived by mimetic representation, Aristotle positions immersion as being socially important, linked to civility, and a way to truth rather than deception as per Plato, though the political problem of immersion persists here.

Aristotle’s theatrical aesthetics, as elaborated in the Poetics, is a naturalistic guide to producing theatre, particularly Tragedy, with a view toward fostering this immersion and catharsis, and these formed the main basis of Western tragic drama in particular and Western theatre in general through the 20th century.

In the late 19th and the 20th century, a number of anti-immersive, anti-naturalistic theatre movements sprang up, roughly concurrently with visual art movements like impressionism, symbolism, and surrealism. These aesthetics are typically traced back to two origins; in terms of playscripts, the symbolist plays of Maurice Maeterlinck are regarded as a distinct break-away point from naturalism in theatre (Braun 1969), and in terms of overarching

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3 Sigmund Freud also draws on the concept of catharsis in developing his psychoanalytic theories, which form the historical foundation of modern psychology.
theatre aesthetics, the political theatre of Vsevolod Meyerhold (1969) is also built on anti-
naturalistic premises, which carried over into later aesthetics that he influenced. Part of
chapter 1 of the thesis traces out a historical lineage starting from Meyerhold’s anti-
naturalistic and anti-immersive theatre aesthetics, and examining them in relation to the
aesthetics of later political dramatists Antonin Artaud (1974), Bertolt Brecht (1974), and
Augusto Boal (1992; 2000; 2002), who all take dramatically different approaches to the
aesthetics of theatre.

Feltham provides this excellent summary of Meyerhold’s aesthetic preoccupations,
which were put into practice as early as 1907.

1) in Meyerhold’s work the plasticity of the acting body is liberated from the
constraints of mimesis via the exploratory system of exercises called
‘biomechanics’.

2) Meyerhold consciously worked to liberate theatrical space from the box-
set with its illusional painted scenery and proscenium arch. [Reference to
Barkhine and Vakhtanov 1967, p. 350]

3) Meyerhold named the fourth wall as an obstacle to be dismantled insofar
as the spectator was to be transformed into a co-creator.

4) the mask is reintroduced as essential to theatre along with clowning,
mime and play-acting [as opposed to naturalistic, mimetic, psychological,
Aristotelian presentation].
(Feltham 2006, pp. 227-8, notes mine)

While Meyerhold’s aesthetics are elaborated upon in depth in Chapter 1, for the
purposes of the literature review it is important to note that all four of these points break
away from Aristotelian, naturalistic, and immersive modes of presentation in terms of actor
training, acting style, the spatial configuration of the stage (scenography, *opsis* in Aristotle’s
*Poetics*), and the spatial configuration of the theatre space entire.

Artaud, Brecht, and Boal’s theatre aesthetics engage with Meyerhold’s in different
ways that are explained in depth in Chapter 1, though very brief summaries of these aesthetics
follow here to contextualise this section of the literature review. It is also important to note
that all of these aesthetics make use of the notion of defamiliarisation as a mode of aesthetic
engagement (Shklovsky 2007). These aesthetics are used to make the familiar and the
quotidian unfamiliar in order to demonstrate something about life, be it some fundamental,
Artaud’s aesthetics, which he calls the “Theatre of Cruelty,” involve a highly ritualized, stylised theatre. The spoken word is given less priority as actors are called on to be sign-conduits that communicate on an unconscious level through sound and gesture. The fourth wall is abolished as the spectators are placed at the centre of a circular theatre space, in which the dramatic action encircles them (Artaud 1974, p. 74). Rather than a process of conscious identification with the protagonist per Aristotle, the meaning of the play and its symbols (meant to be some primordial truth) is to be grasped unconsciously (Feltham 2006, p. 233, Artaud 1974, p. 22). Artaud’s work is simultaneously influenced by, and in tension with, the psychoanalytic approaches of the day (Feltham 2006, pp. 232-233; Goux 2008, pp. 17-18). Artaud viewed the theatre as having its own dark, unconscious side akin to Jung’s notion of the Shadow, and valued its ritual elements as means to engage with the individual and collective unconscious (also per Jung). However, Artaud also writes that psychoanalysis neglects the ritual character of life in favour of a rational, logocentric, approach, as Goux argues: “In relation to this feverish and radical expectancy – this burning urge to recover his images – psychoanalysis, by contrast, seems to be an attempt (both vain and devoid of healing force) to confine his conscience within ‘a verbal organization’” (Goux 2008, p. 20, internal quotation from Artaud’s Letter to René Allendy, November 30, 1927. In Artaud 2004. Oeuvres. Paris: Gallimard. p. 260).

Brecht’s aesthetics, which he calls “Epic Theatre,” are more explicitly political, and are focused on showing up the constructed nature of humanity’s social condition, in contrast to Aristotelian tragedy showing this up as the mechanical workings of Fate: “In short, the spectator is given the chance to criticize human behaviour from a social point of view, and the scene is played as a piece of history” (Brecht 1974, p. 86). Brecht’s methods of direction and actor training are aimed toward this end. In addition to Meyerhold’s movement exercises, actors analyse the history behind the events that the play deals with (Brecht 1974, pp. 26, 86. Thomson 2000, pp. 102-103). This historical knowledge is then used to foster a questioning and exploratory attitude in the audience through the dramatic action. This approach was also complemented by Brecht’s tactics in staging and direction. The main way by which Brecht sought to foster this attitude in the audience was through the use of alienation effects (also sometimes called defamiliarisation effects, verfremdungseffekt in German, from verfremden, which is translated as alienation or defamiliarisation). Alienation effects can refer to any device by which the spectator’s immersion in the action is temporarily broken, changing the
spectators’ expectations. Brecht breaks up the expected action of the play using signs, songs, choruses, sound effects, and other means to give the audience a sense of critical distance to the action or pretense awareness of it (Brecht 1974, pp. 98, 143-144).

Boal’s aesthetics, called “The Theatre of the Oppressed,” are an aesthetic umbrella comprising a number of different styles of theatre, including Invisible Theatre, and Forum Theatre, which is the central Boalian theatre form that this thesis deals with. In Invisible Theatre, scenarios are played out in public spaces without any indication that theatre is happening, but rather just some occurrence in everyday life. Without a designated theatre space or the establishment of theatrical conventions and expectations, Aristotelian identification with protagonists is impossible. Rather, spectators are placed in a situation and have to decide how to respond to it (Boal 2002, pp. 277-280). There is no protagonist, in the spectator’s view, because there is no theatre happening. In Forum Theatre, which is performed in an explicitly theatrical context, an initial scenario depicting a situation of oppression is shown. The protagonist encounters a crisis moment, struggles to break free of the oppression and fails on account of some error or doubtful course of action. While the scenario is never fully resolved, it is sufficiently resolved such that the error becomes visible through some of its consequences:

The original solutions proposed by the protagonist (in the play shown to provoke the audience’s interventions, ‘the model’) must contain at the very least one political or social ‘error’ which will be analysed during the forum session. These errors must be clearly expressed and carefully rehearsed, in well-defined situations. [...] The original play – the model – must present a mistake, a failure, so that the spect-actors will be spurred into finding solutions and inventing new ways of confronting oppression. (Boal 2002, p. 242)

Then, the scenario is replayed a second time, during which any spectator, at any time, can yell out “stop!”

walk onstage, replace the protagonist and enact some alternate course of action to attempt to break free of this oppression. The play forms an exploration of a social situation to foster discussion, as well as act as a rehearsal for subsequent social action. The spectator identifies with the protagonist in a different way than Aristotelian aesthetics would suppose, since they can become the protagonist, and they have agency in the situation (Jackson 1991, in Boal 2002, p. xxiv.; Boal 2002: 25). Staging-wise, the fourth wall is constantly
broken, and the action is not limited to proscenium style stages, often taking place in open spaces where the actors are at the centre of a circle, Forum Theatre taking place in literal fora.

There are two main subsets of Forum Theatre, community-based Forum Theatre performances, which are a result of workshoppping with particular communities (women, the homeless, racial minorities, to give a few examples) and staged with and in front of a homogeneous audience made up of members of that community. This is the original mode of Forum Theatre, and the primary one in its original Latin American context. The second kind of Forum Theatre performance, called the Forum Theatre “show,” is a prepared performance on a certain topic staged for an audience of members of the general public (Boal 2002, pp. 241-242, 253). This is an innovation on the original Forum Theatre form that Boal experimented with in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, which has developed staying power since.

Forum Theatre is especially emphasized in this thesis due to its interactive nature and game-like structure. This allows parallels to be drawn between Forum Theatre and interactive videogames, as well as with the notion of ethical interactivity. Forum Theatre is discussed primarily in Chapter 1, which deals with anti-immersive theatre aesthetics in general.

Chapter 1 draws on Oliver Feltham’s “An Explosive Genealogy: theatre, philosophy and the art of presentation” (2006) to undertake a historical analysis of Meyerhold’s aesthetics and the subsequent anti-immersive aesthetics of Artaud, Brecht, and Boal. In this chapter, I extend Feltham’s analysis of Artaud and Brecht, while the examination of Boal’s aesthetics is purely my own addition.

Feltham makes two main arguments in his article that are relevant to different parts of this thesis and this literature review. Feltham draws on Alain Badiou’s notion of the Event, which the next section of the literature review deals with specifically. For the moment, Events can be summarized as immanent breaks in a situation with noticeable consequences, occurrences in which “something [must] have happened, something that cannot be reduced to its ordinary inscription in ‘what there is’[…] which compels us to decide a new way of being.” (Badiou 2001, p. 41) Events carry Truths, and a process of continued fidelity to the Truth of given Events forms the basis of Good in Badiou’s system of universal ethics (Badiou 2001). Using Badiou’s notion of Events, Feltham positions Meyerhold’s aesthetics as such an Event, and through a historical and philosophical analysis of their aesthetics, positions Artaud and Brecht as undertaking an evolving process of fidelity to the Meyerhold-Event while applying the Truth of that Event in new ways (2006, pp. 226, 230-4). I extend Feltham’s historical and aesthetic analysis on Artaud and Brecht, while working through Augusto Boal’s aesthetics is my own addition and particularly relevant to the thesis’ main issue of aesthetics of intervention in
games and interactive media, as Boal’s theatre is interactive. Subsequently, Feltham argues that this history and these aesthetics point toward “the concept of an art of presentation transgressing the boundaries of theatre, art and philosophy,” or, in other words, “a generic truth procedure in the domain of art” (Feltham 2006, p. 226). The aesthetics of intervention that this thesis presents are an extension of this idea of a generic truth procedure and ethical process for dealing with interventions in art.

**Immersion in Games**

In relation to games, especially digital ones, immersion is theorized and prioritized similarly and differently to the way it is used in relation to theatre. At the most straightforward level, immersion has been argued to be central to rich interactive narrative experiences; either aesthetically, or ontologically, in the sense that digital technology is taken to be necessary to have an immediate experience of a game and its space:

> [In *Zork* (Infocom: 1980), [t]he dungeon itself has an objective reality that is much more concrete than, for instance, the jail on the *Monopoly* board or a dungeon in a tabletop game of *Dungeons and Dragons* – or even a dungeon in a live-action role-playing game – because the words on the screen are as transparent as a book. That is, the player is not looking at a game board and game pieces or at a *Dungeons and Dragons* game master who is also in his or her algebra class or at a college classroom of campsite in the real world. The computer screen is displaying a story that is also a place. The slamming of a dungeon door behind you (whether the dungeon is described by words or images) is a moment of experiential drama that is only possible in a digital environment. (Murray 1997, p. 82)

In this argument, digital games are more concrete and real than the imaginary or symbolic spaces imagined in analog games, an argument that can be linked up with Jacques Lacan’s notion of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real orders of human experience/the psyche (Loos 2002; Eagleton 2009), as well as ontological arguments about games (see: the preceding section of the literature review).
Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of immersion in game studies, drawing on two surveys of the topic as well as primary sources dealing with it. The two surveys are Patrick Markham Brown’s Honours thesis “Immersion as Concept, Experience, Design” (2011), and Gordon Calleja’s book *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (2011). Brown and Calleja both undertake their own reviews of academic literature on immersion, detailing its emergence from presence research (Minsky 1980), psychophysiological approaches to the phenomenon (Czikszentmihalyi 1991), and later theories and models of immersion (including Murray 1997; Grau 2003; McMahan 2003; Brown & Cairns 2004; Ermi & Maýra 2005; Calleja 2011). While Brown provides a general overview of models of immersion, Calleja provides a deep philosophical analysis of the concept and its problems, which is particularly relevant to this thesis, while constructing his own model of *incorporation* as an alternate theoretical concept to immersion. Specifically, Calleja points to four issues that are obstacles to the understanding and consistent use of immersion as a term:

1) *Immersion as absorption versus immersion as transportation*[: There is a lack of consensus on the use of *immersion* to refer to either general involvement in a medium (Salen & Zimmermann 2003, Jennett et al. 2008, Ermi & Maýra 2005) or to the sense of being transported to another reality (Murray 1998, Laurel 1991, Carr 2006).]

2) *Immersion in non-ergodic media*[: It is difficult to extend the concept of immersion to multiple media, with different affordances for engagement, particularly interactive and non-interactive media, where the experience is different.]

3) *Technological determinism*[: A technology being capable of delivering more sensory realism does not necessarily mean that users will feel more present in the environment portrayed.]

4) *Monolithic perspectives on immersion*[: Immersion does not refer to a single experience that we can discover and measure, but rather different forms of experience that [...] need to be considered on a continuum of attentional intensity rather than as a binary, on/off switch (Calleja 2011, pp. 32-33).]

Chapter 3 of the thesis examines contemporary models of immersion in game studies and the ways in which they run into these problems. Chronologically, it begins with Janet
Murray’s notion of immersion as a form of total sensory and cognitive preoccupation with the virtual/fictional world of the game/narrative’s space (1997). Subsequent models of immersion treated the phenomenon as much more nuanced. Alison McMahan makes the distinction between diegetic immersion and non-diegetic engagement (being involved with the game outside of gameplay session, as in strategic discussion, fan production, review-writing, et cetera,) as “two different things, with possibly conflicting sets of aesthetic conventions” (2003, p. 86). Emily Brown and Paul Cairns point to three increasing levels of immersion as a function of attentional intensity; engagement (when the players have developed a sufficient understanding of the interface to play), engrossment (when the players are emotionally affected by the game), and total immersion (when the players have a sense of presence in the fictional/virtual world of the game) (2004, pp. 1298-1299). Laura Ermi and Frans Maÿra split immersion into three different types based on means of motivation for and attraction to the gameplay experience; sensory immersion, (based on the audiovisual features of the game, such as graphical representation, sound, music), challenge immersion, (based on the relationship between the level of difficulty of the game and the player’s skill, related to Czikszentmihalyi’s model of flow-experiences (1991), and imaginative immersion, a catch-all category of experience in which the player

becomes absorbed with the stories and the world, or begins to feel for or identify with a game character, [...] or [where] the game offers the player a chance to use her imagination, empathise with the characters, or just enjoy the fantasy of the game.

(Ermi & Mayra 2005, p. 8)

Two models of game involvement that do not make use of the contemporary immersion concept are also examined in Chapter 3; Gordon Calleja’s model, based on incorporation, is lightly examined. Incorporation refers to

the absorption of a virtual environment into consciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location, as represented by the avatar. This conception retains the two traditional interpretations of the term incorporation: incorporation as a sense of assimilation to mind, and as embodiment.

(Calleja 2011, p. 169)
This incorporation is built upon players involving themselves in six different ways on two different levels corresponding to McMahan’s diegetic immersion/non-diegetic engagement model (McMahan 2003): Players experience “kinesthetic involvement, spatial involvement, shared involvement, narrative involvement, affective involvement, and ludic involvement” (Calleja 2011, pp. 37-38), across two different types of involvement, micro-involvement - which is diegetic, during play sessions, - and macro-involvement - which is non-diegetic, alongside play sessions - (Calleja 2011, pp. 37-42).

The second non-immersive model of player involvement is Erving Goffman’s social-dramatagical model of discursive frames and engrossment. This is explained in depth in Chapter 3, but in brief summary, Goffman argues that all social interactions are performances of different facets of the self (Goffman 1959), which are made mutually intelligible to the interactors through a set of metacommunicative cues called keys that set the context of the communication, which Goffman calls its frame (Bateson 1972, Goffman 1974). The addition of new keys to an interaction, or the subtraction of keys from one, changes the interaction’s frame and the means by which the interaction is understood by the interactors. Games are a type of interaction in which different keys are added that indicate that play is occurring during the activity.

As McMahan and Calleja both note, if using different terminology to do so, there are two kinds of involvement that players have with games; involvement in the play activity, and involvement in social practices around the game and play activity. This distinction is particularly addressed in relation to games by Gary Alan Fine, a student of Goffman’s who undertook an ethnographic survey of Dungeons and Dragons (TSR: 1974) players in the early 1980s, culminating in the book Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds (1983). Fine identifies three frames that compose the experience of role-playing gameplay: the social frame, in which the player is a social actor having everyday interactions (player-as-person), the game frame, which includes the player is playing the game, as well as engaging in the kinds of non-diegetic practices around the game that McMahan identifies, and the game-world frame, in which the player assumes the role of an avatar-character in the fictional space of the game world (in role-playing games and other appropriate game genres). Role-playing gameplay involves rapid and frequent switching between these three frames while the game is in session. Though Fine’s work predates contemporary work on immersion, immersion would also arguably not be an accurate way to describe the role-playing game experience, especially if the player is frequently switching out of the game-world frame, where immersion would
occur if at all. Fine draws on an alternate notion of involvement from Goffman, that of *engrossment*, a sense of involvement in the overall activity even though certain frames may be bracketed and prioritized over others at different times:

> [g]ames are designed to provide “engrossable” systems of experience in which participants can become caught up. In fact, individuals do get “caught up” in fantasy gaming; however, this engrossment is a flickering involvement – it depends on events that occur in the game world. Players do become involved when they face a monster; but once the encounter is completed, they may return to “mundane” discussions about politics, girlfriends, or the latest science-fiction novel, even though the game continues. (Fine 1983, p. 196)

Chapter 3 includes a case study of frame analysis in role-playing games that extends Fine’s analysis, both through the use of Daniel Mackay’s examination of frame analysis in relation to the performative aspects of roleplaying games in *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (2001), as well as my own work mapping this frame analysis onto digital role-playing games (Skolnik 2008a, 2008b).

**Intervention and Badiou’s Ethics**

As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis makes use of Baz Kershaw’s definition of intervention as an act whose purpose is “[to play] with the audience’s fundamental beliefs, and [provoke] a potential crisis in those beliefs without producing immediate rejection” (Kershaw 1992, p. 28). It does this in order to position and assess the way that this is done in relation to videogames and political theatre, as well as to examine interventions in terms of their efficacy at engendering the conditions for positive social change, if not the change itself. The thesis posits an aesthetic process that we can use to account for the different stages of interventions from their conception and development to their reception and results. The previous literature review section on anti-immersive aesthetics deals with the staging of the intervention. This section deals with the process of ethical engagement that successful interventions would provoke. In Chapter 1 of the thesis, I argue that for interventions to produce ongoing change, and for us to deal with such interventions, requires some kind of persistent ethical process. We need to refer back to the intervention and keep using it as an
underpinning for changes to our beliefs and behaviours. Otherwise, these changes become disconnected from the intervention in a way that problematically avoids the temporal aspects of how our beliefs are continuously shaped by our social and personal histories. In other words, we should avoid de-historicizing interventions that are explicitly rooted in history. If we grant that such a process is needed, the further question of what that process constitutes and looks like is a large one with a large variety of possible answers. The thesis limits its scope with respect to this question, focusing on Alain Badiou’s Ethics of Event as one possible candidate for this kind of persistent ethical process. This section of the literature review gives some basic context to what this ethics is ahead of a more detailed analysis of it in Chapter 1, while also discussing some of the history, treatment, and criticism of Badiou’s philosophy in fields related to this thesis project such as ethics, politics, and aesthetics. It also touches briefly upon other ethical approaches to videogames, particularly Aristotelian Virtue Ethics as advocated in Miguel Sicart’s *The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009).

Badiou’s philosophical project involves advocating for objectivity and universality. While this is hardly unique in the history of philosophy it is an unpopular position, especially in the contemporary French philosophical milieu that Badiou writes and works in. It is unpopular owing to the emphasis placed on subjectivity and relativism in the post-structural tradition that is still dominant in continental philosophy. Objectivity and universality are also harder to argue for from a scientific perspective than they used to be, with recent developments in quantum physics placing limits on understanding the universe in an absolute or logically positivistic way.

In terms of ethics, there are two main objective approaches that maintain some currency in addition to Badiou’s. The first, chronologically, is Aristotelian Virtue Ethics, which posits that the good life is lived through exercise and contemplation of virtue, which consists of taking the moderate path between extremes of behaviour and conviction, termed the *Doctrine of the Mean* (Aristotle 1968, pp.77-87). Deontological ethics are another approach, predicated on moral action following from an externally imposed sense of duty to perform said action. Most prominently, Immanuel Kant offered an objective imperative to ground his deontological ethics, the *Categorical Imperative*, which asserts that one should “act in accordance with maxims that can at the same time have as their object themselves as universal laws of nature” (Kant 1998, p. 44).

With science shying away from making claims for the absolute, objective, universal values of its claims, Badiou goes back a step, to mathematics, which is a domain of the universal consisting of proven sets of propositions that derive from axiomatic first principles.
Badiou taps mathematics as a ground for ontology: “Mathematics is rather the sole discourse which ‘knows’ exactly what it is talking about: being” (Badiou 2005, p. 8, emphasis in original). Mathematical ontology, as this approach is called, reconfigures the philosophical project in relation to mathematical axioms:

Mathematics is also the sole discourse [...] in which one has a complete guarantee and criterion of what one says, to the point that this truth is unique inasmuch as it is the only one ever to have been encountered which is fully transmissible.

(Badiou 2005, pp. 8-9)

For Badiou, if the practice of philosophy aims at attaining and communicating some kind of truth, then it must engage with mathematics and its axioms. Particularly, Badiou looks to set theory, which he positions as the basis for ontology, changing the orientation of philosophy on the whole as a consequence:

[Philosophy is not centred on ontology – which exists as a separate and exact discipline – rather, it circulates between this ontology (thus, mathematics), the modern theories of the subject and its own history. The contemporary complex of the conditions of philosophy includes [...] the history of ‘Western’ thought, post-Cantorian mathematics, psychoanalysis, contemporary art and politics. Philosophy does not coincide with any of these conditions; nor does it map out the totality to which they belong. What philosophy must do is propose a conceptual framework in which the contemporary compossibility of these conditions can be grasped. Philosophy can only do this – and this is what frees it form any foundational ambition, in which it would lose itself – by designating amongst its own conditions, as a singular discursive situation, ontology itself in the form of pure mathematics. This is precisely what delivers philosophy and ordains it to the care of truths.

(Badiou 2005, pp. 3-4, emphasis in original)

Badiou’s work in general explores the broader consequences of mathematical ontology, and this thesis focuses on the universalist ethics that Badiou proposes in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001) and further addresses in *Being and Event* (2006, pp. 3-4).
The basis for Badiou’s ethics is that Good resides in a process of militant fidelity to Truths and their consequences. Truths emerge out of Events, significant breaks from the dominant, everyday situation in which they take place that compel us to behave differently (Hallward 2001, pp. ix-x; Badiou 2001, p. 41). An Event occurs that carries a Truth, we interpret it as being such an Event, we acknowledge that Truth and reorganize our behaviour around it, this is Good. Chapter 1 of the thesis analyses this system in more detail. Primarily, it focuses on Badiou’s notion of a truth-process as a way to ground behavioural changes arising out of interventions temporally. Secondarily, it analyses potential problems in Badiou’s Ethics of Event in order to identify where it might need to be rehabilitated to account for the inter-subjectivity of interventions and social life, since Badiou’s notion of fidelity to a Truth-process does not seem to accommodate inter-subjective deliberation (Hallward 2003, p. 268; Eagleton 2009, p. 265). To those ends, it draws on a focused selection of critiques and extensions of Badiou’s ethical work in relation to intervention.

Philosopher Peter Hallward, the English translator of Badiou’s Ethics, and generally an enthusiastic proponent of Badiou’s work, addresses the issues with Badiou’s theory around deliberation, among a wide range of issues pertaining to Badiou’s philosophy in general, in his book Badiou: A Subject to Truth (2003). Terry Eagleton’s Trouble With Strangers: A Study of Ethics (2009) gives a more critical account of Badiou’s ethics, acknowledging both the range of problems that Badiou’s ethics faces while also extolling the interventionist political potential of a rehabilitated version of his ethical system (pp. 223-272, 325-326). Performance theorist Janelle Reinelt’s article “Theatre and Politics: Encountering Badiou” (2004) addresses political problems with Badiou’s aesthetics and ethics that stem Badiou’s emphasis on universality (Badiou 2001; Badiou 2004), while also arguing that Events have a much wider scope than Badiou himself argues on the basis of that same universality:

One of the paradoxes of Badiou’s thought is that although it is aimed at affirming radical possibilities for militant action that can change the world, the terms in which he describes them often seem to limit these possibilities to huge historical events in the case of politics, and geniuses in the case of art. St. Paul, Abelard and Eloise, Schonenberg, and Beckett are his exemplars. It seems essential to expand the applications of his system to everyone – in the name of the Universal address which he himself desires.

(Reinelt 2004, p. 94)
Using these sources, Chapter 1 of the thesis argues that the idea of an ethical truth-process is a highly useful one for dealing with interventions in art works, but also in need of rehabilitation in some ways to avoid political and ethical problems that they identify. A deliberative process and the ability to change one’s mind both need to be accounted for, as well as the potential access to Events being open to everyone. Chapter 4 of the thesis examines the deliberative process in greater detail, and the next section of the literature review examines this area in more detail.

**Deliberative Democracy and the Public Sphere**

This thesis presents arguments that interventions need to make use of a sustained deliberative procedure after the fact as a precursor to any change occurring. Participants and audience members in an interventionist work must refer back to the intervention in order to ground any changes in their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, so the procedure is sustained. The participants are also able to discuss the intervention amongst each other and with others, refining their approach to it. Hence, the procedure is deliberative. In Chapter 1, the thesis discusses how players may or may not interpret an interventionist work as an Event in the Badiouian sense, while also pointing to the problem of Badiou’s ethics lacking an inter-subjective, deliberative element. Hallward notes that in spite of Badiou’s reluctance to admit a generic deliberative procedure in favour of a variable, situation-dependent one, “Badiou might have to engage with Habermas’s elaboration of a “quasi-transcendental” schema of communicative rationality – the minimum upon which we must all agree, so as to be able to disagree (in any particular case)” (Hallward 2003, p. 268). Chapter 5 makes a similar critique of Ian Bogost’s notion of procedural rhetoric, arguing that weakly procedural interventions in multi-player environments are more efficacious interventions because they start an inter-subjective process of deliberation among the players who were a party to the intervention. They encourage players to start a discussion with the goal of squaring their interpretations of the intervention event with their individual and collective beliefs. In general, players may engage with the arguments that rule systems present in different ways, but after that, how are these subjective engagements reconciled in relation to public social life? Deliberation is both difficult and counter-productive to avoid. Chapter 6 argues that the deliberative process that follows from interventions, and the ethical process that they engender, is grounded in deliberative democracy and ideas of the public sphere. It extends the analysis of Badiou’s ethics and Bogost’s notion of procedural rhetoric as they relate to the deliberative mechanisms of democracy and dealing with interventions.
If we accept that some process of deliberation is necessary, which process of deliberation do we choose, and on what basis? To address this question, the thesis examines processes from theories of deliberative democracy, particularly models of the public sphere. Deliberative democracy refers to a democratic system in which the decisions are made as a result of extensive public consultations. These consultations generate a public opinion that legitimates the democratic decision. Deliberative democracy is one particular balance of two democratic ideals; “one involving equal distribution of the power to make collective decisions, the other equal participation in collective judgment” (Warren 2002, p.173). In deliberative democracy, equal participation in collective judgment for all is prioritized. While there might still be elected representatives and news media as we know them,

> [d]eliberation about matters of common concern should not be restricted to political representatives, judges, media pundits, technocrats and other elites, but should infuse a society so structured that it underwrites ongoing processes of public opinion-formation and judgment.  
> (Warren 2002, p. 174)

There are other significant debates surrounding the intersection of ethics and deliberative democracy, most notably whether deliberative theories of democracy require or engage with an ideal of the common good, and if so, at what stage in the deliberative process. Mark Warren argues that “deliberative theories of democracy place a priority on deliberative processes without supposing that the outcomes can or should be measured according to an ideal of the common good” (Warren 2002, pp. 174-175). Joshua Cohen, drawing on John Rawls’ principles of justice (1973), argues that “[d]eliberation […] focuses debate on the common good” (1989, p. 25) by constituting the common good through deliberation. Significantly, it does not take the common good to be a fixed, a priori aggregation of interests and preferences that existed prior to deliberation (ibid). There is an interesting and surprising overlap between deliberative democratic approaches to the notion of the common good and Badiou’s Ethics (2001; 2006), which involves a subjectivation that is “essentially indifferent to the business and requirements of life as such” (Eagleton 2009, p. 265). This is surprising because that business and those requirements are exactly the subject of democratic deliberations. The overlap occurs in that Badiou is opposed to an a priori ideal of the common good, but, when he admits a deliberative procedure into his ethics, it hinges upon a notion of good arising out of a particular situation that is specific to that situation (Hallward 2003, p.
which is roughly compatible with what Cohen proposes, though whether it is a common good or a subjective one is still open to debate.

In essence, deliberative democracy is meant to overcome two problems: the rise of disproportionately powerful elite classes in representative democracies, and the unwieldiness of direct democracy and referenda on issues of importance when large populations are involved. Deliberations aim to produce consensus or compromise to avoid problems that arise from these limitations of democracy.

Deliberations take place among members of a public in a public sphere. A public is composed of the participants in a public sphere, which is a space in which people can freely discuss and rationally debate questions of social policy and political issues, generate an informed public opinion, and steer policy. This public opinion, or public Will, as it is sometimes called, is the ground for the legitimacy of democratic governance and decision-making. Governments that act in line with the public opinion are held to be making legitimate, representative decisions, whereas those that do not are viewed as anti-democratic, and making illegitimate decisions. In the public sphere of deliberative democracy, the participants debate the issues, refine their opinions, and aim to arrive at a consensus. Failing that, a vote is held, and hopefully everyone walks away with a nuanced understanding of the way the issue affects different members of the public. Ideally, the outcome is that the public reaches a palatable compromise. While the intensive public consultations that deliberative democracy requires are not particularly efficient or streamlined, especially when decisions need to be made quickly,

[d]emocratic governance rests on the capacity of and opportunity for citizens to engage in enlightened debate. Although deciding public policy through argument has little to recommend it in terms of efficiency, the purpose of public deliberation, as Aristotle recognized in his Rhetoric, is not efficient government but educated judgment.

(Hauser 1998, p. 83)

Deliberative democracy’s priority is to eventually make the most correct/legitimate decision rather than to make less correct/legitimate ones more quickly.

This thesis emphasizes deliberative democracy and the public sphere because interventions and the ethics surrounding them both require a deliberative framework. Deliberative democracy is well-suited to providing potentially useful models for the
deliberative procedures necessary for an intervention to create the conditions for social change as well as incorporating some of the same desirable social changes into its theory that many interventions aim toward, such as greater democratic participation in decision-making for all. Chapter 1’s examination of Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre is an example of the theatre turning into a discussion forum analogous to a public sphere, and the integration of the theatre audience/participants into a deliberating public. Similarly, the performance component of the thesis, which draws heavily upon Boal’s dramaturgy, aims to foster a deliberative democratic approach to issues surrounding urban protests and policing. The thesis on the whole is invested in deliberative democracy because deliberative democracy engages with the thesis’ subject matter of interventions, ethics, aesthetics, and videogames, across a network of theoretical and practical connections.

The thesis examines three main models of the public sphere derived from deliberative democratic theory; the bourgeois public sphere, the original iteration of public sphere theory proposed by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989, 1995), subaltern counterpublics, associated mainly with later feminist critiques of Habermas’ work by Seyla Benhabib (1992) and Nancy Fraser (1992), and the rhetorical public sphere, advanced by Gerard Hauser (1987; 1998a; 1998b; 1999; 2007). Each of these three models of the public sphere employs different rational, communicative, and/or rhetorical norms to structure the deliberations that take place in them, with different benefits and drawbacks. While these will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6, a brief summary is provided to contextualize this discussion:

Habermas examines the development, change, and collapse of the bourgeois public sphere from a socio-historical perspective. He traces the origin of the modern public sphere to bourgeois centres of discussion in the 17th and 18th centuries, in which a new form of civic society emerged to challenge aristocratic power and governance (1989, pp. 1-56). Based on his analysis of these discussion centres, Habermas enumerated three main rational, communicative norms that he argued ensured that these deliberative centres functioned as a public institution; the disregard of the social status of the participants, the discussion of public topics and the inclusivity of the discussions (Habermas 1995, 36-7). By adhering to these norms, discussions in the public sphere would keep to being open, public, inclusive, and democratic in line with Habermas’ notion of communicative rationality, which arises out of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and which Habermas elaborates on in great depth in *Theory of Communicative Action* (1989b). Communicative rationality refers to
a peculiar rationality, inherent not in language as such but in the communicative use of linguistic expressions, that can be reduced neither to the epistemic rationality of knowledge (as classical truth-conditional semantics supposes) nor to the purposive-rationality of action (as intentionalist semantics assumes). This communicative rationality [emphasis in original] is expressed in the unifying force of speech oriented toward reaching understanding, which secures for the speakers an intersubjectively shared lifeworld, thereby securing at the same time the horizon within which everyone can refer to one and the same objective world.

(Habermas 2000, p. 315)

This notion of communicative rationality underpinning all speech aimed at reaching understanding is central to Habermas’ epistemology in general and to his notion of the public sphere in particular. All discourse in the public sphere is to be aimed at mutual understanding, and to be communicatively rational by consequence, in accordance with the rational communicative norms governing the public sphere.

Among others, Fraser and Benhabib critique Habermas’ model of the public sphere as being exclusionary, blind to difference, and anti-democratic (Benhabib 1992, Fraser 1992). In summary, the arguments for this are as follows:

1) The discussion in the bourgeois public sphere was “governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality. These functioned informally to marginalize women and members of the plebeian classes and to prevent them from participating as peers” (Fraser 1992, p. 119). In effect, this kept the participants’ social status from being irrelevant to the discussions, while also keeping the public sphere from being inclusive.

2) The disregard of the social status of the participants bracketed the inequalities among the participants rather than eliminating them. Fraser suggests that rather than bracketing inequalities, highlighting them in the discussions would be more egalitarian and democratic (ibid).

3) The emphasis on topics of public concern precludes certain issues from entering the public sphere in ways that disadvantage particular groups. Nancy Fraser argues that the exclusion of issues of importance on the grounds that they were matters of private rather than public concern disadvantaged women. These issues would
primarily affect them, such as domestic violence being a major example. Benhabib argues that

[...] in the tradition of Western political thought and down to our own days, [distinctions between public and private] have served to confine women and typically female spheres of activity like housework; reproduction; nurture and care for the young, the sick, and the elderly to the “private” domain. [...] Along with their relegation, in Arendt’s terms, to the “shadowy interior of the household,” they have been treated, until recently, as “natural” and “immutable” aspects of human relations. They have remained prereflexive and inaccessible to discursive analysis."

(Benhabib 1992, pp. 89-90)

The eventual inclusion of these sorts of issues in the public sphere, Fraser argues, is not a result of the dominant public sphere deigning to include them, but rather from women and feminists forming their own alternative public sphere (a subaltern counter-public, in Fraser’s words) that changed the terms of discourse surrounding these issues and eventually the public treatment of the issues themselves (Fraser 1992, pp. 128-132). As a specific example, Fraser argues that

until quite recently, feminists were in the minority in thinking that domestic violence against women was a matter of common concern and thus a legitimate topic of public discourse. The great majority of people considered this issue to be a private matter between what was assumed to be a fairly small number of heterosexual couples (and perhaps the social and legal professionals who were supposed to deal with them). Then feminists formed a subaltern counterpublic from which we disseminated a view of domestic violence as a widespread systemic feature of male-dominated societies. Eventually, after sustained discursive contestation, we succeeded in making it a common concern.

(Fraser 1992, p. 129)

Fraser’s notion of subaltern counterpublics involves the following alterations to Habermas’ model of the bourgeois public sphere for the purposes of greater participation, inclusiveness, and equality; first, rather than there being one public sphere, there are many
public spheres. These are mostly weak public spheres that organize around particular issues and typically concerns of identity politics. In this sense, “weak” means that these public spheres deal with public opinion-formation but not collective decision-making, in contrast to strong public spheres, in which both operations take place. The goal is to grow weak public spheres into strong ones. In subaltern counterpublics, ideas and language are refined in order to reduce the disadvantage of the group in the dominant public spheres. Multiple public spheres help to keep the dominant public spheres and discourse arising out of them in check (Fraser 1992, pp. 122-128). The norms underpinning the operation of the public sphere need to be revised to account for these problems. Inclusivity must occur in practice as well as in theory. All systemic issues are treated as public issues. Vernacular language is used to limit the influence of class and technocratic expertise. Then Habermas’ rational norms of communicative action can be employed.

Gerard Hauser argues that public opinion formation is more complex than rational argumentation in a public sphere, particularly in the sense that the arguments that people have in the street (different vernacular settings using vernacular language), are as much rhetorical as they are rational, if not moreso. Discussing the idea of public opinion as a rational ideal (per Habermas, and also Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Lord Bryce before him) versus the current view of public opinion as an empirically measurable phenomenon that resides in polling data, Hauser argues that

[n]either characterization exhibits empirical fidelity to the complex process whereby a public opinion is formed and communicated. Neither accounts for the dialogical engagements by which an active populace participates in an issue’s development; the contours of the public sphere that color their levels of awareness, perception, and participation; the influence on opinion of sharing views with one another; and the terms of expression warranting the inference that a public has formed and has a dominant opinion. Both, moreover, conceptualize public opinion as the expression of an entity: the public. Neither conceptualizes discourse in ways that account for the rhetorical processes by which those without official status – the actual members of publics – communicate to one another and respond to the messages they receive.

(Hauser 1998b, p. 85)
In essence, for Hauser, public opinion is a process rather than a product, and must be treated as such. This involves taking into account not the statistical measure of a public opinion through a poll is, nor the rationality of the arguments around the issue, but the entire development of the discussions surrounding that issue over the course of its recent history, in diverse discussion circles. Consequently, Hauser argues that Habermas’ model of the public sphere, which emphasizes the rational argument, does not capture the full, rhetorical, character of public opinion formation:

Because Habermas’s model emphasizes ideal speech, it assesses the pragmatic opinions formed in the public sphere in terms of participants’ competence and the rational validity of their discourse. I will argue that his model excludes many arenas in which public dialogue occurs and, moreover, establishes criteria for communication that are insensitive to its essential rhetoricality.

(Hauser 1999, p. 39)

As an alternative, Hauser offers a rhetorical model of the public sphere, which takes into account the vernacular, rhetorical, character of dialogue. Like Habermas’ model, it has three main characteristics, but these are very different to the bourgeois model of the public sphere:

1) The rhetorical public sphere is discourse-based, not class-based.
2) Its critical norms are derived from actual discursive practices and based on a rhetorical norm of reasonableness rather than a theoretical norm of ideal rationality.
3) The rhetorical sphere intermediately brackets all discursive exchanges. That is, rather than being a part of a monolithic discussion, the public sphere is composed of many dialogues around an issue that merge as the discussion proceeds.

(Hauser 1999, pp. 61-2)

This model is much more similar to Fraser’s model of subaltern counterpublics in that it accounts for multiple disparate publics that converge later on in the dialogue. On the surface, there are still some issues within this model with respect to the gender-focused critiques that Fraser levelled at Habermas. For instance, it is not clear how the discourse-based, rhetorical, public sphere better deals with endemic sexism, among other forms of oppression and marginalisation, in discourse and social/discursive norms than Habermas’ bourgeois model
does. Part of the solution is that the third criterion offers the chance for subaltern counterpublics to form and exert their influence in general later on in the ongoing discussion of issues. While it does not solve the problem right now, it offers a means to chip away at it over time. Hauser offers a set of rhetorical, discursive norms that help to foreground the democratic character of his model and to further integrate Fraser’s critique into it;

1) Permeable boundaries: although a public sphere may have a primary membership, it is open to other people joining the discussion.

2) Activity: members of a public actively engage with the issue rather than passively form an opinion of it.

3) Contextualized language: vernacular language is used so that everyone can communicate and participate.

4) Believable appearance: the public sphere must appear believable to themselves and the general public.

5) Tolerance: People with different opinions to that of the public sphere’s primary membership must be able to participate in the public sphere to ensure a robust and vibrant discourse.

(Hauser 1999, 76-81)

Public sphere theory offers models with which we can explain the inter-subjective processes at work in social change, particularly those that arise from interventions with democratic and liberatory preoccupations. After an intervention, and after an ongoing ethical process is established to ground changes in behaviour, comes a process of deliberation in larger groups and wider publics in order to instigate social change in the future. The rules and norms that govern particular models of public spheres correspond with the Goffmanian frames that govern self-presentation and identity within the public sphere, as well as determine the boundaries of the magic circle (per Huizinga) surrounding the activity of political deliberation.

Hauser’s rhetorical model of the public sphere offers the possibility that Ian Bogost’s work on rhetoric and videogames (Bogost 2006, 2007), particularly procedural rhetoric, “a practice of using [computational] processes persuasively” (Bogost 2007, p. 3), might be usefully modified and extended to fit the rhetorical character of democratic deliberation.
Spatial Theory

In this thesis, intervention is emphasized as being tied to scenography at a higher priority than the content of the intervention’s plot. While the content is definitely important, in line with the idea of ethical interactivity that the thesis proposes, there is less to say about it on its own. At the extreme, all the interventionist content in the world is not going to make for social change if its delivery does not work. The use of defamiliarizing scenography is a tactic that facilitates intervention in that it destabilizes the spectator’s otherwise safe position as an audience member and engages them directly in the intervention’s action in some way that varies by which scenographic approach is employed. The thesis examines the aesthetics of Meyerhold, Artaud, Brecht, and Boal to these ends in Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 of the thesis takes a different approach, discussing interventionist scenography in relation to social theories of space, both in relation to live performances and those that take place in virtual, videogame spaces, linking the two to a productive aesthetics of intervention in these spaces.

The starting point for this analysis is, again, in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. While the notion of *catharsis* and its relationship to passive spectatorship were problematic for Meyerhold, Artaud, Becht, and Boal, this chapter emphasizes the hierarchy that Aristotle arranges theatrical elements in to facilitate *catharsis*, with plot on top and *opsis* (staging, scenography) on the bottom (Aristotle 1951, pp. 23-31). The Aristotelian approach is criticized as problematically logocentric, because it emphasizes the plot and the poetic rhythm of the language over the embellishments of staging. This criticism finds its way into Artaud’s emphasis on non-linguistic representation (1974, p.27) as well as arguments about the role and medium of theatre. In *Theatricality as Medium*, Samuel Weber argues that the Aristotelian logocentric approach privileges the semiotic interpretation of language over the phenomenological affect of the performance, a hierarchy that “reduce[s] and delegitimize[s] [theatre’s] distinctive resources” (Weber 2004, p. 284; see also States 1985). The emphasis on the plot and the language with which it is conveyed leads Aristotle to propose his three unities governing good drama, the unity of time, the unity of place, and the unity of action. Weber argues that

Aristotle’s insistence that a tragic plot should be capable of being “taken in at a single view” [...] presupposes a stable and detachable *point of view* [emphasis Weber’s], a fixed position from which the plot can be taken in as a
unified whole. This in turn presupposes a certain arrangement of space: a clear-cut separation for instance, between stage and audience, actors and spectators.

(Weber 2004, p. 283)

This leads back to the ideological problem of immersion and catharsis that Meyerhold, Artaud, Brecht and Boal worked against. While post-structuralist theory would argue both that the notion of any such fixed vantage point could not exist (Eagleton 2003, p. 60) and that the totally passive audience is a myth (Kershaw 1992, pp. 16-17), the uneven power relation set up by the separation of stage and audience persists in theoretical approaches to the theatre and the audience (which I discuss in Chapters 1 and 2), as well as in theoretical approaches to games and players (which I discuss in Chapters 3, 4, and 5).

Drawing on the notion of space as a social construct defined by social practice, in contrast to place as asocial *topos* (De Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1991), and the ways that these theories are extended to different media (Fenemore 2007; Berry 2008; Stockburger 2007; Kouratoras 2010), this chapter examines the ways in which interventions use scenography to create social spaces to explore ideas and belief structures in. A number of different approaches and case studies are employed to this end that all deal in some way with questions of the mediality of theatrical/performance space. In her work on scenography, Thea Brejzek argues for the transdisciplinary applicability of scenography to the design of digital and urban performance spaces in addition to theatrical ones (Brejzek 2010, p. 110), an argument that this thesis extends to videogame spaces specifically. Brejzek argues that the use of social networking and digital communication in flash mobs are scenographic technologies that open up a “distributed mode of spectatorship between ‘distant inquiry’ and ‘vital embodiment’” to participants in the mob due to their ability to reflect on the action of the mob in real-time (Brejzek 2010, p. 119). With these technologies increasingly built directly into games, or a few clicks and keystrokes away at any given time, videogame players are able to make use of the same mode of spectatorship. This extension of scenographic research and practice opens up avenues of social, historical, and cultural critique through playing with and analysing the conventions of the media being used (Klöck 2005; Roselt 2004 [cited in Klöck 2005]; Burns 1972; Kershaw 1992).

These spatial theories are used in relation to different kinds of media that make different uses of the space that they create. Brejzek focuses on urban flashmobs and the way space is constructed through the social process of organizing and executing the mob activity,
while Marsha Berry’s “Locative media: geo-placed tactics of resistance” (2008) examines intervention in urban spaces using locative media. These theories are also applied to videogame spaces in a variety of ways. Axel Stockburger engages with Lefebvre’s taxonomy of spatial aspects, physical, mental, and social space (Berry 2008, p. 102; Stockhauser 2007, p. 224) in relation to massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) in order to argue that videogame spaces make use of all of these types of space. Analyses of player behaviour in World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) by Adam Ruch (2009, online) and Nicholas Duchenault et. al. (2006, online) both illustrate the ways in which the game world is a social space rather than purely a function of the game’s code. Michail Kouratoras (2010) examines first-person shooter games and new media performances in relation to Atraud’s aesthetics and his plague metaphor.

This chapter examines three case studies of tactical performance intervention in and with game worlds, discussing their scenography, the social space that they create, and their interventionist efficacy. The case studies are Blast Theory’s Desert Rain (1999), Joseph DeLappe’s dead-in-iraq (2006-present), and Brody Condon’s Sonsbeek Live: Twentyfivefold Manifestations (2008). In addition to the spatial theories listed in this section, these case studies are examined in relation to notions of emergent and expansive gameplay (Juul 2005, Parker 2008), site-specific theatre (Pearson & Shanks 2001), and virtual reality performance (Dixon 2006; Giannachi 2004; Fenemore 2007).
Chapter 1 - Intervention as Persistent Ethical Process

Introduction – Intervention through Theatre and Intervention through Games

The history of videogames (and, to an extent, analog games) has been marked by the struggle of the majority of people involved in the medium for videogames to be recognized as a legitimate, non-trivial, socio-culturally important medium, with film’s acceptance as an art-form being the typical metric that the acceptance of videogames is measured against. This has led to videogames in particular developing increasingly film-like aesthetics, though that has not secured the desired lofty cultural position for the medium. Film critic Roger Ebert argued that “videogames are inherently inferior to film and literature,” because “video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control” (Ebert 2005).

Games-centric theory that predates the development of the videogame as a medium places a much larger emphasis on the importance of games to society than most of its current advocates. In Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (1938), Johan Huizinga developed a theoretical and anthropological notion of play, positing play as a central building block to civilization and culture; we think of art as doing the same thing.

Clark Abt’s Serious Games (1970) focused on games as a social tool, particularly for education, defining serious games (in contrast to trivial games or games of pure entertainment) as “games [that] have an explicit and carefully thought-out educational purpose and are not intended to be played primarily for amusement” (Abt 1970, p. 9). This was not strictly limited to education, though that was Abt’s primary focus and that of contemporary Serious Games – social action also formed a part of Serious Games’ purview. “Abt’s view was that games with social decision-making content allow learners to not just think, but participate; thought and action can be integrated” (Champ 2011, online). Games, like other art forms, can become a medium that intervenes in social life. This is important, and a major factor in the artistic merit of any medium.

However, I argue that both Ebert and those that are invested in games attaining cultural legitimacy are wrong, but not just because videogames can do the sorts of things that Huizinga or Abt argue that they do: The cultural advocates of videogames are wrong to hitch videogames to film’s aesthetic wagon, and Ebert is wrong to argue that authorial control is at the centre of art. The “filmification” of games - centred on graphical realism - implies
predominantly naturalistic modes of presentation and passive spectatorship that are both politically problematic and do not serve to elevate the content of the medium. Dan Angeloro relates this historically to the development of sound film:

Rewind to 1928, Sergei Eisenstein and his Russian comrades pen a manifesto about the introduction of recorded sound to cinema. They warn future filmmakers of the dangers of pursuing a naturalistic relationship between sound and image. For them, such a realistic synchronisation of sound would destroy the radical potential of montage by limiting the play of association each montage fragment produces in the mind of the viewer. Their fears for the future of cinema turn out to be perfectly realised in Hollywood’s own reply to sound film – the pursuit of acute audio-visual cohesion. (Angeloro 2006, p. 18)

Rather, I argue that the cultural advocates of videogames should have chosen theatre as their model and so should those who would look to use videogames as a means to intervene socially. The reason for this is that playing a videogame entails playing a role in a stage-managed, ludic, setting. Ruggill and McAllister (2011) argue that videogames interpellate players into behavioural codes of play and hybrid player and character/avatar identities. These interpellations are “insistent design invocations” which “hail players into particular roles and behaviors within a play context” (Ruggill & McAllister 2011, p. 34, see also; Althusser 2008). In sum, videogame players are more akin to actors being directed than they are to film viewers.

By historically examining anti-naturalistic theatre aesthetics originating with Vsevolod Meyerhold, and continuing through the work of dramatists as diverse as Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, and Augusto Boal, I aim to establish an aesthetic grounding for interventionist videogames based in theatrical performance aesthetics for both creators and the audience. Subsequently, by examining interventionist theatre with respect to Alain Badiou’s system of an ethic of Truths, I engage with the philosophical underpinnings of the ethics of interventionist art and flag issues with intervention and universalist ethics.

**Context – Sketches of Intervention through Theatrical History**

Theatre has been used as a medium to change opinions, behaviours, and attitudes for as long as we can trace a Western theatre tradition. It was not the first medium to do so – that
honour most likely goes to poetry based on the banishment of the poets in Plato’s *Republic*\(^4\). Those poets that would not censor themselves to only writing hymns to the gods and odes to great men would be banished from Plato’s ideal city-state as their writing would stir up emotions that were not conducive to civic society (Plato 1974, p. 437-8). However, this cannot be separated from Plato’s disdain for *mimesis* as pernicious, dishonest, and a distraction from the pursuit of genuine truth and knowledge that underpins his rational ethic (Plato 1974, p. 421-439). This was one of the major points of disagreement about aesthetics between Plato and his student, Aristotle, who argued that poetry and other mimetic art-forms “are something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts” (Aristotle 1973, p.35). Even in Ancient Greek times, prevailing dramatic theory described in Aristotle’s *Poetics* details the notion of *catharsis*; the building up of negative emotions by way of empathy with the protagonist during the dramatic action, followed by the purgative release of these emotions before the spectator exits the theatre and re-enters civic society (Aristotle in Butcher 1951, p. 23; Butcher 1951 p. 240).

Watching theatre facilitated social cohesion in the *polis* as negative emotions were given a safe external outlet. Furthermore, Greek Tragedies, based on religious myths and morals, reinforced feelings of community, shared history, and shared culture.

Social intervention through theatre was primarily centred on reinforcing civic society, its institutions, and the ideology of the given society in which the plays were written and presented, until the advent of Marxist critique in the late 19\(^{th}\) century. However, not all theatrical intervention up until that time was made to reinforce the *status quo*. While Greek Tragedy was structured around the ideas in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, including the notion of *catharsis*, Greek Comedy served to subvert the *status quo* and lampoon key authority figures. In *The Clouds* (Aristophanes 1962), first performed in 423 BCE, Aristophanes critiques Sophistic education, typical for upper-class Athenians, as producing cynical and exploitative minds without respect for morality and the social fabric of the *polis*. Comedic theatre would also intervene in later times of social tension, as with the example of Molière’s *Tartuffe* (1967), first performed in 1664, entering the ideological battle between the Catholic Church and the French Monarchy (of King Louis XIV) with an incisive critique of religious hypocrisy in the Church that ignited wider controversy in France. It is a plausible argument that this general period of secular and religious tension, which might include *Tartuffe’s* early performances as a

\(^4\) Ancient Greek theatre was a poetic form, with its plays written in dactylic hexameter verse. Plato’s criticism of poets extends further back than recorded Ancient Greek Theatre by approximately four centuries, to Homer, who is disputably the oldest Greek poet whose works have survived to the present day. (The birth dates and dates of activity of Homer and Hesiod, the other contender, are still unknown to the point where historians can not definitely say who came first.)
key event, was an important precursor to the French Revolution 125 years later as the play aimed to bolster a French secularism that eventually toppled both the French state and religious apparatuses.

Marxist critique reconfigured the notion of theatrical intervention both in terms of how critique could be systematically mounted against economically exploitative institutional structures, and in terms of the way in which the interventions that would carry these critiques were structured. Whereas in the Aristotelian cathartic model of drama, the immersion of the presentation would lead to an increased sense of closeness to, increased emotional investment in, and diminished sense of critical distance from the on-stage action (Grau 2003, p. 13) that combine to lead to *catharsis*, Marxist-inspired models of intervention make use of anti-immersive techniques that *disrupt* the spectator’s passive reception of ideological reinforcement via catharsis, which itself would no longer happen. Particularly, this revolved around changing the relationship between the audience and the on-stage action as an analogy for changing the relationship between the social actor and the state. Now, these anti-immersive structures have become mainstreamed and are no longer exclusively or explicitly tied to Marxist critique.

**Generative Events for Critical Aesthetics**

In “An Explosive Genealogy: Theatre, Philosophy and the Art of Presentation” (2006), Oliver Feltham argues that the historical beginning of this change in the structure of theatrical intervention is “the Meyerhold-event— the dual advent of Meyerhold’s scandalous and innovative productions and his writings, which occurred at the beginning of the transformation of the situation called ‘theatre’” (Feltham 2006, p.227). Feltham points to four beginning points for this change in the audience/action relationship that he argues originate with Meyerhold’s avant-garde directing style and actor-training regimen:

1) in Meyerhold’s work the plasticity of the acting body is liberated from the constraints of mimesis via the exploratory system of exercises called ‘biomechanics’.

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5 Biomechanics refers to both Meyerhold’s set of physical actor training exercises and the science upon which Meyerhold claimed they were based. Biomechanics is derived from the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor and relates to the study of efficiency in movement, particularly in work processes. Biomechanical actor training exercises were designed to make the actor react quickly and efficiently to
2) Meyerhold consciously worked to liberate theatrical space from the box-set with its illusional painted scenery and proscenium arch. [Reference to Barkhine and Vakhtanov 1967, p. 350]

3) Meyerhold named the fourth wall as an obstacle to be dismantled insofar as the spectator was to be transformed into a co-creator.

4) the mask is reintroduced as essential to theatre along with clowning, mime and play-acting [as opposed to naturalistic, mimetic, psychological, Aristotelian presentation].

(Feltham, 2006. pp. 227-8, notes mine)

Arguably, these aesthetics are only turned to explicitly Marxist purposes after the Russian Revolution, when Meyerhold joined the Bolshevik Party and worked on radicalizing the Russian theatre from 1918-19. Nonetheless, Meyerhold argued for and began implementing these aesthetics in his theatrical praxis as early as 1907, while he worked with Russian Imperial Theatres (Meyerhold 1967, p. 159-167).

Feltham highlights Meyerhold’s intervention in the methods of theatre practice as the generative event for modern theatre because of the divergent ways in which later dramatists would take up choice selections of his ideas to relate to their dramatic and social preoccupations. Feltham points to Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht, specifically, while Augusto Boal (1992; 2002) and Jerzy Grotowski (based on Wolford 2000, p.193), also developed their own praxes based on some of Meyerhold’s ideas. In the introduction to Meyerhold on Theatre, Edward Braun extends this history slightly further back, pointing to the Symbolist plays of the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck (1977) (particularly The Intruder, The Blind, and Inside [also sometimes translated as Interior]) as necessitating a break from naturalistic representation and Stanislavskian direction on account of the “mystical abstractions of [this] ‘new drama’” (Braun 1969, p.19). Meyerhold himself cites Maeterlinck as an influence in this respect, as well as Verhaeren, Wagner, and curiously, the great naturalist (and later, realist, and later still, modernist) playwright Henrik Ibsen (Meyerhold 1969, p.60). Meyerhold describes Ibsen as the pre-eminent naturalistic dramatist based on his detailed analysis of individual sections of the production in isolation (Meyerhold 1969, p.27), but

directorial directives in line with Meyerhold’s notion of “reflex excitability” – “the ability to realize in feelings, movements and words a task which is prescribed externally[,]” on reflex (Meyerhold 1969, p. 201). What elevated this beyond mimesis of these efficient movements was the influence of the director. In “Meyerhold and biomechanics,” Robert Leach cites Meyerhold as describing biomechanical actor training as “‘devoted largely to the understanding of the body in space’, or as he called it, ‘scenic movement’” (Leach 2000, p. 40).
castigates him for his lack of a holistic approach. Citing Alexander Pope’s “An Essay on Criticism,” which argues for a critics to embrace a holistic understanding of texts, Meyerhold argues that

“[t]he naturalistic director subjects all the separate parts of the work to analysis and fails to gain a picture of the whole. He is carried away by the filigree work of applying finishing touches to various scenes, the gratifying products of his creative imagination, absolute pearls of verisimilitude; in consequence, he destroys the balance and harmony of the whole.”
(Meyerhold 1969, pp. 27-8)

Given this critique, Ibsen seems out of place in this list of influences, for which I would give two explanations. First, it is plausible that Meyerhold drew influence from Ibsen in terms of what not to do in rehearsing and staging a play, reinforcing a holistic approach in Meyerhold’s own work. Secondly, the deliberate way that Ibsen’s plays mounted social commentary and critique by examining, in detailed fashion, the underbelly of polite European society, goes a long way toward explaining this influence in a more positive sense. Meyerhold could take the best aspects of Ibsen’s approach and adjust them to fit his own aesthetics and socio-political preoccupations.

This set of influences could complicate Feltham’s notion that Meyerhold’s aesthetics were the single generative event that transformed modern theatre (Feltham 2006, p.227), but Meyerhold’s aesthetics and their influence on later theatre practitioners are evident enough that Feltham’s claim isn’t hyperbolic. It would benefit from additional context, however.

Later Practitioners and how they Engaged with Meyerhold’s Aesthetics

Artaud

Feltham examines the ways that Meyerhold’s influence manifests itself in the work of Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht (Feltham 2006, pp. 230-235). Making use of Feltham’s 4-point summary of Meyerhold’s aesthetics, I will extend his analysis of Artaud and Brecht’s engagement with them. These four points break down into two categories; they relate mainly to either the acting style/technique or the performance’s staging.
Feltham points out that Artaud admired Meyerhold’s attempts to break with naturalism and his efforts to build what Artaud called “a theatre of action and of the masses” (Feltham 2006, p. 232, citing Artaud). However, there were significant aesthetic differences between their respective theatrical projects.

Fundamentally, Meyerhold argued for a theatre that eschewed naturalistic realism in favour of self-conscious theatricality: “I regard this fragmentation of the theatre into intimate [naturalistic] theatres as the obstacle which is obstructing the rebirth of the universal theatre, the truly dramatic theatre, the festive theatre” (Meyerhold 1969, p. 61). This was the end that his aesthetic means were oriented toward. Artaud’s aesthetic goal is similar, emphasizing the theatricality and artifice of the theatre in ways that reveal truth to the audience:

[T]he thing which seems to surprise and astonish us the most is this revealing aspect of matter, suddenly seeming to disperse in signs, to teach us the metaphysical identity of abstract and concrete and to teach it to us in lasting gestures. For though we are familiar with its realistic aspect, here it is raised to the nth power and absolutely stylised.

(Artaud 1974, pp. 41-42)

Artaud proposes several ways to accomplish this, some in line with Meyerhold’s aesthetics, some not: While Meyerhold set out to liberate the actor from the constraints of mimetic acting through biomechanics, Artaud has much less to say about the actor than he does about the action of a given performance. Particularly, Artaud argues that Western (Aristotelian, psychological, mimetic) theatre loses its theatricality because of its emphases on mimesis and on the spoken word:

I maintain the stage is a tangible, physical place that needs to be filled and it ought to be allowed to speak its own concrete language. I maintain that this physical language, aimed at the senses and independent of speech, must first satisfy the senses. There must be poetry for the senses just as there is for speech, but this physical, tangible language I am referring to is really only theatrical in as far as the thoughts it expresses escape spoken language.

(Artaud 1974, p. 27)
In spite of the above quotation, Artaud and Meyerhold both agree that there is some value to the spoken word in theatrical performance. While looking to complement the spoken word with clowning, mime and play-acting, Meyerhold’s aesthetics never moved to abandon it and theatrical dialogue. For his part, Artaud also looks toward mime as a complement to the spoken word (Artaud 1974, pp. 28-29) while taking a much narrower view as to how the spoken word can be an appropriate vehicle for the theatricality of the theatre:

To make metaphysics out of spoken language is to make language convey what it does not normally convey. That is to use it in a new, exceptional and unusual way, to give it its full, physical shock potential, to split it up and distribute it actively in space, to treat inflexions in a completely tangible manner and restore their shattering power and really to manifest something; to turn against language and its basely utilitarian, one might say alimentary, sources, against its origins as a hunted beast, and finally to consider language in the form of *Incantation*.

(Artaud 1974, p. 35)

Meyerhold and Artaud also both agree to some degree that an overemphasis on dialogue stifles the theatricality of the performance and the engagement of the spectator. As noted above, Artaud demands a more complex, physical, gestural, spatial language appropriate to the theatre, while Meyerhold, citing Schopenhauer, argues that

“[a] work of art can influence only through the imagination. Therefore it must constantly stir the imagination.’ (Schopenhauer) But it must really stir it, not leave it inactive through trying to show everything. To stir the imagination is ‘the essential condition of aesthetic activity as well as the basic law of the fine arts. Whence it follows that a work of art must not give *everything* to our senses but only as much as is necessary to direct our imagination on the right track, letting it have the last word’ (Schopenhauer) [...] The naturalistic theatre denies not only the spectator’s ability to imagine for himself, but even his ability to understand clever conversation. Hence, the painstaking *analysis* of Ibsen’s dialogue which makes every production of the Norwegian dramatist tedious, drawn-out, and doctrinaire.

(Meyerhold 1969, pp. 26-27)
This leads both Meyerhold and Artaud to argue for a theatre that is not based on the primacy of the theatrical text (the script), or the playwright that authored it, but rather on the primacy of the participants in the given performance (director, actors, audience). Meyerhold argues that “[o]nce the director has grasped the play’s inner dialogue, he can interpret it freely, using the rhythm of the dialogue and the plasticity of the actor, and heeding only those stage directions which were not dictated by technical expediency” (Meyerhold 1969 p.63). Artaud asserts that “instead of harking back to texts regarded as sacred and definitive, we must first break theatre’s subjugation to the text and rediscover the idea of a kind of unique language somewhere between gesture and thought” (Artaud 1974, p. 68). The director, actors, and audience, communicating in this language, are the prime movers in the performance. Artaud prioritizing the work of agents over the script’s programming also informs the notion of strong and weak procedurality in games, as discussed in Chapter 6. Though there are relatively few examples of this gestural language being employed primarily in the theatre, there are numerous examples of it being employed in contemporary performance art and dance. One example is Angelika Festa’s 1987 performance, *Untitled Dance (with fish and others)*. As performance theorist Peggy Phelan recounts:

Festa literally hung suspended from a pole for twenty-four hours[...] The pole was positioned between two wooden supports at about an 80° angle and Festa hung suspended from it, her body wrapped to the pole with white sheets, her face and weight leaning toward the floor. Her eyes were covered with silver tape and thus looked, in all senses, beyond the spectator. About two and a half feet from the bottom of the pole was a small black cushion which supported her bare feet. Her feet were in turn projected onto a screen behind her to the left in close-up. The projection enlarged them so much that they seemed to be as large as the rest of Festa’s body. On a video monitor in front of Festa and to the left, a video tape loop of the embryology of a fish played continuously. Finally, on a smaller monitor facing Festa a time-elapse video documenting the dance (re)played and re(in)flected the entire performance.

In a sense, it is not co-incidental that Festa refers to her performance as dance. Even though *Untitled Dance (with fish and others)* lacks some of the typical hallmarks of dance, it enacts the same kind of non-verbal communication as dance does even without music or discernible movement. The communication between the performer and audience is further nuanced by the impossibility of eye contact between each other (Phelan 1993, pp. 156-163). The piece, however, consists of a single, extended gesture, contextualized in relation to the projections of Festa’s feet and of the videotape footage that accompany her action. The meaning of the gesture also depends on whether the spectator takes the performance as self-contained or contextualized in relation to other cultural works, or only Festa’s other works, as Phelan elucidates in her interpretation of the work as relating to issues of femininity, visibility and disappearance (Phelan 1993, pp. 160-163).

A major set of questions in regard to Artaud’s aesthetics is how to constitute this theatrical language, how the actor should be trained to communicate using it, and how the actor should communicate using it on stage during a performance. Artaud gives a clear answer to the first question, specifying that “[t]his difficult, complex poetry assumes many guises; first of all it assumes those expressive means usable on stage such as music, dance, plastic art, mimicry, gesture, voice inflexion, architecture, lighting and decor” (Artaud 1974, p. 28). The other two questions, however, are left more vague and open-ended. The only reference to actor training in *The Theatre and its Double*, a collection of writings that serve as Artaud’s aesthetic manifesto, refers to breathing exercises based on Cabalistic arcana (Artaud 1974 pp. 88-95). As far as how the actor is to perform on stage, Artaud seems only suggest that the actor obliterate any connection with either self or character, and to act as a sign-conduit, a human “hieroglyph” that conveys complex ideas or metaphysical truths in gesture and sound (Artaud 1974, pp. 72-73). This liberates the actor from naturalistic mimesis, and changes the actor’s function from imitation to signification. Between this and Artaud’s emphasis on non-verbal, non-dialogic communication, his aesthetics make use of the first and fourth of Meyerhold’s aesthetic principles, as identified by Feltham – the liberation of the actor from mimesis, and the use of mask and physical theatre techniques to communicate, while still maintaining a dramatically different approach.

In terms of the theatrical stage, Meyerhold makes two significant breaks from the contemporary conventions of the naturalistic drama of his time:

First, he argues that theatre and the spaces that are used for it need to be reconsidered in terms of scope and turned into mass events in massive spaces:
We must consider the demands of the contemporary spectator and think in terms of audiences not of three to five hundred (the proletariat is not interested in so-called ‘intimate’ or ‘chamber’ theatre) but of tens of thousands. Consider the packed crowds at football, volley-ball and ice-hockey matches: soon we shall be presenting dramatized sporting events in the same stadia. The modern spectator demands the kind of thrill which only the tension generated by an audience of thousands can give.

(Meyerhold 1969, p. 256)

Secondly, in terms of the specific configuration of these spaces, Meyerhold argues that this theatre requires

[the removal of] the boxes and [the abolition of] seating in tiers. The only design suitable for a performance created by the combined efforts of actors and spectators is the amphitheatre, where there is no division of the audience into separate classes dependent on social standing and financial resources. Also, we must destroy the box-stage once and for all, for only then can we hope to achieve a truly dynamic spectacle. By making the stage machinery sufficiently flexible to present a series of rapidly changing scenes, we shall be able to abolish the tedious unity of place and the compression of the action into four or five unwieldy acts. The new stage will have no proscenium arch and will be equipped with a series of platforms which can be moved horizontally and vertically to facilitate transformation scenes and the manipulation of kinetic constructions.

(Meyerhold 1969, p. 257)

It is unclear whether amphitheatre here refers to a circular seating area around the stage as was popular in Roman amphitheatres, or semicircular or narrower arc-shaped amphitheatres as were more common in Greece. Presumably, in keeping with the space being like a sporting stadium, it would be the former. This also disrupts the notion of the fourth wall somewhat, as there isn’t a single plane dividing the actors from the spectators (though perhaps there is a cylinder doing so over and around the stage).

What is meant by a performance “created by the combined efforts of actors and spectators” is not an immediately interactive form of theatre, but rather that the play would
be presented to a large focus-group, a mass test audience in the same way as Hollywood films are trialled. The play would then be edited in response to the audience’s reactions (Meyerhold 1969, pp. 256-257). This, combined with the spectators using their imagination to fill in deliberately left blanks in the theatrical presentation, is how Meyerhold treats the audience as a “co-creator.” This is a sticking point in Meyerhold’s aesthetic when thinking about interventionist videogames. Given the interactivity associated with the medium, directly translating Meyerhold’s notion of the audience as creator to videogames would be extremely limited and would champion illusionary agency and spectacular interactivity in dealing with pre-defined actions rather than allowing the audience to truly create and choose. Intervention demands the latter, requiring a new videogame aesthetic based on a more ethically interactive theatre aesthetic.

While Artaud deals with some of the same questions as Meyerhold as far as how to stage a performance, and elements of their approaches to staging overlap, by and large Artaud comes to very different conclusions. Both agree on abolishing the proscenium arch, but rather than levelling the class-based playing field among spectators, Artaud proposes a vastly different staging method that inverts this idea of theatre in the round:

We intend to do away with stage and auditorium, replacing them by a kind of single, undivided locale without any partitions of any kind and this will become the very scene of the action. Direct contact will be established between the audience of the show, between actors and audience, from the very fact that the audience is seated in the centre of the action, is encircled and furrowed by it.

(Artaud 1974, p. 74)

By placing the spectator at the centre of the action that unfolds around them, which is based on a gestural, stylized, theatrical and physical language, incorporating ritual gesture and incantatory speech, Artaud seeks to reveal metaphysical truths about the world itself, and to “affect the spectator’s sensibilities” (Feltham 2006, p. 233), in line with his parallel between theatre and the plague:

[W]e can see that theatre action is as beneficial as the plague, impelling us to see ourselves as we are, making the masks fall and divulging our world’s lies, aimlessness, meanness, and even two-facedness. It shakes off stifling material
dullness which even overcomes the senses’ clearest testimony, and collectively reveals their dark powers and hidden strength to men, urging them to take a nobler, more heroic stand in the face of destiny than they would have assumed without it.

(Artaud 1974, p. 22)

There is communication between the director, actors, and audience, but no direct sense in which the audience are co-creators in the performance. The audience consciously takes in the spectacle and unconsciously processes it.

While there are many commonalities between Artaud’s theatrical approach and Meyerhold’s, Feltham notes, importantly, that “at a certain point in his thought, Artaud distances his conception of theatre – a magical metaphysical event – from the ‘Russian’ conception:

I consider as vain all those attempts made in Russia to place the theatre at the service of immediate political or social ends. This is the case however new the staging procedures employed. These procedures, insofar as they wish to subordinate themselves to the strictest givens of dialectical materialism, turn their back on the metaphysics that they scorn, and remain scenic staging following the most vulgar sense of the word.

(Feltham 2006, p.233, citing Virmaux 1970, p. 138)

Artaud’s writing demonstrates an uneasy relationship with theatre that presents material that is socially or politically topical. As noted above, on one hand, an emphasis on that sort of content makes it difficult or impossible for theatre to function as a medium for broad metaphysical revelation:

[T]heatre, in as much as it remains confined within its own language and in correlation with it, must make a break with topicality. It is not aimed at solving social or psychological conflicts, to serve as a battlefield for moral passions, but to express objectively secret truths, to bring out in active gestures those elements of truth hidden under forms in their encounters with Becoming

(Artaud 1974, p. 51).
At the same time, Artaud’s first proposed show making use of his aesthetics of the Theatre of Cruelty was entitled, and about, *The Conquest of Mexico*. Artaud states that this subject matter was chosen because it involves the present, and because of all the references it allows to problems of vital interest both to Europe and the world. From a historical view, *The Conquest of Mexico* raises the question of colonisation. It revives Europe’s deep-rooted self-conceit in a burning, inexorably bloody manner, allowing us to debunk its own concept of its supremacy. It contrasts Christianity with far older religions. It treats the false conceptions the West has somehow formed concerning paganism with the contempt they deserve, emphasising with burning emotion, the splendour and ever present poetry of the ancient metaphysical foundations on which these religions were built. [...] By raising the dreadfully contemporary problem of colonisation, that is the right one continent considers it has to enslave another, it questions the real supremacy some races may have over others, showing the inner filiation linking a race’s genius with particular forms of civilisation. It contrasts the tyrannical anarchy of the colonisers with the deep intellectual concord of those about to be colonised.

(Artaud 1974, p. 85)

As the essays containing these disparate quotations were chronologically separated, this may demonstrate a shift in Artaud’s thought that was more inclusive of topicality while still maintaining its distinctly metaphysical elements. However, I am not satisfied that this explanation fully resolves this tension, which is a matter for further research. For the purposes of this thesis, it is worth noting that both the revelatory element of Artaud’s theatre and this possible topical socio-political element can serve to classify his performance aesthetics as interventionist.

**Brecht**

For Meyerhold, the biomechanical method of actor training liberates the actor from the constraints of mimesis and Stanislavskian System acting. This ostensibly solves the typical
problem that Meyerhold sees with naturalistic actors, namely, that “[they have] always been so overwhelmed by emotions that [they have] been unable to answer for [their] movements or for their voice[s]” (Meyerhold 1969, p.199). In Meyerhold’s view, the physical training that the biomechanical method provides allows actors to maintain an unconscious awareness of all three of these things and to develop reflex excitability. Reflex excitability refers to “the ability to realize in feelings, movements and words a task which is prescribed externally” on reflex (Meyerhold 1969, p. 201). As a reflexive action, the actor responds to the tasks given by the director unconsciously.

For Bertolt Brecht, whose aesthetic goal was to make audiences actively critical of the content of theatre productions as opposed to passively immersed in it, Stanislavskian acting also did not suffice, but for the same reason, neither did Meyerhold’s biomechanics. In the chapter “A Dialogue about Acting,” from the book Brecht on Theater: The development of an aesthetic (1929; in Brecht 1974), Brecht begins to describe the way that he believes actors need to act in order to bring this goal about:

How ought they to act, then?
For an audience of the scientific age.
What does that mean?
Demonstrating their knowledge.
Knowledge of what?
Of human relations, of human behaviour, of human capacities.
All right; that’s what they need to know. But how are they to demonstrate it?
Consciously, suggestively, descriptively.
(Brecht 1974, p. 26)

The actor’s consciousness of the process is meant to assist the spectator’s own conscious criticality, but this is not limited to the actor’s on-stage performance. Brecht devised methods of rehearsal and actor training to foster this consciousness on the part of actors long before the performance would take place. The subject matter of Brecht’s plays was typically topical, social and political. As Brecht describes,

[t]he epic theatre is chiefly interested in the attitudes which people adopt towards one another, wherever they are socio-historically significant (typical). It works out scenes where people adopt attitudes of such a sort that the social
laws under which they are acting spring into sight. For that we need to find workable definitions: that is to say, such definitions of the relevant processes as can be used in order to intervene in the processes themselves. The concern of the epic theatre is thus eminently practical. Human behaviour is shown as alterable; man himself dependent on certain political and economic factors and at the same time as capable of altering them. [...] In short, the spectator is given the chance to criticize human behaviour from a social point of view, and the scene is played as a piece of history.

(Brecht 1974, p. 86)

Given this, it is not surprising, as Peter Thomson notes, that “[i]t is a prerequisite of Brechtian actor training that the trainee should be open to a study of history, including the history of the present. The tendency of historical enquiry is almost inevitably towards astonishment in the enquirer” (Thomson 2000, pp. 102-103). By undertaking a historical examination of the events that the play deals with, the actor can develop this astonishment and structure his performance around it, communicating it to the audience and inviting them to engage with the historical throughline that the actor provides. Speaking of the results of historical enquiry and its subsequent astonishment on the Brechtian actor, Thomson adds that as a result, “[w]e discover details that compel us to reassess the causes of events we had previously taken for granted” (Thomson 2000, p. 103). This is true for the spectator as much as it is for the actor.

While departing from Meyerhold’s approach, Brecht still abandons mimesis, if for different reasons. For Brecht, rather that mimetically imitating reality, the actor represents the multiple and nuanced ways that people can be in situations.

While Meyerhold implemented masks, mime, clowning and play-acting into his theatre, Brecht is not well-known for doing any of these, even though, like Artaud, he takes inspiration from Asian theatre, in which mask and mime are common. Particularly, Brecht draws inspiration from Chinese theatre’s use of the alienation effect, a device used extensively, if differently, by Brecht in his own theatre. These effects are known in theatre circles as verfremdungseffekt, from the German verfremden, meaning alienation or defamiliarization.

Broadly, thanks mainly to Brecht’s deployment of them, alienation effects have come to mean any technique or device by which the spectator’s immersion in the performance is deliberately disrupted in order to create critical distance for the spectator to engage critically with the performance. For Brecht in particular, this is mainly done to highlight some socio-
historical aspect of the performance’s action (Brecht 1974, p. 98), though alienation effects can also be deployed for emotional or tactile purposes. For example, the sudden sound of a loud bang in the theatre can jolt the spectators out of their immersion in the play, and leave them in a heightened state for the next few minutes of the play’s action, without making any social or historical comment in and of itself.

As Brecht himself defines it, the alienation effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one’s attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected. What is obvious is in a certain sense made incomprehensible, but this is only in order that it may be made all the easier to comprehend. Before familiarity can turn into awareness the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation. However frequently recurrent, modest, vulgar it may be it will now be labelled as something unusual.

(Brecht 1974, p. 143-4)

Brecht notes that the alienation effect occurs in Chinese Theatre because “the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. [...] The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place” (Brecht 1974, pp. 91-2). Rather than an unseen spectator, the audience member is put into the role of a witness to the action that is occurring on stage. In addition to the acting techniques that Brecht pins down as the source of the Chinese alienation effect, Brecht’s experiments with alienation effects in Germany before his exile, as well as in Scandinavia and the United States during it, also involved “music (choruses, songs) and [the use of the set] (placards, film etc.)” (Brecht 1974, p. 96). In terms of staging, this was the bulk of Brecht’s innovation; aside from the use of placards, film, and other media giving the audience information to be processed outside of the action of the play, Brecht’s dismantling of the fourth wall comes from acting technique rather than the spatial configuration of the theatre. This jarring effect can be likened to the theatrical presentation passing from zuhanden to vorhanden for the spectator; a breakage occurs where the theatre becomes present-at-hand, and requires cognitive work to understand in context.
The Meyerholdian notion of the spectator as an active co-creator does not come into play in Brechtian theatre either. The spectator is implicated in interpreting the play, but not in creating its meaning or influencing its action. That particular innovation is attributable to the subsequent work Augusto Boal\(^6\).

**Boal**

Augusto Boal developed a set of theatre aesthetics that form the umbrella grouping of “Theatre of the Oppressed” (abbreviated as TO), a theatre-making toolkit that has broadened with the contributions of other dramatists such as Adrian Jackson, Barbara Santos, and Boal’s son, Julian, among others. This consists of a broad grouping of actor-training exercises and performance styles that Boal outlined in *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1992). Drawing on Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* ([1960]2003), TO presents scenarios of oppression to engender debate and discussion, but also the acting-out of prospective solutions to the oppression by both the actors and the audience as a precursor to analogous social action. Generally speaking, and originally, TO performances are workshopped with particular communities (prison inmates, refugees and sex workers, to give a few examples) and centred on particular types and relationships of oppression in those communities, though TO is not limited to this kind of structure. Later in his career, Boal frequently staged performances involving trained actors, without workshops, in front of heterogeneous audiences that may or may not have uniformly related to whatever scenario of oppression was presented. These were called “TO shows” (Boal 1992, p.241-2).

Boal’s central theoretical and practical innovations deal with interactivity. They are the notions of “simultaneous dramaturgy” (Boal 2000, p. 132) and the “spect-actor” (Boal 2002, p. 15). Simultaneous dramaturgy refers to the actors pausing a performance in order to solicit

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Brecht dropped his experiments with *Lehrstücke* in the 1930s, and Boal picked them back up and modified them substantially. Boal became much more strongly associated with interactive political theatre than Brecht.
suggestions for how to proceed from the audience, and then continuing the scene along those lines. Spect-actorship extends this to the point where the spectators can take to the stage and act out their own suggestions. Rather than passively watching the presented work (spectatorship), a spect-actor always has the agency to interact with the onstage action directly (acting). Boal’s performance styles centre on simultaneous dramaturgy and spect-actorship. They provide a more literal means for the spectators and actors to dismantle the fourth wall and turn the audience into conscious co-creators. This notion of spect-actorship is central to this thesis and to my argument for an aesthetics of intervention for videogames, which argues for the need to transform spectators into spect-actors and to allow them opportunities for political dynamisations through the experience of the videogame medium and individual videogame artefacts. Boal’s actor-training exercises seek to facilitate this in the actors in a somewhat similar fashion to Meyerhold’s biomechanical training exercises, and it is worth noting that in workshop-generated performances, these exercises help the untrained workshop participants to do this.

While a much deeper elaboration on the topic is beyond this chapter’s immediate scope, and while this may or may not have entered Boal’s mind, the issue of staging an interventionist performance for homogeneous or heterogeneous audiences relates to major and ongoing debates about the nature of ethics. Theatre that accepts the currently dominant western ethics of alterity, in the tradition of Lévinas, would seek to perform to a homogeneous audience and highlight differences as a means to foster the expression of subjectivity and identity politics. By contrast, theatre that accepts universalist ethics would seek to perform to a heterogeneous audience in order to display “generic humanity” (Hallward 2003, p. 205, citing Alain Badiou) as fundamentally the same, with differences as social constructions. This is why Alain Badiou, as a militantly universalist ethicist (and playwright), argues that

\[t\]rue theatre […] is one whose audience must represent “humanity in its very consistency, its infinite variety. The more it is united (socially, nationally) […] the less it supports, in time, the eternity and universality of an idea. The only audience worth the name is generic, an audience of chance.”

(Hallward 2003, p. 154, internal quotation from Alain Badiou’s *Petit manuel d’inésthétique*, p. 116)

There are two main performance styles in TO: Invisible Theatre, and Forum Theatre. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* also lists Image Theatre, but this is generally used a
workshopping tool that is typically used to develop Invisible and Forum Theatre pieces rather than the centre of a performance.

Invisible Theatre is “public theatre which involves the public as participants without their knowing it” (Jackson 1991, in Boal 2002, p. xxiii). The spectators can interact with the action of the performance, which usually consists of “an unexpected subversion of normal behaviour” (Jackson 1991, in Boal 2002, p. xxiii), in any number of ways – arguing with the actors or other spect-actors, a physical intervention into the scene, et cetera. Typically, Invisible Theatre is geared toward provoking debate surrounding the subversive behaviour exhibited, a way to encourage social critique through a performance that the spect-actors are immediately experiencing (it being indistinguishable from everyday life), but with the possibility of critical distance maintained. Boal offers the example of an Invisible Theatre piece staged on the Paris Métro that consisted of two incidents of sexual harassment. The first incident saw a man make several improper advances toward a woman in the same subway car. The woman became indignant, but nobody responded to the incident save for one actor taking the aggressor’s side. Three stops later, a pair of women made improper advances toward a man that had just gotten on the train (everyone mentioned until this point was an actor). This led to a lively debate over gender and sexual harassment as actors and passengers alike intervened in the scene. It also exposed some unequal gender perceptions on the part of the men and women present (Boal 2002, pp. 277-280).

In Invisible Theatre, the spectatorial experience is immediate because the performance is not bounded by theatrical conventions. It appears to be an extraordinary situation arising within the sphere of ordinary life. This highlights the agency of the audience, as there are no conventions that dictate that they are to sit quietly and watch as things proceed around them, even if the presentation of the performance is grounded in the naturalistic conceit of presenting artifice as realistically as possible. There are no conventions whereby the audience can recognize the performance as artifice, which sidesteps the ideological problems of naturalistic presentation.

Forum Theatre is different in a number of ways, most importantly in various framings surrounding the exercise:

Forum Theatre is a theatrical game in which a problem is shown in an unsolved form, to which the audience, again spect-actors, is invited to suggest and enact solutions. The problem is always the symptom of oppression, and generally involves visible oppressors and a protagonist who is oppressed. [...] After one
showing of the scene, which is known as 'the model' [...] it is shown again slightly speeded up, and follows the exact same course until a member of the audience shouts 'Stop!', takes the place of the protagonist and tries to defeat the oppressors.


In Forum Theatre, the spect-actor is made aware of the particular framing of the game by a figure called the Joker, who presides over the proceedings and “whose function is to ensure the smooth running of the game and teach the audience the rules” (Jackson 1991, in Boal 2002, p. xxiv). Additionally, the Joker provokes deliberation in the audience by helping to denaturalise the social relationships that the play is about, serving a similar role to the mythological Trickster-figure.

In Forum Theatre, the spect-actor is conscious of themself as a social actor and as the oppressed protagonist while they are on and off-stage (in the latter case, this is by virtue of their being able to take over the stage at any point), but the relationship between these two entities is not unidirectional and representational like the relationship between characters and spectators in Aristotelian Drama. Catharsis is not self-referential, and since the spect-actor in Boalian theatre occupies both positions (self and other), the relationship between spectator and actor necessarily ceases to be representational of someone else. As Boal argues,

when an actor carries out an act of liberation in a normal play where intervention by the audience is not allowed, he or she does it in place of the spectator, which event is thus, for the audience, a catharsis. But when a spect-actor occupies the stage and carries out the same act there, he or she does it in the name of all the other spectators, because they know that, if they don’t agree, they themselves can invade the stage and show their opinion – and the event is thus for them not a catharsis but a dynamisation.

(Boal 2002, p.25)

In terms of staging, Boal is less committed to Meyerhold’s aesthetics. For Boal, particularly with respect to Forum Theatre,

[t]he piece can be performed in any genre (realism, symbolism, expressionism, etc.) except surrealism or the irrational; the style doesn’t matter, as long as
the objective is to discuss concrete situations (through the medium of theatre).

(Boal 2002, p. 242)

Similarly, the design of both the set and the performance space are not particularly relevant in Boal’s work. Even though most Forum Theatre pieces are not performed on proscenium stages, there is nothing precluding the possibility, aesthetically speaking. The proscenium and box stage are not obstacles to participation in the same way because the spectator can cross it and intervene in the on-stage action.

Additionally, in so far as masking, clowning, mime and other primarily gesturally expressive modes of performance communication are concerned, Boal is open to the possibility, but not committed to the point that it is a necessity in Boalian performances:

Ultimately the [initial Forum Theatre scenario] is a piece of theatre just like any other, with the single difference that it is not evangelical, it carries no message, no words of wisdom, just doubts and anxieties which will stimulate judgement and action on the part of the assembled audience. Which is why if one can use music, it should be used a lot; if one can use dance, there should be as much dancing as possible. If one can play with colours, why limit oneself to black and white?

(Boal 2002, p. 263)

The interventive power of Boalian theatre resides in its interactive elements and the agency given to the spect-actors. These allow the performance to mount resonant critiques of particular issues in which the spect-actors are implicated. It is worth noting that there are two different forms of Forum Theatre that implicate the spect-actors differently; the typical form of Forum Theatre which is staged for an homogeneous audience of members of a given oppressed group, and Forum Theatre “shows,” which are staged for a public audience. The spect-actor would naturally be implicated in a different way if they were not subject to the represented oppression, but opening up the audience has led to positive results, Boal argues (2002, pp. 241-242), if without describing these results in detail.
Intervention, Defamiliarization, and Modes of Audience Perception

In all of these theatrical aesthetics, the way the spectator is meant to perceive and relate to the on-stage action is changed. Abandoning naturalism disrupts the spectator’s ability to claim that the on-stage action represents the way the world is and should be. Rather, the theatre represents a world of possibilities that are up for grabs and that the spectator is implicated in. Brecht encapsulates this neatly in “Theatre for Pleasure and Theatre for Instruction”:

The dramatic theatre’s spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It’s only natural – It’ll never change – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable – That’s great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre’s spectator says: I’d never have thought it – That’s not the way – That’s extraordinary, hardly believable – It’s got to stop – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary – That’s great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.

(Brecht 1974, p. 71)

Some sort of critical distance to the on-stage action is necessary for this shift to occur, and Meyerhold, Artaud, and Brecht all elaborate ways by which this distance is achieved through acting techniques, staging, and/or deliberate alienation effects. While these theatrical aesthetics have been generative for the theatrical avant-garde and even commercially successful in the mainstream at times, the link between the techniques and the desired social result of performances as interventions needs to be made explicit. In addition to the question of evaluating a performance’s efficacy, a more detailed account of the audience’s involvement in the process is in order even though it is difficult to evaluate in a quantitative way in the same way that a performance’s efficacy is.

From the qualitative viewpoint of aesthetic theory and philosophy, this is a somewhat easier question to tackle, though the conclusions are plausible, not definite.

Naturalism has, at its core, the idea of making art realistic, or, natural – an expression of the world as we are familiar with it. Ideally, in perceiving a naturalistic piece of art, we would not have to break from our habits of perception that gets us by in our day-to-day social interactions.

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7 There is room for psychologists and experts on cognition to do research on the cognitive reactions of audiences to these distancing aesthetics and effects, but that is far beyond the scope of this project.
lives. We see a thing and we interpret it as that thing. In “Art as Technique” [1917](2007), a manifesto of Russian Formalism, critic Viktor Shklovsky argues that works of art are a different class of objects than those we encounter in our everyday social lives and demand a different perceptual process to interpret and a different creative technique to make. Speaking of the difference between poetic and everyday utterances, Shklovsky argues that our everyday mode of perception is habitual and automated to the point where we employ a form of perceptual shorthand.

Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed. In this process, ideally realized in algebra, things are replaced by symbols. Complex words are not expressed in rapid speech; their initial sounds are barely perceived. Alexander Pogodin offers the example of a boy considering the sentence “The Swiss mountains are beautiful” in the form of a series of letters: $T, S, m, a, b$.

(Shklovsky 2007, p. 4)

This shorthand has benefits and drawbacks. The main benefit is that it “permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort” (Shklovsky 2007, p. 4). The main drawback is the limited way in which we apprehend objects perceived in this manner:

By this ‘algebraic’ method of thought we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics. We see the object as though it were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette. The object, perceived thus in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not leave even a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten.

(Ibid)

This is an aesthetic instance where Heidegger’s notions of *zuhanden* and *vorhanden* are applicable. Meyerhold, Artaud, and Brecht, especially Brecht, would argue that naturalistic drama fosters this shorthand, which enables habitual, automated, and unconscious perception; theatre as a *vorhanden* set of objects and experiences. Viewed in this way, “[e]ither objects are assigned only one proper feature – a number, for example – or else they
function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition” (Ibid). While all three of the dramatists and Shklovsky are interested in the conscious process by which spectators engage with art works, Shklovsky’s own view seems to be more in line with Artaud’s view that conscious engagement with art serves a higher purpose than subsequent political engagement. Citing the following passage from Leo Tolstoy’s diary, Shklovsky argues that conscious engagement with objects is central to the value of life itself:

I was cleaning a room and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn’t remember whether or not I had dusted it. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious, I could not remember and felt that it was impossible to remember – so that if I had dusted it and forgot – that is, had acted unconsciously, then it was the same as if I had not. If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been. (Tolstoy, 1897, in Shklovsky 2007, pp. 4-5)

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. [...] And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important.* (Shklovsky 2007, p.5)

Defamiliarizing the object is one (possibly the) way by which conscious perception becomes favoured over habitual, automated perception, the aesthetic experience becoming embodied and contextualized (*zuhanden*). For Artaud, and, it would seem, Shklovsky, this is to reveal truths about, or to enrich life in general. For Brecht, this is to show up the constructed and contrived nature of social norms, mores, and codes.

Phenomenologist and theatre critic Bert States argues that these forms of perception break down into semiotic (significative) and phenomenological perception. Particularly, for
States, conscious engagement with objects occurs in moments of phenomenological arrest – when our senses bring objects to the forefront of our minds and make some sort of demands on us (it isn’t just a simple matter of suddenly seeing things as they are or as they should be):

Certainly, the significative is the stronger – or at least the steadier – eye, which is to say that we tend to see the world as something we get through. But now and then the world detains us. For example: I am walking to the bus terminal to get my ride home. Suddenly, as I approach, the bus parked in the lot strikes me as being outrageously large and rectangular. It is heavy with material and texture; it is not a bus, it is a queer, unforeseen shape. This may be the sun coming off it in a certain way, it may be my mood; but I find myself arrested by this thing.

(States 1985, pp. 8-9)

Defamiliarized art objects call for us to perceive the objects and our relationship to them differently so that we can recontextualize them. Even though this recontextualization might eventually result in us slotting these objects back into the familiar spaces that they previously occupied, the process of interpreting and contextualizing them requires us to navigate alternative meanings and possibilities for them. Defamiliarization calls on us to confront our perceptions of objects, and to move from this to confronting our preconceptions of them. This is central to intervention as a means to “‘play’ with the audience’s fundamental beliefs, and to provoke a potential crisis in those beliefs, without producing immediate rejection” (Kershaw 1992, p.28).

**Intervention as Persistent Ethical Process**

The goal of intervention is not just to provoke a potential crisis in the audience’s beliefs in a particular moment in a particular interventionist work, but for this crisis, once actualized, to persist outside of the artistic space in order to potentially effect changes in the spectator’s everyday social behaviour. In order for these changes to take place in a sustained way, the spectator also must persistently refer back to the intervention and make use of some kind of ethical process to underpin these changes. There are several options for what sort of ethical process a spectator can use. They can make utilitarian estimates of the balance of positive and negative consequences of different courses of action, or attempt to square their
experience of the intervention and their beliefs with some sort of universal or some sort of subjective ethical maxim; or to take the ethical egoist approach and consider what course of behaviour is best for them while solipsistically dismissing the rest of the world as irrelevant to the decision, among other options. Each of these approaches is fraught with difficulties in the context of intervention.

The ethical egoist perspective is problematic with respect to intervention, and in general, in the simplest way. Since it takes for granted the *a priori* assumption that the given spectator’s self-interest should motivate the pursuit of any action that they take, there is no apparent way for an intervention to decouple this *a priori* belief that serves as the justification for the spectator’s behaviour. There is no way to provoke a crisis at all if the ethical egoist approach is consistently adopted by the spectator, though the spectator would be the problem more than the intervention. Also, this line of argument presupposes that ethical egoism’s supposedly empirical grounding is also factual, which is heavily contested and contestable.

Utilitarian calculation avoids the problem of elevating self-interest *a priori* but still seems unsuitable as a truth process for interventions because interventions address the spectator’s fundamental beliefs, not the values that they place on different people and social actions as a result of those beliefs. Consequently, if the result of the intervention is the spectator engaging in utilitarian calculations, then the intervention would have missed its target or failed to provoke an adequate crisis in the spectator’s beliefs to be a success.

Universal ethical maxims are problematic because “the pronouncement of universality covers up unacknowledged exclusions” (Reinelt 2004, p. 87). In the context of art, universality’s “historical legacy to the present is precisely a narrow, Western, Europeanized, white and male notion of ‘Great Art’” (Reinelt 2004, p. 88), and the same problem exists for ethics as for art. The representational messages of so-called universal art, reflected in each piece’s so-called universal thematic content, are social, political, aesthetic, and ethical. Artists and art works make value judgments and claims about the way that things are and the way that they should be routinely. However, if we grant this critique of the concept of the Universal’s historical use, then regardless of an artist’s idealistic best intentions or cynical worst ones, the universality of these value judgments and claims is suspect because the Universal itself is a suspect category; far from being universal at all, “all positive content of the Universal is the contingent result of hegemonic struggle” (Žižek 1999, p. 101, in Reinelt 2004, p. 88).

Finally, subjective ethical maxims, whether individual or societal, are problematic in that they are relative and preclude the ability to make judgments of ethical systems or
decisions with any moral suasion. Rather than an ethical maxim being good or bad it is reduced
to being different relative to the system from which it is being criticized. This ethical approach
also allows a spectator to dismiss the intervention as irrelevant or talking about something
else.

To some degree, Alain Badiou provides a good model for this ethical process in his
“Ethic of Truths” (Badiou 2001, pp. 40-57). In opposition to Enlightenment ethics and
Lévinasian ethics, which position ethics as a protective bulwark against a priori social Evils,
Badiou argues that ethics are enacted through sustained participation in a truth-process (as an
a priori Good) that emerges out of Events.

In this context, Badiou defines an Event as an occurrence in which “something [must]
have happened, something that cannot be reduced to its ordinary inscription in ‘what there
is’[…] which compels us to decide a new way of being” (Badiou 2001, p. 41). Events interpellate
people as involved subjects and compel them toward a process of fidelity to the truth and
meaning of said Event. Badiou offers the example of Einstein’s papers on General Relativity:
“[I]f I am faithful to their radical novelty, I cannot continue to practise physics within its
classical framework” (Badiou 2001, p.42). Interventionist art works are Events in the sense that
Badiou proposes to the degree that they compel us to perceive objects and social relations
differently. In interventionist theatre, at certain moments, the action makes a break from the
representation of normal life, potentially producing social truths through Brechtian alienation
or presenting Artaudian metaphysical truths that viewers must process, though this is not
limited to theatre. Photography, painting and visual media contain similar effects, which
Roland Barthes termed as punctum\footnote{Barthes, writing about photography, identifies two loci of engagement with photographs; the studium, which is the level of general cultural interest in a photograph as a whole, which is analogous to the semiotic approach to interpretation, and the punctum, a localized part of some photographs that breaks through and implicates the viewer on a personal level through a phenomenological, affective interaction.} (Barthes 2000, pp. 26-27). Music does as well, through the
effects of rhythm and composition, especially in opera where it is paired with theatrical
symbolism in a Wagnerian gesamtkunstwerk.

For Badiou, ethics is a twofold process; subjects caught up in events recognize some
truth that underpins the event as a break from everyday social reality, and then subsequently
maintain a fidelity to the event and its truth. For Badiou, truth is defined as “the real process of
fidelity to an event: that which this fidelity produces in the situation” (Badiou 2001, p. 42). It is
subjectively derived from a subject’s interactions with an event.

The evental truth, to become a general one, requires this process of fidelity – people
who acknowledge and accept the Badiouian truth in an event become its champions and flag-
bearers in everyday society and from there large-scale social transformations can eventually happen. The faithful (and militant) adherence to evental truths, for Badiou, is the a priori Good that underpins his ethical system. This is also a particularly controversial point of Badiou’s ethical theory because it is not clear what this fidelity is based on. Peter Hallward asserts that fidelity and the Badiouian truth process comes about through rigorous rational inquiries into the everyday social situation that brought forth the interventive event (Hallward 2003, p. 126). However, the basis for these inquiries is unclear given that, as Terry Eagleton notes, citing Hallward, “For Badiou [...] subjectivation is essentially indifferent to the business and requirements of life as such” (Eagleton 2009, p. 265). If this is the case, then it is difficult to see where the rational ground for an ethical inquiry into a situation is for Badiou. This leads Eagleton to the conclusion that while Badiou’s ethics are ostensibly centred on subjects in particular situations (from which Events are derived), they are not based on deliberating what one should do in them from a moral perspective:

Adherence to a truth event for Badiou [...] is a purely fideistic affair. In a strain of Maoist spontaneism, knowledge and reflection are the enemies of faith, not its essential undergirding. Analysis and political practice must remain distinct. Ethics is a lived relationship to truth, not a question of speculating on what one should do. Truth itself is axiomatic rather than deliberative, a dogmatism with which Mao might well have found himself in hearty agreement. It has little to do with reflection, existing as it does on the extreme edge of knowledge. We are offered, then, a series of stark, eminently deconstructible oppositions: truth (or faith) versus knowledge, politics contra everyday life, infinity rather than finitude, event versus ontology, chance against system, subject rather than object, rebellion over consensus, autonomy versus causality, transcendence over historical immanence, eternity as against time. (Eagleton 2009, p. 265)

Badiou distils the truth-process of Good into an ethical imperative that stresses this element of fidelity: “Keep going!” or “Never forget what you have encountered” (Badiou 2001, p. 52). It is a version of Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic ethical maxim; “ne pas céder sur son désir,” (in Žižek 1998, online. My translation: do not yield ground on what you desire, Žižek’s translation: “[do not] compromise, or give way on, one’s desire” (ibid)). The main difference is that for Badiou, the operating desire is one for Truth rather than any other desire.
Another potential is that Badiou’s system does not adequately allow room to criticize what truth a given subject draws out of an Event. This lack of criticality arises out of the extreme individual (as opposed to cultural) subjective relativism with which Events are experienced. The Nuremberg rallies are an example of a problematic Event, to say the least. At least two conflicting potential truths emerge out of them; either the Nazi notion of German identity *contra* Jewish, Socialist, non-Aryan, homosexual and other identities is latched onto as truth or is rejected in lieu of a more socially inclusive vision of reality that is taken on as truth, whether vociferously or not, by each individual present at the event or implicated in its consequences. There is no criterion for distinguishing between which of the truths to take on as good to adhere to. If we take Eagleton’s critique at face value, then moral calculations are already out the window in this regard. Seemingly aware of this problem, Badiou argues that genuine events contain universal truths and “neither [exclude] nor [constrain] anyone” (Badiou 2001, p. 73), and that the Nazi takeover was a pernicious *simulacrum* of a truth-Event that was able to fool much of the ordinary German populace into a process of fidelity to it. However, this jars with Badiou’s concepts of Truth and Subject: “There is not, in fact, one single Subject, but as many subjects as there are truths, and as many subjective types as there are procedures of truths” (Badiou 2001, p. 28). Eagleton adds:

> [In Badiou’s thinking, t]ruths are the same for everyone, and anyone at all can proclaim them. They fly in the face of all local, ethnic, communitarian *doxa*. Yet truths in themselves are stubbornly singular. In fact, there are as many truths as there are human subjects. Unlike the truths of the symbolic order, they are not theoretical, rule-governed or propositional, but event-like, non-conceptual, revelatory and subject-constituting. (Eagleton 2009, p. 267)

The explanation that truths are both universal and deeply subjective/subject-constituting seems contradictory, not to mention that truths being both subjective and subject-constituting seems circular. This makes Badiou’s explanation problematic. To some degree, Badiou’s concept of evil as perversions of the truth-process allows him to salvage this somewhat. Badiou argues:

> It is upon these three dimensions of the process of truth – the convocation by an event of the *void* of a situation; the uncertainty of *fidelity*; and the powerful
forcing of knowledges by a truth – that the thought of Evil depends. [...] For Evil has three names:
- to believe that an event convokes not the void of the earlier situation, but its plenitude, is Evil in the sense of simulacrum, or terror;
- to fail to live up to a fidelity is Evil in the sense of betrayal, betrayal in oneself of the Immortal that you are;
- to identify a truth with total power is Evil in the sense of disaster.
(Badiou 2001, p. 71)

To explain some of Badiou’s terminology, the void of a situation is some universal aspect of the event that refers back to it after the event has passed. This is drawn from Badiou’s ontology, which is derived from mathematical set theory. This universal element is of key importance to Badiou’s ethics, which are themselves universalist. “The void, the multiple-of-nothing, neither excludes nor constrains anyone. It is the absolute neutrality of being, such that the fidelity that originates in an event, although it is an immanent break within a singular situation, is none the less universally addressed” (Badiou 2001, p. 73). For Badiou, simulacra of events look like events, but relate to particularities of the situation in which they arise as opposed to universal aspects of them. The example of the Nazi takeover of Germany, according to Badiou, is such a simulacrum of an event:

since it conceives itself as a ‘German’ revolution, and is faithful only to the alleged national substance of a people, is actually addressed only to those that it itself deems ‘German’. It is thus – right from the moment the event is named, and despite the fact that this nomination (‘revolution’) functions only under the condition of true universal events (for example the Revolutions of 1792 or 1917) – radically incapable of any truth whatsoever.
(Badiou 2001, p. 73)

The first and third of these categories of Evil could suffice as means by which to determine what the truth arising out of an event is and how to evaluate it provided that we are able to identify these evils at the time of the event. It might be possible, in at least some situations, to determine whether a purported truth is universal or particular, or whether it is being presented in an absolutised fashion, though this is contestable. Failure to maintain fidelity necessitates time passing after the fidelity is first established.
Additionally, Badiou’s system seems to admit no mechanism for two people who have taken up fidelity to different truths arising out of the same Event to deliberate them between each other and to change their view without the intervention of another Event. They are and should be militantly faithful to whichever Truth they derived from the first Event. Their minds are already made up, and there is no immediately apparent way to reconcile them. Badiou’s notion of Truth seems to allow one change, in the heat of the moment, so to speak, while proscribing subsequent ones.

Badiou’s ethical truth process has some use as a way to explain artistic interventions, their desired social effect, and the process by which this effect would come to pass through the intervention’s spectators after their immediate interaction with the interventionist work is over. It provides a useful analogy for how the spectator can take in an intervention’s content, as well as the deeply personal choice (as per Kershaw) as to whether and how to act on their interpretation of it after the fact. However, it lacks solid criteria for determining the goodness of truths and refining the ethical process by way of deliberation with others, as interventions are staged in front of diverse audiences negotiating meaning with each other. It can be argued that this is because it is an ethical system that lacks a corresponding moral system that would serve as a common ground for those deliberations. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas’ notion of the public sphere (Habermas 1995), the moral system would allow people to have the minimum necessary common agreement about the substance of what is being debated to be able to disagree with each other. Eagleton, who is critical of Badiou on this point, argues that Badiou’s ethical system is reminiscent of the Derrida of Spectres of Marx, with his desire for a Marxism without doctrine, programme, party, orthodoxy or institution. It is rather like the ultra-Liberal Anglican who sees a Christianity unencumbered by such embarrassments as God, Jesus, heaven, hell, sin and repentance. The most Derrida can muster is a Marxism without a name, a shamefaced socialism absolved from the crimes of its forebears only at the price of being politically vacuous.

(Eagleton 2009, p. 263)

Perhaps Badiou’s ethical system can yet be rehabilitated as Badiou himself has changed his ideas along these lines over time, as Peter Hallward notes:
Precisely because engagement in truth is always an axiomatic intervention, Badiou’s approach excludes any merely moral or critical distance (in which one might ask, “What should I do?”). Nevertheless, Badiou naturally wants to avoid a simply dictatorial model of subjective engagement, however logical its dictation. His response is to accept some sort of deliberative procedure, while insisting that such a procedure arises in each case as fully internal to its situation.[1]

(Hallward 2003, p. 268)

Badiou discusses the possibility of ethical deliberative procedures in an interview with Hallward, where he makes explicit that deliberative norms do not precede the situation, which Habermas would disagree with:

As a general rule, every generic procedure is in reality a process that can perfectly well be deliberative, as long as we understand that it invents its rule of deliberation at the same time as it invents itself. It is not constrained by a pre-established norm that follows from the rule of deliberation. You only have to look at how the rule of deliberation in different organisations, in different political sequences, and in different political modes, is entirely variable. …

Every time a plurality of individuals, a plurality of human subjects, is engaged in a process of truth, the construction of this process induces the construction of a deliberative and collective figure of this production, which is itself variable.

(Badiou & Hallward 1998, p. 122)

Hallward takes a more conciliatory approach to the question of deliberative procedures and norms in Badiou’s ethics:

The whole question is precisely whether such deliberation is variable, in the sense of so many variations on some kind of minimally invariant process, or forever different, in the sense of so many inventions ex nihilo, each one literally peculiar to a given procedure. This is where Badiou might have to engage with Habermas’s elaboration of a “quasi-transcendental” schema of communicative rationality – the minimum upon which we must all agree, so as to be able to disagree (in any particular case).

(Hallward 2003, p. 268)
Events and their Scale

In addition to acknowledging the need for some sort of deliberative mechanism in Badiou’s ethical system, Reinelt simultaneously looks to reform Badiou’s project in relation to universality while also drastically extending its scope to encompass interventionist performance practice in general. Reinelt’s formulation of events in a performance context may be particularly useful in recasting Badiou’s ethics in terms of interventions in general, as well as in specific contexts such as with respect to performance or gameplay.

One significant part of Reinelt’s critique stems from Badiou’s aesthetics (Badiou 2004), which like his ethics and the mathematical ontology that forms the basis for both, is militantly universalistic:

One of Badiou’s ‘Fifteen theses on contemporary art’ proclaims: ‘Art cannot merely be the expression of a particularity (be it ethnic or personal). Art is the impersonal production of a truth that is addressed to everyone.’ One must reply, ‘A truth that is addressed to everyone: yes; an impersonal production: no such thing’.

(Reinelt 2004, p.87)

Consequently, Badiou is insistent that “[n]on-imperial art is necessarily abstract art” (2004) on the grounds that such abstract art is the only kind of art that could possibly express a universal truth as opposed to a contingent one that re-inscribes some aspect of the status quo. In response, Reinelt rightly points out that “[t]he theatre is always particular, always for the moment, always embodied, always corrupt. This is its strength as well as its weakness” (Reinelt 2004, p. 88). Even in forms of theatre/staging that deliberately aim at some degree of abstraction, such as Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, or, to use one of Badiou’s favoured dramatists, Beckett’s contemplative theatre, the drive for abstraction is never totalising, and theatre can still evoke the kinds of radical action and change that Badiou’s ethics is centred upon.

A second part of Reinelt’s critique is focused on the question of scale; how wide-scale does an event have to be, and who decides if it is a capital-e Badiouian Event or not?

One of the paradoxes of Badiou’s thought is that although it is aimed at affirming radical possibilities for militant action that can change the world, the
terms in which he describes them often seem to limit these possibilities to huge historical events in the case of politics, and geniuses in the case of art. St. Paul, Abelard and Eloise, Schonenberg, and Beckett are his exemplars. It seems essential to expand the applications of his system to everyone – in the name of the Universal address which he himself desires. My own view is that the artistic or political act will in fact be ‘the expression of a particularity’ but that its truth is addressed to everyone. (Reinelt 2004, p. 94)

This need for a universal criterion for intervention is a problematic blind-spot for Badiou’s Maoist political theory that extends from his ontology and ethics. Badiou’s latest book, The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings (2012), provides a taxonomy of riots, from immediate collective outbursts that fade away as if providing a catharsis to the masses that participate in them, to historical, lasting Events that carry political Truths and enable an ethical process of fidelity to those Truths (Bernes & Clover 2012, online). Badiou identifies two features of historical riots that cause them to persist. First, they transcend gender, age, and class boundaries. This allows them to be universal in the sense of being for everyone. Second, they are animated by the communist Idea, what is left of communism after the failure of state/party communism (ibid). While not categorizing the Tunisian or Egyptian uprisings as Events at the time that they began, Badiou seems far more inclined to do so now, particularly in the Egyptian case, given the way that he frames the Tahrir Square riots as historical riots that carried a political Truth to start a process of ethical truth-fidelity. In that case, in terms of political truths in general, the Truth in question is that of the communist Idea, in spite of the decided lack of communism arising out of the revolution in Egypt: “Glorious be the Tunisian and Egyptian peoples who remind us the true and unique political duty: faced with the state, the organised fidelity to the communism as movement” (Badiou 2011, cited in Shin 2011, online).

Viewing communism as a generic outcome of an Event and associated truth-procedure, Badiou refers to communism as (generic) movement rather than communism as a specific movement. Badiou defines communism as movement as follows (note the shift in his attitude toward deliberation between the publication of Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil and this):
“Communism” here means: common creation of a collective destiny. This “common” has two distinctive traits. First, it is generic, representing in one place humanity in its entirety. In this place there are people of all the kinds a population is usually made up of, all words are heard, all propositions examined, all difficulty taken for what it is. Second, it overcomes the great contradictions that the state pretends to be the only one capable of surmounting: between intellectuals and manual workers, between men and women, between rich and poor, between Muslims and Copts, between people living in the province and those living in the capital (Ibid).

One result of Badiou not naming the Tunisian uprising that preceded the Egyptian one as one of his Events is also illustrative of the problem, setting off a very public feud between Badiou and one of his disciples, Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, whose 2011 book Après Badiou is an invective-filled attempt to discredit Badiou. “For MBK, […] this [refusal] appears as final evidence of the political uselessness of Badiou’s thought” (Fox 2012, online). Kacem argues that what happened in Tunisia could not fit with Badiou’s notion of the event precisely because it does not draw on communism, whether in general or, in Badiou’s words, in terms of communism as movement:

What bothers Badiou’s bureaucratic leftism is that the twenty-first century has begun with the master-signifiers “freedom” and “democracy” and not with “communism” or “equality.” Badiou manages the feat of not even mentioning the word “event,” even though this is the first major, absolute event of the twenty-first century. He doesn’t mention the word “revolution” either, even though that’s what it is.

(Kacem in Galloway 2011, online)

For Badiou, who maintains a militant fidelity to Maoism, democracy and freedom are not the universal concepts that the West presumes them to be, which seemed to taint the Tunisian uprising’s Event-ness ontologically, for him, if we take Kacem on his word.

Given these issues surrounding Badiou’s definition and use of the concept of Event, Reinelt’s proposal offers important possibilities to redeploy it in more widely applicable ways. Reinelt points to the example of the controversy surrounding the Dixie Chicks in 2003 as a generative Event (Reinelt 2004, pp. 92-94). In summary, Reinelt points to Natalie Maines, the
lead singer of the Dixie Chicks’ comment during a concert in London, England, that the band was “ashamed that the president of the United States of America is from Texas” where they are also from (Reinelt 2004, p. 92). After The Guardian picked up the story and it spread through wire services, a large backlash occurred against the band in the USA, replete with death threats, record burnings, and bans from radio play on several radio syndicates. Faced with this backlash, the band doubled down on their political criticism of the war in Iraq, which started just after the initial incident. They integrated this criticism into their tour shows with video montages of “civil rights protests and archival footage of Nazi book burning folded into shots of the burning of their records” (Reinelt 2004, p.93). Reinelt argues that Maines’ initial off-handed comment created an Event that compelled the band to remain remain faithful to it and its consequences, leading to a the band making a sustained intervention over the course of their 2003 tour and beyond through their public, theatrical, performances (Reinelt 2004, pp. 92-94).

The distinction between the predominantly political and the predominantly aesthetic becomes porous and blurred with respect to interventionist action. Walter Benjamin offers the following possibilities for the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of art in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (Benjamin 2008, pp. 19-55): For Benjamin, all efforts to aestheticize politics lead to fascism: “The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life. [...] All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war” (Benjamin 2008, p. 41). Benjamin also argues that politicizing aesthetics produces the opposite result, particularly when the “aura” of authenticity around original works is devalued when works are easily reproducible by technologies of reproduction: “[A]s soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics” (Benjamin 2008, p. 25). Benjamin aligns this political aesthetic practice with (a more sympathetic) communism that stands in contrast to the aestheticized politics of fascism (Benjamin 2008, p. 42).

While Benjamin’s argument that the demystification of art objects can help foster politicized and political art is a useful one, along the lines of the anti-immersive and defamiliarization-based theatre aesthetics analysed earlier in this chapter, Crispin Sartwell raises a significant objection to the way Benjamin deals with politics as a system that is either free of aesthetics’ influence or that prefigures aesthetics itself. This objection adds an important dimension to any aesthetics of intervention:
Not all art is political, but all politics is aesthetic; at their heart political ideologies, systems, and constitutions are aesthetic systems, multimedia artistic environments. The political “content” of an ideology can be understood in large measure actually to be – to be identical with – its formal and stylistic aspects. It’s not that a political ideology or movement gets tricked out in a manipulative set of symbols or design tropes; it’s that an ideology is an aesthetic system, and this is what moves or fails to move people, attracts their loyalty or repugnance, moves them to action or apathy. [...] The aesthetic embodiments of political positions are material transformations and interventions, with concrete effects.

(Sartwell 2010, pp. 1-2)

Sartwell’s argument, while problematizing Benjamin’s perspective, connects aesthetics and politics to a subjective process of political life informed by both, that can be aligned with the way Badiou conceptualizes subjectivity and fidelity to Events.

In the Dixie Chicks example, Maines’ initial off-handed statement, taking place in an aesthetic performance, took on unexpected political significance. Other explicitly political interventions become aesthetic through the way that they are performed by the key actors in the intervention, including performances of their fidelity to the Event. Though not invested in Badiou’s philosophy, Sudipta Kaviraj’s analysis of Mohandas Gandhi’s sedition trial in 1922 is a potential example of aestheticized politics that can be construed as an Event. On the increasingly relevant basis that “theatricality is part of what [a political] act is” (Kaviraj 2007, p.71), Kaviraj argues that Gandhi’s performance and rhetorical strategy during the trial was instrumental to the political meaning of the trial and to its political consequence; eventual Indian independence (Kaviraj 2007, pp. 78-83, 87). This performance, which Kaviraj examines in terms of Gandhi’s language, rhetoric, gesture, dress, and legal manoeuvres, consisted of subverting the form of the trial as well as the ideological narrative that the colonial government sought to use the trial to propagate.

The theatrical task of the state is to reduce him, through the public process of the trial, into a pitiable ordinary man, whose pretensions of enacting the political miracle of successful defiance of imperial power is stripped away. He is seen to be defenceless, demystified; defiance is shown to be impossible. Conversely, Gandhi’s task is to show that he can protect the image of a person
who shows the possibility of defiance, and through his example, encourages others to do the same.

(Kaviraj 2007, p. 80)

The result of performances in political action in general and in trials specifically can create new possibilities for political life and subjectivity that extend beyond the Event in question. Gandhi’s sedition trial (and conviction) strengthened his movement of non-violent resistance to British colonial rule while creating support in the Indian peasantry and some sections of the middle-class that eventually toppled the regime. It solidified the idea that the Indian people, with Gandhi as their avatar, were capable of more just self-rule and galvanized people into non-violent action along these lines.

Conclusion

I have provided a contextual history of artistic intervention in theatre as an inroad into discussing artistic intervention generally. Particularly, I examined the way that spectatorial perception changes between traditional representational media content and interventionist content that makes some use of defamiliarization, analysing Meyerhold, Artaud, Brecht and Boal’s defamiliarizing aesthetics. Any interventionist aesthetic has to be connected to a set of subsequent interpretive and ethical processes for an intervention to be efficacious in the long-term. Alain Badiou’s Ethic of Truths, while problematic in several ways, offers some possibilities for a general aesthetics of intervention, particularly in terms of how it conceptualizes Events and ethics as a process of fidelity to the Truths that these Events carry. The introduction of a deliberative process (per Habermas or later public sphere theorists, and later accepted by Badiou to some degree) and a smaller-scale definition of Events (per Reinelt) incurs an advantageous trade-off. It dilutes Badiou’s original formulation of ethics as a purely subjective process of relating to objective ethical Truths, while re-aligning ethics as an inter-subjective, aesthetic, and political process. Fidelity to an Event finds a deliberative ground, and Events emerge out of everyday life as much as the work of exceptional people. This version of Badiouian ethics experiences the possibility of being for everybody and can take on immediate political importance. Eagleton, though harshly critical of the philosophy underpinning Badiou’s *Ethics*, acknowledges that
for all its manifest defects, the slogan “Stick to your desire!” is an excellent political injunction at the present time. There is no point in the political Left settling for half. What has made global capitalism more difficult to challenge in our day is the fact that it has grown more predatory, not less so. This means that the very changes in the system which have helped to dispirit and deplete the left are also why the need to combat that system remains more urgent than ever. The left should thus preserve its faith, rather than submitting to the lures of reformism or defeatism. It should respond to a political system which is incapable of either feeding humanity or yielding it sufficient justice with something of the implacable refusal of an Antigone – a refusal which is folly to conservatives and a stumbling-block to liberals. Even if it finally fails in this project, it can at least reap the bitter-sweet satisfaction of knowing it was right all along.

(Eagleton 2009, pp. 325-326)

This thesis attempts to use the adjusted version of Badiou’s notion of the event that was presented in this chapter in order to develop an aesthetics of intervention in videogames in three ways. First, it frames videogames as experiences that can be capital-E Events for players, in line with Reinelt’s idea of the validity of smaller, more localized Events than Badiou proposes. Second, it addresses the problem of deliberation inherent in Badiou’s Ethics by highlighting deliberative models and procedures that apply to the videogame field. Third, it examines design strategies that can be used to facilitate deliberation on the part of videogame players about their gameplay experiences.
Chapter 2: Spatial Intervention Tactics and the Social Construction of Game Space

Introduction

This chapter examines the scenographic and spatial aspects of three case studies of tactical performance interventions using game worlds; Blast Theory’s Desert Rain (2004), Joseph DeLappe’s dead-in-iraq (2006-present), and Brody Condon’s Sonsbeek Live: Twentyfivefold Manifestations (2008). This analysis extends the discussion of Artaudian and Brechtian dramatic aesthetics that commenced in the previous chapter. This chapter argues for the concept of analog and digital game space as socially constructed rather than an immutable, physical/virtual topos. One version of this argument is that a feedback loop occurs in which the configuration of spaces prefigures us and we configure spaces, repeat. This is different from the position of Aristotle’s aesthetics, as discussed in the previous chapter. In Aristotle’s aesthetics of tragic drama, the spatial configuration of the theatre contributed to catharsis, prefiguring people’s dispositions in social life after their experience of the tragic drama, without the space being configurable by the audience. Game space affords opportunities for players/interactors/audiences to configure it, whether this is on the level of modifying games and the code that is translated into representations of space on a screen, or on the level of experiencing the engrossed sense of occupying game spaces and changing them through actions during the course of gameplay. This difference affords powerful potential for subversion, disruption, and political expression.

Of the three case studies, Desert Rain and dead-in-iraq are thematically similar in that they are tactical performance interventions that make use of the space of war-games to intervene in the discourse surrounding particular wars; the Gulf War of 1991 and the Iraq War of 2003-present, respectively. Presenting defamiliarizing experiences through the use of spatial tactics, these are site-specific interventions that comment on the process of the “banalization of war” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009, p. 100) through the “interaction of video game culture and the military apparatus” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009, p. 100). Nick Dyer-Witheford and Craig de Peuter position in a neo-Marxist framework, situating them as “games of multitude” in contrast to “games of empire” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009, pp. 185-214). Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks define site-specific performances as

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9 More specifically, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter position this work in line with Hardt and Negri’s notions of “multitude” as democratic people power and “empire” as the power and interest of the elite military-industrial-entertainment complex as described Hardt and Negri’s book Empire (2000).
conceived for, mounted within and conditioned by the particulars of found spaces, existing social situations or locations, both used and disused: sites of work, play and worship: cattle-market, chapel, factory, cathedral, railway station. They rely, for their conception and their interpretation, upon the complex coexistence, superimposition and interpenetration of a number of narratives and architectures, historical and contemporary, of two basic orders: that which is of the site, its fixtures and fittings, and that which is brought to the site, the performance and its scenography: of that which pre-exists the work and that which is of the work: of the past and of the present. They are inseparable from their sites, the only contexts within which they are intelligible.  

(Pearson & Shanks 2001, p. 23, edit mine to correct a typographical error in the source text)

In contrast, *Sonsbeek Live: Twentyfivefold Manifestations* makes use of an analog game space without immediately apparent political intent, while still using defamiliarization tactics of the kind discussed in Chapter 1 to elicit deliberation in the non-player audience.

A final introductory note; *dead-in-iraq* is also discussed in Chapter 5 of the thesis, with a particular focus on the rule set of *America’s Army* (Ubisoft and United States Armed Forces 2002), the game that the performance takes place in. While I minimize repetition in the retellings of the performance as much as possible, some repetition between these sections is both necessary and unavoidable.

### The Sociality of Videogame Space

The notion of space as defined by social practice is elaborated on in the work of Michel De Certeau (1984) and Henri Lefebvre (1991). De Certeau distinguishes between place as a bounded geographic location and space as a “practiced place” (De Certeau 1984, p. 117). He offers the example of a city street defined as a place by town planners and paved into existence, which is only made into a space by the city’s inhabitants walking along it (ibid). Desire paths are a complementary example of this social configuration of space. Desire paths refer to footpaths dug into the ground by repeated footfalls, typically along the easiest or most direct path from point A to point B. In landscape architecture, and particularly in urban parks,
desire paths increasingly dictate the location that paths will be placed on or moved to, in order to fit with the way that people already traverse the local place and define it as a space through their walking. In these two examples, respectively, space is constructed both by top-down institutional design and by the bottom-up practices of autonomous subjects. I argue that the construction of space in video games operates in the same way. Lefebvre makes a similar use of the notion of social space in his efforts to develop a unifying theory of space that takes into account the three seemingly disparate ways in which we conceptualize space (Berry 2008, p. 102; Stockburger 2007, p. 224): “[Physical space] – nature, the Cosmos; secondly, [mental space], including logical and formal abstractions; and thirdly, [social space]” (Lefebvre 1991, p. 11). Berry explains that Lefebvre defines social space as “a set of relations between things that ‘overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects’ and includes human activities” (Berry 2008, p. 102). These relationships are structured by norms and conventions, which form the horizon of expectations for interactions within the space, but at the same time, the norms and conventions are malleable as a result of unforeseen social practices that might take place within the given space at any moment. In an ongoing feedback loop, spaces partly prefigure our behaviour while our behaviour partly configures and reconfigures them.

Axel Stockburger argues that these three aspects of spatiality are all present and operative in videogame spaces, particularly MMORPGs: “[F]irstly, there exists a physical space where the player is located; secondly, there is the mentally constructed space arising from narrative and rule based structures; and finally we are confronted with spaces generated by the social interaction of individuals” (Stockburger 2007, p. 224). One particularly compelling example of this concept of socially-constructed space and of this feedback loop is visible in player movement patterns in World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). In their quantitative study of tens of thousands of World of Warcraft players, Ducheneaut et al. (2006) examined the player traffic across the different zones of the game world of Azeroth on a heavily populated server. While, predictably, large and central hub cities that offered a wide range of services for characters (Ironforge, Orgrimmar) were the most heavily visited, more isolated cities, in spite of offering the same services and being designed to be visited with similar frequency, were scarcely visited in comparison:

Darnassus, for instance, is also a capital city (for the Night Elves), offering services that are entirely similar to Orgrimmar and Ironforge (large number of merchants, trainers, a bank, etc.). Yet it is one of the least visited places in the game, which is all the more surprising considering Night Elves are the most
popular race. Its location probably explains this low use: Darnassus is an isolated island in the upper left corner of Azeroth, connected to the mainland by a single flight point or by an even slower boat. As such, Darnassus illustrates how players always try to optimize their play time: A Night Elf faced with a lengthy trip back to Darnassus for training or a much shorter one to Ironforge will most probably choose the latter. No matter how beautifully designed a zone is (and Darnassus is beautiful, with a unique “elvish” aesthetic), players will apparently favor expediency over sightseeing.

(Ducheneaut et al. 2006, online)

In the same way that desire paths might show up flaws in the designs of landscape architects working on parks, this example demonstrates a flaw in the design of the game world, as the bottom-up inclination of players to optimize their play time clashes with the top-down intent of the designers to prioritize visiting all of the locales.

This conflict of player and designer intents extends to other spatial aspects of the *World of Warcraft* gameplay experience. Adam Ruch’s examination of *World of Warcraft*’s terms of use and end-user license agreements highlights the tension between developer/publisher Blizzard Entertainment’s perspective of *World of Warcraft* as a service and the player-participants’ perspective of *World of Warcraft* as a space (Ruch 2009). The distinction between service and space is that:

> The term 'service' allows for the game to be set in relation to the real world in a different way than if Blizzard were to suggest that the gameworld represented a 'space.' A 'space' might entail a sense of public, of open space not directly under the control of Blizzard, which is exactly the notion Blizzard needs to squash before it gets started.

(Ruch 2009)

Stockburger argues that with the shift from single-player videogames to massively multi-player networked videogames (such as *World of Warcraft*) that serve as spaces for social and ludic performance, “it becomes evident that such game environments represent economical and social universes in their own right and that they amount to public spheres which are owned and maintained by private companies” (Stockburger 2007, p. 223). These spaces, and the way they are governed, are being interrogated by artists, scholars and game players alike. The clash
of interests around the service/space distinction results in tensions developing between players and developers, especially around issues of ownership. Blizzard claims ownership of characters, in-game items, chat logs (which includes the creative output of role-playing players), and accounts, while a significant proportion of players, given their notion of the game as a space, expect ownership of all of these things and act accordingly, selling items, accounts and characters in grey-market real-money transactions, regardless of terms of use and end-user license agreements (Ruch 2009; Dibbell 2006).

De Certeau distinguishes between strategies and tactics as two ways of operating in a space. In summary, strategic action in a space involves dictating the relations that occur within the space from a position of power (De Certeau 1984, p. xix) whereas tactical action is “a way of operating within a space when in a relatively powerless position” (Berry 2008, p. 110). In the case of World of Warcraft, it can be argued that Blizzard Entertainment has the capacity to act strategically as both the creator/maintainer of the game with access to the game’s code as well as a corporate institution with the power and resources to pursue violations of the game’s terms of use and end-user license agreements by banning player accounts from the game or even through legal proceedings. The spatial strategy employed by Blizzard through these documents, according to Ruch (2009), is to frame World of Warcraft as not being a space at all, but rather a service. By contrast, the players, lacking in access to the game’s code or Blizzard’s institutional power, are confined to acting tactically. Actions such as trading characters and accounts, engaging in real-money sales of in-game items, resist the strategic ordination of how the game world should function as a service and the way that this impacts on the players’ rights with respect to the game. These actions re-assert the players’ collective view that the game world is a space, public, something that they create and something that they have certain rights with respect to. Not all tactical action is resistive, and not all action undertaken by those relatively outside of positions of power is tactical. The majority of World of Warcraft players play the game as Blizzard intends.

For those players that do not, the kinds of actions that they undertake fall under the umbrella of “emergent gameplay,” that is, gameplay in which the interactions of simple rules-systems creates complex gameplay behaviours, including “situations where a game is played in a way that the game designer did not predict” (Juul 2005, p. 76). This includes the ‘metagaming’ processes of real-money trading, account swapping, et cetera. In this sense emergent gameplay is an oppositional spatial tactic for game spaces in the same way that “[networked] locative media is a tactic that may be used to resist and provide a commentary on the commodification of public space” (Berry 2008, p. 110).
Felan Parker identifies a subset of emergent gameplay that occurs when players in a game space collectively negotiate and agree to follow new rules of their creation. This involves further restricting their play, as they have both the coded and the socially negotiated rules to follow, but simultaneous allows the players to create new games (as rule sets) within the game space. Parker terms this kind of gameplay “expansive gameplay” (Parker 2008, online). While this would only be viable in much smaller-scale games, expansive gameplay is worth noting as a distinct spatial tactic with resistive potential in general, as well as operating in the subset of World of Warcraft players who treat the game as a space through their actions rather than treat it as a service.

The social view of space reinforces the practice of scenography as an interventionist tactic. To frame or to reframe a space is to reconsider the range of social behaviours in that space. These World of Warcraft players have framed the game space as a space rather than a service, with potentially much further ranging legal and political importance. As Anja Klöck argues, artists and scholars use scenography to “explor[e] the mediality of the system of representation through which they are working,” in relation to the technologies that the system of representation employs and in relation to the human audience. Klöck cites Roselt, who argues that

[t]o talk about mediality in the theatre means to ask how the relationship between spectators and actors is arranged, which conventions are used, questioned or stretched... Therefore it should be understood that a theatre does not become a medial space by overloading the stage with screens or covering it in video-projections, but by negotiating in the theatre this borderland of perception and by repeatedly probing the seam between stage and audience to the extreme.
(Roselt 2004, p. 23, in Klöck 2005, pp. 118-119)

This notion of mediality in the theatre fits with the changes in scenographic approaches developed by Meyerhold, Artaud, Brecht and Boal, discussed in the previous chapter, and also aims to recast the theatre space as a social one. While Artaud’s hyper-immersive theatre of esoteric signification and Brecht’s anti-immersive theatre of rational critique seem to operate at cross-purposes, both share this goal and converge in interesting and productive ways in relation to videogames. Thea Brejzek, speaking of flash mobs, suggests that social networking and digital communication tools open up a ‘distributed mode of
spectatorship between “distant inquiry” [my note: the priority of Brecht’s aesthetics] and “vital embodiment” [my note: the priority of Artaud’s aesthetics] to participants in the mob due to their ability to reflect on the action of the mob in real-time (Brejzek 2010, p. 119, internal quotations from Rancière 2004, p. 3). This is true of games as much as it is of flash mobs. Networked game spaces frequently integrate text and voice chat, and even when they don’t, they are only a few keystrokes removed from external chat programs or a web browser. Players are able to engage in the same kinds of real-time communication and reflection as flash mob participants, oscillating between the reflective and embodied poles of interpretation in an integrated way.

Case Study 1: Joseph DeLappe’s dead-in-iraq

dead-in-iraq is an ongoing performance art intervention that takes place in the game-world of networked multi-player online games of America’s Army (U.S. Army & Ubisoft 2002). America’s Army is a first-person shooter game designed both as an entertainment medium and as a vehicle for improving the public perception of the United States military, and its enlistment and recruitment numbers. To that end, the game advertises itself as a realistic simulation of military service that will help players make informed decisions about joining the military. This is problematic for a number of reasons, not the least of which the omission of many of the darker facets of military service from the simulation, including but not limited to permanent injury, the loss of friends and comrades, and death.

In a typical multi-player game of America’s Army, the players are divided into two teams, an attacking and a defending team. The attacking team has to capture a position or fulfil particular objectives within a certain time limit, while the defending team has to prevent the attacking team from doing so. In any given iteration of a dead-in-iraq intervention, everything proceeds as normal except that rather than engaging in the typical gameplay, DeLappe manipulates his avatar into a heavily trafficked, cross-fire filled area of the game map, throws down his weapon, stands still, and broadcasts the name, age, service branch and date of death of an American soldier killed in Iraq into the game’s chat. DeLappe continues doing this until he is kicked out of the game by a majority vote from the other players, or until the game ends. DeLappe describes dead-in-iraq alternately as “essentially a fleeting, online memorial to those military personnel who have been killed in this ongoing conflict” and as “an act of protest” (Delappe 2008).
From a site-specific performance perspective, DeLappe’s actions disrupt the conventions that structure the gameplay of America’s Army that is at the centre of the players’ performance. In relation to theatre, Elizabeth Burns identifies two types of conventions at work, rhetorical and authenticating conventions (Burns 1972, in Kershaw 1992 pp. 25-28). Rhetorical conventions refer to the conventions of the fiction created by the performance:

> Between actors and spectators there is an implicit agreement that the actors will be allowed to conjure up a fictitious world [...] This agreement underwrites the devices of exposition that enable the audience to understand the play. These conventions [...] can be described as rhetorical. They are the means by which the audience is persuaded to accept characters and situations whose validity is ephemeral and bound to the theatre.

(Burns 1972, p. 31, in Kershaw 1992, p. 25)

These conventions function both as a grounding for the audience’s pretense awareness, and as an interpellative strategy used by the performance to appeal to the audience to view and interact with it in a particular way, as fiction. Authenticating conventions refer to the conventions by which the audience relates the meaning of the performance to their extra-theatrical, everyday social lives based on “the notion that there is a category of theatrical sign directly engaged with the ideology of the ‘real’ extra-theatrical world” (Kershaw 1992, p. 26). Intervention functions by the performance manipulating the authenticating conventions through which the performance is interpreted while maintaining the audience’s horizon of expectations through the rhetorical conventions (Kershaw 1992, p. 28). The authenticating conventions can be altered during the course of a performance through changes in plot, performance style, and scenography. DeLappe disrupts both types of conventions in *dead-in-iraq*.

While acting within the hard-coded constraints of the game, DeLappe nevertheless flouts the genre conventions dictating the way the game is strategically designed to be played. DeLappe also disregards the social conventions between players governing how a multiplayer game typically plays out. At the same time, injecting the game’s communicative space with brief obituaries to real fallen soldiers highlights and calls attention to what is deliberately glossed over in service of the game’s ideological position by linking the game’s action to external referents from the everyday social world, shifting the balance in favour of engagement with the game’s authenticating conventions. DeLappe uses this same device in...
another game space intervention, *War Poets: Medal of Honor* (cited in Winet 2003), in which, under the alias of Siegfried Sassoon or Wilfred Owen, he recited the realistic, anti-war poetry of the eponymous British war poets in Medal of Honor’s multiplayer game chat in order to complicate the game’s narrative (Winet 2003, p. 98). In all of these instances, DeLappe rejects the game’s interpellation, which the other players have already accepted, and pays the price of harassment that is a part of the artistic/political statement he makes through his intervention.

These interventions have features of both Brechtian and Artaudian aesthetics. When they occur, the relationship between the audience, as other players, and the performance, is also changed. As active participants in the game space who have to deal with the disruption caused by the intervention, particularly the sudden numerical imbalance of serious players on teams robbing the game of its competitiveness, the audience is implicated in the action. DeLappe plays the role of the spoil-sport by bringing elements of free-play, *paidia*, into a space of rule-governed play, *ludus* (per Caillois 1961, pp. 27-35):

> The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a ‘spoil-sport’. The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. That is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its *illusion* [... and] therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community.
> (Huizinga 1955, p. 11)

Any immersion brought on by their typical expectation of gameplay is ruptured through DeLappe’s calculated alienation effect. The audience must react on a social level, but how? The opportunity to provoke a crisis in the audience’s beliefs arises as a result of pulling them out of their horizon of expectations. At the same time, the stylized, gestural quality of DeLappe’s avatar-performance takes on an Artaudian air. The linguistic communication via chat is complemented by the gestural communication of DeLappe’s avatar-body as it engages in atypical (suicidal) gameplay, prompting the audience to try to interpret DeLappe’s performance as a complete sign-system, with DeLappe, the performer, fitting into Artaud’s notion of the performer as human hieroglyph. DeLappe’s own silence on the subject of why he
is doing what he is doing during an intervention leads the audience to interpret and react to
the performance internally and subjectively as individuals, or inter-subjectively as a collective,
complicating the operation of the game’s dominant ideology. The game space is transformed
from a competitive, immersive space, into a discursive one, through DeLappe’s intervention.
Documentary screenshots on DeLappe’s webpage show the wide range of interpretations and
reactions or different players and groups thereof, ranging from a player questioning their plan
to join the armed forces to players putting their callousness toward the soldiers’ deaths on
display, in contrast to the game designers’ desired ideological positions for the players, as well
as more nuanced commentary on the event (DeLappe 2009). Some of these screenshots are
shown and discussed in greater depth in Chapter 5.

Case Study 2: Blast Theory’s Desert Rain (1999)

British interactive media art and performance group Blast Theory’s Desert Rain is a
hybrid virtual reality game and performance installation that “restages’ the 1991 Gulf War as
a participatory VR war game” (Dixon 2006, p. 23). By way of brief summary, drawing from
and Blast Theory (2004, online), Desert Rain is a thirty-minute performance in which six players
are each required to undertake a mission to locate a different target person in a virtual reality
environment that is projected onto a rain screen in front of them, navigating the virtual space
through a footplate interface. They do not know why they are pursuing these targets, and
there is an added element of time pressure due to the mission having a twenty-minute time
limit. If and when each player finds their target, a live performer walks through the rain screen,
handing the player a swipe card before leading all of the players, if successful, through the
next VR space, a hangar densely packed with numbers representing Iraqi Gulf War dead. A
player’s failure to find their target ends the performance, though the installation was not
designed to make this difficult to accomplish. After navigating the hangar, including climbing
over a mound of sand that is blocking the exit, the players enter the final room, a mock-up of a
motel room with only a card reader and a monitor as distinguishing features. Swiping the card
in the reader cues a video of the “real’ people who were their targets. The video shows the
targets sitting in the same motel room the players are sitting in a mock-up of, and describe
how the Gulf War changed their lives” (Dixon 2006, p. 49). At the end of the performance, the
players reclaim their coats and/or bags, which were taken from them beforehand, and which
have had a container with approximately one hundred thousand grains of sand, one for every Iraqi Gulf War death, hidden inside (Blast Theory 2004, online).

Drawing on Blast Theory’s documentation of Desert Rain, Dixon and Giannachi both assert that the *coup de théâtre* of the piece was the moment when each player found their target and was greeted by the performer “break[ing] through the screen of water [...] utterly shattering the space between the virtual and the real in a heart-stopping moment of user disorientation” (Dixon 2006, p. 49) that arose because “the various worlds explored by the piece suddenly manifested themselves to the viewer in rapid succession” (Giannachi 2004, p. 118). This effect occurred through the manipulation of the rhetorical conventions of the performance. While the players may have entered the installation with the expectation of being spectators in a performance, or even co-participants in one, their interactions with the performers were limited to following them through the space and following their instructions at particular times during the VR sections of the installation. Playing the VR game carried no expectation of live performance intervening (Giannachi 2004, p. 118). The abrupt shift in the kind of performance that the players were involved in, as well as the nature of their roles within it, was destabilizing. As such, this effect functions as a Brechtian alienation effect/verfremdungseffekt on the basis that this shift in the audience’s expectations of and toward the performance create critical distance amid the participant’s confusion. The participant is effectively asked to reconsider the whole scope of the performance as it occurs, which is a breach of immersion in the performance and its narrative while simultaneously part and parcel of the performance’s purpose. This fosters engrossment rather than immersion as the participant is called upon to piece together the experience in terms of different roles that they are simultaneously playing (social actor, player, performer), rather than just one. The performer’s interruption of the virtual by the real also doubles as an Artaudian manoeuvre, with the performer dissolving the boundaries between the real and the symbolic through gesture alone. These spatial and performative distortions combined with the further alienation effect that occurred when the players swiped their cards and learned that their targets were real people, in a the same space as they were in a mock-up of, with real experiences of the (real) Gulf War.

From an artist’s perspective, the interruption of virtual reality spaces by real people is a powerful strategy/tactic/technique/device for social intervention through performance. From a spectator’s perspective, this interruption changes the interpretive process in a similar way to how *dead-in-iraq* does, by playing with the rhetorical and authenticating conventions of the performance through scenography and spatial practice.
Case Study 3: Brody Condon’s Sonsbeek Live: The Twentyfivefold Manifestations (2008)

Brody Condon’s *Sonsbeek Live: The Twentyfivefold Manifestations* was a live-action role-playing game (LARP) that took place at the Sonsbeek sculpture festival in Arnhem, the Netherlands, in 2008. Over the course of this 100-day festival, 26 works of sculpture were placed and exhibited in Arnhem’s Sonsbeek Park for visitors and passers-by to view. During that time, six sessions of *Sonsbeek Live*, each lasting for a different weekend, were played. As such, the game and performance, unlike most LARPs, was open to a public audience.

The game’s setting was as follows: Players were encouraged to sign up in bands of 3-5 people. Each band represents a nation or people, and has been called to the sacred ground of Sonsbeek to compete with the other bands for the prize of the favour of the godlike Immortals for the next generation. The player-characters gain favour for their band by performing rituals at the various Statues in Sonsbeek, places of power and representations of one of the Immortals that correspond to one of the exhibited sculptures. The aesthetic style of these rituals, in terms of the decisions about what performative content constitutes these rituals and how they are staged, is left to the imagination and discretion of the relevant bands and their respective ritual masters (a class of player-character that is responsible for organizing and running said rituals). Passers-by in the park who had come to see the sculptures on one of these weekends were treated to an unexpected and mystifying spectacle, including groups of costumed people running around and performing actions in a context that these spectators did not have access to. Because of the players’ proximity to exhibition spectators, one rule of the game involved acknowledging but not interacting with them to preserve the aura of mystery surrounding the event (Condon 2008, pp. 6-7). The video documentation for *Sonsbeek Live*, while limited, gives some impression of what the rituals that the players came up with looked like and what these spectators saw. One ritual involved a band marching in procession, holding mirror shards in front of them until reaching a certain location, at which point the band’s ritual master began screaming into the mirror shard he was holding for an unknown duration. Another involved a player mumbling in incomprehensible tongues for an unknown duration (YouTube user “sylo1000” 2008). Beyond this objective to complete the most or most effective rituals of any group, there was no prefigured plot for the players to follow. Rather, the narrative was determined through the organic interactions of the rival bands that would interrupt rituals in progress or contest certain ritual sites. These conflicts and contestations
were resolved by negotiation or ritual dueling, the latter governed by a series of rules. The result was a constantly fluctuating balance of free (*paidia*) and rule-governed (*ludus*) play over the course of the game (Caillois 1961, pp. 27-35).

Whether those spectators, or Brody Condon, knew it at the time, those passers-by who were not put off by the in-your-face oddity of the game unfolding before them were actually watching one of the most interesting manifestations of Antonin Artaud's aesthetics of the Theatre of Cruelty, particularly with respect to staging. The outdoor theatrical performances of the players spanned the entire park, surrounding spectators who were encircled by the action of the game’s “circular show.” Because of *Sonsbeek Live*'s focus on ritual performance, the content of the performance also aligned with Artaud's aesthetics. Like *dead-in-iraq*, the performance in *Sonsbeek Live* is site-specific – the spectators’ attempts to draw meaning from the performance cannot be removed from the players' entirely different interactions with the same sculptures that the spectators came to see. *Sonsbeek Live* is also, loosely speaking, a form of augmented reality – one in which virtual elements and meanings are systematically superimposed over real objects. Unlike Aristotelian drama, the performance is not logocentric but one in which the importance and use of words (whether in a comprehensible known language or not) was balanced with that of gesture, sound/music, and other aesthetic factors in a fashion approaching the Wagnerian ideal of a complete work of art, *gesamtkunstwerk*. To Artaud’s mind, this kind of spectacle would engage the unconscious mind and reveal some fundamental, revelatory truth about the world to the people watching.

With *Sonsbeek Live*, did that happen? It is impossible to say definitively, because spectator accounts are absent from the documentation of the event, but it is at least plausible that the Artaudian aesthetic had its full effect in spite of *Sonsbeek Live* not seeming to have any fixed, determinate meaning, as well as avoiding making any explicit political statements for spectators to engage with per Brechtian theatre. Brechtian theatre demands of its spectators to ask whether the social world has to be the way it is represented. Artaudian theatre demands of its spectators to ask a more fundamental question; “what might/does the staged action signify to begin with?” Their process of understanding may or may not lead them to any fundamental truth, consciously or unconsciously, it being unclear whether *Sonsbeek Live* proposes any. However, there is enough sensory material in the performance to allow any spectator to infer a personal truth out of the framework that the performance provides.

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10 This refers to both a complete work of art in the sense of a synthesis of different art forms into a highly developed hybrid form as well as a value-judgment positioning this as a higher ideal for art to aspire to (Wagner 1995).
Conclusion

As mentioned in the previous chapter and elaborated in this one, intervention in theatre involves manipulating the conventions of performance to create an experience of defamiliarization to provoke a potential crisis in the audience’s beliefs. The same is true of videogames manipulating the conventions of the player’s performance. Spatial conventions are an important subset of these conventions because of the feedback loop that Lefebvre raises; we configure spaces, and spaces also prefigure our behaviours to a degree. De Certeau’s spatial theory differentiates between the top-down organization of space as strategy, and the bottom-up counter-play of social space as tactics (De Certeau 1984, p. xix; Berry 2008, p. 110). Ruch and Duchenault et al’s analyses of player behaviour in World of Warcraft provide an excellent example of Lefebvre and De Certeau’s ideas at work, examining the ways that players perceive the space of the game world and develop tactics and behaviours in accordance with their vision of the space.

Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht’s scenographic approaches to theatre, which were discussed in the previous chapter, are readily adaptable to the medium of games. Whether employed in digital game spaces, as in dead-in-iraq’s reconfiguration of America’s Army, or analog ones, as in the live-action role-playing game of Sonsbeek Live: The Twentyfivefold Manifestations.

Intervention plays with the audience’s expectations and beliefs by manipulating conventions, of the medium, of plot, of character, genre, space, and so forth. The spatial conventions that ground the audience’s experience of any media are some of the most fundamental conventions of the given medium, as they set up the relationship that the audience has with the medium, and the horizon of expectations that intervention seeks to defy. With games, the spatial conventions refer not only to the game space, but the cultural conventions surrounding play that lead to the creation of magic circles. Any aesthetics of intervention requires an account of space to explain what is involved with playing with these conventions.

The next chapter expands on these conventions in relation to the relationship between the player and the game during the course of play, encapsulated in phenomena variably termed as immersion, engagement, and engrossment.
Chapter 3 - Breaking Immersion: Engrossment-Based Game Aesthetics

Introduction

The Introduction and Chapter 1 of this thesis argued that Aristotelian, immersive, theatre aesthetics are politically problematic on account of immersion precluding critical distance between the spectator and the action. While this chapter extends that critique, its primary objective is to propose engrossment as an alternative theoretical and aesthetic principle, arguing that engrossment is a more widely applicable theoretical construct with which to examine how players engage with games than immersion is. This chapter uses the role-playing game genre as an example in which an immersion-based framework fails to encapsulate the range of player experiences in the course of the game.

This chapter’s argument is twofold. First, it argues that the most spectacular interactivity is the kind that takes place in a fictional (but not unreal) world within which one is immersed, where there is no reference point for reflection in the everyday world of social experience. This kind of spectacular engagement is prevalent in Aristotelian theatre (see Chapter 1) where the interventionist force of the play is an ideological corrective delivered by manipulating the audience’s emotions through the action in a carefully crafted and stage-managed world drawn from mythological archetypes that resonate with the audience - catharsis. Secondly, it argues that immersion-based frameworks for understanding gameplay and positioning the player do not take into account the multiple identities and frames or reference that players occupy in order to participate in and make sense of play, which engrossment-based frameworks, such as frame analysis address as a matter of primary importance. This is also an epistemological argument, as it positions immersion as objectivist in its design and its approach to the way players derive meaning, and positions engrossment as constructivist.

While the question of models for player experience in videogames involves dealing with the nature of human-computer interaction, this chapter, like the thesis as a whole, limits its scope to the models of immersion and engrossment used in humanities-centric game studies and sociology, though there is some overlap with computer-science approaches to human-computer interaction. Brenda Laurel’s landmark book *Computers as Theatre* (1993), for

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11 Parts of this chapter were used in “Interactivity, Immersion, and Performance in the Role-Playing Game” (Skolnik 2008c), an unpublished half-thesis that was an examinable outcome for the author’s Master’s Degree.
example, proposes a poetics of human-computer interaction by adapting Aristotle’s theory of representation from theatre to acts of computation, using theatre as an interface metaphor, and a model for HCI design (and videogame design as a specific branch thereof). Gonzalo Frasca extends Laurel’s work on videogame design in “Rethinking Agency and Immersion: videogames as a means of consciousness-raising” (2001a), and in Videogames of the Oppressed: videogames as a means for critical thinking and debate (2001b), by extending Augusto Boal’s aesthetics of the oppressed to videogame design, modification and play.

This chapter examines the theoretical constructs of immersion and engrossment as ways in which people engage with media, using analog and digital role-playing games as case studies in order to argue for an engrossment-based aesthetics of games. While this will be elaborated on in greater detail in the course of this chapter, and was discussed in the literature review, some starting definitions are also provided here: Immersion refers to either the sense of being transported to a fictional/other place or the sense of absorption in a medium or activity (Calleja 2011, pp. 32-33). Engrossment refers to involvement in a game in which players switch between different referential frameworks in order to navigate the experience of play; such as the player occupying the frameworks of a social actor, a player, and a character (Fine 1983, pp. 182-196). This switching of frameworks is antithetical to immersion, which would have the player constantly occupying the role of a character. The phrase “role-playing game” (abbreviated RPG) is used in several contexts. First, it refers to pop culture entertainment products along the lines of Dungeons and Dragons (TSR, 1974). It is also used to describe actor training exercises, theatrical workshopping, psychotherapy tools and sexual practices. This chapter and this project in general only deals with this first kind of role-playing game. The chapter will also include a brief overview of both the history of the RPG genre and examples of analog RPG gameplay in order to orient the reader to this phenomenon, which is less mainstream than its digital counterpart.

One reason that I have chosen to look at the role-playing game genre in particular is that it has been generally regarded as a particularly immersive, engrossing, engaging or addicting game genre. The second reason, building on this first one, is that these games involve a multi-faceted performance that drives the gameplay, arguably implicating the players more deeply in the game’s action.

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Laurel integrates the Brechtian critique of Aristotelian aesthetics into her poetics of human-computer interaction, positioning the Brechtian notion of catharsis as “emotional closure [that] necessarily takes place beyond the temporal ‘ending’ of a play” (1993, p. 121), something that is reflected upon afterward rather than experienced in a self-contained way.
A Brief Overview of Role-Playing Games to Inform the Case Studies

In The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art, Daniel Mackay traces the emergence of the role-playing game genre back to tactical wargames, and specifically, to a pair of developments related to the wargame genre's established conventions. The first development, attributed by Mackay to Dave Wesely, (Mackay 2001, p. 14) was the experimental design of wargame scenarios that had non-zero sum outcomes (a zero-sum game is one in which only one player or side can win.) This was a significant break from the straightforward win-or-lose scenarios offered by the tactical wargame. The second development, attributed by Mackay to Dungeons and Dragons co-creator Dave Arneson, who was a player in one of Wesely's groups, was a shift from the macro-level of overseeing armies and battalions to overseeing individual characters in smaller-scale scenarios (Mackay 2001, pp. 14-5). What emerged out of these developments was the beginning of the contemporary role-playing game form. In these games, players would pursue overlapping but not necessarily identical goals, and would collaborate in their attempts to achieve them. Because of the role-playing game's origin in tactical war gaming, the emphasis in early role-playing games was on strategy and the interaction of the players with the game's rule system. While this strategic/tactical aspect has been a mainstay of the genre, over time the role-playing game evolved into a more performance-oriented exercise, with the development and enactment of a character becoming an increasingly important and significant part of the role-playing game experience as well.

Mackay defines the role-playing game as “an episodic and participatory story-creation system that includes a set of quantified rules that assist a group of players and a gamemaster in determining how their fictional characters' spontaneous interactions are resolved” (Mackay 2001: 4-5, emphasis in original). As this definition suggests, role-playing games are exercises in collaborative storytelling and performance and thus, participatory. In a role-playing game, participants assume the role of one or more characters in an interactive story that is created and enacted by one or more Game Masters (abbreviated GM, a generic term). Aside from the responsibilities of creating and enacting the narrative, the GM also plays the role of any non-player characters (NPCs) and adjudicates any conflicts involving the rules of the game (Mackay 2001, pp. 4-5, Skolnik 2008a, online).

In role-playing games, perhaps uniquely, players take on the roles of the characters that they create at a level beyond merely piloting an avatar through the game space and selecting options from branching dialogue trees. They act out the role “in-character” using
physical acting in analog games, chat interfaces in digital ones, and performative language in both. “Performative language” is a phrase coined by John Langshaw Austin to describe a class of utterances (speech-acts) that carry the added value of performing some action (Austin 1975, pp. 4-11). For example, to say “I promise X” is not just to say that you promise X. It is you promising to do X. The phrase “I now pronounce you husband and wife” is performative in that it involves a religious or civic authority wedding two people in the traditional manner, but is meaningless outside of that proper context (Austin 1975, pp. 9-11). This is in contrast to constative language, which is language that describes something (Austin 1975, pp. 1-3). In analog and digital role-playing games, performative language is used in in-character dialogue and to indicate actions where acting them out is impossible. For example, in an analog game, if a scene is described where there is a ladder that a player wants their character to climb, but there is no corresponding ladder in the physical space of the game, that player might say “I climb the ladder” with the implication that he is speaking of their character doing this in the game world. While this is less of an issue in single-player digital RPGs because of the fixity of the virtual game space, in large-scale multi-player digital RPGs, or massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) communities of players engage in role-playing beyond the scope of the digital system, carrying on in-character conversations and crafting stories beyond the game engine, which is the main situation in which players use performative language in digital RPGs.

Role-playing gameplay involves a process of negotiating these performative declarations in relation to the game’s rules. This hypothetical, though representative, example illustrates this process of performance and negotiation at work:

Lisa is the GM in a game of Dungeons and Dragons. Mitchell, Christina, and Dave are the players. The current scenario has the players exploring an underground tomb in search of treasures and information that would enable them to continue along on Lisa’s overarching plot for the game. Mitchell is playing the role of Cormack, a thief and treasure hunter. He and the other player-characters have just defeated a powerful monster guarding the entrance to the tomb’s burial chamber.

Lisa: You all step over the monster’s fallen body and into the tomb’s burial chamber. The chamber is large, about 30 feet by 35, with a high ceiling. At the centre of the room is a stone sarcophagus flanked by a pair of pedestals, each
holding up a fist-sized gemstone, one ruby, and one emerald. Cormack, you entered the room first, what do you do?

Mitchell: I take the ruby off of the pedestal.

Little does Mitchell know that Lisa has planned for the gemstones to trigger traps if they are touched. Cormack is now at risk of being disintegrated by a magical spell. For Cormack to evade the trap and survive, Mitchell will have to roll thirteen or higher on a twenty-sided die (d20).\(^\text{13}\)

Lisa: Roll a d20.

Mitchell rolls a 12.

Mitchell: 12.

Lisa: OK. Cormack reaches for the ruby. Unbeknownst to him, the moment he touches it, a burst of magical energy emanates from it. An instant later, all that’s left of Cormack is a mound of dust and a pair of boots. You’re going to need to make a new character.

Mitchell’s initial performative action, his character taking the ruby off the pedestal, requires an intervention of the game’s rules. Lisa asks for the die roll, and when the result is reported back, she narrates the consequences of the action, allowing the other players to continue in the story and undertake their own performative actions while Mitchell works on making a new character.

The Problems of Defining Immersion

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace*, a pivotal and highly influential text on interactive media as narrative artefacts, Janet Murray defines immersion as “[t]he experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place [...] the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different from water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus” (Murray 1997, p. 98). Murray views this process as integral to conveying the moments of experiential drama that characterize meaningful experiences of interaction in these texts/spaces. Immersion gives us the sense that these things are happening to us as we occupy a role in the interactive and virtual space of the

\(^{13}\) Many role-playing games make use of polyhedral dice, and in some games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, dice with different numbers of faces are used. A convention has emerged whereby an X-sided die is referred to as a dX. So, as a shorthand for saying “roll three twelve sided dice,” a player may be told to “roll 3d12.”
narrative/game. Implied in this definition of immersion is a surrender of critical apparatus, as Oliver Grau argues in *Virtual Art: From illusion to immersion*: “[Immersion] is characterized by diminishing critical distance to what is shown and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening” (Grau 2003, p. 13). If all of a participant’s attention in an interactive narrative or an immersive setting is turned toward taking in this new reality, how can the participant mount a critique of it? How can critical distance be established in a setting where immersive proximity to that setting is a necessary condition?

Seeing this problem here, Grau addresses this set of questions by arguing that there is not a simple relationship of “either-or” between critical distance and immersion; the relations are multifaceted, closely intertwined, dialectical, in part contradictory, and certainly highly dependent on the disposition of the observer. Immersion can be an intellectually stimulating process; however, in the present as in the past, in most cases immersion is mentally absorbing and a process, a change, a passage from one mental state to another. It is characterized by decreasing critical distance to what is shown and increased emotional involvement in what is happening.

(ibid)

This is not necessarily satisfying, not least because of the tension between Grau’s claims that there is a complex nuanced relationship between critical distance and immersion, while immersion is itself characterized by diminishing critical distance.

Immersion as a concept in game studies became particularly prevalent with Janet Murray’s definition, which draws on the metaphor of being “jacked in” to a virtual reality interface and experience indistinguishable from the everyday social world of human existence; the holodeck in *Star Trek*, or the neural jacks in William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984). This kind of experience, primarily featured as a science-fiction/cyberpunk literary trope, is appealing to the public, marketers, and academics (Calleja 2011, p. 17) in part because it provides a deterministic and teleological endpoint for entertainment technologies. Calleja (2011, p. 26) points to Salen and Zimmerman’s critique of the so-called “immersive fallacy,” a view represented by François Laramée’s assertion that “[a]ll forms of entertainment strive to create suspension of disbelief, a state in which the player’s mind forgets that it is being subjected to entertainment and instead accepts what it perceives as reality” (Laramée, quoted in Salen and Zimmerman 2003, p. 450). Salen and Zimmerman’s critique is based on the
notion that the sensory component of games is secondary to the moment-to-moment gameplay dynamics with regard to creating an engaging/enjoyable/immersive gameplay experience, using *Tetris* as a key example of engaging gameplay without mimetic, photorealistic graphics (Salen and Zimmermann 2003, p. 170; Calleja 2011, p. 26).

As a consequence of the contemporary field of game studies taking Murray’s metaphorical definition of immersion as a disciplinary starting point, as well as the difficulty involved in defining a highly subjective, phenomenological, type of experience, Patrick Markham Brown notes that the use of immersion as a theoretical construct has been muddied by inconsistent application. As discourse around the term developed, problems arose with moving from a metaphoric to a concrete definition for the term which theorists tried to address with varying degrees of success:

> the concept [of immersion] itself is a vague, and arguably inconsistent theory. With a plethora of different ideas and implications surrounding the term, it is no wonder academics are at a loss for an agreed model. Brown & Cairns (2004) go as far to say that “it is not clear what immersion is or indeed if people are using the same word consistently” (p. 1). This sense of alienation with the concept is echoed by McMahan (2003), who states that “no specific terminology has yet been proposed” (p. 68), while Ermi & Mäyrä (2005) more closely explore the usage of the term by academics and players, stating that said demographics use the term “often in an unspecified and vague way without clearly stating to what kind of experiences or phenomena [immersion] actually refers to” (p. 4)

(Brown 2011, p. 10)

In the fifteen years since *Hamlet of the Holodeck*’s publication, a number of new theories of immersion have been proposed in relation to videogames, largely in order to deal with two problems; the aforementioned political problem of immersion, as well as to attempt to clarify a definition of the term “immersion” itself. In this chapter, I draw on primary literature on immersion in videogames (McMahan 2003; Brown and Cairns 2004; Ermi and Mäyrä 2005; Calleja 2011) as well as overviews of conceptual history of videogame immersion in Gordon Calleja’s *In-Game: from immersion to incorporation* (2011) and Patrick Markham Brown’s *Immersion as Concept: experience and design* (2011) in order to provide context for the state of the present debates surrounding immersion as a concept.
Calleja points to four specific problems with the conceptualization of immersion that must be solved to have a clear understanding of the phenomenon that the word is meant to describe:

1) **Immersion as absorption versus immersion as transportation**[\][23] There is a lack of consensus on the use of *immersion* to refer to either general involvement in a medium (Salen and Zimmermann 2003, Jennett et al. 2008, Ermi and Maïra 2005) or to the sense of being transported to another reality (Murray 1998, Laurel 1991, Carr 2006).

2) **Immersion in non-ergodic media**[\][24] [It is difficult to extend the concept of immersion to multiple media, with different affordances for engagement, particularly interactive and non-interactive media, where the experience is different.]

3) **Technological determinism**[\][25] [A technology being capable of delivering more sensory realism] does not necessarily mean that users will feel more present in the environment portrayed.

4) **Monolithic perspectives on immersion**[\][26] [Immersion does not refer to] a single experience that we can discover and measure[, but rather different] forms of experience that [...] need to be considered on a continuum of attentional intensity rather than as a binary, on/off switch. (Calleja 2011, pp. 32-33)

**Models of Immersion in Game Studies**

Murray’s definition of immersion, as the starting point for the use of the concept in game studies, is one that posits immersion as total; our sensory apparatus and mental faculties are pre-occupied with the fictional setting that we feel as if we are transported into. This definition of immersion runs into issues with the first and fourth of the problems Calleja identifies. Murray’s definition privileges the notion of immersion as transportation into another world over immersion as the player’s sense of absorption in the activity, which is a minor problem considering that there is no consensus on which experience the word immersion describes. It does neglect the latter, though this also does not fall completely within the purview of Murray’s project, which is a discussion of the future possibilities for interactive
narrative in particular. More problematic is the binary nature of immersion for Murray as an on/off total/none proposition, which future models of immersion have attempted to deal with.

Alison McMahan (2003) distinguishes between two different kinds of immersion that roughly equate to immersion as absorption and immersion as transportation. For McMahan, there is immersion in the game world, particularly the game’s narrative. McMahan terms this diegetic immersion, based on the notion of diegesis, the literal narrative form of storytelling in the sense of a narrator telling a story that presents the story’s internal world. McMahan also identifies immersion as taking place in aspects of the game that are not related to the game world, narrative, or even the experience of gameplay directly, which she terms non-diegetic immersion. It is worth noting that diegesis is itself a tricky concept with respect to games, particularly videogames. Where diegesis refers to a “tell, rather than show” narrative style in contrast to mimesis’ “show, rather than tell” approach, a videogame’s setting is also highly mimetic/representational. The space that makes up that setting is represented to us, so our experience of it is not strictly diegetic. Consequently, the notion of diegetic immersion can be expanded to accommodate these representational aspects of the game’s narrative and setting/space. Non-diegetic immersion accounts for non-narrative representational aspects of the game’s world (for example, the interface or heads-up display), but also involvement in peripheral, meta-game, activities such as discussing the game in general, or strategies, tactics and play-styles specifically, engaging in fan practices around the game, or other such pursuits:

immersion means the player is caught up in the world of the game’s story (the diegetic level), but it also refers to the player’s love of the game and the strategy that goes into it (the non-diegetic level). It seems clear that if we are talking about immersion in videogames at the diegetic level and immersion at the non-diegetic level, then we are talking about two different things, with possibly conflicting sets of aesthetic conventions.

(McMahan 2003, p. 68)

On that basis, McMahan makes the distinction that immersion relates to the direct experience of the media object (game) and is limited to taking place on this diegetic level. At the non-diegetic level, McMahan argues that what is taking place is not immersion, but rather engagement:
Engagement is different from immersion and describes ‘immersion’ at the non-diegetic level using the concept of deep play. ‘To be so engaged with a game that a player reaches a level of near-obsessiveness is sometimes referred to as deep play.’

(McMahan 2003, p. 69)

Emily Brown and Paul Cairns (2004) make further distinctions between different progressive stages of heightened immersion based on a qualitative study of responses to interview questions about immersion and the gameplay experience that were posed to a small sample of (seven) self-described “gamers.” There are several possible methodological objections that can be raised to Brown & Cairns’ study; namely that a sample size that small is not representative, that a sample selection of self-described “gamers” indicates a specific perspective on immersion rather than a general one, and that the methodology assumes that the lay perspective on immersion suffices to define the term in specialist theory. Brown and Cairns’ study has been regarded as a useful one because it takes into account immersion as a continuum of attentional intensity. Specifically, Brown and Cairns identify the following three progressive levels of immersion in video gameplay: engagement, engrossment, and total immersion (Brown & Cairns 2004, pp. 1298-1299). In spite of the potential methodological issues, most of their conclusions could have been reached independently of the methodology that they used, so the study should not be dismissed out of hand for those reasons.

For Brown and Cairns, engagement is similar in some ways but different in others to the way that McMahan uses the term. This is because Brown and Cairns do not make the distinction that McMahan does between diegetic immersion and non-diegetic engagement, and consequently their model only addresses immersion as diegetic involvement. Rather than engagement involving the player devoting attention to the non-diegetic aspects of the game experience, Brown and Cairns position engagement as the lowest level of immersive involvement in the diegetic aspects of the game:

The first stage of immersion is engagement. This is the lowest level of involvement with a game and must occur before any other level. To lower the barriers to enter this level, the gamer needs to invest time, effort, and attention.

(Brown & Cairns 2004, p. 1298)
The barriers to engagement that Brown and Cairns identify are the game’s accessibility and the player making an initial investment of time and attention as a sunk cost before engagement kicks in. Accessibility refers to both the game’s genre appealing to the player and the game’s controls and feedback mechanisms corresponding to the player’s expectations. Without these, Brown and Cairns argue that players would lose interest before they would become engaged and want to keep playing (2004, pp. 1298-1299).

The second level of immersion that Brown and Cairns identify is *engrossment*, which is a state in which “the gamers’ emotions are directly affected by the game” (2004, p. 1299). They argue that this state is dependent on the precondition of good game construction; “[g]amers could tell when a game was well-constructed and could see when designers had put effort into the construction. This added to their sense of respect for the game” (Ibid). The engrossment category and description thereof are somewhat strange. It is not always clear how polished game design leads to emotional attachment. While the pool of players that Brown and Cairns interviewed identified “visuals, interesting tasks, and plot” (Ibid) as features that indicated a game’s well-constructed-ness, only plot seems to have an obvious connection to the player’s emotional state. Also, the emotional investment seems to be framed less as a consequence of the sunk cost of the player’s prior investment of time and attention rather than the game itself and features of its design affecting the players’ emotions directly:

At this level of immersion due to the time, effort and attention put in, there is a high level of emotional investment in the game. This investment makes people want to keep playing and can lead to people feeling “emotionally drained” when they stop playing. The game becomes the most important part of the gamers’ attention and their emotions are directly affected by the game.

(Ibid)

The third and final level of immersion that Brown and Cairns identify is *total immersion*, which they equate with *presence*, specifically defined as a sense of “being cut off from reality and detachment to such an extent that the game was all that mattered,” or all that they felt that they were experiencing (Ibid). They identify “empathy and atmosphere” (Ibid) as the barriers to a total immersion state – the players must empathize with other characters and feel present in the carefully crafted game world or else the sense of distance is too great for total immersion to take hold.
Calleja notes that Brown and Cairns’ three-step formulation of immersion is problematic because it mixes the metaphors of immersion as extradiegetic absorption in the activity at the first two levels and immersion as transportation into the diegetic world at the third, total immersion, level (Calleja 2011, p. 30).

Laura Ermi and Frans Maÿra address immersion by breaking it up into three types, rather than incremental levels, of immersion; sensory, challenge-based, and imaginative immersion, based on a series of interviews with children following video gameplay sessions (2005):

Fig. 3.1: SCI Model of Immersion (Ermi & Maÿra 2005, p. 8)

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Sensory immersion refers to the player’s involvement with the game’s audiovisual/representational features. Challenge-based immersion refers to the balance of challenge and the player’s abilities, echoing Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of a desirable “flow-state” that occurs as the result of a “successful balance of the perceived level of challenge and the skills of the person [in which one …] often loses one’s sense of time and gains powerful gratification” (Czikszentmihalyi 1991; Ermi & Maÿra 2005, p. 2). When the game is not challenging enough, the tasks become too trivial for the player to need to maintain concentration and attention. Similarly, when the game is too challenging, the ratio of effort to reward/gratification skews too much toward effort, and results in frustration and a lessened desire to keep playing. Getting the balance just right increases the likelihood that a player will enter into a flow-state:

Fig. 3.2: Schema of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, p. 74).

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Imaginative immersion occurs when the player becomes absorbed with the stories and the world, or begins to feel for or identify with a game character, [...] or [where] the game offers the player a chance to use her imagination, empathise with the characters, or just enjoy the fantasy of the game.

(Ermi & Mayra 2005, p. 8)

While Calleja notes that Ermi and Maýra’s “gameplay-experience” model of immersion shares one methodological issue with Brown & Cairns’ work, the “difficulty in attempting to empirically establish the meaning of a term like immersion by asking the general populace what it means” (Calleja 2011, p. 31), he also positions Ermi and Maýra’s model as significant in three ways. It acknowledges the multidimensional character of immersion, it makes distinctions that are medium-specific (the challenge element is uniquely relevant to games, for example), and it is consistent in addressing immersion as non-diegetic absorption in a medium rather than mixing in applications of immersion as diegetic transportation.

Calleja proposes a model of player involvement in games that distinguishes between six different avenues for players to involve themselves in games (“kinesthetic involvement, spatial involvement, shared involvement, narrative involvement, affective involvement, and ludic involvement” [Calleja 2011, p. 37-38]) that all cut across two temporal states; the micro-involvement state that refers to the diegetic experience of involvement during play, and the macro-involvement state that refers to the non-diegetic or extra-diegetic experience of involvement between play sessions (Calleja 2011, p. 37-42).

Fig. 3.3: Calleja’s model of player involvement (2011, p. 38)

This is particularly a model of player involvement rather than a model of immersion because Calleja disputes the validity of immersion as phenomenon/concept/metaphor in the first place:
[The] assumption [] that the external world can be excluded so completely as the participant is submerged into the virtual environment [] is problematic: The player or participant is not merely a subjective consciousness being poured into the containing vessel of the game. Our awareness of the game world, much like our awareness of our everyday surroundings, is better understood as an absorption into our mind of external stimuli that are organized according to existing experiential gestalts. (Lakoff & Johnson 2003; Damasio 2000; in Calleja 2011, pp. 167-168)

In other words, immersion presupposes that our encounters and experiences in virtual worlds and media fictions/texts/artefacts are distinct from, rather than part and parcel of, our encounters and experiences in the everyday social world of human existence, so-called “real” life. Laura Levin notes the theoretical development of the term “meatspace” in digital media studies to denote the physical world in contrast to virtual ones in order to address this presupposition: “[The use of the term ‘meatspace’] marks an attempt to move away from the term ‘real world’, which suggests that experience in cyberspace is less authentic than non-electronic interactions” (Levin 2006, p. 16). This is similar to and different from the way that Gibson conceives of meatspace and cyberspace as experiences corresponding to the Cartesian body and mind, respectively. Levin’s use of meatspace is more grounded in the phenomenological approach to embodiment, in which “our body is not primarily in space: it is of it” (Merleau-Ponty 2006, p. 171). Experiences in virtual spaces are mediated through the body, experiences of everyday social spaces are mediated through the body, and the experiences are, consequently, equally real. While Merleau-Ponty does not write about virtual worlds and immersion specifically, he does offer a useful approach to bodily habituation that corresponds well to internalizing the rules and interfaces of games. Merleau-Ponty argues that the link between our intention to do a thing and our bodies doing the thing are a result of us internalizing the spatial relationships necessary to do those things rather than externalizing and objectivizing them. Internalizing the skill to be a professional typist, to use one of his examples, involves “incorporat[ing] the key-bank space into [one’s] bodily space” (Merleau-Ponty 2006, p. 167) rather than “posit[ing] the keys as objective locations” (Ibid). He extends the argument with the example of a professional organist adapting to playing an unfamiliar organ for the first time, and being ready to perform after an hour’s rehearsal:
Are we to maintain that the organist analyses the organ, that he conjures up and retains a representation of the stops, pedals and manuals in relation to each other in space? But during the short rehearsal preceding the concert, he does not act like a person about to draw up a plan. He sits on the seat, works the pedals, pulls out the stops, gets the measure of the instrument with his body, incorporates himself within the relevant directions and dimensions, settles into the organ as one settles into a house. He does not learn objective spatial positions for each stop and pedal, nor does he commit them to ‘memory.’
(Merleau-Ponty 2006, p. 168)

Like typewriters or organs, we internalize virtual settings and digital interfaces into our “bodily space” to interpret or function in them. We learn the control schemes of videogames through bodily experimentation with the controller and the visual feedback the game provides. We accumulate expertise in navigating game spaces by genre like musicians accumulate musical expertise by instrument: While movement is different in every 3-dimensional first-person shooter videogame, we are able to adapt our bodily knowledge of how navigation works in an unfamiliar game environment within the genre quickly and easily, without objective measure or reference, in the same way that an organist acclimatizes themself to playing an unfamiliar organ. Experiences of virtual worlds, by virtue of being navigable via control interfaces that we learn to use bodily rather than representationally, are always fundamentally embodied experiences.

Immersion is held to be a purely psychological/mental state as opposed to a physical one, so, in order to accommodate this fact and based on his own model of player involvement, Calleja proposes that immersion as a theoretical construct should be discarded in favour of incorporation, which he defines as;

“the absorption of a virtual environment into consciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location, as represented by the avatar. This conception retains the two traditional interpretations of the term incorporation: incorporation as a sense of assimilation to mind, and as embodiment.
(Calleja 2011, p. 169)
Unlike immersion frameworks, in Calleja’s incorporation framework, there is no question of critical distance. The player always remains grounded in meatspace, in a position where such distance is always possible: “the player is not merely transported to a virtual world, but also incorporates that world into her own consciousness in a dual process” (Calleja 2011, p. 172). This aspect of the player incorporating the virtual world into their consciousness is seen as a sustained, ergodic process that requires the player’s critical engagement in order for the condition of incorporation to persist.
The Sociological Engrossment Model

Calleja’s gameplay experience model of player incorporation dovetails with prior sociological research on play as a form of symbolic interaction, starting with Erving Goffman, who studied human interaction broadly, but often dealt with play and theatricality specifically. Goffman was interested in the way that human communication is structured by performances specific to the situation in which the people communicating find themselves. Games provide a particular kind of social situation that is ripe for analysis. In general social interactions, Goffman argues that each of the interactors undertake a performance of their identity in order to manage the first and subsequent impressions that others have of them; typically an idealized and normative version of themselves, in what Goffman calls putting up a front (Goffman 1959, p. 32). Consequently, as each interactor tries to present this idealized version of the self and to exert control over the context of the interaction, and as each other interactor tries to ferret out the other interactors’ true intentions through cues that they wittingly or unwittingly drop, communication begins to involve a process of distinguishing between “the expression that one gives, and the expression that he gives off” (Goffman 1959, p. 14). In this framework, identity is constantly negotiated and reconstructed in a series of performances rather than a fixed category. Goffman distinguishes between unfocused interactions, in which people are in contact just by virtue of being in the same place, and focused interactions, which occur “when people effectively agree to sustain for a time a single focus of cognitive and visual attention, as in a conversation, a board game, or a joint task” (Goffman 1972, p. 7). Goffman’s analyses break these interactions into smaller segments called strips.

This process of picking up on semiotic cues to determine the meaning of communication forms the basis for Goffman’s system of frame analysis as a way to make sense of communicative interactions. Goffman draws on Gregory Bateson’s definition of psychological frames as sets of premises that we use in order to interpret objects and social experiences (Bateson 1972, pp. 187-188) in order to define frames as divisions of experience in which particular rules and principles operate, “basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events” (Goffman 1974, p. 10). These frames are determined by meta-communicative cues that signal a change in the meaning of the interaction that warrants a change in frame, which Goffman calls keys, (keying as the state of the interaction and as the action of using keys) (Bateson 1972, pp. 187-188; Goffman 1974, pp. 41-44). Bateson gives the example of play as a distinct frame from everyday life, echoing Huizinga’s notion of the magic circle and play as a “separate” activity, through an analysis of
the meta-communicative signs that monkeys use to denote that they are playing rather than simply fighting (Huizinga 1955, p. 57; Bateson 1972, p. 179).

Plain speech is the default keying in interactions because interpreting plain speech involves the simplest interpretive process for the other interactors. Not all interactions are plainly spoken, though. For example, people can interact jokingly, sarcastically, or ironically. They can lie and deceive. They can be rehearsing a play or reciting a speech. All of these add an interpretive layer, or lamination, on top of the default mode of plain speech (Goffman 1974, p. 82). Consider that you can have more than one lamination operating at the same time, and things can quickly get complicated. Keys can signal the addition of laminations to a frame (up-keying) or signal their removal (down-keying) (Nissen undated: online). Starting from the plain speech default position, one interlocutor may decide to tell a joke and up-key the interaction by adopting a joking tone of voice. When he or she has finished the joke and the other people present have laughed at it or not, he or she might then down-key the interaction back to the default, plain speech state. As impression management and identity performance also often play a large part in interactions, there are often multiple keys operating at once. Goffman sees a potential problem in that while changes of keying such as signalling a joke or a return to normal conversation help to make the frame uniform for all of the participants in an interaction, some interactors might want to manipulate what some or all of the other interactors perceive the frame to be to their advantage. Deceiving someone into thinking that a lie is a plain spoken truth is the most obvious possibility of this, in which case the liar wants to manipulate the rest of the interactors into having the opposite view of the frame as the liar does. Sometimes this is benign, like deceiving a friend into not thinking that a surprise birthday party awaits the friend just beyond the door. Other times, it is not, such as a con game. Goffman terms these kinds of deceptions fabrications (1974, p. 83). While this project does not deal with fabrications further, they are important to raise to give a complete account of Goffman’s theory and to highlight how fragile our interpretive apparatus can be.

An analysis of which frames are at work in role-playing games can be particularly useful to understand the player’s experience in these games as well as how immersion does or does not relate to it. As Gary Alan Fine, a major figure in ethnographic sociology and a student of Goffman’s, notes, “[g]ames seem particularly appropriate to the application of frame analysis because they represent a bounded set of social conventions, namely a social world” (Fine 1983, p. 182).
Fine undertakes such a frame analysis in *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds*, an ethnographic account of *Dungeons and Dragons* players and their social organization. In this book, Fine identifies three frames that operate in the role-playing game. They are:

1. The social frame inhabited by the person,
2. The game frame inhabited by the player, and
3. The game-world frame inhabited by the character (Mackay 2001, p. 54).

### The Social Frame

The social frame is the primary frame that we as social creatures inhabit most of the time. It is the frame of our perceptions and our preconceived ideas, and crudely stated, it is the frame we find ourselves in when we are doing “nothing special.” For a number of reasons, treating the social frame (like any other) as a primary framework is problematic. As the example of the role-playing game will illustrate, social actors can (and often do) apply multiple frameworks in order to understand the same event. A more difficult complication is that, as Goffman notes,

> [w]hen one looks at some ordinary happening in daily life, say, a passing greeting or a customer’s request for the price of an article, an identification of the primary framework is, as already suggested, very considerably more problematic. Here indeed is where the writers in the tradition I am employing have quietly fallen down. To speak here of “everyday life” or, as Schutz does, of the “world of wide-awake practical realities” is merely to take a shot in the dark. As suggested, a multitude of frameworks may be involved or none at all. To proceed, however, an operating fiction might be accepted, at least temporarily, namely, that acts of daily living are understandable because of some primary framework (or frameworks) that informs them and that getting at this schema will not be a trivial task or, hopefully, an impossible one. (Goffman 1974, pp. 25-26)

The basis for employing Goffman’s operating fiction, which I am likewise doing, is that in many cases, our interpretations of everyday events turn out to be correct, and linking this fact to an interpretive framework is not a wild stretch because, as Goffman states, “social life is
often organized as something that individuals will be able to understand and deal with” (Goffman 1974, p. 26). Because some manner of everyday social frame is predicated on common social and cultural ground, we can use it to connect a social actor’s perception of an event to their interpretation of that event – “the organization of what is perceived,” as Goffman terms it (ibid).

Certainly, this operating fiction is not without its problems, especially in the wake of post-structuralism, as it seems to presuppose the need for an (inaccessible) objective vantage point from which to gauge the correspondence of our interpretations of events with the (unverifiable) truth of those events. This opens up a massive philosophical debate that dwarfs this project’s scope, though cultural theorist and critic Terry Eagleton offers a counter-argument that moves to resolve this issue and that I am provisionally accepting:

Another anti-theoretical stratagem is to claim that in order to launch some fundamental critique of our culture, we would need to be standing at some impossible Archimedean point beyond it. What this fails to see is that reflecting critically on our situation is part of our situation. It is a feature of the peculiar way we belong to the world. It is not some impossible light-in-the-refrigerator attempt to scrutinize ourselves when we are not there. Curving back upon ourselves is as natural to us as it is to cosmic space or a wave of the sea. It does not entail jumping out of our own skin. Without such self-monitoring, we would not have survived as a species. (Eagleton 2003, p. 60)

The Game Frame

Where the social frame is organized by people’s common-sense understanding of the world or everyday life, the game frame is organized by the given game’s rules and conventions, according to Fine (1983, p. 186). In the case of role-playing games, rules and conventions are both important features, and while they may sound similar, they address different facets of gameplay activity. RPG’s rules and conventions place boundaries on the range of possible interactions and outcomes available to the player, but these are different types of boundaries that pertain to different types of interactions.
For example, a common situation in *Dungeons and Dragons* entails the adventuring party (composed of the player characters) engaging in combat with antagonists. In this situation, let us assume that a player, whose character is a knight, decides to enter a mêlée carrying a tower shield in one hand and using a jousting lance like a sword in the other. Although the game makes numerous exceptions to the laws of physics (the existence of magic being an obvious one), the rules dictate that neither tower shields nor jousting lances can effectively be used in this way (and not unreasonably so, were we to think about that scenario using common sense). In this example, there is room for the rules to intervene to ensure correspondence with the rules governing the setting.

If we were to modify the example such that this player declared that their character was charging into combat with a *Star Wars*-style lightsabre, then the situation would become more ambiguous. Different rules could intervene here, rules that specify that making random things up is not how the game is to be played, but this example has less to do with maintaining the game’s correspondence with the rules than with maintaining its narrative coherence. This is what the game’s conventions are meant to address. Successful role-playing in gameplay requires a measure of agreement between the players as to what the conventions bounding the narrative aspects of the game are (setting, characters, plot, etc.). Breaking this agreement ruptures the game frame, and play must stop so that the resulting mess can be sorted out before play resumes again. The errant player is informed that there are no lightsabres to be had, and while his character may have the opportunity to stumble onto the D&D equivalent of one, a “vorpal sword,” in the future, their character does not have one at present, and they is asked to stick with the sword-and-sorcery genre.

Rules and conventions form the basis of the game frame, and serve similar but different purposes. Rules bound the players’ interactions and ensure correspondence (compatibility) between these interactions and the game. Conventions bound the players’ interactions and ensure coherence between these interactions and the narrative delivered by the game. Role-playing games’ necessary features are interactions, rules, and conventions (which imply narratives). This can be illustrated as follows:
The game-frame is fairly uniform across rule-based games and game genres. Chess provides a good basis for comparison. As an analogous example to the D&D knight wielding their weaponry in a manifestly ridiculous manner, consider a tournament chess player attempting to move a rook diagonally. In that situation, the play stops and an arbiter is called. The move is declared illegal and one of two things might happen, depending on the rules governing the event (as distinct from but complementing the rules governing the game of chess itself); the position is reset and the offending player forced to make a legal move with the same rook (under the touch-move rule) if such a move is available to them, or another legal move with another piece if not, or the game is forfeited to the other player. The correspondence of interactions with the rules governing chess had to be maintained, as, after a diagonal rook move, the players could no longer be said to have been playing chess at all. Chess requires a far more rigid correspondence of interactions with rules than Dungeons and Dragons does; D&D, and the RPG genre by and large, allow for the establishment of “house rules” to govern individual games to fit the tastes of their participants whereas chess does not. The reason I bring this up is simply to clarify that in chess, there is one overarching set of rules for how chess is played (slight variations are admitted for territorial federations, but do not fundamentally alter the game). RPG play demands correspondence with the rules adopted by individual groups rather than having one overarching set of rules.

Where chess differs most significantly from RPGs is in regard to the game’s conventions. Because narrative plays a major part in the gameplay experience in RPGs,
conventions to establish boundaries for interactions and enforce narrative coherence are a necessary feature of the play frame. RPGs have plots, settings, characters and other narrative devices that need to be properly addressed at every turn. Chess has none of these narrative features. While it can be argued that a game of chess presents a self-contained narrative of some idealized military battle taking place between kings and their armies on a level field, nothing about this potential narrative would change the way a game of chess would be played. The types of moves the pieces could make, or the sequence in which these moves would be made, respond to the rules of chess and the players’ impulses, not to narrative considerations.

The Game-World Frame

Because of the nature of play as a separate activity, engaged in “with precise limits of time and place” (Caillois 1961, p. 6), games can be said to be “world-building activities” (Goffman 1961, p. 25). Role-playing games offer this world-building aspect on two levels. The first manifests itself in the enactment of a “temporary [world] within the ordinary world, dedicated to an act apart” (Huizinga 1955, p. 10) and governed by rules apart – that is, the imposition of a game-frame on the experience of the participants. The second appears in the enactment of another temporary world, the game-world in which the characters being played can be said to exist. While this is another remove from social reality, Fine is quick to point out that “the players not only manipulate characters” (the relation their actions in the game frame have to the characters in the game-world frame), “they are characters” (1982, p. 186). This suggests the character as an immediate extension of the player, but needs further elaboration as such.

Fine draws on Glaser and Strauss (1964, cited in Fine 1982, pp. 187-203), who “distinguish four structural types of awareness contexts” (Fine 1982, p. 187) that structure social interactions: open, closed, suspicion, and pretense awareness contexts. These awareness contexts are concerned with how aware the interactors are of the identity of the other interactor, and how the other interactor perceives the first interactor’s identity. When both interactors know both these factors, it is an open awareness context. When at least one interactor does not know at least one of these factors, it is a closed awareness context. When at least one interactor does not know, but suspects, one of these factors, then it is a suspicion awareness context. Finally, when both interactors know both factors, but pretend not to, it is a pretense awareness context.
Where Glaser and Strauss apply these awareness contexts to different interactors in social situations, Fine extends this analysis to the different levels of meaning and experience associated with the same individual occupying different frames.

Rather than an open awareness context occurring between the player’s different identities across frames, Fine argues that a pretense awareness context occurs:

These would seem to require open awareness, since both “figures” are the same physical being. However, this reasonable assumption is misleading about the nature of frames of experience. In few cases is there open awareness between frames, because open awareness entails denying the existence of the other frames as realms of experience. Open awareness denies the engrossing character of fantasy. [...] More characteristic of framing is the pretense awareness context; the existence of frames outside of primary frameworks depends on the individual’s being willing to assume an unawareness of his other selves. The actor’s character pretends to know nothing of the actor’s self and knowledge, but it is only a pretense of ignorance for nondissociated individuals.

(Fine 1982, pp. 187-8)

This pretense awareness context takes on specific forms in games in general and in fantasy games in particular, allowing the frame-identities of the players to be maintained:

In the game structure players must play by the rules and refrain from using other devices that are illegitimate. Likewise, the character must know only that information which is available within the game frame and not what the player or person knows.

Fine 1982, p. 188)

Players are characters when the self in the game-world frame is at the forefront, with pretense awareness between that self and the selves in other frames maintained.
Role-Playing Frames and Keys

Each of these frames has a different key. Frames, particularly in game activities, can be considered to exist at various levels of remove from the primary social framework. The game frame is at one level of remove from the default social frame, the game world frame at a second level of remove from the social frame. In order for the activity of role-playing gameplay to make any sense, interactions have to be keyed appropriately for the players to understand what is taking place within which frame. Role-players’ degree of attention to and occupation of the given frames shifts frequently and routinely, and the players must up and down-key accordingly. For example: a role-playing session is in progress, and the participants are engaged in a dramatic scene where they are tensely negotiating with an antagonist. They are, for the moment, firmly rooted in the game-world frame. Then the doorbell rings. The pizza the players ordered is being delivered. The game master matter-of-factly asks who will answer the door, dropping the dramatic and argumentative tone of voice that he had previously been using, and returning to their normal posture rather than the antagonist’s arrogant bearing. He has down-keyed the interaction between the participants in the game, and the rest of them will be able to pick up on the cues that the GM made and shift to the social frame. The same thing happens when a player slips a pop-culture reference into the gameplay, or launches into a tangential and out-of-character anecdote. Eventually, the return to play is established, and the interactions are up-keyed as the participants leave the social frame for the game and game-world frames. Another example of changes of frames and keys occurs when game and game-world frame information has to be brought into synchronization. For example, later in the same hypothetical role-playing game session, the player-characters are engaged in combat because their attempts at negotiating with their antagonist failed miserably. In the course of the combat, Jeff’s character, Celinor, gets wounded by being engulfed in the blast of a fireball spell. The GM describes what happens in the game-world frame: “With a deafening WHOOSH and a burst of a sulphurous stench, the area Celinor is standing in momentarily bursts into magical flames.” This event also entails an interaction with the rules in order to determine how badly wounded Celinor is by the blast. The GM rolls six six-sided dice and sums up the total before declaring: “Jeff, Celinor takes 22 points of damage.” The GM has shifted into the game frame, and following that utterance, Jeff notes the shift in key and frame and follows suit, subtracting 22 from the hit point total on his character sheet. Combat continues with many repeated back-and-forth movements between the game-world and game frames as events occur.
Daniel Mackay expanded on Fine’s frame analysis on the basis that within the game and game-world frames, role-players employ different discursive modes that act as different keys, thereby necessitating additional frames. Mackay breaks the role-playing experience down into interactions that occur in one of five frames (the bracketed notes are my own, and the order is from the most down-keyed to the most up-keyed):

1) the social frame inhabited by the *person*;
2) the game frame inhabited by the *player*;
3) the narrative frame inhabited by the *raconteur*; [3rd person address, out of character]
4) the constative frame inhabited by the addresser; [2nd person address, in character]
5) the performative frame inhabited by the *character* [1st person utterances, in character; equivalent to Fine’s game-world frame].

(Mackay 2001, p. 56, emphasis in original)

The narrative frame encompasses those utterances where the “players and the gamemaster assume a storyteller, or raconteur, relationship by narrating their characters’ actions in the third person as if they were spinning a yarn to [an] eager group of listeners” (ibid). The constative frame encompasses utterances where the gamemaster describes the game-world to the players in-character, typically in the second person, informing the player characters “you see X,” “you hear Y,” or “Z happens to you.” These descriptive utterances are constative speech acts in the Austinian sense, hence the name of this frame (Austin 1975, p. 1-3). The performative frame encompasses the utterances made when the players are...
performing the role of their characters in the first person. In these situations, their utterances are performative. In the act of speaking these kinds of utterances, players performing the role of their characters, they also do something in the game world via the utterance. This occurs in the same way as making a promise involves saying something and simultaneously doing it, with the only difference being that whereas ordinary promises occur exclusively in the social frame, the performative utterance in a role-playing game occurs in the game frame, and the action embedded in the utterance occurs in the game-world or performative frame.

**Frame Analysis and Digital Role-Playing Games**

Seen through the lens of frame analysis, the workings of immersion in the RPG are further complicated. As we have seen, the frequent re-keyings and frame shifts that occur in role-playing games make it extremely difficult for immersion in the performative frame of the game-world to persist. This is particularly problematic in models of immersion that make use of the notion of immersion as a total sense of presence in the game world (Murray 1997, Brown & Cairns 2004, diegetic immersion specifically in McMahan 2003).

Since those models of immersion refer to digital videogames, any critique of immersion arising out of a frame analysis of analog role-playing games would have to make the claim that a similar framing process takes place in digital ones, and that it disrupts this kind of immersion in similar ways. Fortunately, the initial three-frame frame analysis proposed by Fine seems to hold, as all of the criteria for this analysis remain intact with the migration of the role-playing game to digital realms. The player is, quite uncontroversially, still occupying referential frames corresponding to their positions as a person, a player, and a character in a digital game. It is in mapping Mackay’s discursive frame analysis onto digital role-playing games that some problems might emerge and some distinctions need to be made because of changes in the function of discourse in digital role-playing games over time. The shift from text-based games to graphical ones gives a greater possibility for a player to experience immersion as presence.

There is some scholarly disagreement as to what game can be claimed to be the original and paradigmatic role-playing game. Murray (1997, p. 82), among others, cites Zork (Infocom: 1980), and Jesper Juul (2005, p. 84) argues for Adventure (Crowther and Woods: 1976), which predates Zork by four years but was not released as a commercial product. In any case, both of these games were text-based, and structured the game’s discursive modes
similarly, which is the relevant feature for the argument at hand. As graphics were not available or used to represent the fictional world, this had to be done using language. The way that language was used in these games corresponds to the way Mackay suggests language functions in live role-playing games.

For example, consider the following snippet of *Zork* gameplay (player commands are preceded by a > sign):

```
Inside Building
You are inside a building, a well house for a large spring.
There are some keys on the ground here.
There is tasty food here.
There is a shiny brass lamp nearby.
There is an empty bottle here.
>get the keys and the food and the lamp and the bottle
set of keys: Taken.
tasty food: Taken.
brass lantern: Taken.
small bottle: Taken.
>go east
The stream flows out through a pair of 1 foot diameter sewer pipes. The only exit is to the west.
```

(Infocom, 1980)

This sample fits with all of the discursive frames that Mackay’s model employs. The player is looking at this gameplay sample on a computer screen, the edges of which delineating the social and player frames. Outside of the screen, the player is a person sitting down at the computer to play a game. The player’s actions are driven strategically and considered in the player frame as well. The performative utterances are accounted for by the player commands. These look like straightforward imperatives, but in the context of the game they are taken as a shorthand for a performative declaration – “go east” becomes “I go east,” with the accompanied fact that by virtue of the player typing the utterance, the character does what is specified by that utterance; he goes east.

The constative utterances, such as the “[insert item here]: Taken,” lines, are also structured as a shorthand. “tasty food: Taken” translates as “the tasty food is taken by you”
and then again to “you take the tasty food.” The second-person address is used to relate the results of actions in the game-world to the player in-character.

The narrative utterances, such as “[t]he stream flows out through a pair of 1 foot diameter sewer pipes. The only exit is to the west[,]” are those computer-issued third-person utterances that relate the story and setting from a raconteur position. It is worth noting here that there is very little to distinguish narrative and constative utterances, which are both used to describe the game-world. It can even be argued that narrative and constative utterances can be conflated, as a narrative utterance X can also be taken as a shorthand for “you see X.” My view of this is that both types of utterances are used deliberately to deal with particular types of information, narrative discourse for description of the setting and plot, constative address for describing player actions and their results within the setting and plot.

As graphics became increasingly viable and were more commonly used in games, developers decided that certain game features that had previously been based on language no longer had to be rendered that way. Since then, the constative and performative discursive modes have been largely replaced by visual feedback and interactions with input/output devices. Settings, actions and their results are not typically narrated or described in graphical games; they are seen.

Performative language is replaced by somatic commands with a keyboard, joystick, mouse, or other input controller. Typing “Go east [ENTER]” is replaced by holding down an arrow key and navigating through the graphically rendered game space, for example. The inputs serve as non-verbal performative shorthands; “I move to the right” is inferred by the interface when the player holds the joystick to the right or presses the right arrow key.

Constative address is often (but not always) phased out in favour of visual information. For example, in Diablo (Blizzard Entertainment 1997), the player’s hit points are visually represented by a clear sphere with a red liquid in it. The level of the liquid drops as the character suffers damage. This serves as a visual replacement for the constative “you take X damage” sorts of utterances. In any case, this information is still processed in the constative frame. In spite of these visible representations being viable replacements for constative address, other games persist in using textual address alongside these visual pieces of information. Everquest II (Sony Online Entertainment 2004) is one example of a game that employs this technique:
In the graphical digital RPG, the constative frame remains limited to quantifying the effects of rule interactions upon the character, as opposed to serving a narrative function (alongside the narrative frame, at a slightly more up-keyed level) in describing the game world.

The narrative frame is ambiguously treated in the digital RPG, and I would argue that it blends together with the performative frame in ways that make it difficult to gauge which one is at work at a given time. In terms of handling actions, the performative frame has been replaced by the use of Input/Output devices, however, in terms of handling narrative development, both the narrative and performative frames are used in digital RPGs. The narrative frame is typically used in narrative segments interspersed within the gameplay. The player is taken out of the character so that the game can establish a raconteur relationship with the player to further the game's narrative. Cutscenes are the most prominent example of narrative frame devices, be they video, voice-over, or text-based. Since the RPG is built around a quest narrative structure, the introduction and development of the quests may be handled using the narrative frame. For instance, in *Diablo*, the “Valor” quest is introduced when the player-character interacts with a pedestal with a book on it (the player clicks on the pedestal). This triggers a voice-over and rolling text caption, reflecting what the character reads, though
narrating it out of character: “... And so, locked beyond the Gateway of Blood and past the Hall of Fire, Valor awaits for the Hero of Light to Awaken...” (Blizzard 1997).

Further information can be obtained by asking non-player characters in the village about it. While these conversations are taken as in-character, they are separated from the regular gameplay in the same way as the excerpt from the book; the player-character cannot do anything else while the voice-over is in progress except if the player clicks to skip it. While these conversations inform the narrative every bit as much as the excerpt from the book, they take place in the performative frame. This is not always so simple, though. The NPC conversations in Diablo frequently use forms of address to make explicit its framing as performative, such as referring to the character as “you,” or punctuating sentences with “good master” (referring to the player-character) though matter-of-fact descriptions of events can be read as either narrative or performative.

In some form, all of the same discursive frames that are present in analog role-playing games also operate in the digital ones. The player shifts between them in the course of play in a similar fashion.

**Frames, Engrossment, and Immersion**

Given that the role-playing game experience, analog or digital, is structured by a range of discursive referential frames that the player moves between, immersion as a sense of presence in the game world is not persistent. That said, role-players still can get caught up in the games they play, so what is it that they are experiencing? Goffman’s works offer an alternate conception to this kind of immersion, termed *engrossment*:

> When an individual becomes engaged in an activity, whether shared or not, it is possible for him to become caught up by it, carried away by it, engrossed in it – to be, as we say, spontaneously involved in it. He finds it psychologically unnecessary to refrain from dwelling on it and psychologically unnecessary to dwell on anything else. A visual and cognitive engrossment occurs, with an honest unawareness of matters other than the activity. (Goffman 1972, p. 35)

At first glance, engrossment sounds like the same phenomenon as immersion, though there is a significant difference that is expounded upon by Fine. Fine points out a shift in Goffman’s
treatment of engrossment in frames between the above quotation, published in *Encounters* in 1961 and Goffman’s 1974 *Frame Analysis*, arguing that

Goffman does not here recognize the oscillating character of such engrossment. Although perhaps contrary to common sense, people easily slip into and out of engrossment. Frames succeed each other with remarkable rapidity; in conversations, people slip and slide among frames. Engrossment, then, need not imply a permanent orientation toward experience. This point is consistent with Goffman’s discussion of talk as a “rapidly shifting stream of differently framed strips.”

(Fine 1983, p. 182)

Immersion deals with an engagement in the fictional world provided by a gameplay activity, whereas engrossment, by virtue of its “oscillating” or “flickering” nature, encompasses all the varying levels of engagement in the activity as long as the agreement between participants that the activity continues persists. Dropping out of character/the performative frame changes the frame of the role-playing activity, but does not mean that a separate activity to it is occurring – rather, that frame is pushed into the background until the situation is keyed back to it.

Fine asserts that

> games are designed to provide “engrossable” systems of experience in which participants can become caught up. In fact, individuals do get “caught up” in fantasy gaming; however, this engrossment is a flickering involvement – it depends on events that occur in the game world. Players do become involved when they face a monster; but once the encounter is completed, they may return to “mundane” discussions about politics, girlfriends, or the latest science-fiction novel, even though the game continues.

(Fine 1983, p. 196)

Engrossment sustains the fantasy frame. If role-players lose their engrossment in it, the keying of the situation is likely to change. Given the flickering character of engrossment, this often happens, and it might seem like a serious problem. Fine argues that, though it may seem paradoxical, this actually helps to sustain the fantasy keying by virtue of the voluntary nature
of the role-playing activity (like any other form of play, based on Caillois and Huizinga’s definitions):

In addition to the recognition that engrossment is essential for the stability of the fantasy frame, one should consider the effect of the voluntary nature of the frame and the “fun” that is embedded in it. Voluntary frames, i.e., frames in which persons are not constrained to stay, are more likely to be rapidly keyed than are mandatory frames – although this is, of course, a matter of degree.[...] Because it is voluntary, fantasy gaming permits side involvements to take precedence – a point structurally different from how engrossed [my note: or immersed] one can become in the game.

(Fine 1983, pp. 196-197)

Conclusion: The Political Aesthetics of Engrossment

On the political level, the critique of immersion that this chapter presents and the way that this thesis lionises anti-immersive aesthetics might seem self-defeating if we actually go so far as to accept the critique. Suppose we take a position that total immersion (the kind with the political/ideological problems explored in the previous chapter) neither exists, nor has existed, nor will, nor should. In that case, what do we need anti-immersive aesthetics for if there is no immersion to position them against and if the political problems of immersion have to come from elsewhere? In that case, we are always subjectively grounded in our own Being-in-the-World of everyday social reality (per Heidegger 1962), so why do we need special aesthetics to highlight that instead of keeping with a roughly Aristotelian mode of presentation and representation?

I argue that even if we throw immersion out the window conceptually, we can still fit these aesthetics and cultural critiques into our analytic toolbox. By considering engrossment as a continuum ranging from lightly engrossing (in which the experience generates few and/or less intense shifts in framing) to highly engrossing (in which the experience generates many and/or more intense shifts in framing), then we can still make judgments about the aesthetic and political value of how fictional worlds are presented. We can position Aristotelian presentation as lightly engrossing and anti-immersive aesthetics as highly engrossing, and we can make political and aesthetic judgments about those categories. We can position lightly engrossing works as characteristic of the Aristotelian mode of presentation and
representation, setting up a one-way relationship of the spectator/player identifying with the protagonist and their place in the fictional world. In other words, we can make the same critique of the cultural product that we did of immersion, without recourse to the concept. Similarly, we can position anti-immersive aesthetics as providing highly engrossing experiences as they demand shifts in framing for the viewer/player to interpret what is being presented and represented, especially with regard to the social norms and codes underpinning the content and its presentation.

Engrossment opens up all of the same possibilities for criticism and critique as immersion does, but also a more holistic and nuanced way to conduct that criticism and critique. Using immersion as a guiding concept allows us to analyse the player experience in terms of whether and when immersion is switched on or off in moment-to-moment gameplay (Murray 1997; Grau 2003), or when more or less attentional intensity is generated in the player (Brown and Cairns 2004). Engrossment allows all this and more; with the particular opportunity to analyse moment-to-moment gameplay for shifts in frame, how these are and can be designed, played in and with, how it relates to the player as social being, player, and character in the social, game, and game-world frames. Engrossment in games is not just about the player's sense of absorption in or transportation into a game world, but rather the player's simultaneous Being-in-several-worlds; the everyday world of social and embodied reality (social frame), the world of fictions (game-world frame), and the liminal world of mediation afforded by the game (game-frame).

Acknowledging these multiple simultaneous identities and the shifts between them may seem to cheat the player of a willing suspension of disbelief, or to keep the player stuck in their own head while playing or intervening as an interactor. However, the player’s pretense awareness constitutes an active construction of belief in what is happening in the game. We do not ask interactors to dissociate, or create closed awareness contexts between themselves and the characters that they are playing. Segmenting the player’s knowledge from the character’s knowledge in a pretense awareness context gives the player a more vivid sense of the fantasy that is unfolding through play while maintaining the possibility for critical distance.
Chapter 4 - Code-Breaking and Videogame Engrossment

Introduction

Videogames interpellate players into behavioural codes of play and hybrid player and character/avatar identities. This takes place on multiple levels; as the platform studies approach to game studies emphasises, pieces of gaming hardware such as consoles and controllers offer the player different affordances (Montfort & Bogost 2009). The game as a designed object composed of programming code structures the way that a player experiences the game’s rules, mechanics, narrative, and space. These interpellations are “insistent design invocations” which “hail players into particular roles and behaviors within a play context” (Ruggill & McAllister 2011, p. 34, see also: Althusser 2008). These design invocations allow for play that is enjoyable despite the tedium and aimlessness that Ruggill and McAllister associate with videogame play (2011, p. 35). For example, grinding in role-playing games (playing through repetitive and tedious gameplay segments to attain higher character levels and greater character power) is an insistent design invocation of this kind. The promise of playing the powerful questing hero later keeps players interested in spite of the fact that the player is playing the middling errand-runner now.

Play generally incorporates an element of work. Aarseth argues that interactive narratives, including narrative-oriented videogames, require “non-trivial effort […] to allow the reader to traverse the text” (1997, p. 1). This can also hold for non-narrative-oriented videogames, taking into account a range of possible tasks including mastering the controller interface, solving puzzles, powering through tedium, or engaging in the more delightful task of navigating compelling challenges. When this work is channelled into dealing with well-structured challenges with a reasonable difficulty curve, it can produce a desirable and enjoyable play-state, a flow-state (Csikszentmihalyi 1991) in which the player is motivated to keep playing to overcome the challenge.

This chapter examines two case studies, which centre on code-breaking as a game-play activity: the cipher puzzles in Assassin’s Creed II (Ubisoft 2009), and the protein-folding puzzles of Foldit (University of Washington 2008). These case studies position the work that the player undertakes in relation to the diegetic level (Prince 1987, p. 20) of the game’s action - drawing on Alexander Galloway’s use of diegesis (2006, pp. 7-8). It does so in order to argue that the relationship between work and reward can offer different kinds of experiences with different political and aesthetic values, particularly in regard to narrative-centric games.
In this chapter, I argue that metadiegetic gameplay tasks, those “[p]ertaining to or part of a diegesis [...] that is embedded in another one and, more particularly, in that of the primary narrative” (Prince 1987, p. 50), foster a desirable sense of engrossment; a condition involving the player oscillating between several different referential frames constantly, rather than identifying with the character in the game-world exclusively as with immersion (Goffman 1974, Fine 1983: 196, for immersion, see: Murray 1997, Grau 2003). In line with the previous chapter, I argue that this gameplay structure is aesthetically desirable in video game design for entertainment purposes, allowing opportunities for deeper player involvement, as well as for interventionist purposes, allowing opportunities for players to experience critical distance and reflect on the act of play from that distanced vantage point.

**Games, Work, and Reward**

Generally, work and reward in narrative-centric games are considered on diegetic terms. Players work to progress through the story and are rewarded with plot development and new challenges in the game. If the game is well-made, these rewards and this new content delight them aesthetically. There are beautiful stories, challenges, worlds, characters, and experiences for players to encounter through play. Players’ work goes into the game’s world, and rewards manifest in it; this feedback loop continues until they stop playing. Diegetic work leads to diegetic reward. However, this is not the only relationship work and reward can have to diegetic level. The first case study illustrates the engrossing use of metadiegetic fiction puzzles. The second case study illustrates the complications of attempting this kind of analysis with non-narrative-centric games.

**Engrossment and Player Involvement**

Sebastian Deterding (2013) argues that formalist game studies are troubled by media convergence and instrumental play patterns that disrupt formalist assumptions about play. Deterding traces a history of player-centric, micro-sociological accounts of play being called for as a response to this problem, citing frame analysis (Goffman 1974) as the most used method for addressing it.
Frame analysis, which is discussed at length in the previous chapter, examines the different framings of events and experiences that people employ to understand social situations, for example, to discern when someone is joking, storytelling, or employing some particular kind of communicative act. Gary Alan Fine (1982: 182-196, see also Mackay 2001: 54) points to three such frames in relation to games, particularly role-playing games: the social frame (player-as-person), the game frame (player-as-player), and the game-world frame (player-as-avatar/character).

Fine, citing Goffman, argues that the constant need to shift between these frames during the course of play creates engrossment in the play activity:

> Although perhaps contrary to common sense, people easily slip into and out of engrossment. Frames succeed each other with remarkable rapidity; in conversations, people slip and slide among frames. Engrossment, then, need not imply a permanent orientation toward experience. This point is consistent with Goffman's discussion of talk as a “rapidly shifting stream of differently framed strips”
> (Fine 1983: 182)

As a model for player involvement, engrossment carries some benefits over immersion (Murray 1997, Grau 2003), namely that critical distance is maintained and engrossment encompasses a number of gameplay-related practices that occur outside of play (strategic discussion, fan production, and so on; see: McMahan 2003). More recent approaches to player involvement, such as Gordon Calleja’s (2011) notion of phenomenological incorporation, are compatible with frame analysis and its engrossment-based approach.

This chapter argues that the judicious use of metadiegetic elements in games, puzzles in the case studies specifically, fosters engrossment. Its analysis of the first case study, *Assassin’s Creed II*’s cipher puzzles, explores this kind of metadiegetic puzzle-solving.

One alternate configuration of work and reward in relation to diegetic level is gamification; the layering of game-like elements on top of non-game tasks in order to make these tasks more compelling, which is another example of a possible set of Ruggill and MacAllister’s insistent design invocations. While numerous critiques of gamification have been made (they are well summarised in Rey 2012), particularly centering on gamification as a form of crude behaviourism or exploitation, for this article’s purposes, the focus of gamification is that it also employs a different structure of player work (per Aarseth) and reward – one where
the work takes place outside of the game, and the rewards occur within the game. Advocates of gamification argue that this gameplay structure is more engaging and compelling for players (Zichermann 2011). The second case study, Foldit’s protein-folding puzzles, also deals with this work/reward configuration.

**Puzzle Aesthetics**

Veli-Matti Karhulahti’s “Puzzle Art in Story Worlds: Experience, Expression and Evaluation” (2012) examines the aesthetics of puzzles in general as well as videogame specific fiction puzzles, which are “puzzles that are integrated to fictional story worlds [...] in which stories take place” (Karhulahti 2012, p.2). Karhulahti’s article serves a useful starting point for examining the gameplay presented by certain puzzle sequences in Assassin’s Creed II and the core puzzle-solving gameplay of Foldit. Using Karhulahti’s analysis, I argue that pragmatic aesthetics aligns with an engrossment-based approach to player involvement and experience, and subsequently examine the case studies in terms of how they conform and do not conform to Karhulahti’s definitions of puzzles and fiction puzzles, and with what consequences.

Karhulahti’s main argument is that puzzles, and especially fiction puzzles, are self-contained pieces of art with particular means of expression, and can produce and support aesthetic experiences in players who encounter them (Karhulahti 2012, p. 1): “[A] puzzle is indeed a small work of art that stimulates curiosity and provides a kind of aesthetic pleasure all its own” (Danesi 2002, 227, cited in Karhulahti 2012, p. 4). This argument borrows from John Dewey’s pragmatic aesthetics, which position art as residing in “aesthetic experiences that take the place of artworks” (Dewey 1934, p. 222, cited in Karhulahti 2012, p. 2), and Phillip Deen’s application of pragmatic aesthetics to games (Deen 2011, online).

Dewey argues that “Art is quality of doing and of what is done. [...] The work takes place when a human being co-operates with the product so that the outcome is an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and ordered properties” (Dewey 1934, p.3, cited in Karhulahti 2012, p.1). The implied consequence of this, though Karhulahti does not state it explicitly, is that the notion of co-operation with a product designed to generate an aesthetic experience is analogous to how interactivity works as a central feature of videogames (per Deen 2011, online). Players complete a feedback loop that incorporates their input and the game’s output, and that in turn generates the aesthetic experience of play. However, Karhulahti also notes that in Dewey’s aesthetics the products with which human beings co-operate are not limited
to so-called art products designed to foster aesthetic experiences, but also the goings-
on of everyday life. Aesthetic experiences result from a “special sense of presence”
rather than a particular class of object (Karhulahti 2012, pp. 1-2). This echoes
Shklovsky’s formalist aesthetics, which situate art as “a way of experiencing the
artfulness of an object” (2007), as discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

Karhulahti makes a useful distinction between this special sense of presence and
immersion, arguing, per Dewey, that immersion does not fully account for an aesthetic
experience (2012, p.2). While aesthetic experiences can be self-contained, immersive, intense
experiences of interaction with an object, they can also “be formed of plural events [...] that
continue after interruption to be constructed post hoc” (ibid, with internal reference to Dewey
1934, p. 37). These plural events lead to what Dewey calls an integral aesthetic experience.
Consequently, these aesthetic experiences are more aligned with an engrossment framework
than an immersion framework. The engrossment framework can accommodate both kinds of
experiences, whereas the immersion framework can only accommodate the former kind.

Karhulahti draws on Clara Fernández-Vara’s study of adventure game puzzles, in which
she defines a puzzle as

>a challenge where there is no active opponent, but rather it is a problem that
needs a solution. The solution entails logical thinking, rather than physical
skills, and it is the result of insight thinking. Puzzles usually have a single
solution, even if it may [be] possible to obtain it in more than one way.
(Fernández-Vara 2009, pp. 125-126)

Karhulahti defines a fiction puzzle very similarly, save for the addition of narrative,
diegetic elements to the puzzle that make it a fiction puzzle instead of simply a puzzle:

[A fiction puzzle is] a mental challenge where there is no active opponent. It is
integrated to a story world and there is usually a solution, which may be
possible to obtain in more than one way. The solution entails insight and
logical thinking, and it is attained by interacting with the story world primarily
through a player character.
(Karhulati 2012, p. 3)
While Karhulahti positions a fiction puzzle’s integration into a fictional world as a yes/no proposition in the above quotation, there might be room to ask questions like “how integrated to a story world does a fiction puzzle have to be?” or, “What diegetic level does it have to operate at?” Karhulahti seems to be aware of this, as, in the paragraph before this definition, he notes that fiction puzzles are only typically, but not always, solved through the direct control of a player character. For example, in the case of typing in a puzzle solution, the input is not an action undertaken by the player-character directly, though it is representative of one (it is extradiegetic rather than diegetic). The solution might then be used in the player character’s speech to represent the character solving the puzzle, hypothetically. This seems to create a hierarchy of fiction puzzles in which those fiction puzzles solved through the direct control of a player character (through diegesis or mimesis) sit at the top, and in which those solved outside of the game by the player (through extradiegesis and metadiegesis) representatively of the character sit below. Furthermore, this raises the possibility of more, different, kinds of player activity that play a role in fiction puzzles. In relation to the case studies, which are analysed in the next section, the case study of the code-breaking segment in Assassin’s Creed II is a possible example of a different kind of fiction puzzle. In it, the player character is presumed to be able to see the same hidden-ciphered messages that the player can, but where there is no means to solve the puzzle in the game interface and in such a way that the player character can be made to indicate having solved the puzzle of the coded message. It is a puzzle that is clearly located in the fictional world, but the solution is inaccessible in it and in the game’s interface more broadly.

Case Study 1: “The Truth” segments in Assassin’s Creed II (Ubisoft 2009)

The Assassin’s Creed series takes a particular approach to diegetic level in its storytelling. The story of each game is told on two different diegetic levels, in relation to two protagonist-characters. In the Assassin’s Creed II, the player is cast into the role of modern-age protagonist Desmond Miles, who re-lives the memories of his Assassin ancestor, Ezio Auditore da Firenze, through the use of the high-tech Animus device. Most of the time, the player controls Ezio, punctuated by brief periods of controlling Desmond between missions. Occasionally, players are reminded about the simultaneous operation of these two diegetic levels, as occurs when one of Desmond’s companions, who supervise his experiences in the
Animus device, will chime in to describe or contextualise an object, place, or person of importance.

While it is not a puzzle game, *Assassin’s Creed II* features puzzle elements. Most of these puzzles are spatial. Like Ubisoft’s previous *Prince of Persia* releases, there are puzzles around platforming, in which the player must, for example, navigate protagonist Ezio Auditore da Firenze to the top of the interior of the church of Santa Maria Novella using a network of scaffolding, rafters, chandeliers, and other environmental features. In a similar vein, there are puzzles that involve navigating Ezio from one location to another without being detected. These are typical diegetic puzzles in the sense that all the work done to solve them takes place within the game and its fictional world, and their rewards are also diegetic in the form of progression or story development.

Some of *Assassin’s Creed II*’s optional puzzles, however, are atypical in the sense that they demand extradiegetic work of the player in order to solve them. In *Assassin’s Creed II*, a set of optional puzzle sequences are activated by finding and examining each of twenty hidden glyphs on the exterior of buildings. Solving all twenty puzzle sequences leads to a plot revelation called “The Truth,” which is that, in the game’s fictional universe, humanity was preceded and enslaved by a technologically advanced progenitor race, referred to throughout the later instalments of the *Assassin’s Creed* series as “those who came before.” The types of puzzles within these sequences vary from locating a hotspot in an image, to solving code wheels, to identifying which five of ten paintings have something thematic in common. On some of the screens where these puzzles take place, typically in the image hotspot puzzles, ciphered messages are hidden, and revealed if the player moves the cursor over them, usually with a key to the cipher likewise hidden elsewhere in the image. Non-player characters, who give hints to the immediate puzzle of finding the hotspots, do not mention anything about the ciphers, nor is there anywhere within the game interface to solve them, leaving it for the player to decipher them outside of the game, extradiegetically. The content of the ciphered messages relates to the overarching historical narrative of the series, filling in gaps between the periods that the *Assassin’s Creed series* has covered (the Third Crusade, Renaissance Italy circa the Pazzi conspiracy, Revolutionary America, and the present day). The cipher puzzles are metadiegetic.

These ciphers act as a reward for paying attention and enrich the gameplay experience by giving the players a greater understanding of the game’s narrative and its world, as well as a sense of satisfaction from deciphering the messages, some of which can take significant amounts of work or research to decode if the player is not already familiar with the type of
cipher used. While many of the ciphers are simple transposition ciphers, others such as the Masonic (pigpen) cipher, have a much less intuitive key by which to decode them and might require frequency analysis or brute force methods to decipher the message without prior knowledge of how the cipher works.

One such cipher puzzle (illustrated through the following images) involves a basic transposition cipher hidden in an image of Nicola Tesla at the Telefunken Wireless Station. The main puzzle solution involves moving the cursor over Tesla’s lap, which reveals that Tesla was in possession of one of the Pieces of Eden, each a techno-magical artefact that the game’s protagonist Assassins and antagonist Templars are searching for:

Fig. 4.1: Assassin’s Creed II Code-Breaking Segment, Screenshot 1/3; Placing the cursor over Tesla’s magnifying transmitter reveals the key to the cipher in the magnified view on the right side of the screen. (Youtube user GeopLP 2012, 31:04-31:39)
**Fig. 4.2:** Assassin’s Creed II Code-Breaking Segment, Screenshot 2/3; Placing the cursor over the large spark to the right of the magnifying transmitter reveals the ciphered message, which, when deciphered using the key shown in Figure 1, reads, “He used it to develop a bottomless source of energy. Telefunken Wireless Station” (ibid).

**Fig. 4.3:** Assassin’s Creed II Code-Breaking Segment, Screenshot 3/3; Placing the cursor over Tesla’s lap reveals the “it” that the ciphered message refers to, the Piece of Eden, there. Pressing the A button at that point solves the puzzle and advances the game. The message at the bottom of the screenshot refers to the game’s antagonists, the Templars, stealing the Piece of Eden from Tesla to prevent the development of free wireless electricity (ibid).
The subsequent puzzle sequence strongly implies that Mark Twain was the Templar agent who stole the Piece of Eden from Tesla before handing it off to Thomas Edison, who is also a Templar in the game’s narrative.

This gameplay sequence does several interesting things. It provides the player a richer, more deeply contextualized understanding of the game’s setting by filling in gaps in its historical timeline and integrating new characters into the overarching narrative. This provides imaginative prompts for fan practice such as fan-fiction writing, as well as widening the game’s network of intertextual references. This is important because of a feedback loop that Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman identify in games. Salen and Zimmerman argue that games are open cultural artefacts, in the sense that player-made cultural productions feed into players’ understanding of the game world, or the game world itself, and contextualize the game within the wider culture. The game and the wider culture continuously influence each other (Salen & Zimmerman 2003, p. 552). This argument employs Johan Huizinga’s notion of play taking place within a “magic circle” (Huizinga 1955, p. 57), a separate space in which the rules and pretenses of the game are treated as real and centrally important (Huizinga 1955, p.8).

Fig. 4.4: Magic Circle – Culture Feedback Loop;  *Illustration of the feedback loop between the game (magic circle) and the wider culture. The arrows represent the transfer of contextual information from one to the other.*

For one example of this feedback loop at work, this gameplay sequence provides a different fictional take on the Tesla/Edison rivalry and the Tesla/Twain relationship than Matt Fraction’s graphic novel *The Five Fists of Science* (Fraction & Sanders 2006). In *The Five Fists of Science*, Tesla and Twain team up to fight a supernatural conspiracy involving Edison, J.P.
Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and Guglielmo Marconi trying to summon eldritch horrors through a mixture of occult ritual and mad science. People who are familiar with The Five Fists of Science might engage with the game world of Assassin’s Creed II differently on account of this feedback loop allowing outside cultural information to seep into the game.

The code-breaking gameplay sequence also explicitly destroys any sense of immersion in the game. If and when the ciphered message and key are discovered, the game effectively tells the player to leave and decode the cipher before coming back to solve the hotspot puzzle, which would involve moving the cursor such that the cipher would no longer be visible. At the same time, the code-breaking sequence fosters a sense of engrossment by signalling to the player to exit the game-world frame (to enter the game frame) with the specific promise of the player later returning to a more developed game-world. In other words, the gameplay sequence creates an integral aesthetic experience. Another way to conceptualize this change is through McMahan’s notion of extradiegetic engagement, in which the player shifts from being immersed in the game world to being involved in an external activity that is related to the game (code-breaking), though McMahan’s dual notions of immersion and engagement are not mutually exclusive with the engrossment framework.

The combination of out-of-game (extradiegetic) work and in-game (diegetic) reward involves some players in a more meaningful way than the typical combination of diegetic work/diegetic reward, while simultaneously not alienating those players who never notice the hidden messages to begin with. This kind of player engagement through puzzles, though not limited to coded messages, is a device that game developers can and should use more often in order to engage players and provide richer experiences. This structure of involvement is also accomplishes the same goal as its inverse, the gamification structure; greater levels of involvement from the player, with the main difference being that the involvement is in the puzzle/game as an aesthetic object rather than in an external, material, reward. In other words, this structure is not gamification, it is a game.

Case Study 2: Simulating Protein Folding with Foldit (University of Washington 2008)

Where Assassin’s Creed II provides a clear-cut example of an extradiegetic work/diegetic reward structure in a gameplay sequence, the University of Washington’s Foldit (2008) provides a more complicated example of the interplay between work and reward, in game and out. Foldit is a game about folding protein, in which players are presented with
protein strands and asked to use the game’s simplified protein folding tools to fold the protein into an optimal configuration. This involves manipulating simplified representations of protein strands such that the new shapes of the protein structure exhibit certain properties that physical protein strands would also have. For example, folding proteins in Foldit involves minimizing empty space along the protein chain while also keeping sufficient distance between atoms, maximizing the strength and efficiency of electrical bonds in the protein chain, among other criteria. The player has access to a number of computer-assisted tools to fine-tune the optimization from a starting point that is determined by the player’s physical manipulation of the protein structure with the point-and-click interface. The idea behind Foldit is to tap players’ pattern recognition and problem-solving skills to help direct and speed up the computational side of protein modelling (UWFoldit 2012, 1:26-2:06). This has been successful in certain narrow but significant applications, leading to breakthroughs in protein modelling for certain protein structures and to new possibilities for protein-tailored antiretroviral drugs as treatment for HIV/AIDS (Khatib, DiMaio et. al. 2012).

Foldit is a game without a fictional world, so it would be odd to think about the work and rewards that a player undertakes and receives in terms of diegesis and extradiegesis. In that sense, its gameplay, while composed of a series of puzzles, are not fiction puzzles. At the same time, the work and reward structure in Foldit seems to operate on multiple levels. The player works “diegetically,” in the sense of within the game-frame, to optimize the shape of given protein structures, and receives rewards in that same frame, such as points and global leader-board rankings, as well as “fun animations and sounds” (Youtube user UWFoldit 2012, 1:15-1:20).
Fig. 4.5: Diegetic Reward in Foldit; solving puzzles is rewarded with “fun animations and sounds.”

At the same time, the player’s work is translated into an extradiegetic context, in which it is used to assist medical research in the social frame of everyday life. This also leads to a further set of extradiegetic rewards for players, such as the satisfaction of contributing to medical research, and the social capital and recognition that comes with making these contributions through, for example, joint authorship credit on scientific articles describing Foldit-generated advancements (University of Washington Game Center 2012, online).
Fig . 4.6: Foldit players credited as co-authors of scientific papers (University of Washington Game Center 2012, online):

Foldit incorporates diegetic and non-diegetic work and reward at different times. The developers of Foldit as well as external commentators rightly describe the game as making use of a gamified structure. As described in the above analysis, the work of players in the game combines with external rewards and creates a feedback loop that motivates the players in their play. Foldit also uses a similar meta-diegetic approach to Assassin’s Creed II’s code-breaking segments in that there are in-game rewards for contributing to solving out-of-game problems (that are simulated in the game).

As Foldit seems to cover the entire spectrum of diegetic and non-diegetic work and reward at different times, assessing the player experience is more complicated and is temporally contingent on which gameplay structure is operating at the given time. It can be argued that over the course of a long period of play, Foldit eschews immersion and favours an engrossment-based model of player-involvement. Players move between the social and game frames through the work they put into the game and the rewards they get out of participating.

Foldit’s approach to gamification in particular enables particular forms of criticism. One can examine the game’s work/reward structure and make judgments about its ethics and
efficacy. By engaging with diegetic and extradiegetic work and reward, Foldit treats each of its puzzles in a balanced fashion; each puzzle is presented as a matter of scientific and social importance, a self-contained challenge/aesthetic experience (Dewey 1934, Danesi 2002, Karhulahti 2012), and a gamified path to reward, which can motivate different kinds of players, in different ways, at different points in their play. In addition to the possibility of being more efficacious than a more “pure” reward-based gamification, this use of gamification in concert with genuine, aesthetic, puzzle-solving experiences is also less exploitative. Foldit is a game, is gamification, and is possibly something else.

**Tracking Player Involvement Across A Work-Reward Spectrum: a Method for Holistic Criticism and Analysis**

What can we extrapolate from case studies like the code-breaking segments in Assassin’s Creed II and Foldit’s gameplay to talk about the analysis of games in general? Two possibilities stand out: first, the notion of a continuum of diegetic/extradiegetic work and reward, and secondly, the player’s motivation and experience changes in response to shifts on that spectrum at certain points in time.

This work/reward continuum, tentatively, looks like this, in relation to the examples given in this chapter:
As discussed earlier, the typical gameplay structure of diegetic work and reward is at the upper right of the diagram. It is associated with play and reward within the game-world frame, when applicable in games with a fictional world and narrative, or the game-frame in games without those. At the lower right, a switch to non-diegetic reward changes the work/reward structure to that of gamification. The work is still put into the game-world or game-frame, but the motivating reward comes from and relates to the social frame. Games that award achievements and trophies also fit this structure of work and reward. Work is expended to play the game in the particular style that will unlock the given achievement/trophy, for the cultural capital that the achievement and trophy gives as a marker of status and skill. Mikael Jakobsson’s study of the Xbox Live achievement system as a massively multi-player online role-playing game (2012) provides a strong indication of this:

In contrast to the optional characteristic of achievements as scaffolding, this experience showed a glimpse into the force of the system leading gamers to engage with games in ways that they never thought they would. I did not realize it at the time, but I had ceased playing the trivia game and was at this
point only playing the XLMMO [Xbox Live Massively Multi-Player Online Game].
(Jakobsson 2011, online, emphasis in original, notes mine)

At the upper left, the work-reward structure shifts again, to non-diegetic work yielding
diegetic reward. This is the gameplay structure of the Assassin’s Creed II code-breaking puzzle
gameplay segment. At the lower left, non-diegetic work and non-diegetic reward suggests that
we are doing something other than playing a game when this gameplay structure is in effect.
We are not acting within the fictional world, and neither are the rewards for our work related
to it. One suggestion for what occurs in this situation is playbour, exploitative work disguised
as play, the extreme negative kind of gamification; particularly if players are being misled to
think that they are simply playing a game. While that can be the case, it is not necessarily so.
For example, changing the time and date setting on a console in order to unlock a Christmas
trophy is not illegitimate play or an instance of the player being exploited, though it is also not
playing the game.

If we consider the code-breaking segment, and those like it, from Assassin’s Creed II in
the context of the entire game, its narrative, and its setting, it is a tiny part of the overall
Assassin’s Creed II experience. It is an optional puzzle that takes place within an optional
puzzle, with no resemblance to the third-person action gameplay that characterizes the
Assassin’s Creed series. A player can easily engage in hours of typical gameplay before coming
across this kind of puzzle, and the player is quickly returned to typical gameplay after solving it.
There is a fairly extreme pair of shifts in gameplay experience that occur within a very short
time; the type of work shifts from diegetic to extra-diegetic, and then back. What happens to
the player in that interval? I have argued that this kind of puzzle, and shift in gameplay focus,
provides a richer, motivating gameplay experience for some players, though it might also
alienate others, or fail to engage them as intended, for example, driving them to an online
walkthrough rather than to crack the code. Players respond to shifts in how the gameplay
experience is structured in terms of work and reward over time. Examining how players
respond to these shifts, can lead to more developed and nuanced accounts of players’
gameplay experiences and the efficacy of game mechanics. This is the case whether
researchers analyse individual experiences by way of deep reading (Keogh 2012), or analyse
collective experiences in aggregate statistically (Ermi & Majra 2005).

The case of Foldit further demonstrates the importance of a temporal approach to the
gameplay experience, as every possible configuration of work and reward can be present at
any given point. Examining gameplay in terms of shifts in work and reward structures over time is central to examining the player experience as well as the efficacy of the game’s design in such a case. Do diegetic or non-diegetic rewards motivate players more at certain points in play? How do players perceive the kinds of work they put into the gameplay activity? These kinds of analysis can help to answer those questions.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that an engrossment-based framework best allows us to understand shifts in player involvement in games over time, especially when the work expected of the player in playing the game is variably diegetic or extradiegetic, and when the rewards that the player gets out of the game are as well. I have also proposed a continuum of work and reward in games that can allow us to track shifts in the work-reward structure of games over time, allowing us to focus our attention on the temporal aspects of these shifts and the gameplay experience. We can identify gameplay sequences where the typical structure of diegetic work leading to diegetic reward is temporarily replaced, and analyse them in relation to the whole of the game in order to examine the possible intended effects of these shifts, what degree of aesthetic efficacy they have.

The initial analysis of the case studies presented in this article points to several conclusions that might be generally useful springboards for temporally-based, frame-analytic accounts of atypical gameplay sequences (per Deterding 2013):

First, the assumption that gameplay should be structured around diegetic work leading to diegetic reward is not necessarily true. Changing this structure through strategic and aesthetic design decisions can lead to interesting, generative, and engaging aesthetic experiences that are desirable.

Second, while positioned as a work/reward structure that involves players deeply in a game, gamification is not necessarily any better of a design strategy in general than its opposite structure, which is found in the hidden cipher puzzles in *Assassin’s Creed II*. While gamification sometimes fosters a player’s deep involvement in gameplay, it is sometimes antithetical to that outcome. For example, adopting a play-style optimised for attaining achievements or external rewards can be potentially jarring and deleterious to a sense of immersion, engrossment, or involvement in a game. The hidden cipher gameplay sequence from *Assassin’s Creed II* is highly engaging for those players that embark upon solving the
optional puzzle while requiring effort outside the game and keeping the rewards strictly inside it.

Third, a new field of possibilities opens up when games blend diegetic and non-diegetic work and reward, as the example of Foldit demonstrates. Foldit resists classification and demands close temporal analysis because the game play experience fluctuates in response to the flow of gameplay and the player’s individual motivations over time. The micro-sociological surveys of gameplay that Deterding advocates for are a useful approach to this, though a great amount of detail is required to account for shifts in player attitudes coinciding with shifts in gameplay structure.

Fourth, and finally, game studies can benefit from a more refined vocabulary to deal with work and reward in games, especially as it relates to the player experience. This paper has provided a tentative one with the work-reward continuum, as well as its use of Fine’s engrossment framework and Karhulahti’s puzzle aesthetics.

There are also a number of possibilities for further research in this area. Interdisciplinary research with scholars in fields such as sociology and psychology might yield further insights into the ways that work and reward operate in games. Building on Karhulahti’s puzzle aesthetics and Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow, player involvement might be studied in relation to a game’s difficulty. Finally, the design of work/reward systems for games for social change and gamified systems might be further examined and improved.

In relation to this thesis’ main research question, the structure of non-diegetic work and non-diegetic reward (per the Assassin’s Creed II code-breaking segment), provides integral fiction puzzles, and engrossing play experiences with the appropriate critical distance for interventionist game design and gameplay.
Chapter 5 - Strong and Weak Procedurality

Introduction

There is a disciplinary debate in game studies about whether the meaning of a videogame is inherent in the game’s rule set (Bogost 2007) or constructed by players through the performative process of gameplay (Sicart 2011). The former position is based on the argument of proceduralism, that is, that the videogame’s expressive and communicative potential comes from its affordances as a medium, which include procedurality; the computer’s “defining ability to execute a series of rules” (Murray 1997, p. 71).

These two seemingly disparate positions have a major impact on the disciplinary discourse of game studies because of the ontological and epistemological claims that they make about what games are and how we interpret and understand them. Particularly, the procedural argument has a significant impact on the theory and design of games as interventionist artefacts for the purpose of political and social change. This chapter attempts to reconcile these perspectives by introducing the concepts of strong and weak proceduralism using case studies of interventionist game design and gameplay. It also proposes a criticism informed by these concepts.

Gonzalo Frasca’s September 12th (2003) provides an example of strong procedurality. A game is strongly procedural when a fixed rule set limits the number of potential gameplay actions, styles, and meanings a player can enact or interpret, when a fixed, determinate, authorially intended meaning is primarily derived from unpacking the game’s procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007), and when the game’s procedural rhetorics are more prescriptive because they guide the player toward this intended meaning. In September 12th, there is no possibility for playing in ways that are not prescribed by the game’s rules. The game’s rule-set and its meaning as a political message are so strongly linked to each other that there is no room for alternative gameplay or meaning.

Interventionist play in video game spaces, as occurs in Joseph DeLappe’s dead-in-iraq (2006-present) demonstrates the weak procedurality at work in America’s Army (Ubisoft & United States Armed Forces, 2002). In contrast to September 12th, America’s Army features a complex game engine that opens up a wide range of potential actions, play styles, and

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14 While strong and weak procedurality are terms committed to publication, an examiner raises the legitimate concern that average gamers would resist associating with the term “weak procedurality” or any concept of weakness. Consequently, I propose rigid and flexible procedurality as alternative words to express the same concept that circumvent this problem.
interpretations of the game. While America’s Army features an authorial meaning, the game’s procedural rhetoric is both less important than the game’s representational content as a means for the player to interpret the meaning and not prescriptive. dead-in-iraq centres on play styles that are possible within the framework of the rules, but in opposition to the games’ procedural rhetorics, allowing for subversion and the creation of new meanings within the game space by the players.

These ideas of strong and weak procedurality allow for a more nuanced approach to the question of the roles of rule sets, game designers, and game players in determining the meaning of games. They also enable a comparative criticism of interventionist game design methods and mechanics, allowing us to evaluate the relative efficacy of strongly and weakly procedural approaches in interventionist games and interventions in game spaces.

Miguel Sicart’s polemical article Against Procedurality (2011) energized one of the most intense debates in the game studies discipline in the months following its publication. These debates were focused on the question of how important game rules and game players are to the construction of a given game’s meaning. While it was, in some ways, a rehashing of the ludology/narratology debates of the late 1990s and early 2000s, the fact that the response to Sicart’s article was so passionate and wide-ranging suggests that the issue of where a game’s meaning is situated is unresolved and still pertinent. Sicart positions the procedural viewpoint as asserting the primacy of the game’s rules over the player’s active and performative construction in determining the game’s meaning. In this framework, the player’s experience is constructed and mediated by the interactions of rules forming a simulation that is at the core of a videogame, therefore rules come before the player experience in determining the videogame’s meaning. Ian Bogost’s highly influential books Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism (2006) and Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames (2007) elaborate on this argument using the idea of “procedural rhetoric,” that is, “a practice of using [computational] processes persuasively” (Bogost 2007, p. 3). Specifically, games mount rhetorical arguments and claims through their rules, which the players then encounter through play.

Sicart asserts that “[p]roceduralists claim that players, by reconstructing the meaning embedded in the rules, are persuaded by virtue of the games’ procedural nature” (2011, online), though this persuasion seems to be more temporary and provisional than either Sicart or Bogost, from whom Sicart draws this idea, suggest. Players accept and internalize the rules of the game in so far as it enables them to proceed with their play, but any lasting effect on
their belief structures seems to require conscious engagement with the claim or argument after the fact, and not to be a guaranteed proposition by any stretch.

This chapter attempts to reconcile the false dichotomy of the procedural and constructivist approaches to the meaning of games by placing them on a contiguous spectrum instead of their current configuration as oppositional poles in a binary relation. This analysis will be anchored through an exploration of the aesthetics of intervention in videogames introducing the concepts of strong and weak procedurality to clarify how a game’s structural context relates to the meaning it may generate for the player. Strongly procedural games are those in which design features converge in order to push the player toward procedural interpretation of a fixed authorial meaning. Weakly procedural games, by contrast, are those in which design features tend to lead to open gameplay styles, emergent behaviours, and player-constructed meanings. This chapter looks at case studies of interventionist games and gameplay in order to make claims for the efficacy of strongly and weakly procedural game-based interventions. It also develops a view of what a games criticism informed by strong and weak procedurality would look like and what potential benefits it would have.

### Aesthetics of Intervention and Procedurality

In order to discuss intervention in videogames, this chapter draws on Baz Kershaw’s general definition of intervention from his history of British political theatre from 1960-1990, which was discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis. To summarize this definition, for Kershaw, the goal of intervention is “[to play] with the audience’s fundamental beliefs, and [provoke] a potential crisis in those beliefs without producing immediate rejection” (Kershaw 1992, p. 28). This is a particularly useful definition for two reasons:

First, it acknowledges the audience of an intervention’s choice about whether the intervention will be efficacious or not. A spectator or a participant in an interactive media experience can always choose to dismiss the event as a fiction or as irrelevant to their life, or to embrace the event as ideologically central to it (Kershaw 1992, pp. 28-9). Second, the definition, paired with the examination of theatrical conventions that contextualize it, specifies two possible levels of efficacy if it is not rejected; an intervention can provoke deliberation, and from this deliberation, it can provoke change (ibid).

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15 This refers to situations in which the interactions of simple rules in a system or rules create complex gameplay behaviours, including “situations where a game is played in a way that the game designer did not predict” (Juul 2005, p. 76).
Procedurality is central to interventionist game design because it provides an argument for a fixed, determinate, authorial meaning that players engage with and are persuaded by. If the meaning of a given game arises from authorial intentionality, then it is easier to position that game as making a specific intervention rather than just being a game about some particular situation. The procedural approach also makes it easier to measure whether a game is efficacious in making an intervention with its procedural arguments and claims than the constructivist approach of mapping out the maze of the players’ subjective interpretive associations triggered by their gameplay experience. Outside of game design considerations, this has major importance for attracting and justifying funding for interventive game projects as it offers the possibility of showing tangible results. Consequently, this has led to the adoption of the procedural approach in interventive game design initiatives such as Serious Games, Games for Change, and newsgames, among others.

The procedural approach’s emphasis on authorial intentionality also attracts criticism along the lines that it instrumentalises the act of play and the performative character of the player’s experience, subordinating the player to the designer and the designer’s rules (Sicart 2011, online). Additionally, proceduralism is criticized as taking for granted certain features of games as ontological givens; that there is something unique to games as rule-based simulations and representations that necessitate some different interpretive method than any other representational media artefact. Anne Mette Thorhauge (2012) argues that the constructivist and culturally contingent interpretive methods afforded by cultural studies, particularly semiotic analysis as per Stuart Hall (1980), are capable of and sometimes better for getting the interpretive job done, particularly in cases where the intended meaning and play style of a game is subverted by emergent play cultures in a given game’s player-base. Finally, the procedural approach is criticised for its approach to interpretation and meaning-making on the grounds that if the player’s interpretive role is to complete the meaning intended by the designer, this opens up the potential problem of the propagandisation of games as opposed to games fostering critical deliberation in their players (Sicart 2011, online). This criticism is in line with Althusser’s argument that ideology functions by interpellating individuals as normative subjects (Althusser 2008, pp. 44-50). The rules of games are subject-constituting, in that they structure the player’s expectations and set the normative range of behaviours during the act of play. The more strongly procedural the rules are, the more the player is interpellated as a particular kind of subject and compelled to act in accordance with those rules and expectations. The less strongly procedural the rules are, the more the player is free of this.
ideological grip and the more the player can structure their gameplay experience – that is, act as an individual rather than a normative subject.

Some of these criticisms are fairer than others. Where Sicart argues that in a proceduralist framework “the designer plays the player” (2011, online) and the meaning is embedded squarely in the game’s rules, Ian Bogost is much more moderate about the site of a game’s meaning. For Bogost, the meaning of a game is found in the simulation gap; “the space between rule-based representation and player subjectivity” (Bogost 2007, p. 43). Because of the concept of the simulation gap, Bogost’s particular procedural approach is not the all-or-nothing proposition that Sicart suggests. Rather than the meaning being squarely embedded in the game’s rules and designer’s intent, these come together with a player’s associative interpretation of the gameplay process to locate a game’s meaning somewhere between the two. What is unclear about the notion of the simulation gap is how rule-based representation and player subjectivity are and should be weighted to take into account different rule sets, design approaches, and player experiences. For a given game, do we prioritize the rule set and designer intent in order to maintain that the procedural approach yields tangible benefits and measurable results for game-based interventions? Or, do we prioritize the player experience and position the game’s rule set as a form of semantic contexture “whose purpose it is to help the perceiver construct his own attitude toward reality” (Mukařovský 1977, p. 9) through a dialectic and semiotic process that involves negotiating the gap between the perceiver’s individual consciousness and the wider normative social consciousness that the rule set is meant to reflect (ibid.)? If either, then for what reasons do we do so? Bogost’s notion of the simulation gap provides a good starting point to answer this question, but it needs to be elaborated upon to do so.

**Strong and Weak Procedurality**

Different kinds of game design methodologies, rule sets, and designed gameplay experiences necessitate different answers to these questions. This is a question of degree: how much do a given game’s rules dictate the game’s aesthetic/communicative content and function? A game with strongly thematic content, a very rigid rule set, and a limited range of potential actions and play styles with which these actions can be enacted would justify a more procedural approach to its meaning and the method by which it is conveyed. By contrast, a game with a less rigid rule set or a wide range of potential actions and play styles might not justify it as much. Perhaps more so than proceduralist or constructivist theories of
interpretation, the question of which one to use when dealing with games in general and interventionist games in particular is problematic because it does not take into account the specificity of player experiences on one hand, and the specificity of design strategies and rule sets on the other.

One possible way to resolve this is to reposition procedurality in games from its current status as a (disputed) ontological feature and an essential property of games in terms of kind to an interpretive/epistemological feature of games in terms of degree. This repositioning allows games and their optimal interpretive processes to sit on a continuous spectrum between the poles of strong and weak procedurality.

**Strong and Weak Procedurality and its Subsequent Aesthetics**

A strongly procedural game has the following characteristics:

- A fixed set of rules that limits the number of potential gameplay actions, gameplay styles, and meanings that the player can enact and interpret.
- A fixed, determinate, authorially intended meaning that is primarily derived from a process of unpacking the game’s procedural rhetoric.
- Procedural rhetorics which are more prescriptive because they guide the player to the intended meaning.

By contrast, a weakly procedural game has the following characteristics:

- An open set of rules that allows for a wide range of play styles and interpretations of the meaning of the gameplay experience.
- An open meaning or a specific meaning that is derived from the player’s associations with the game’s semiotic content rather than the game’s rules.
- Procedural rhetorics, if they are present at all, are secondary interpretive methods and cannot be prescriptive because the meaning is interpreted from the game’s semiotic content.

In general, the more prevalent any of these characteristics are for a given game, the further toward the appropriate end of the spectrum we might position it. The more toward one end of the spectrum a game is positioned, the more appropriate procedural or semiotic interpretation is for that game. For interventionist games around particular social and political themes, topics, and issues, where proceduralism is most often advocated as the appropriate
interpretive approach, by comparing different games’ relative procedurality and their relative efficacy as interventions, we could begin to make claims about what design approaches make for the most efficacious interventions through games.

Case Study 1: Strong Procedurality in September 12th: A Toy World (Frasca: 2003)

Gonzalo Frasca’s September 12th is a landmark interventionist political videogame in terms of its reach and its explicitly and strongly procedural approach. Released in 2003 following the American invasion of Iraq, September 12th is the first of a series of Newsgames, which “attempt to make social and political statements with games, much like political cartoons” (Bogost 2006, p. 119). In the style of a political cartoon, September 12th’s social and political statement is made through abstracting and simplifying current events, except with an element of interactivity involved. The game’s title and introductory splash screen (Fig. 5.1) position the game as not a game at all, but rather a simulation designed for exploring ‘some aspects of the war on terror’ (Frasca 2003):

Fig. 5.1: Introductory splash screen of September 12th (Frasca 2003).
Falling under the auspices of Newsgaming.com, the claim that *September 12th* is not a game might be disingenuous, though *September 12th* deliberately lacks certain arguably defining features of traditional games, chiefly victory and loss conditions. The game’s main gameplay screen (Fig. 5.2) depicts “an anonymous Middle Eastern town with civilians, dogs, children and terrorists milling about” (Bogost 2007, p. 86). The player controls a targeting reticle with the mouse, and left-clicking will result in a missile being fired at the designated point on the screen after a short delay. The player can shoot, or not. If the player doesn’t shoot, the people (and dogs) wander endlessly about the town. If the player does, any of the people or dogs caught in the blast radius will be killed, and any of the buildings destroyed. Civilians have a certain chance of turning into terrorists if they come within a certain distance of a corpse. This is visually signified through an animation in which they transform that is accompanied by an audio cue. After some time passes without a missile being fired, the buildings begin to get rebuilt and some of the terrorists turn back into civilians.

*Fig. 5.2: Initial September 12th game state* (Frasca 2003).
The procedural rhetoric that *September 12* presents is generally straightforward:

“The game’s message is simple: bombing towns is not a viable response to the terrorist threat; it begets more violence” (Bogost 2006, p. 119). The game’s rules are tightly bound to this message insofar as it accounts for the predominant play style from among the two that the game offers; the one where the player chooses to shoot rather than not to shoot. The secondary play style, in which the player does not shoot, diminishes the simulation that the game presents, reducing it to people walking about a town, terrorists or civilians, and nothing happening. Any changes in representation for the player to pick up on are dependent on them shooting, whereupon the representations and their changes are all rule-driven. The representations only mean anything when they are connected to the player action that drives them, in this case shooting, and what interactive feedback results from it. People within a certain distance of a blast will run to survey the damage, and some of them will turn into terrorists as a result. The player derives the intended meaning of the game by unpacking these rule-driven representations, inferring what the rules are and what claims are made by the game through them. There is little ambiguity about what the rule-based representations signify and consequently about the game’s intended meaning. As such, *September 12* is a strongly procedural game that demands a procedural interpretive approach in order to understand its message and political rhetoric.

*September 12*’s strong procedurality does not entirely preclude alternative interpretations, though these tend to result from the player’s struggle with what is included and what is omitted from the game’s content rather than the game’s rules directly, a condition Bogost terms “simulation fever” (Bogost 2006, p. 132). Bogost emphasizes that the value of *September 12* and procedural artefacts is in provoking simulation fever and letting the player negotiate that condition in the simulation gap. Bogost compares two opposite responses to *September 12*: one by an unnamed player posted on the GameGirlAdvance blog, and one by game designer Greg Costikyan (Bogost 2006, pp. 131-133). Bogost describes the unnamed player as having a nuanced and generative encounter with simulation fever:

Interesting... I found myself first thinking “wow, this is a lot of work to go to in order to say one ‘little’ thing.” Which led me to believe that that’s not what the authors were trying to do. Which led me to think about the fact that I don’t necessarily care what the authors were trying to do, it’s how I incorporate it into my own context that is what matters more to me. Which led me to realize that even a simple simulation gives me room to actively
participate in creating meaning in a different way than static textual or visual representations like editorials and cartoons. Which led me to think more deeply about these issues.

(Bogost 2006, p. 133)

It is not immediately apparent that this has anything to do with simulation fever because this reaction does not seem to tie directly into what the game includes or omits to simulate an abstract, simplified system. It might be argued that simulation fever is present here purely on account of the player negotiating subjectivity in relation to the game. If so, it can also be argued that simulation fever opens up avenues for deliberating what the meaning of a simulation or game is on a different level than the strictly interpretive. This player’s response shifts the emphasis from the rules of the game and the subsequent representations in it to the nature and role of simulations in general and how it relates to their subjectivity. This might allow the player to look at the game’s particulars in light of these deliberations on the role simulations can play, and come to generative interpretations that do not need to be in line with the game’s intended, rule-directed meaning. In this player’s case, the deliberative process points to something entirely different than the game’s intended meaning about blowback and American foreign policy, focusing rather on the game’s expressive potential as a politically communicative artefact specifically, and the possibilities for games as politically communicative artefacts. An important question: if the player is thinking more deeply about the issues around the positioning of simulations as possible political interventions than he/she is about the issue presented in the given simulation, how effective can the simulation be as a political intervention into a particular social or political situation?

Greg Costikyan’s response to September 12th evidences a different kind of encounter with simulation fever:

There are no victory conditions. Essentially, you continue until everyone is dead and the city is a smouldering pile of rubble – or you don’t, and everyone just toddles about the city until you become bored and go play Nethack or something. Now... I see. Terrorists are perfectly peaceable people who toddle around until nasty, evil Western imperialists destroy them and half of their neighbours through indiscriminate missile attacks.

(Bogost 2006, p. 131).
Costikyan rejects the neat link between the simulation’s rules and its message, as well as the value of the simulation itself, in a case of what Sherry Turkle terms “simulation denial” (Turkle 1997, in Bogost 2006, pp. 106-7), ‘[rejecting the simulation] because [it] offer[s] only a simplified representation of the source system’ (Bogost 2006, p. 107). The absence of terrorist acts in the game increases its focus on the American military response to September 11th, but also detaches it from the stated motivation for that response. Any symmetricality seems to be avoided; the increased number of terrorists means nothing in that they never do anything, whereas if, for example, the game had a second screen showing a Western city that would suffer occasional terror attacks related to the number of terrorists and other rule-driven considerations, the game would be more accurately representative of how terrorism works.

The only reference to terrorism beyond the caricature representations of terrorists ambling about the town is the game’s title, which implies that the game’s action immediately follows the terrorist actions of September 11th, 2001. This is also a detachment of the game from history, with the American military action in Iraq not starting until 2003. Similarly, the game portrays American military forces as engaging in a tit-for-tat battle with the forces of terrorism while the motive for the 2003 war in Iraq does not line up with this, shrouded in intelligence scandals though it is.

The responses that to September 12th that Ian Bogost discusses reflect some general points and issues about strongly procedural games as interventions. If we return to Kershaw’s definition of intervention, the prospect of simulation denial poses difficulties for strongly procedural simulations and/or games in terms of being effective interventionist artefacts. If these games centre on rule-based simulations and abstract simplifications of social life, they can be rejected on the basis of not being accurate enough, by way of simulation denial. If the purpose of an intervention is to provoke a potential crisis in the audience’s beliefs without producing immediate rejection, then the threat of simulation denial undermines these games’ potential for interventionist efficacy. While some simulations will be more complex than others, expanding the complexity of the rules and interactions available to the player reduces control over the game’s meaning. Neither Costikyan’s response nor the unnamed player’s response is unreasonable, they depend on different interpretations about the accuracy and usefulness of the simulation. Costikyan’s rejection of the simulation reflects the notion that “a work of art should never be exploited as a historical or sociological document without a preliminary interpretation of its documentary value, that is, the quality of its relation to the given context of social phenomena” (Mukařovský 1977, pp. 84-5). If the documentary value of the piece of art is subjectively weighed and found wanting, why not reject its arguments about
a situation that it purports to engage with? If the relationship of an interventionist simulation to the social reality it is intervening in is not clearly articulated enough, then that simulation’s ability to meaningfully intervene in it is jeopardized.

*September 12th* provoked deliberation in the unnamed player, and others, on the role of simulations as communicative and interventionist artefacts. While that is a discussion worth having, this is deliberation that is removed from the issue that the game is intervening in, and it runs a greater risk of being a process of deliberation that stops short of meaningful change. While Bogost does not focus on this, it is also plausible that some people will deliberate upon the game’s message that the military response to terrorism is ineffective rather than simply taking it for granted or offhandedly agreeing with it. Whether strongly procedural games like *September 12th* play with the player’s fundamental beliefs and provokes a crisis in those beliefs is open to debate, but it seems like *September 12th*’s strong procedurality seems to limit its potential to provoke a generative interventionist crisis. The argument is simple enough that you can agree, or not, but the stakes are not high enough for the game or the way the argument is presented in it for a crisis to occur in its players.

**Case Study 2: *dead-in-iraq* and Weak Procedurality in *America’s Army* (U.S. Armed Forces and Ubisoft: 2002)**

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Joseph DeLappe’s *dead-in-iraq* is an ongoing performance art intervention that takes place in the game-world of networked multi-player online games of *America’s Army* (Ubisoft & United States Armed Forces, 2002). That chapter discussed the spatiality and scenographic approach employed in DeLappe’s intervention, while this chapter deals with how *dead-in-iraq* approached the game’s procedurality and rule interactions. *America’s Army* is a first-person shooter that casts the player in the role of an American soldier across a range of conflicts, which is in itself very common for the genre. What is distinctive about *America’s Army* is that the game is explicitly designed as a recruitment and public relations tool for the United States Armed Forces. The design decisions that are motivated by that goal are, in part, procedural. Before joining online games, the payer must undergo tutorials in the form of simulated basic training that are meant to instruct them in both good gameplay technique and the proper behaviour according to military protocol in terms of handling weapons, the chain of command, and so forth. The intended result is that the players will identify with soldiers through their familiarity with military procedure and their enjoyment
of the game. This is further fostered by the player-avatar always being portrayed as the American soldier and player-avatars on the opposing team always being portrayed as enemy others during gameplay. These and other factors contribute to the possible result of players enlisting or developing a more favourable view of the Armed Forces as a result of their encounters with the game. To that end, *America’s Army* advertises itself as a realistic simulation of military service that will help players make informed decisions about joining the military.

While *America’s Army* makes heavy use of procedural rhetoric in presenting its message, simulating the ideal code of conduct of American soldiers, its complex game engine affords many opportunities for alternative and oppositional play styles. Certain actions are allowed by the engine but carry restrictive punitive consequences, “turning a weapon on one’s drill sergeant immediately lands the player in the brig. [...] Even the use of foul language is grounds for in-game discipline” (Bogost 2007, p. 76). However, there are also many more gameplay styles that are not precluded by the game’s rules, DeLappe’s interventionist performances among them. The game’s rules and their correspondence to the ideology that the game presents affords DeLappe opportunities to play against the authorial meaning of the game and instigate an interventionist crisis in the experience and beliefs of the other players in a game that DeLappe intervenes in. DeLappe uses the rules and conventions governing the space in order to set his intervention up in opposition to it in the style of site-specific theatre (Pearson & Shanks 2001, p. 23). Playing outside of the dominant gameplay style, DeLappe disrupts the numerical balance of the teams and complicates the agonistic aspects of the game from which most players would derive enjoyment. Combined with injecting the obituaries of real American soldiers in the war in Iraq into the game space, DeLappe’s intervention raises the stakes for the participants, who are pulled out of the immersive experience of the game and its typical gameplay by alienating the players from their ordinary experience of the medium (Brecht 1974, p. 98). The intervention demands of the players that they negotiate the strange event and develop a new social practice in the game space, and possibly outside it, afterward, in response to it (De Certeau 1984).

DeLappe’s interventions, though they take the same form, have wildly varying results and relative levels of efficacy from one iteration to another because they are inter-subjective. They depend on the other players and how they react. They often lead to the other players interrogating DeLappe as to his motives, which DeLappe always remains tight-lipped about:
Fig. 5.3: dead-in-iraq screenshot 1/6; A player interrogates Joseph DeLappe about his motives during a dead-in-iraq intervention (DeLappe 2009, online).

Sometimes, these interventions result in a player engaging critically with the game’s procedural rhetoric and deliberating the game’s claims as they relate to the player’s life. In one instance (see Figures 5.4 & 5.5), a player expresses newfound doubts about the enlistment he was planning as he is confronted with the reminder of the grim reality of the risks of military service:
Figure 5.4: dead-in-iraq screenshot 2/6; DeLappe’s username choice is itself provocative (DeLappe 2006).
Though the game and intervention are less procedural, and the intervention functions differently than in a strongly procedural game intervention like September 12th, there is still a possibility that the other players will reject the intervention. This rejection would occur for some different reasons than with strongly procedural interventions such as September 12th. In dead-in-iraq’s case, the rejection would have to be for a different reason than that the simulation is not accurate enough, because DeLappe is not simulating anything while he simultaneously makes the statement that, among other things, America’s Army is not realistic enough. There are a number of possible reasons that players reject the intervention. The most obvious one is that they want to play in the typical way and are trying to return the game to its ordinary state so that they can derive the pleasure that they expect from the typical gameplay experience that the game offers them, be it agonistic competition, the challenge and desire to display skill, socializing with other players, escapism, and so forth. Sometimes, players become defensive as they have a stake in the game’s ideology that is being challenged. Sometimes,
players are left confounded and withhold judgment. Figures 5.6 and 5.7 illustrate two rejection responses:

*Fig. 5.6: dead-in-iraq screenshot 4/6; Player daffyq responds to the crisis produced by the intervention with hostility and defensiveness (DeLappe 2006).*
Fig. 5.7: *dead-in-iraq* screenshot 5/6; Players reject the intervention and react with hostility (DeLappe 2009).

In any case, while some players reject the intervention as irrelevant, trolling, or grieving behaviour, *dead-in-iraq* instigates a moment of crisis before the rejection occurs that all the players must negotiate. While measuring the success rate of the intervention as a way to demonstrate efficacy is unrealistic, the fact that there are high enough stakes for there to be a crisis for the players involved means that there is a better chance that the intervention will be efficacious. The unpredictable and inter-subjective nature of interventions in multiplayer game spaces empowers players to express themselves and react to others expressions’ of interventionist rhetoric. Figure 5.8 demonstrates this by way of a second player engaging in an intervention alongside DeLappe:
Fig. 5.8: *dead-in-iraq* screenshot 6/6; A second player uses the inter-subjective nature of multiplayer gameplay to complicate the intervention in the voices of Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush (DeLappe 2006).

General Arguments about Strong and Weak Procedurality in Interventions

Strong and weak procedurality in interventions provide different sets of potential benefits and drawbacks that the case studies of *September 12th* and *dead-in-iraq* demonstrate, respectively. Following on the analysis of those case studies, I propose the following general arguments about strongly and weakly procedural interventions in games:

- **Strongly procedural interventions in games are less likely to provoke a crisis in the fundamental belief structures of their players. There are more ways to reject strongly procedural interventions and the lack of stakes or a moment of crisis in the course of play means that players will be more likely to deal with simulation fever rather than the tension between their belief structure and that presented by the intervention.**

- **Strongly procedural interventions in games are more likely to provoke rejection by their players. There are more ways for players to reasonably reject a given strongly procedural intervention. In addition to any of the**
ways that they can reject a weakly procedural intervention, they can also deny that the simulation is accurate enough to be relevant to their everyday lived social reality (simulation denial).

- Strongly procedural interventions are more likely to lead a player to enter a particular deliberative thought-process in line with the procedural rhetoric of the game. These interventions are more focused and open to a smaller range of interpretations.

- Weakly procedural games are more likely to lead a player to enter a deliberative thought process based on their subjective associations with the content of the intervention because their range of interpretations is not limited by a strongly procedural rhetoric.

- Weakly procedural interventions are more likely to lead to change in a given player because the interpretive process used to relate to the intervention engages with the player’s fundamental belief structure.

- Weakly procedural interventions are more likely to be efficacious in multi-player games because they are better positioned to take advantage of interpretive inter-subjectivity than strongly procedural interventions are.

These arguments are all open to debate, and will necessitate a different critical approach to games to resolve in either direction. By comparing the specific mechanics and aesthetics that underpin different interventions, we can make better claims and judgments about how to use the expressive power of videogames to make meaningful social and political interventions.

Conclusion – What Strong and Weak Procedurality Allow Us to Do

The concepts of strong and weak procedurality can enable and justify new approaches to game studies and game criticism in general. First, it can help the field of game studies transcend the artificial dichotomies and binary oppositions between the rules and the player, as well as the proceduralist and constructivist approaches to interpretation, by repositioning these terms at the ends of a contiguous spectrum. New questions would then emerge. Rather than debating whether a game’s meaning is inherent in its rules or extrinsically constructed by a player, we would be able to discuss games, their rules, the design decisions that help form the player’s experience, and the player’s subjectivity in a more holistic fashion. This holism allows game studies to approach film critic and theorist André Bazin’s ideal of criticism of any media artefact as being as complex as the medium it purports to critique in the sense that it is
cognizant of each of the artefact’s constitutive parts in relation to the affordances of the particular medium (Bazin 1981, pp. 58-9).^{16}

The procedural affordances of the videogame medium are central to the communication that takes place through it. Strong and weak procedurality, paired with Kershaw’s definition of intervention, offer a generative way of examining, and designing, interventions within that medium, as well as a possible set of heuristics for doing this effectively. As a starting point, this chapter argues that weakly procedural design will generally be more efficacious as an interventionist design strategy because it allows players to reach a conclusion of their own and on their own, rather than feel like it is forced upon them by a rigid rule set.

A criticism informed by the concepts of strong and weak procedurality allows us to make comparative judgments about the efficacy of different design’s respective approaches to procedurality and to begin to determine which types of methods are more efficacious in instigating change in the fundamental belief structures of their players and change in the wider social world. We can use the ideas of strong and weak procedurality to examine and critique ludic interventions in order to refine them and make positive social changes through praxes of game design and criticism. These ideas offer possibilities to shift the game studies discipline from its past and current obsessions with the ontology of games to a deeper engagement with the ethical, the political, and the social.

^{16} “Can one imagine an opera critic who criticizes only the libretto? Yet where most of our film reviews are concerned, it is useless to look for an opinion on the décor or the quality of the photography, for judgments on the use of sound, for details on the continuity – in a word, for that which constitutes cinema. If these basics were not lost sight of, nine times out of ten we would have critical unanimity at least about the workmanship of a film. Because what is true of stupidity is also true of film – below a certain level no discussion is possible” (Bazin 1981, p. 58).
Chapter 6 – Intervention, Deliberation and Rhetoric

Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1, any theory of intervention requires a persistent ethical process that is linked to a process of deliberation. The ethical process is used to ground changes in behaviour following from the intervention, and the deliberative process is used to ensure that the ethical process is inter-subjective. By subjecting possible courses of action to scrutiny and debate in a group, the best courses of action should be taken more frequently than acting solipsistically or on intuition alone. The second half of Chapter 1 asked what ethical process we should take, and what features it should have, drawing on Alain Badiou’s ethics of Event and critiques thereof. While there were a number of possible choices of ethical systems, Badiou’s ethics of Event provides a compelling explanation of interventions and a persistent ethical process that follows them. This chapter takes a similar approach to deliberative procedures, starting with deliberative democratic theory and the notion of the public sphere (Habermas 1989, pp. 1-5). It examines three main models of the public sphere, and then analyses Ian Bogost’s notion of procedural rhetoric in videogames in terms of publics. This analysis is undertaken to critique, extend, and to identify new areas of procedural rhetoric in relation to politics and deliberation that need to be further explored.

Deliberative democracy refers to a democratic system in which the decisions are made as a result of extensive public consultations. These consultations generate a public opinion that legitimates the democratic decision (Bessette 1980; Cohen 1989; Hauser 1998; Fishkin 2010). Deliberations take place among members of a public in a public sphere. A public is composed of the participants in a public sphere, which is a space in which people can freely discuss and rationally debate questions of social policy and political issues, generate an informed public opinion, and steer policy (Hauser 1998, p. 86). People become members of a public over being simply private individuals when they enter into these deliberations with other people and negotiate their interests and preferences with the other members of the group. This public opinion, or public Will, as it is sometimes called, is the ground for the legitimacy of democratic governance and decision-making. Governments that act in line with the public opinion are held to be making legitimate, representative decisions, whereas those that do not are viewed as anti-democratic, and making illegitimate decisions. In deliberative democracy, the participants in a public sphere debate the issues, refine their opinions, and aim to arrive at a consensus. Failing that, a vote is held, and hopefully everyone walks away with a
nuanced understanding of the way the issue affects different members of the public. Ideally, the outcome of any vote, should it be necessary, is that the public reaches a palatable compromise.

Deliberative democracy is compatible with representative democracy, involving elite representatives doing the deliberation, and with direct democracy, involving the general population doing the deliberation (Leib 2006). This thesis, like most literature on deliberative democracy, focuses on the latter because it is interested in the increased access of the general population to deliberation and decision-making power, leading to change from the bottom up rather than from the top down. Deliberative democracy operates on a spectrum with respect to two democratic ideals, “one involving equal distribution of the power to make collective decisions, the other equal participation in collective judgment” (Warren 2002, p. 173). Representative deliberative democracy prioritizes the second at the expense of the first, as decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of elites, while populist deliberative democracy emphasizes both. This type of populist deliberative democracy is increasingly relevant in the post-2008 global financial crisis landscape, with increased distrust in elites and representative democratic institutions’ ability or willingness to represent everyone.

Deliberations take place in the public sphere. With large numbers of participants with different interests and levels of commitment to those interests, rules and norms are required to prevent the public sphere from descending into chaos. The question of which rules and which norms to employ has been a persistent one since Ancient Greek political theory. This question has been enmeshed in and commented on in the arts of the time since then. In Chapter 1, I mentioned Aristophanes’ Clouds as critiquing sophistic education and its emphasis on rhetoric as a cynical means of persuasion and manipulation, particularly in legal and political practice. In the Athenian assembly, the philosophy underpinning rhetoric and its use were controversial because there was a recognized problem with the best orators, as opposed to the best arguments, dictating deliberations and policy. In Rhetoric, Aristotle attempts to work around this problem by creating hierarchies of different kinds of rhetoric and arguments in order to argue for rhetoric as an ethical and political practice “guided by the primary political virtue of phronēsis, or practical wisdom” (Aristotle 1991, cited in Hauser 1999, p. 18). Aristotle did this by dividing rhetoric into three types, deliberative, forensic, and epideictic (Aristotle 1967, p. 33). Deliberative rhetoric, which this thesis and chapter generally focuses on, deals with arguments about the future consequences of political courses of action (Aristotle 1967, p. 35), forensic rhetoric deals with judicial arguments about the truth of past statements or the innocence or guilt of individuals in past actions (ibid), and epideictic rhetoric
deals with praising or blaming people (ibid). Within these kinds of rhetoric, Aristotle divided arguments into three argumentative modes of increasing persuasiveness, validity, and phronēsis: pathos arguments; which appealed to the listener’s emotions, ethos arguments; which appealed to the speaker’s technical or moral authority to speak credibly on a topic, and logos arguments, arguments presenting a series of logical reasonings (Aristotle 1967, p. 17). While Aristotle’s approach to Rhetoric was that Rhetoric was the means to discover what a given audience would find persuasive (1967, p. 13), and to then use the relevant kind of argument to persuade them, by emphasizing logos arguments over ethos arguments over pathos arguments in general, Aristotle sought to avoid the Sophistic problem. Modern models of the public sphere generally tend toward a similar ideal of rationality while taking into account changes in the way democracy operates and different preoccupations from Ancient Greece. There are three main models of the public sphere with different approaches to their rules and norms; Jurgen Habermas’ model of the bourgeois public sphere, Nancy Fraser’s notion of subaltern counterpublics (also principally associated with Seyla Benhabib and Geoff Eley), and Gerard Hauser’s rhetorical public sphere.

Habermas’ model of the bourgeois public sphere

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1989), Habermas argues that the modern public sphere arose out of new communication networks that formed due to early capitalism and the development of a civil society that started to replace personalized state power in Northern Europe (pp. 14-26). Particularly, Habermas traces the origins of the public sphere to coffeehouses, salons, and literary societies that served as centres for bourgeois gatherings and deliberation over current events (Habermas 1989, pp. 29-36). Habermas identifies three common characteristics of these diverse settings that he argues structured the continued rational-critical discourse and deliberation in them:

However much the *Tischgesellschaften*17, salons, and coffee houses may have differed in the size and composition of their publics, the style of their proceedings, the climate of their debates, and their topical orientations, they all organized discussion among private people that tended to be ongoing; hence they had a number of institutional criteria in common: *First*, they preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality

17 Translation: table societies, referring to literary or social clubs.
of status, disregarded that status altogether. [...] Secondly, discussion within such a public presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned [my note: a domain of common concern was formed]. [...] Thirdly, the same process that converted culture into a commodity (and in this fashion constituted it as a culture that could become an object of discussion to begin with) established the public as in principle inclusive. (Habermas 1989, pp. 36-7)

These common characteristics functioned as rational-critical norms to ensure rational-critical discourse and to ensure that the best arguments prevailed. The disregard of status was meant to ensure that anyone present would be able to contribute to the discussion without being dismissed or favoured on the basis of status. The limitation of arguments to those dealing with the domain of public concern was meant to ensure that arguments were about broad public issues rather than individual preferences or private disputes. The notion of inclusivity arises out of the notion that there were numerous analogous venues where these deliberations were taking place. As such, members of any given discussion circle had to take into account the fact that their deliberations were only a small part of the sum total of deliberations taking place across all such circles. Since people had access to multiple groups, and membership boundaries were porous in part thanks to the disregard of status, discussion circles were inclusive in that they were always a part of wider discussions and needed to engage with those outside of the circle. Additionally, Habermas notes that inclusivity arises out of the issues being of public concern. The issues “became ‘general’ not only in their significance, but also in their accessibility: everyone had to be able to participate” (Habermas 1989, p. 37, emphasis in original).

As later critiques of Habermas (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Fraser 1992; Benhabib 1992; Eley 1992; Poupart 2000) that will be discussed in detail in the next section note, everyone did not literally mean everyone. Habermas himself is quite clear about this from the start, noting in his preface to The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere that his work “leaves aside the plebeian public sphere as a variant that in a sense was suppressed in the historical process” (Habermas 1989, p. xviii, emphasis in original). Habermas continues by arguing, highly contestably, that the Plebeian public sphere, whose continued but submerged existence manifested itself in the Chartist movement and especially in the anarchist tradition of the
workers’ movement on the continent, remains oriented toward the intentions of the bourgeois public sphere.

(Ibid.)

The inclusivity norm sees a conflation between Habermas’ limited view of inclusivity within a select range of classes and inclusivity of all regardless of class. Habermas describes each discussion circle as

Immersed within a more inclusive public of all private people, persons who – insofar as they were propertied and educated – as readers, listeners, and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion.

(Ibid.)

This conflation, or a similar widening of the inclusivity norm, is necessary when discussing today’s democracy, in which groups who were marginalized in the bourgeois public sphere (working classes and women, among others), participate in deliberation and the political process.

These norms were meant to foster rational-critical debate on the issues of public concern of the time, limiting the scope of ethos and pathos arguments and emphasizing logos arguments. By adhering to these norms, discussions in the public sphere would keep to being open, public, inclusive, and democratic in line with Habermas’ notion of communicative rationality, which arises out of The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and which Habermas elaborates on in great depth in Theory of Communicative Action (1989b). Communicative rationality refers to

a peculiar rationality, inherent not in language as such but in the communicative use of linguistic expressions, that can be reduced neither to the epistemic rationality of knowledge (as classical truth-conditional semantics supposes) nor to the purposive-rationality of action (as intentionalist semantics assumes). This communicative rationality is expressed in the unifying force of speech oriented toward reaching understanding, which secures for the speakers an intersubjectively shared lifeworld, thereby
securing at the same time the horizon within which everyone can refer to one
and the same objective world.

(Habermas 2000, p. 315, emphasis in original)

This notion of communicative rationality underpins all speech aimed at reaching
understanding. It is central to Habermas’ epistemology in general and to his notion of the
public sphere in particular. All discourse in the public sphere is to be aimed at mutual
understanding, and to be communicatively rational by consequence, in accordance with the
rational communicative norms governing the public sphere.

Finally, Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere ceased to function as a
crucible for democracy because of the development over time of the overlap of the
institutions of the public sphere with those of private interests (1989, pp. 141-150), the
massification of media (1989, pp. 181-195), and the disassociation of public opinion from
rational-critical debate among others in favour of mass-media construction of public opinion
through statistical polling (1989, pp. 211-222).

Subaltern Counterpublics

As mentioned in the previous section, Habermas’ notion of the bourgeois public
sphere and of the norms underpinning it have been critiqued for still being status and class-
bound, for being exclusionary, and for being blind to difference (From a feminist perspective,
see: Fraser 1992; Benhabib 1992; Eley 1992. In general sociological terms, see: Bourdieu &
Wacquant 1992; Poupart 2000). Part of the reason for this is that the goal of communicative
rationality Habermas identifies and desires is an ideal, not how discourse works in actual
democracy, which Nancy Fraser notes in “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the
Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” (1992): “I contend that [Habermas’] analysis of the
public sphere needs to undergo some critical interrogation and reconstruction if it is to yield a
category capable of theorizing the limits of actually existing democracy” (p. 111).

From a sociological perspective, this interrogation centres on relations of domination
and how they are perpetuated in society. Drawing on Bourdieu’s interconnected theories of
*habitus, field,* and *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1983; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992;
Bourdieu 2008), Franck Poupart argues that
if the dominated acquiesce in the principle of their domination, it is because, like those who dominate, they accept the social order which is established and legitimated by these ‘gifts’ [privilege]. The ideological function realized here through culture – or, more exactly, the social uses of culture – appears in this analysis as the symbolic aspect of domination: symbolic violence is that form of violence which only acts on social agents with their complicity. (Poupart 2000, p. 71, note mine)

Complicity is maintained through the transmission and acceptance of dominant hegemonic ideology through culture, acts of symbolic violence that are understood to turn people against their own interests and further relations of domination. While interpretations to cultural texts are subjective (per Hall 1980), Bourdieu also argues that they are grounded in social class and class relations through the notion of habitus and class habitus (Bourdieu 1984).

To summarize the concepts underpinning Bourdieu and Poupart’s notion of symbolic violence, Bourdieu argues that agents (people) compete for resources (different forms of capital (per Bourdieu 1994; see Johnson 1993, pp. 6-9)) in different institutional spheres of everyday life, fields (Bourdieu 1993). Each of these fields has a different set of expectations and norms attached, roughly analogously to Goffman’s notion of frames, discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis (Goffman 1974). The main difference between Goffman and Bourdieu’s approaches to social actions is in the way that they conceive of the strategies that people employ in situations: where Goffman argues that the masks that people adopt in social situations are a result of utilitarian choices to maximize gain, Bourdieu views social strategies as more intuitive: “The Bourdieusian concept of strategy should not be understood as a choice, subjective and rational, but as a feel for the game: a practical sense, emanating from a system of dispositions, the habitus” (Poupart 2000, p. 77).

Randal Johnson, in the introduction to Bourdieu’s 1993 book The Field of Cultural Practice, introduces the concept of habitus as follows:

Bourdieu formally defines habitus as the system of ‘durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. […] The habitus is sometimes
described as a ‘feel for the game’ a ‘practical sense’ (sens pratique) that
inclines agents to act and react in certain situations in a manner that is not
always calculated and that is not simply a question of conscious obedience to
rules. Rather, it is a set of dispositions which generates practices and
perceptions. The habitus is the result of a long process of inculcation,
beginning in early childhood, which becomes a ‘second sense’ or a second
nature. According to Bourdieu’s definition the dispositions represented by the
habitus are ‘durable’ in that they last throughout an agent’s lifetime. They are
‘transposable’ in that they may generate practices in multiple and diverse
fields of activity, and they are ‘structured structures’ in that they inevitably
incorporate the objective social conditions of their inculcations. [...] Finally, the
dispositions of the habitus are ‘structuring structures’ through their ability to
generate practices adjusted to specific situations.

(Johnson 1993, p. 6, internal quotations from Bourdieu 1977, p. 72)

In summary, a person’s habitus is the set of pre-conceived ideas and beliefs that they bring
into a given situation. Derived from childhood upbringing, the habitus is linked to social class,
which exerts influence on the inculcating process by which the habitus is imprinted onto
people. Bourdieu argues that people from the same social class and the same society each
have a largely overlapping habitus, which serves as the ground for aesthetic judgments of taste
(Bourdieu 1984). By extension, this class habitus also serves as the ground for political
judgments, per Sartwell’s argument that all politics are a function of aesthetic systems
(Bourdieu 1984; Sartwell 2010, pp. 1-2, see: Chapter 1).

Symbolic violence operates by interpellating subjects as a part of the world that their
habitus is built upon rather than any semblance of an objective world, which is central to
Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence functioning through a process of recognition (the
subject recognizing themself as a part of the world that the habitus suggests prereflexively)
and misrecognition (the subject misrecognizing the world that the habitus suggests as
objective and universal):

According to Bourdieu, recognition can only occur due to a ‘misrecognition
founded on an unconscious adjustment of subjective structures to objective
structures’. The doxic adherence to the world created by this correspondence
is anchored in the very depths of the body, where the schemata of action,
perception and appreciation, that is to say the schemata of the habitus, are internalized. These structured structures, adjusted to the objective conditions of which they are the product, are also structuring structures allowing one to constitute the world as though it were self-evident, a world all the more readily accepted given that these structures operate at a pre-reflexive level of motor behaviour [...] Domination is thus inscribed in the most everyday practices: the theory of domination proposed by Bourdieu takes the form of a theory of practice, centred around the concept of habitus, explaining the process of recognition and misrecognition through which domination is legitimated. (Poupart 2000, pp. 71-2)

Fundamentally, Bourdieu’s critique of Habermas’ notion of the public sphere centres on the idea that the way that Habermas describes deliberation in the bourgeois public sphere is such an act of symbolic violence:

As against the universal pragmatics of Habermas, Bourdieu opposes a praxeology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 139) which insists on the symbolic violence inherent in the use of language: it is necessary to complement the quest for the conditions for truth with an assessment of value beyond the linguistic sphere. Relations of meaning, Bourdieu shows, do not constitute a separate domain: they are crosscut by relations of power, which they reinforce even while masking them. To try to separate them, even in a normative form, can only accentuate the misrecognition of their social function. (Poupeau 2000, p. 84)

The historical and political-philosophical approach to the public sphere, which informs the feminist critiques of Habermas, does not reject the first principle of rational deliberation. However, it insists on adjusting the norms governing the public sphere and the deliberative process in order to counteract this tendency toward symbolic violence and domination. Drawing on Seyla Benhabib’s critique of Habermas’ notion of a sphere of public concern as gender-blind owing to the exclusion of the feminine, domestic, private, intimate sphere from public sphere discussions (Benhabib 1992, p. 92), Fraser argues that what constitutes the public sphere and matters of public concern need to be redefined to fit with
contemporary ideals and practices of democracy (Fraser 1992, pp. 111-112). Fraser argues that it is not sufficient to conclude that as an ideal, Habermas’ model of the public sphere is uncompromised by the exclusions it made use of. As Fraser notes, “[t]he question of open access cannot be reduced without remainder to the presence or absence of formal exclusions. It requires us to look also at the process of discursive interaction within formally inclusive public arenas” (Fraser 1992, p. 118).

In conducting such an analysis, Fraser makes three main arguments about the way that the ideal norms of the public sphere and the actual discursive practices in public sphere did not match up:

First, Fraser argues that the norm of disregard of status does not eliminate inequalities among the participants in the discussion, or allow for the possibility of eliminating these as the inequalities are bracketed rather than eliminated or addressed (1992, pp. 118-121):

“Insofar as the bracketing of social inequalities in deliberation means proceeding as if they don’t exist when they do, this does not foster participatory parity. On the contrary, such bracketing usually works to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates. In most cases it would be more appropriate to unbracket inequalities in the sense of explicitly thematizing them – a point that accords with the spirit of Habermas’s later communicative ethics.” (Fraser 1992, p. 120)

Rather than the disregard of status, Fraser argues that highlighting differences in status lead to a more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic deliberative process, particularly in that it includes marginalized/non-dominant groups, their concerns, and the context of domination from which they are arguing built into the process.

Secondly, and relatedly, Fraser argues that in practice the differences between participants in the public sphere were not effectively bracketed anyway:

Rather, discursive interaction within the bourgeois public sphere was governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality. These functioned informally to marginalize
women and members of the plebeian classes and to prevent them from participating as peers.\footnote{This can be read in terms of Bourdieu’s critique as an instance where these marginalized groups are unable to participate due to being out of step with the requisite class habitus for the deliberative process.} \footnote{Anthony McCosker’s article “Trolling as Provocation: YouTube’s Agonistic Publics” (2013: forthcoming), argues that these sorts of protocols of style and decorum also run the risk of robbing the public sphere of affect. Practices such as flaming and trolling, which would not fit with Habermas’ ideally rational discourse, can serve useful deliberative functions in a situation of “agonistic pluralism.” Agonistic pluralism refers to a democratic politics that provides “channels through which collective passions can express themselves while simultaneously permitting modes of identification that will label the opponent not as an enemy but as an adversary” (Mouffe 2000, pp. 126-127, in McCosker 2013, forthcoming).}

(Fraser 1992, p. 119)

Third, Fraser argues that the distinction between domains of private and public concern precluded certain categories of issues from entering into deliberation within the bourgeois public sphere. Particularly, issues that especially affected women, such as domestic violence, that we now understand to be systemic, social, and public issues, were excluded from discussion on the grounds that they took place within the private, intimate, domestic sphere. This exclusion is an extension of the gendered public/private divide that Benhabib identifies:

\[\text{[i]n the tradition of Western political thought and down to our own days, [distinctions between public and private] have served to confine women and typically female spheres of activity like housework; reproduction; nurture and care for the young, the sick, and the elderly to the “private” domain. [...] Along with their relegation, in Arendt’s terms, to the “shadowy interior of the household,” they have been treated, until recently, as “natural” and “immutable” aspects of human relations. They have remained prereflexive and inaccessible to discursive analysis.}\]

(Benhabib 1992, pp. 89-90)

A historical examination of the way that the view of these issues shifted from being a private concern to a public one is illustrative of the functioning of the public sphere in actually existing democracy. The eventual inclusion of these sorts of issues in the public sphere, Fraser argues, is not a result of the dominant public sphere deigning to include them, but rather from
women and feminists forming their own alternative public sphere (a subaltern counter-public, in Fraser’s words) that changed the terms of discourse surrounding these issues and eventually the public treatment of the issues themselves (Fraser 1992, pp. 128-132). As a specific example, Fraser argues that

until quite recently, feminists were in the minority in thinking that domestic violence against women was a matter of common concern and thus a legitimate topic of public discourse. The great majority of people considered this issue to be a private matter between what was assumed to be a fairly small number of heterosexual couples (and perhaps the social and legal professionals who were supposed to deal with them). Then feminists formed a subaltern counterpublic from which we disseminated a view of domestic violence as a widespread systemic feature of male-dominated societies. Eventually, after sustained discursive contestation, we succeeded in making it a common concern.

(Fraser 1992, p. 129)

Fraser’s notion of subaltern counterpublics involves the following alterations to Habermas’ model of the bourgeois public sphere for the purposes of greater participation, inclusiveness, and equality; first, rather than there being one public sphere, there are many public spheres. These are mostly weak public spheres that organize around particular issues and typically concerns of identity politics. In this sense, “weak” means that these public spheres deal with public opinion-formation but not collective decision-making, in contrast to strong public spheres, in which both operations take place (Fraser 1992, p. 134). The goal for participants in these publics is to grow the weak public spheres into strong ones. In subaltern counterpublics, ideas and language are refined in order to reduce the disadvantage of the group in the dominant public spheres. The existence of multiple public spheres helps to keep the dominant public sphere and discourse arising out of it in check (Fraser 1992, pp. 122-128). The norms underpinning the operation of the public sphere need to be revised to account for these problems. Inclusivity must occur in practice as well as in theory. All systemic issues must be treated as public issues. Vernacular language is used to limit the influence of class and technocratic expertise. Differences must be highlighted with the aim of eliminating inequalities. Then, where they do not create contradictions, Habermas’ rational norms of communicative action can be employed.
In “Vernacular Dialogue and the Rhetoricality of Public Opinion” (1998), Gerard Hauser argues that public opinion is more complicated of a phenomenon than the two main ways used to describe it allow for. These two ways are as an ideal - the product of rational-critical discourse, as per Habermas, among others, and the other is as a “real” snapshot picture of people’s aggregate preferences about an issue, delivered through statistical opinion polling. The latter is presently the dominant notion of public opinion, though it has been critiqued extensively as a manipulable and anti-democratic concept (Habermas 1989, p. 211-222). Specifically, Hauser argues that

[n]either characterization exhibits empirical fidelity to the complex process whereby a public opinion is formed and communicated. Neither accounts for the dialogical engagements by which an active populace participates in an issue’s development; the contours of the public sphere that color their levels of awareness, perception, and participation; the influence on opinion of sharing views with one another; and the terms of expression warranting the inference that a public has formed and has a dominant opinion. Both, moreover, conceptualize public opinion as the expression of an entity: the public. Neither conceptualizes discourse in ways that account for the rhetorical processes by which those without official status – the actual members of publics – communicate to one another and respond to the messages they receive.

(Hauser 1998b, p. 85)

Essentially, where these two characterizations of public opinion see it as a product, Hauser argues that it is a process that is grounded in the vernacular, rhetorical exchanges that take place in the street and in the venues of everyday life: “[P]ublics do not exist as entities but as processes; their collective reasoning is not defined by abstract reflection but by practical judgment; their awareness of issues is not philosophical but eventful” (Hauser 1999, p. 64). If we accept this, it follows that measuring public opinion is not about a statistical poll measure, nor is it about any judgment of the rationality of the arguments that led to such opinion. Rather, public opinion needs to be contextualized against the backdrop of the recent history surrounding an issue and its development into a topic of public discussion, from diverse
discussion circles that eventually converged toward being a public sphere, what Hauser calls the *rhetorical ecology* of discourse (Hauser 1998b, p. 104). Additionally, the rhetoric (rather than the argumentative rationality) employed in these circles that drives participants toward a public opinion must be examined. Rationality is only a part of the larger overarching rhetoric that is at the centre of argumentation and deliberation:

Because Habermas’s model emphasizes ideal speech, it assesses the pragmatic opinions formed in the public sphere in terms of participants’ competence and the rational validity of their discourse. I will argue that his model excludes many arenas in which public dialogue occurs and, moreover, establishes criteria for communication that are insensitive to its essential rhetoricality. (Hauser 1999, p. 39)

Taking public opinion as arising out of vernacular exchanges in a public sphere, but also that the norms governing the public sphere need to be centred on the rhetoricality of communication rather than ideal rationality, Hauser develops a new model of the public sphere, complete with new rhetorical norms, to address these issues. The three main features of the rhetorical public sphere model proposed by Hauser areas follows:

Habermas positions his model of the public sphere as discourse based on account of the norms of communicative rationality rather than class-based owing to the very class-specific nature of the *bourgeois* public sphere. The reason that it is a class-based system is that norms of communicative rationality restricted the openness of the public sphere along class and gender lines. As Fraser and Benhabib argue, the limitation of discussions to issues of “public” concern, restricted access to women and systemic, if domestic, issues into the discussions. Similarly, the emphasis on rational norms is also a gendered dismissal of the non-rational, emotional, non-masculine.

In contrast, Hauser argues that his own model is discourse based because it “emphasizes the prevailing discursive features in any given body of exchanges and treats class domination as an empirical claim to be inferred from data rather than as a generating assumption” (Hauser 199, p. 61). In other words, the content of the exchanges in the rhetorical public sphere are continuously weighed against these norms rather than presumably

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21 Here, the Bourdieusian critique of Habermas applies in terms of cultural capital, and the marginalisation of women based on a perceived lack of it.
prefigured by them. In this way, harmful biases, relations of domination, and the like can be identified, highlighted (per Fraser), and dealt with accordingly in discourse.

Secondly, where Habermas positions his model of the public sphere as a counterfactual ideal, an ideally deliberative process informed by ideal rationality, Hauser emphasizes the fact that “a rhetorical model’s critical norms are derived from actual discursive practices. This model replaces the norm of critical rationality with the rhetorical norm of reasonableness” (ibid, emphasis in original). This inverts the hierarchy the Habermas sets up with critical rationality as the ground for deliberation, in that it “asserts that critical rationality is but one form of reasonableness and not necessarily the one best suited as normative for deliberative discussions” (Hauser 1999, p. 76). Hauser emphasizes that “arguments and appeals will differentiate themselves in terms of their persuasiveness and their success in forging identifications” rather than their relative degree of rationality (Hauser 1999, p.62). This emphasis on persuasiveness and identification means that arguments that are broadly reasonable across a wide variety of perspectives will gain more currency and support (ibid). This would also help keep a check on elite power.

Third, where Habermas at different times envisions a unitary or dominant public sphere, Hauser argues that “a rhetorical focus emphasizes indeterminate bracketing of discursive exchanges” in the sense that localized publics, as small as two people talking to each other, are “potentially included in larger, more polyphonous exchanges” (Hauser 1999, p. 62). As issues build importance these localized public spheres and the public opinions that they help to generate are funneled into a larger, polyphonic public discussion. Hauser argues that the public sphere has a “reticulate structure,” that is it is a network rather than a node in a network (Hauser 1999, p.71, emphasis in original).

In summary, Hauser’s rhetorical model public sphere emphasizes discourse over class, reasonableness over rationality, and public opinion as the scaling-up over time of discourse on a given subject. The rhetorical norms that Hauser proposes are meant to reinforce these characteristics.

Rhetorical Norms of the Rhetorical Public Sphere

Hauser proposes five rhetorical norms to govern discussions in a rhetorical public sphere with the purpose of ensuring that interlocutors have good reasons to base their
judgments upon, reasons that take into account differences within the group of interlocutors (Hauser 1999, pp. 76-77). Paraphrasing Hauser’s explanations, these norms are:

1. **Permeable boundaries**: Since the issues discussed in a group have reach and consequences that exceed the membership of the group, groups need to be open to diverse perspectives in order to try to forge a common, public, opinion.

2. **Activity**: Publics are active. They engage with issues and multiple interests/perspectives in order to choose and decide which position to adopt, rather than passively going along with an *a priori* position.

3. **Contextualized language**: Vernacular language is used to ensure clear understanding of the issues for all as well as to mitigate the status/power disparity that comes from technical language and jargon.

4. **Believable appearance**: While Hauser’s elaboration on this norm is somewhat vague, this norm seems to function in a similar fashion to Habermas’ inclusivity norm. Groups need to be believable and present themselves as such to take part in wider discussions and integrate into the converging discussions and groups in the public sphere. As Hauser notes, “A public sphere’s contours at any given time provide its participants an overall pattern of awareness” (Hauser 1999, p. 79). Specifically, this awareness is of the public nature of group deliberation.

5. **Tolerance**: Because civil society is made up of diverse groups with diverging interests and perspectives, which “make consensus unlikely” (ibid), “meanings likely to have rhetorical salience are those which produce solutions that interdependent partners regard as acceptable for their own reasons” (Hauser 1999, p. 79, internal reference to Hauser and Cushman 1973). The norm of tolerance for differing perspective aims toward palatable compromises for all rather than optimal results for individual constituencies.

Hauser argues that these rhetorical norms “set the defining conditions for our discursive arenas” (1999, p. 80), fostering deliberation over manipulation so that a genuinely public opinion can be formed and expressed. These norms also address the criticisms of Habermas’ bourgeois model of the public sphere, if in a different way than the subaltern counterpublic model proposes. These are not mutually exclusive norm sets, though their emphases are different when taken separately. The most productive convergence of rational and rhetorical norms is the emphasis on vernacular discourse and the awareness and tolerance of the interests of other groups.
Procedural Rhetoric and the Rhetoricality of Public Discourse

In the previous chapter, I examined Ian Bogost’s notion of procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007, p. 3), the act of using (computational) processes persuasively in order to complicate the idea that the more strongly procedural rhetoric is employed, the more efficacious an intervention making use of computational elements will be. Where the previous chapter dealt with this issue in terms of aesthetics, particularly in terms of how strong procedurality can make it easier to reject an intervention out of hand or focus discussion away from an issue and onto the rule-based representation of that issue, this chapter examines the way that Bogost’s notion of procedural rhetoric fits into wider notion of the public sphere. Particularly, it emphasizes reading procedural rhetoric into Hauser’s rhetorical model of the public sphere, where it might most appropriately fit. While the previous chapter critiqued the procedural approach to design and interpretation for interventionist purposes specifically, this one is more interested in connecting Bogost’s notion of procedural rhetoric to deliberation.

In order to approach this task, it is important to examine how Bogost views and uses the concept of rhetoric in general, especially because it is different from the way Hauser does. Where Hauser emphasizes rhetoric as predominantly related to persuasions and central to political discourse, Bogost emphasizes the split between political or persuasive rhetoric on one hand and aesthetic or discursive rhetoric on the other:

[T]he concept of rhetoric was extended to account for new modes of inscription – especially literary and artistic modes. Rhetoric in writing, painting, sculpture and other media do not necessarily make the same direct appeals to persuasion as oratory. Rhetoric thus also came to refer to effective expression, that is, writing, speech, or art that both accomplishes the goals of the author and absorbs the reader or viewer. [...] Writers and artists have expressive goals, and they deploy techniques to accomplish those goals. The poststructuralist tendency to decouple authorship from readership, celebrating the free play of textual meanings, further undermines the status of persuasion. Here, persuasion shifts from the simple achievement of desired ends to the effective arrangement of a work so as to create a desirable possibility space for interpretation. In contemporary rhetoric, the goal of persuasion is largely underplayed or even omitted as a defining feature of the
field, replaced by the more general notion of elegance, clarity, and creativity in communication.
(Bogost 2007, pp. 19-20)

There is a tension in Bogost’s work between communicative rhetoric and persuasive rhetoric, as his discussions of case studies, particularly the *Howard Dean for Iowa Game* (Bogost & Frasca 2003) which Bogost co-designed with Gonzalo Frasca, indicate (Bogost 2007, pp. 135-143). Even when the *Howard Dean for Iowa Game* communicates its procedural claim about the mechanics and effects of campaign outreach through procedural rhetoric effectively, Bogost viewed the game as a failure “in its conception” rather than its execution, because “it failed to distinguish Dean from any other political candidate” (Bogost 2007, p. 139). That distinction would take place on the persuasive level. In short, the *Howard Dean for Iowa Game* does not make the jump from discussing the procedural system to discussing the political particularities of the situation it represents, the Howard Dean campaign and how Dean’s ideas might change the political fabric of the United States were he elected. This disconnect is an example of one of the problems with strongly procedural design that I raised in the previous chapter.

At the same time, while Bogost emphasizes communicative rhetoric over persuasive rhetoric in his analysis of *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game*, the persuasive element is always present nevertheless. As Bogost defines procedural rhetoric as the act of using computational processes persuasively (Bogost 2007, p. 3), there is always an element of persuasive rhetoric involved. This persuasive rhetoric itself takes place in some sort of system; possibly the closed loop of the game and the player, and possibly a larger interpretive and discursive context, such as a public sphere where this persuasive rhetoric is grounded in norms and particular social and political goals that persuasion is being deployed for.

While Bogost acknowledges a broad system in which persuasive procedural rhetoric is deployed, it is not quite the same system as Hauser proposes with his rhetorical model of the public sphere. There are two probable main reasons for this: First, Bogost may never have heard of Hauser or his work, which has less traction than Habermas’ generative bourgeois model or the subaltern counterpublic model that succeeded it. Secondly, Bogost seems to be more interested in the way procedural rule systems mount arguments and claims than the negotiated rule systems used for mounting arguments and claims in the public sphere.

The main difference between Bogost and Hauser’s treatments of persuasive argument is in relation to the rhetorical norm of tolerance. In his analysis of *Freaky Flakes* (KCTS
Television, 2004; cited in Bogost 2007), a program that allows users to design cereal box art, Bogost raises the issue of raising objections in procedural systems. His analysis of this situation seems opposed to Hauser’s tolerance norm. Bogost notes that:

[o]ne might argue that many computational systems do not allow the user to raise procedural objections – that is, the player of a videogame is usually not allowed to change the rules of play. Many critics have objected to this tendency, calling for games that allow players to alter core simulation dynamics to allow alternative perspectives. Most famously, Sherry Turkle has criticized Sim City for its failure to include alternative taxation-to-social-services dynamics, a debate I have discussed in detail elsewhere [my note: Bogost 2006, pp. 102-106]. [...] I have two responses to this objection. For one part, the type of user alteration Turkle and others call for is not the same as the dialectical objections Blair requires of arguments. 22 One raises objections to propositions in the hopes of advancing conflicting or revisionist claims. Conversely, one allows user alteration in order to construct an artifact that accounts for multiple perspectives on a particular subject. One usually makes rhetorical claims precisely to exclude opposing positions on a subject, not to allow for equal validity of all possible positions. [...] Such a wholesale revision might imply a different simulation entirely, one that would be outside the expressive domain of the artifact. However, procedural representations often do allow the user to mount procedural objections through configurations of the system itself. (Bogost 2007, p 37, emphasis in original)

While there is a lot to unpack here, the main points that I am arguing are first, that ethically interactive systems would allow for the kinds of control over the system that Turkle describes, and secondly, that this is a major break from Hauser’s rhetorical norm of tolerance, at least in terms of temporality. While Hauser suggests that embracing alternative ideas in discussion is inevitable, he also argues that it is valuable to do so in the course of discussions because “[p]resupposing conformity of values and ends or imposing a preordained orientation reduces the capacity of discursive arenas to accommodate the range of opinions on an issue and the

22 Blair argues that visual arguments “lack [the] dialectical aspect [of] the process of interaction between the arguer and the interlocutors, who raise questions or objections” (Bogost 2007, p. 34), which is what Bogost refers to in the quotation above.
strength of judgments that emerge from civic conversation” (Hauser 1999, p. 79). Bogost argues for the practical use of rhetoric excluding these alternative ideas in the course of discussions, especially in relation to procedural rhetoric in computational systems, or, more charitably, deferring their entry into the discussions:

For another part, all artifacts subject to dissemination need not facilitate direct argument with the rhetorical author; in fact, even verbal arguments usually do not facilitate the open discourse of the Athenian assembly. Instead, they invite other, subsequent forms of discourse, in which interlocutors can engage, consider, and respond in turn, either via the same medium or a different one. Dialectics in other words, function in a broader media ecology than Blair and Turkle allow. This objection applies equally to all rhetorical forms – verbal, written, visual, procedural, or otherwise. Just as an objection in a debate would take place during the negation or rebuttal of the opponent rather than in the construction of the proponent, so an objection in a procedural artifact may take place in a responding claim of a verbal, written, visual, or procedural form. Such objections are not disallowed by [the artifact]; they merely require the interlocutor to construct a new claim in another context – for example a responding TV spot or software program.

(Bogost 2007, pp. 37-38)

Part of this clash of approaches is a result of different approaches to context. Where Bogost looks to the context of what takes place within a computational/procedural system, Hauser looks to the context of the wider system that discussions take place in, specifying that “a well-functioning [tolerant rhetorical public sphere…] embraces a course of action that secures a space of open exchange apart from system imperatives” (Hauser 1999, p. 79). The question becomes temporal; does Bogost’s approach fit with Hauser’s notion of the bracketing of discursive exchanges, where arguments enter the flow of the river of discussions and converge in the ocean where public opinion is formed, or does the break with the norm of tolerance at the time of argument preclude this from happening? The answer depends on how fast the decision on something needs to be made, how quickly the public opinion must be marshalled and deployed. Constructing a new claim in a different context both takes time and is in a different context than the original argument. This latter point is both beneficial, in that it broadens the perspectives in the discussion, and problematic, because it can easily be
dismissed as being a result of taking the original argument out of context. In any case, if constructing the new claim and disseminating it takes more time than the discussion allows, then the alternative view is excluded.

Conclusion

In conclusion, reading Bogost’s concept of procedural rhetoric into Hauser’s rhetorical model of the public sphere raises important questions about the inclusion of alternative ideas into discourse, the circumstances in which it happens, and the systemic rules and norms governing how this occurs. There are tensions between the two sets of ideas that relate to temporality; when is an alternative claim deferred entry into discourse, and when is it denied? How do we balance the need for the inclusion of alternate perspectives with the construction of rhetorical systems? Particularly, how should we allow procedural objections to take place within procedural rhetorical systems? Should they take place in the moment of play or after the fact in a different context? How much can the rule systems of simulations and procedural artefacts merge with the negotiated norm systems of political discourse, deliberation, and decision-making? These questions merit further research.

In terms of the aesthetics of interventionist practice that this thesis proposes, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 5, interventions aim to foster two kinds of provocations: First, intervention aims to provoke a crisis in the spectator’s beliefs without producing rejection (Kershaw 1992, p. 28) which, in view of Bourdieu’s theory of practice, might be conceived of as undermining or subverting the habitus and the process of recognition and misrecognition that leads to domination. Secondly, intervention aims to provoke inter-subjective deliberation among the performers and audience that share in the intervention. The subaltern and rhetorical models of the public sphere provide useful ways for interventionist artists to structure and facilitate these deliberations while minimizing the encroachment of relations of domination into the process. Hauser’s rhetorical model of the public sphere offers a set of general norms that takes into account the critiques made in subaltern counterpublic sphere theory, and is central to the interventionist aesthetics for those reasons.
Conclusion

Summary of Arguments by Chapter

Throughout this thesis, I have proposed aspects of a coherent aesthetics of intervention in videogames, with each chapter taking a particular approach to this large topic. Intervention is a process; Baz Kershaw provides a useful and generative definition of intervention: a means to “‘play’ with the audience’s fundamental beliefs, and to provoke a potential crisis in those beliefs, without producing immediate rejection” (Kershaw 1992, p.28).

The thesis introduction discusses why intervention is important, particularly in the context of intervention in interactive media. Where interactivity implies agency, power, and control, it often falls short of providing its audience or users with these in a political sense. The introduction raises the ideas of spectacular interactivity and ethical interactivity in order to draw out the distinction between interactivity that genuinely grants these affordances and interactivity that does not. Drawing on Guy Debord’s concept of the Society of the Spectacle, where media spectacles offer the masses the illusion of agency, power, and control in order to foster consumption and maintain the status quo (Debord 2008), spectacular interactivity is the kind of interactivity that is politically problematic to artists and critics like Guillermo Gomez-Peña, who argues that since embracing modern conditions of production, meaningful citizen participation in decision-making has been increasingly replaced by the interactive illusion of participation, which works to the benefit of elites in positions of power and to the detriment of everyone else – precisely the problem that democracy is meant to avoid (Gomez-Peña 2001, p.15). Ethical interactivity is interactivity that gives the audience agency, power and control to shape the medium and the world beyond it. I define ethical interactivity in terms of three characteristics:

1) The interactors have editorial control over the medium’s content.

2) The medium’s representational content deals with ethical issues and situations, either on an individual level or on a wider social and political one.

3) The medium implicates the interactors in the given ethical/social/political issue by giving them information and choices to make based on that information and by providing open-ended feedback based on those choices.
In Chapter 1, I connect Aristotle’s dramatic aesthetics from the *Poetics* to spectacular interactivity and intervention to avant-garde 20\textsuperscript{th} century theatre and scenography to a state approaching ethical interactivity. I also connect these avant-garde theatre aesthetics to Alain Badiou’s Ethics of Event, using Oliver Feltham’s article, “An Explosive Genealogy: theatre, philosophy and the art of presentation” (2006), which discusses both, as a way to bridge the two. This chapter argues that intervention is not limited to what takes place in the theatre during performance, but also what precedes and succeeds it; the mise-en-scène, the staging, and the discussions that the audience has during the intermission and after the performance has ended and they have left the theatre space. To be efficacious at generating the preconditions for social change, such as deliberation in the audience, or social change itself, an intervention must tap into a persistent ethical process. The audience member must consistently reflect back on the intervention and conclude that some change in outlook or behaviour is in order. Alain Badiou’s Ethics of Event, while problematic for several reasons, provides a useful template for this kind of ethical process with the idea of ethical fidelity. For Badiou, moments of defamiliarization, such as those that underwrite the avant-garde dramatic aesthetics of Meyerhold, Artaud, Brecht, and Boal, which this chapter discusses in depth, have the status of capital-e “Events.” The defamiliarization process reveals or highlights a Truth within that Event, which the audience member then might recognize as such. If so, the process of fidelity to that Truth, accepting it as Truth and living by it and its consequences is how Good is conceived of in Badiou’s system. This partially accounts for a persistent ethical process that functions in interventions. What Badiou’s Ethics of Event lacks, and has been critiqued for lacking, is some mechanism for deliberation. If two people find a different Truth in a given Event, how do they reconcile it? Badiou’s Ethics presumes a militant fidelity to whatever Truth one interprets or perceives. This is a problem if we take ethics to be a process by which we decide, inter-subjectively, how we should live as individuals and collectively. Furthermore, Badiou’s Ethics is critiqued for not being Universal due to oversights on Badiou’s part, in spite of the fact that Badiou advocates a militantly universal ethical program. Where Badiou classifies Events as massive in scale, not even classifying the Tunisian uprising that collapsed the state as such an Event, Janelle Reinelt argues that smaller-scale actions can provoke Events and their corresponding ethical truth-process, drawing on the example of the Dixie Chicks’ career after criticizing American foreign policy. This has the effect of opening up the possibility of experiencing, or causing, an Event to anyone.

Chapter 2 extends the discussion of scenography and spatiality in avant-garde 20\textsuperscript{th} century theatre from Chapter 1. It argues that spatial conventions are an important subset of
the conventions that govern the experience of a medium, and that they are central to intervention’s project of playing with the audience’s beliefs and expectations by playing with the conventions of the medium. This chapter argues that any aesthetics of intervention requires a theory of space, and attempts to provide one, drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau (1984) and Henri Lefebvre (1991), who propose theories of space as a social construct. For these theorists, there is a feedback loop that takes place between spaces and people. People configure spaces, spaces prefigure people’s behaviours, repeat. Using case studies of interventionist and avant-garde performance using game spaces, this chapter argues that intervention makes use of this concept of social space to foster interventionist efficacy.

Chapter 3 further focuses on interventionist aesthetics in games by examining the relationship between the player and the medium. Game studies has focused much attention on the concept of immersion, defined variably as the sense of being transported to a fictional space, or the sense of being absorbed in a medium for the duration of an activity (Calleja 2011, pp. 32-33). Immersion implies a passive mode of spectatorship and a voluntary surrender of critical distance (Grau 2003, p. 13), aligning the interactivity of immersive videogames with spectacular interactivity. This chapter examines three different models of immersion, as well as two alternative ways to conceptualize player involvement in gameplay; engagement, which refers to extradiegetic involvement in the activity, such as fan practices and strategic discussions outside of play, to give some examples (McMahan 2003; Calleja 2011), and engrossment, which refers to frequent and rapid shifts between different referential frameworks (player-as-person, player-as-player, player-as-character) that are required to make sense of a game (Goffman 1974; Fine 1983). Engagement offers some critical distance after the fact of playing, while engrossment allows critical distance during play as the player can always shift back to the frame of the player-as-person, occupying and pre-occupied with the everyday world of social reality. Using analog and digital role-playing gameplay as case studies, this chapter argues that an engrossment-based framework for player involvement is both a more accurate way to describe the player experience and a productive way to structure interventions by using the shifts in framework to foster critical distance and deliberation. It is also a useful framework to analyse when players experience these shifts and how they respond to them over time during gameplay.

Chapter 4 continues the examination of player involvement with regard to immersion and alternative frameworks for involvement while also dealing with the notion of work and reward in gameplay. Games are, in Aaresth’s words, ergodic, meaning that they require non-trivial effort on the part of players to traverse them. We put this work in to get rewards out.
Typically, the relationship between work and reward is that they are both diegetic. We put work into the game world through our character avatar, and we get the reward of advancing the game’s narrative plot, opening up new opportunities and contexts for us to keep putting work into the game, though other relationships between work and reward exist. This chapter examines case two studies of gameplay sequences that eschew this diegetic relationship, the “Truth” segments of Assassin’s Creed II (Ubisoft 2009) and the core gameplay of Foldit (University of Washington 2008). The “Truth” segments of Assassin’s Creed II employ a relationship of putting non-diegetic work into the game to receive diegetic reward, the game effectively telling you to leave it alone for a while and come back when you have solved a puzzle that the character you control makes no reference to. This necessitates switching between referential frames to navigate the full range of gameplay options, which Goffman and Fine would characterise as engrossment. Foldit demands both diegetic and non-diegetic work, and offers both diegetic and non-diegetic rewards, as a very complicated example of the range of potential work/reward relationships that games can use to involve players. I argue that the approach taken with Assassin’s Creed II fosters engrossment, creates an enjoyable play state for some players, and is suitable as an intervention tactic for designers to employ, and I argue that Foldit requires a framework for us to examine work and reward, which I provide a starting version of.

Chapter 5 examines interventionist game design and gameplay in relation to the notion of procedurality and procedural rhetoric (Murray 1997; Bogost 2006; Bogost 2007). Procedurality refers to the computer’s unique affordances to rapidly calculate the interactions of numerous rules and generate rule-driven output (Murray 1997, p. 71). Procedural rhetoric refers to “a practice of using [computational] processes persuasively” (Bogost 2007, p. 3). In the procedural rhetoric argument, games mount arguments and claims through their rule-systems and the interactions between rules in addition to or in lieu of through their representational content. Miguel Sicart, who views the procedural argument as arguing that games mount claims and arguments through their rules in lieu of through their representational content, argues that this problematically erases the player from the equation (Sicart 2011, online). This chapter argues that this is a false dichotomy, and that this problem can be sidestepped by placing procedurality on a spectrum between poles of strong and weak procedurality. I argue that a strongly procedural game has the following characteristics:

- A fixed set of rules that limits the number of potential gameplay actions, gameplay styles, and meanings that the player can enact and interpret.
- A fixed, determinate, authorially intended meaning that is primarily derived from a process of unpacking the game’s procedural rhetoric.

- Procedural rhetorics which are more prescriptive because they guide the player to the intended meaning.

I also argue that, by contrast, a weakly procedural game has the following characteristics:

- An open set of rules that allows for a wide range of play styles and interpretations of the meaning of the gameplay experience.

- An open meaning or a specific meaning that is derived from the player’s associations with the game’s semiotic content rather than the game’s rules.

- Procedural rhetorics, if they are present at all, are secondary interpretive methods and cannot be prescriptive because the meaning is interpreted from the game’s semiotic content.

Using strong and weak procedurality, I examine two case studies of interventionist gameplay, Gonzalo Frasca’s *September 12th: A Toy World* (2003) and Joseph DeLappe’s *dead-in-iraq* (2006-present). As a result of this examination, I argue that weakly procedural games likely have a greater potential for efficacious intervention than strongly procedural ones do. The reasons for this include that weakly procedural interventions are harder to reject out of a sense that the rules do not accurately simulate the real-life situation that the game purports to represent, and that weakly procedural interventions are more likely to provoke a crisis in the player’s belief structure, and that weakly procedural interventions are more likely to open up an inter-subjective deliberative process among players. While this is an open question until much more research is done on it, the concepts of strong and weak procedurality allow us to position games on this spectrum of procedurality, determine what points in gameplay are more procedural than others, and map out how effective interventions in games are in relation to how much they emphasize strong or weak procedurality during a given gameplay sequence.

Chapter 6 continues the discussion of procedural rhetoric in order to discuss what a deliberative process arising out of an intervention might look like in terms of rules and norms, drawing on public sphere theory. This chapter completes the chronological account of an aesthetic and ethical process of intervention; first an intervention is conceptualized and staged. The audience experiences a defamiliarization effect and begins to reconsider their
beliefs and behaviours in light of their new perspective on a previously familiar aspect of their lives. They are then able to deliberate their perspectives in some version of a public sphere. Finally, they can then decide whether to embrace the intervention as a Badiouian Truth, or not; therefore, they can maintain fidelity to the Truth of the intervention (or not). If they do, this would result in them changing their beliefs and behaviours after the intervention. This chapter examines three models of the public sphere that might accommodate the need for deliberation in any interventionist aesthetics; Jürgen Habermas’ bourgeois model, Nancy Fraser’s subaltern counterpublics model, and Gerard Hauser’s rhetorical model of the public sphere. In this chapter, I argue that the critiques of Habermas’ model as blind to difference, exclusionary, and even anti-democratic require it to be reworked, while Fraser and Hauser’s models, which are not mutually exclusive, are viable models of a space for inter-subjective deliberation. The chapter then examines Hauser’s model in relation to Bogost’s notion of procedural rhetoric, which, one might expect, would fit most neatly into a rhetoric-based public sphere. I argue that attempting to integrate these two rhetorical perspectives raises important questions and problems, particularly surrounding how and when to include dissenting and alternative ideas into discourse, as Hauser’s model of the public sphere is much more amenable to this than Bogost’s model of procedural rhetoric is.

**Aesthetics of Intervention in Videogames**

In sum, the aesthetics of intervention in videogames that I propose and advocate for, whether for interventions involving Forum Theatre or interventions in general, are as follows:

1) An intervener needs a personal stake in the subject which they are intervening in.
2) An intervention using videogames should employ ethical interactivity, giving the audience a measure of editorial control over the content of the medium.
3) This editorial control should be structured by rules, but should remain weakly procedural to maximize player agency and editorial control.
4) An intervention is an event, as Badiou terms it, but can be personal and smaller-scale than he suggests, per Reinelt. As Kershaw argues, interventions create a crisis in the audience’s beliefs and compel the audience to confront this crisis in a different subjective mode to their everyday one, with the possibility of fostering long-term changes in attitudes and behaviour.
5) Interventions using videogames should eschew immersion in favour of fostering engrossment. This helps the audience maintain the critical distance that is necessary for ethical interactivity and critical reflexivity.

6) Engrossment can be fostered through the use of scenography, spatial design, and particular interventionist tactics related to space. As an added benefit, good spatial design can also minimize the intrusion of uneven power relations into the intervention.

7) Some additional tactics, such as altering the relationship between work, reward, and diegesis, can also help foster engrossment.

8) Interventions are an inter-subjective process where ideas and possible changes are deliberated. These deliberations occur in a public sphere requiring rules and norms to structure the discussions. The subaltern and rhetorical models of the public sphere proposed by Fraser and Hauser respectively provide fewer structural obstacles to participation. Discussions should be designed toward those structures.

9) The discussions themselves can be made engrossing. Discussing individual interventions in progress or in post-mortem summary provides the required changes of frame and can help to sustain engrossment and interest.

10) This engrossment-centred mode of discussion also connects the play experience to the everyday social experience, fostering the crisis in beliefs that the intervention seeks to create.

Mary Flanagan’s Critical Play Design Model provides a useful design template for such interventions that can accommodate these aesthetics, particularly through the explicit introduction of values goals into the iterative design process.

Consequences and Future Work

If we accept this aesthetics of intervention, then what might we gain? What is at stake, and so what? I have endeavoured to answer these questions throughout the thesis, pointing to ways that we can use the aesthetics of intervention proposed in this thesis in order to better design, create, and stage efficacious interventions in analog and digital game spaces. Game journalist and critic Daniel Golding argues for a need for an understanding of the relationships between games and social change, which this thesis’ proposed aesthetics of intervention might
help provide. Writing about the first Australian Games for Change Festival, Golding argues that this festival, billed as the go-to place for socially conscious game design around social issues and causes fails miserably at showcasing this:

Let me make this as clear as possible: if the first Australian Games For Change conference is anything to go by, Games For Change has no agenda for change. This is strange, given that Games For Change describes itself as an organisation that, “facilitates the creation and distribution of social impact games that serve as critical tools in humanitarian and educational efforts. Unlike the commercial gaming industry, we aim to leverage entertainment and engagement for social good.”

(Golding 2012: online)

This comes as a result of a de-politicization of change, Golding argues, with the conference reducing change to “just the wisp of good intentions” (Golding 2012: online). The aesthetics of intervention proposed in this thesis, expand on Mary Flanagan’s Critical Play Model of Game Design (2009), highlighting a process by which designers, critics, and players can move from intention to meaningful interventionist action. It details how that action is then engaged with and interpreted, and how it fosters the preconditions for social change through meaningful deliberation and discussion among players in a public sphere. It offers a roadmap for opportunities to reclaim power and disrupt the media spectacle of spectacular interactivity. This thesis may be of use to scholars, artists, critics, and designers who might use interventionist aesthetics to gradually bring about a videogame culture, made up of videogame artefacts and discussions surrounding them that integrate elements of intervention and social change.

If that is too optimistic, then there are smaller scale changes that this thesis proposes that would be far more easily achieved that that admittedly lofty goal, particularly in terms of game criticism and analysis. This thesis advocates for and proposes more holistic models of analysis for games that can be deployed to get a better sense of the player’s moment-to-moment interactions and engagement with games.

These aesthetics of intervention might intervene in academic, ludic, artistic, and political discourse in many ways.
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Dear Prof Tofts,

SUHREC Project 2012/069 Ethical Interactivity: Theory, Design, Practice

Approved Duration: 04/06/2012 To 30/06/2013 [Adjusted]

I refer to the ethical review of the above project protocol undertaken by SUHREC Subcommittee (SHESC4) at a meeting held on 13 April 2012. Your response to the review as e-mailed 24 May 2012 was reviewed by a SHESC4 delegate.

I am pleased to advise that, as submitted to date, the project has approval to proceed in line with standard on-going ethics clearance conditions here outlined.

- All human research activity undertaken under Swinburne auspices must conform to Swinburne and external regulatory standards, including the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and with respect to secure data use, retention and disposal.

- The named Swinburne Chief Investigator/Supervisor remains responsible for any personnel appointed to or associated with the project being made aware of ethics clearance conditions, including research and consent procedures or instruments approved. Any change in chief investigator/supervisor requires timely notification and SUHREC endorsement.

- The above project has been approved as submitted for ethical review by or on behalf of SUHREC. Amendments to approved procedures or instruments ordinarily require prior ethical appraisal/clearance. SUHREC must be notified immediately or as soon as possible thereafter of (a) any serious or unexpected adverse effects on

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participants and any redress measures; (b) proposed changes in protocols; and (c) unforeseen events which might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

- At a minimum, an annual report on the progress of the project is required as well as at the conclusion (or abandonment) of the project.

- A duly authorised external or internal audit of the project may be undertaken at any time.

Please contact the Research Ethics Office if you have any queries about on-going ethics clearance, citing the SUHREC project number. Please retain a copy of this clearance email as part of project record-keeping.

Best wishes for the project.

Yours sincerely

Kaye Goldenberg
Secretary, SHESC4

*******************************************

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Appendix Two: Ethics Declaration

I, Michael Ryan Skolnik, declare that:

- All conditions pertaining to the clearance were properly met, and,
- That annual and final reports have been submitted.

Signed:

February 19, 2014
List of Publications
