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Bryan G. Behrenshausen

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**TOUCHING IS GOOD: AN EIDETIC PHENOMENOLOGY OF INTERFACE,  
INTEROBJECTIVITY, AND INTERACTION IN NINTENDO'S *ANIMAL  
CROSSING: WILD WORLD***

By

Bryan G. Behrenshausen

B.A. Millersville University of Pennsylvania, 2005

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in Communication)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May, 2007

Advisory Committee:

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Bryan G. Behrenshausen

December 1, 2006

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An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
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Situating videogames and the meaningful practice of playing videogames for future study by the discipline of communication, this eidetic phenomenology centers the focus of such inquiry at the site of the body. As videogame studies have heretofore largely ignored or presupposed a bifurcation between player and videogame, a phenomenology is likewise crucial to investigating the lived experience of videogaming as an embodied activity by theoretically eschewing such subject/object distinctions and methodologically generating genuinely new, heuristic spaces for thinking about this phenomenon.

In particular, the existential phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which emphasizes the body as necessarily enworlded, offers an insightful conceptualization of the videogame player's intentional and meaningful endeavor. Merleau-Ponty's latter work specifically details the intricacies of a body's sense of touch, outlining three specific modalities: "a touching of the sleek and the rough," a

“touching of the things,” and “a veritable touching of the touch.” The notion of touch is also key in portraying the already-imbricated nature of player and videogame.

Using these modalities as frames for organizing experience, I enact performative playings of the videogame *Animal Crossing: Wild World* by Nintendo. This study proceeds methodologically by way of the three-step phenomenological method outlined by Merleau-Ponty – one that necessarily entails a description, a reduction, and an interpretation. Performative playings generate descriptive *data* later thematized as *capta* in order to synthetically produce *acta*, or an interpretive orientation toward the *data/capta* relationship. Each of three phenomenological reflections respectively examines one of these modalities.

The first reflection (upon “a touching of the sleek and the rough”) explores the ways in which the sensual touch of the player both intersects with a new material technology that facilitates gameplay (the Nintendo DS videogame console) by way of a touch-sensitive interface, and “crisscrosses” with a player’s embodied sense of sight. Framed by the human-technology-world relations outlined by technoscience philosopher Don Ihde, descriptions of these intersections and crisscrosses yield interpretations of a corporeal schema with specific embodied preferences for action in various gamic spaces: a being-in-the-(game)world.

The second reflection (upon “a touching of the things”) interrogates my interobjective relations with other enworlded body-objects. While I have a body that interacts with this technology, I also am a body – a material object grounded in the self-same flesh of the world. By way of Vivian Sobchack’s philosophy of interobjectivity, I recognize that I am a passionate videogame player, and literally re-

cognize my primordial, immanent and embodied abilities as both subjective object and objective subject to interpret my experiences being “touched” by the objects of the gameworld (whose inhabitation I detailed in the first reflection).

The third reflection (upon “a veritable touching of the touch”) uses the first two as an experiential ground to explore the ways in which I and other players “keep in touch” by playing videogames. My descriptions of these videogaming experiences indicate the presence of Roman Jakobson’s six elements and correlative functions integral to an understanding of human communication, specifically situating videogames for study by the discipline of communication. Playing videogames is an interactive practice that synthesizes the analog (both/and) logic of human player-subjects and the digital (either/or) logic of game-objects as they emerge from an undifferentiated, chiasmic interrelationship. Operating from a digital-analog logic allows players to convert contexts of choice into choices of context.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### (INSERT COIN)

For my parents, who (against their better judgment) bought me a Nintendo when I was in first grade. They bought it to keep me quiet; instead, they gave me so much more to talk about.

For Kate, my Player 2, who so strongly and graciously endured my two years spent away from Pennsylvania as a graduate student in Maine, and who admits that while she is not very adept at playing videogames, she never tires of hearing me talk about them.

For Brent, who did not really mind playing Nintendo with me, but who nevertheless handed me his controller when we got to “those hard parts.”

For Chris, the Punisher to my Nick Fury, who let me play videogames at his house when my parents wouldn’t let me play in mine, and whose intuitions about videogames always seem to mirror my own, providing momentum and motivation for this thesis.

For my thesis committee – Eric, Kristin and Nate – whose feedback and encouragement throughout this project literally made it appear.

For my friends, the nicest group of people I have ever met in my entire life: Danielle (who makes the best hummus), Erin (who kills the best deer), Babs (who plays the best backstabber), Ben (who makes the best gestures), Sammer (who plays the best goalie), Kochan (who parses the most faces), JBro (who has the best poker face), and Andrea (who finds the best hiding spots). My life in Maine would have



been impossible without your meals, rides (small, large and extra large), laughs, gifts, helping hands, accommodations, thoughtfulness, encouragement – and, of course, rounds of *Dance Dance Revolution*.

And finally, for Sabel Able, hedgehog and proprietor of the Able Sisters clothier in *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, who reminded me one day of her father's advice, saying, "The shortest route to getting something done is to just do it."

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### (STAGE SELECT)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS (INSERT COIN).....	iii
FOREWORD (PRESS START TO BEGIN).....	1
1. A TYPOLOGY OF VIDEOGAME METATHEORY (SELECT PLAYER).....	6
Introduction.....	6
Select Player.....	8
Defining Videogames.....	10
Lexical Issues.....	12
The Traditional Perspective: Videogames as Mass Entertainment Media with Psychological Effects.....	14
The Critical/Cultural Perspective: Videogames as an Articulation of Culture, Marketing and Technology.....	19
The Ludological Perspective: Videogames as Formalized Simulations.....	24
The Narratological Perspective: Videogames as Game-Stories and Cyberdramas .....	29
Criticism and Conclusion.....	34
2. EIDETIC PHENOMENOLOGY AS METHOD.....	41
Introduction.....	41
Existential Phenomenology.....	42
Eidetic Phenomenology as Method.....	47
Research Procedure.....	51

Animal Crossing: Wild World.....	53
Touch.....	56
3. BEING-IN-THE-(GAME)WORLD.....	61
Touching is Good.....	61
Human-Technology-World.....	66
Background Relations, or A ‘Comfortable’ Position ‘Made in Japan’ .....	70
Mediated Relations, or ‘Acts,’ ‘Moments,’ and What My Body ‘Knows’ .....	74
Alterity Relations, or ‘How the Game Paused Itself’ .....	80
4. INTEROBJECTIVITY AND THE PASSIONATE PLAYER.....	83
Interobjectivity.....	86
Ethics.....	94
Aesthetics.....	101
Conclusion.....	107
5. STAYING IN CONTACT, KEEPING IN TOUCH.....	108
Model.....	112
Contact.....	113
Code.....	117
Addresser.....	120
Addressee.....	124
Message.....	127

Context.....	128
CONCLUSION (GAME OVER).....	131
ENDNOTES (BONUS STAGE).....	134
REFERENCES (TOP PLAYERS).....	141
APPENDIX.....	152
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR.....	153

## FOREWORD (PRESS START TO BEGIN)

March 6, 2004, was, quite simply, a great day to be alive.

It was a fabulous day for many reasons: it was the first day of spring break during my junior year in college; it became beautifully sunny after some light showers that cooled the air and earth in the early morning; and I was spending it with my best friend, Chris, whom I hadn't seen for many, many weeks.

Much like our undergraduate cohorts, we were using the first day of spring break for a road trip. But *unlike* others we knew – who were driving to Cancun, Ontario and elsewhere – we were spending the first day of our long-awaited spring break at school.

The destination: Princeton University, only a few hours from our neighborhood in suburban Pennsylvania. The university, whose name is synonymous with prestige, was hosting the first academic conference about videogames *ever* to be held at an Ivy League school. It was the kind of high-culture/low-culture collision that makes geeks squirm with delight. Chris and I were salivating like über-nerd Pavlovian drones.

Friends since early childhood, Chris and I owed much of our friendship to videogames. When I was in second grade, and my mom restricted my videogame playing time to a mere 30 minutes per day, I would trudge up the block to Chris' house, where the Nintendo Entertainment System was waiting, obscured from the watchful eyes of Big Mother. Chris was always ready with a second controller.

Our lives unfolded behind those controllers and those screens. We solidified an elementary school friendship over *Super Mario Bros. 3*, talked junior high school romances through intermittent pauses in *The Punisher*, and negotiated the social stresses of high school via *Goldeneye 64*. Both in college now, we talked games when we could, but more frequently, life was getting in the way of play.

Then, on March 6, Christmas came early. I had read about the conference in the *New York Times* and hopped online to shoot Chris an instant message with a hyperlink to the story.

“This is historic,” I wrote, and waited for his response, which came some moments later when he had finished reading the piece.

“We’re going.”

So as we rolled into a Princeton parking lot, and I tried to keep the misty drizzle from besmirching my vintage Atari *Defender* T-shirt, neither of us had any doubts about the great time we were going to have (“Academics want to talk about *videogames*? At a *university*? At an *Ivy League university*? And I don’t have to pay to hear them?”).

We weren’t disappointed, of course. That day, we heard the intellectuals weigh in regarding virtual economies emerging from massively multiplayer online videogames; cyber crime and virtual theft; narratological spaces in *Super Mario Bros.*; the “music” of the Atari 2600; and the development of a new lexicon for the emerging discipline of videogame studies.

And that’s when it hit us both – hard. People were actually talking about videogames the way we’d *always wanted to hear them discussed*. I think Chris and I

have always known, deep down, there's more to videogames than the popular media, behaviorist scientists – and indeed, most players – have realized. But recognition was spreading, and quickly. A *discipline* was emerging right in front of us. In what could very easily have been representative of similar activity throughout the rest of the world, people from all camps – semioticians, narratologists, feminists, ludologists, media critics, journalists, artists – were converging in this tiny Princeton classroom. Graduate students of the Nintendo generation, not much older than Chris and me, packed the seats (and some presented papers), knowing what we knew, waiting like we were, for our intuitions to manifest. Academics with a penchant for lengthy analyses and discourse about discourse about discourse sounded great, but in many ways they were restating what was obvious to the gameheads in the crowd.

*Videogames matter.* And they matter not only because they make lots of money in an age of so-called “new media”; they matter because people like Chris and I – and videogame players all over the world – *know*, without analysis, that they're sites of meaningful interaction among people. Playing videogames constitutes meaningful experience *for* and *between* human beings. For this reason, the field of communication – which foremost maintains a rigorous exploration of the ways in which human beings create and share meaning in symbolic practice – is perfectly situated to enhance our understanding of videogames and the practice of videogaming.

To say we gameheads at Princeton that day “knew” videogames are important is not to say we processed logically and rationally every argument from every pundit at every minute of lecture in order to arrive at a specific conclusion about games’

potential. To say we “knew” games are important is instead to say that at a gut level – at a very *visceral* and *embodied* level – our *lived experience* of videogaming was all we needed to conclude that something powerful happens when people play videogames, whether alone or with others. When finished playing videogames, many gamers may feel (even if they don’t re-cognize it) something “there” that wasn’t there before. Something is created. *Something happens*. I like to think we’re touched by the videogames we play – as we might be touched by a piece of music, getting goosebumps upon hearing it; or by a novel, losing sleep when exploring its implications; or by a movie, crying at the outcome of the narrative. Videogames might be “new” media, but they depend on a tried and true apparatus for their impact: the body. Once we begin to consider the implications of being touched by the videogames we play – when we begin to theorize about the practice of videogaming at a point not of separation between body and game but rather one of mutual interdependence – entirely new ontological, epistemological, and axiological issues surrounding and arising from the meaningful experience of playing videogames become extraordinarily salient.

Stuffed in tiny Princeton desk chairs, little did Chris and I know that the revolution had already begun in earnest a few years prior to our arrival at this conference. In 2001, Espen Aarseth had already announced “year one of *Computer Game Studies* as an emerging, viable, international, academic field” (¶ 2). He wrote:

Today we have the possibility to build a new field. We have a billion dollar industry with almost no basic research, we have the most fascinating cultural



material to appear in a very long time, and we have the chance of uniting aesthetic, cultural and technical design aspects in a single discipline. (¶ 9)

What follows is a labor of love, spurred by that beautiful day in March 2004, by a conscientious and superb thesis committee, and by the unremitting lure of the videogame, which has given us so much to ponder.

## Chapter 1

### A TYPOLOGY OF VIDEOGAME METATHEORY (SELECT PLAYER)

#### Introduction

“[. . .] It is very likely that future generations will use [computers] in their leisure time to interact with game playing programs. The commercial profits of such entertainment could well exceed that of any ‘useful’ activity.” (Bell, 1972, pp. 10-11)

We need to take videogames seriously.

Long considered “violent, addictive, childish [and] worthless” by “society” (Wright, 2006, p. 111), videogames are now emerging as powerful new media rife with social implications so pervasive they are becoming difficult to ignore. Foremost, we might say videogames demand attention simply because of their social and commercial success. For example, “Nolan Bushnell’s *Computer Space* brought him around \$500 in royalties in 1971; a little over twenty years later, in 1992, the video game industry grossed over \$5.3 billion, an increase of more than ten-million-fold” (Wolf, 2001, p. 5). In 1999, the videogame industry generated \$6.9 billion in the United States alone (Wolf, 2001); revenues skyrocketed to \$27 billion in 2005 (Grossman, 2006). If the popularity of a medium can be inferred from its economic success, then we might consider videogames one of the most popular forms of entertainment media in the last decade. Such success is not limited to the United States alone. A 2005 study by the BBC found that 5.1 million individuals aged 16 to

24 played videogames with some degree of regularity. This number increases to 6.7 million among individuals aged 36 to 50 (BBC, 2005).

But apart from making money, videogames do much more. Some argue videogames can provide insight into the nature of representational or cognitive processes (Gee, 2003; Myers, 2003). Writers in both popular media and academic circles are debating fervently the role of videogames as aesthetic objects and art forms (Humble, 2006; Gee, 2006). Videogames have prompted legal scholars to re-evaluate law and policy in light of virtual game worlds' intersections with traditional legislation (Lastowka, 2006), and have been identified as an ideal-type commodity in this era of post-Fordist economic systems, blending marketing, technology and culture in unparalleled ways (Kline et al, 2003). Videogames blur lines dividing work and play (Yee, 2006; Kücklich, 2005), and they may potentially play a large role in adolescent male psychological development (Janz, 2005). They might be a postmodern answer to the problem of the fragmented self in traditional, linear narrative (Ryan, 2001) – but then again, perhaps they are not, and should not be, anything of the sort (Aarseth, 2004).

Most importantly, we must take videogames seriously because they are rich sites of meaningful experience. As “the first medium to combine moving imagery, sound, and real-time user interaction in one machine,” the videogame makes possible “the first widespread appearance of interactive, on-screen worlds in which a game or story [takes] place” (Wolf, 2001, p. 5). Thus, as a cultural phenomena, videogames have profound implications for thinking and theorizing about our lived experience within a fundamentally media-ted existence. Taking videogames seriously means

nothing less than augmenting current conceptualizations of our meaningful relations with others and interrogating the limits of body and world.

This study takes videogames seriously.

### **Select Player**

The practice of videogaming necessitates choice; videogaming is an engagement with media that thrusts choice to the forefront of experience. Unlike traditional, linear media such as television and film – which require that viewers actively attend to their narratives as they unfold from beginning to end – videogames demand viewers become *co-producers* of the game text as they solve puzzles, juggle numerous variables, and master complex algorithms to continue the gaming experience (Wolf, 2001). In this way, game player choice is key to the practice of videogaming, for it literally shapes the videogame text, the temporality and progression of which vary from play session to play session.

One of the text-shaping choices demanded by many videogames is “player selection.” Present typically at the beginning of a game, and necessary to the continuation of the game text, this choice – wherein players are often required to choose among various avatar archetypes to represent them in the game world – can have profound effects on the nature and course of the ensuing game play experience. For instance, in a Tolkien-esque fantasy game, a player may be required to choose among wizard, dwarf or elf archetypal avatars for representation in the game world. Choice of one such avatar – and thus the declination of the others – will have profound repercussions that resonate across the entire scope of the game text, for each archetype is programmed with a unique set of variables. Selecting the dwarf

archetype, for example, may allow players to wield certain items or weapons but find others unusable, practice one set of skills but remain ignorant of others, enter some game spaces but find others inaccessible, engage some game elements but ignore others. In some cases, even the goals of the game may shift when a player chooses one archetype instead of another.

In much the same way that those *playing* videogames make choices with profound implications for the eventual nature of the videogaming experience, those *examining* videogames must make an equally critical choice about the theoretical tools with which they will engage the research experience. Currently, the field of videogame studies exhibits a rich, multi-disciplinary orientation to research and theorizing about an increasingly important practice. Those turning toward videogames from a variety of disciplines and traditions operate with different goals, and with implicit presuppositions about the nature of videogames, the player, and videogaming as practice. A particular set of theoretical tools may illuminate some opportunities while foreclosing others, articulate acutely some aspects of videogaming while superficially skimming the surface of others, observe quite clearly some aspects of videogaming but find others completely nonexistent.

In what follows, I explicate the metatheoretical underpinnings of four predominant paradigms in the emerging field of videogame studies.<sup>1</sup> This explication clears a space for thinking and theorizing about playing videogames as an embodied practice. I will also provide brief examples of current research trends in each paradigm (or “perspective”). Doing so warrants initial clarifications.

## Defining Videogames

Various definitions of “videogame” abound. Currently, “it is perfectly possible to conduct a thorough discussion of computer and videogames with no consensus as to precisely what forms, experiences, or technologies are under examination” (Newman, 2004, p. 10), but in the interest of expediency I will briefly outline a definition of “videogame.” As most such definitions are lists of characteristics, I begin by considering two attempts to circumscribe an object of inquiry.<sup>2</sup> Newman (2004) adapts Howland’s (1998) description of the essential elements of a videogame, saying all videogames have five common components: graphics (images displayed on a screen while players “play” videogames), sound (any music or sound effects played during the game), interface (anything with which players are in direct contact in order to play a videogame – the term encompasses both hardware interface devices like controllers or software interface devices like on-screen menu systems), gameplay (defined ambiguously as “how much fun a game is,” a game’s mechanics and its “immersive” qualities), and story (background information players gather before their actual engagement with the game as well as information players gather in-game – typically described in narrative fashion).

The nebulous “gameplay” element of the above description (which Newman, 2004, regards as a “fuzzy term”) is an integral facet of any “videogame” definition, for it is a site at which we may most easily appreciate any embodied practices that are part of a player’s engagement with videogames. This is to say, while “graphics” and “interface” are qualities intrinsic to the videogame (they are generally immutable in the hands of players, manipulated only by programmers and designers, and are pre-

defined for players “out of the box”), “gameplay” instead explores *what gamers do* with games in the face of being told *what they can do, how they use* an interface, the ways in which rules become meaningful (in which games become “fun”), the manner in which graphical representations shape experience, and so forth. Therefore, the “gameplay” element might best be concretized by research such as Jesper Juul’s – research whose focus is the videogame’s existence in relation to itself (as a set of rules), in relation to the player, and in relation to the larger symbolic practices and cultural circuits in which it is embedded (Juul, 2005). In order to completely appreciate a videogame’s “gameplay,” I will adhere to Juul’s (2003; 2005) “classic game model,” which lists six necessary and sufficient elements for the presence of a game. For further discussion of this model, including its origins, see this chapter’s section pertaining to ludology.

According to this model, a game is

1. a rule-based formal system;
2. with variable and quantifiable outcomes;
3. where different outcomes are assigned different values;
4. where the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome;
5. the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome;
6. and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable. (2006, pp. 6-7)

Infusing Newman’s definition with Juul’s model provides a working set of necessary conditions one might use to define “videogames” and differentiate them from other forms of interactive entertainment. However, neither of these descriptions

attends sufficiently to the computerized nature of the videogame. One should always remember that videogames invariably feature computerized components (typically designated as the “console” or simply the “hardware”) that *render* the graphics and sound integral to videogames, and that *manage* the complex sets of variables and rules that determine conditions for gameplay and story. Juul (2005) observes:

There appears to be a basic affinity between games and computers: Like the printing press and cinema have historically promoted and enabled new kinds of storytelling, computers work as enablers of games, letting us play old games in new ways, and allowing for new types of games that would previously not have been possible. (p. 5)

Any serious study of videogames should not forget this fundamental material component of the phenomenon.

### **Lexical Issues**

In the early days of any discipline (such as the current state of videogame studies), questions of semantic specificity and lexical representation are important. For instance, Wolf and Perron (2003) note:

While the term “electronic games” is so broad as to include any games that have an electronic component [. . .] the terms “video games” and “computer games” are more specific to the subject at hand; they are the terms most often used in popular and scholarly discourse. (p. 2)

In other words, not all games with electronic components necessarily include “video” components; thus, not all electronic games are videogames. The second term, “computer games,” is a popular alternative to “video games” because it references



specifically the inextricable, computerized component of the object of inquiry.<sup>3</sup> That is, “computer games” are a special kind of game in which complex graphical simulations, rules and variables can be managed by a computer system structuring the overall game system.

Throughout my work, I choose to use the term “videogames” to designate the object of inquiry. Foremost, this term pays homage to a designation that emerged in popular discourse and has cultural recognition. Also, the term “videogames,” written as a compound word rather than a noun modified by an adjective (“video games” or “computer games”), suggests a unique object worthy of its own label. In this way, I agree with David Thomas (2005) who says the compound word “helps clarify the world of videogames as a certain type of game, and not just a qualified class of games like puzzle games or word games” (§ 7). While I certainly will not contend videogames share no commonalities with games in general (studying videogames is impossible without studying games in general, and this is why I take care to include Juul’s model in my definition of videogames), I also argue videogames are different *enough* to warrant a concrete term. Where authors I reference and quote directly have used other terms to identify the object of inquiry, I leave these designations unchanged in deference to them.

Having made these distinctions and clarifications, I will proceed with a discussion of four predominant theoretical perspectives on videogames and videogaming.

## **The Traditional Perspective:**

### **Videogames as Mass Entertainment Media with Psychological Effects**

Historically (that is, during the last three decades in which videogames have received notable, albeit meager, academic attention), videogames and the practice of videogaming have been forced into the same theoretical and methodological frameworks used to examine the psychological effects of mass media on individuals' cognitive, emotional, physiological and behavioral states. Indeed, under this umbrella, research about videogames can be seen as a subset of media effects research in general (Anderson & Dill, 2000). Primarily, research of this nature has focused on two overarching themes: the effects of videogames on violent/aggressive behavior in adolescent males (Uhlmann & Swanson, 2004; Jansz, 2005; Williams & Skoric, 2005; Anderson, 2004) and gender portrayals in videogames and their related advertising (Scharrer, 2004).

This paradigm conceptualizes videogames as mass entertainment media with psychological effects. Beyond this assumption, however, many traditional studies fail to specifically define or describe that which they consider a "videogame" (one notable exception is Jansz, 2005, who takes great care in appropriating Juul's model when clarifying what will be considered a videogame). One reason many traditional studies fail to elucidate specific definitions of their objects of inquiry may be that their work emerges from an era in which videogames were *not* taken seriously – that is, in which the formal, theoretical and structural specificities of videogames and their constitutive parts were not explored and described in great detail.

Even so, while this paradigm subjects videogames to the same types of analyses TV and film have undergone, qualities setting videogames apart from these traditional media (namely, their interactive nature) have demanded new models and taxonomies from researchers operating from this perspective. Videogames demand “active involvement of the user [. . .]. The active gamer stands in relative contrast with the consumers of television entertainment who can enjoy a program in a passive way if they like” (Jansz, 2005). Film and television are “lean back media” according to Jansz because they are “generally less demanding and can be enjoyed rather passively” (p. 222). Videogames, like novels, are conversely “lean forward media,” says Jansz (2005) because “their content comes into existence in response to the gamer’s efforts” (p. 222). Simply put, the videogamer is “the ultimate case of the so-called ‘active media user’ prominent in uses and gratifications theory” (Jansz, 2005, p. 222). While the “leaning” distinction invokes references to the body, this perspective typically depicts players as “brains in a vat.” It emphasizes the notion that players quickly and *cognitively* process information from games (which elicit emotions, according to Jansz, 2005), and then respond to those stimuli by way of subsequent motorized bodily mechanics (pressing buttons on a game controller). The player is situated in a communicative, interactive relationship with the videogame, such that, according to Jansz (2005, p. 221), communication is the presence of a message (“When the player refrains from communicating, the game ceases to exist”) and interactivity is a frequent swapping of messages (“A video game requires a constant exchange of messages between the game and its player”). As such, this tradition operates with conceptualizations of communication based on information

theory models (Deetz, 1994). These models focus primarily on the deproblematized message as a synonym for communication, and they typically eschew talk of persons as anything but disembodied, decontextualized variables producing and exchanging messages as a way of reducing uncertainty about assumedly preformed ideas and common goals.

Constituting the traditional perspective on videogames is what Mumby (1997) calls a “discourse of representation” (p. 4), a discourse in communication studies that can “be roughly characterized in terms of the positivist appropriation of Cartesian dualism” and is founded on “the radical (Cartesian) separation of subject (researcher) and object (of knowledge) and the development of research tools that allow this bifurcation to remain as inviolable as possible” (p. 4). This bifurcation espoused by Cartesian thinking is also present in discourse about the relationship between player and videogame. Studies operating from the traditional perspective on media effects are concerned primarily with identifying and predicting causal relationships between videogames as mass entertainment media and individuals. This is to say, empiricist social science research on videogames examines the ways in which exposure to mass media messages influences individuals’ cognitive, behavioral or physiological states. For instance, a meta-analysis by Anderson and Bushman (2001) found that “exposure to violent video games increases aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, increases arousal, and decreases helping behaviour” (cited in Anderson, 2004). Moreover, several studies (Anderson, 2004; Anderson & Dill, 2000; Williams and Skoric, 2005) attribute the somewhat recent and urgent turn toward issues of videogame violence to the Columbine shootings. After the April 20, 1999, incident,

investigations into the lives of shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold found the two had frequently played the videogame *Doom* and customized several versions of the game to simulate what could be considered the real-world conditions of the eventual school shootings (Anderson & Dill, 2000). This finding stoked interest in correlations between playing violent videogames and violent behaviors in adolescent males, and thrust videogame violence to the forefront of American consciousness. Participants who in a study by Yale psychologists Uhlmann and Swanson (2004) “played the bloody and violent video game *Doom* for 10 min [sic] subsequently associated the self more with aggressive traits and actions” (p. 49). A sharp dualistic division between player and videogame is clear here, as the relationship between the two essentialist entities is one of causality and effectiveness.

Useful for identifying this perspective are the methods its researchers typically employ to achieve such findings. Many studies assess correlations between videogames and aggressive behavior by way of social-science experiments conducted in laboratory settings.<sup>4</sup> Studies embracing the traditional perspective on quantitative content analysis, on the other hand, are concerned primarily with probabilities. This is to say, empiricist content analyses involving videogames note the absence or presence of a particular common elements in media messages, as well as the *frequency* with which these elements are either absent or present. For instance, a study examining videogame advertising frames its analysis of data via the following questions: “What percentage of ads for video games contains violent images? How frequently do violent words and phrases appear in the text? What percentage of the ads contain sexual acts, words, or innuendos? How frequently do video game ads use

fear, humor, or user identification appeals?” (Scharrer, 2004, p. 399). Underpinning this method are presuppositions, held by representational theories, that media messages have universal and invariant effects, and that common elements have specific, rigid, unilateral meanings, and can be codified and classified by such.

Undoubtedly, the traditional approach to videogame research will continue unabated. Recently, Jansz (2005) articulated what he expects to become “a model for the unfolding of emotion on violent video games” in research involving videogames’ effects on adolescent males (p. 219). Herein, by way of scientific metaphors, videogames are depicted as “private laboratories” in which adolescent males – discouraged by social norms from overt public emotional experimentation – may deliberately and consciously negotiate identity construction during a notoriously turbulent period of their lives (p. 231). “Within the virtual world of the game, gamers can enact, or perform, a particular identity in the most literal sense of the word” (p. 231). The appeal of violent games stems, for Jansz, from a desire to sate the curiosity that is part and parcel of physiological, emotional and psychological experimentation. Videogames are the compartmentalized, private laboratories in which such exploration is possible, as this new form of entertainment media constantly elicits emotions from players in a decontextualized, cognitive circuit of message production and exchange.

## **The Critical/Cultural Perspective:**

### **Videogames as an Articulation of Culture, Marketing and Technology**

The critical and cultural studies paradigm for the study of videogaming works to explicate ideologies implicit in game texts, expose power relations structuring the practice of videogaming, and offer subversive alternative performances or readings.

A critical/cultural perspective on videogaming takes as its object of analysis the “gamework,” a neologism that is “conceptually reminiscent of Thierry Kuntzel’s ‘film-work,’ which in turn harkens back Sigmund Freud’s ‘dream-work’” (Ruggill et al, 2004, p. 298). Viewing videogames as gameworks is a way of abstracting them from their typical contexts as entertainment media and illuminating their signifying practices (Ruggill et al, 2004). “Gamework,” however, is not synonymous with “videogame.” Gamework and videogame share four components, according to Ruggill et al (2004, p. 298): 1) digital instructions that mediate interactions among players, such as rule sets, 2) the storage and processing components within which these instructions are executed, 3) the documentation and packaging that sell and explain game play, and 4) the player(s). In addition to these qualities of a videogame, a gamework adds “critical consciousness about game production, distribution, and consumption” (p. 299). In sum, “gamework” signifies much more than how people *play* in industrialized, computerized, capitalistic early twenty-first-century societies; it also embodies how they labor, relate to one another, and rest, as well as how they make sense of the present, remember the past, and imagine the future. (p. 299)

For Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter (2003), videogames are an articulation of three circuits of interactivity – a cultural circuit, a technological circuit, and a marketing circuit. In the cultural circuit “the game player is discursively positioned as a protagonist within a fictional scenario. Here, we ‘read’ the video game as a semiotic apparatus that invites players to assume an imaginary identity, or, to use the more technical term, ‘interpellates’ them in a particular ‘subject-position’” (p. 53). The technological circuit “involves the process of technological innovation and diffusion – the way inventions pass into popular use” (p. 55). Finally, the marketing circuit examines “the interaction between marketers, commodities, and consumers” (p. 56). These three circuits interlock to articulate videogames as a commodity exemplary of post-Fordist, information capitalism.

Broadening the scope of videogame analysis in order to examine the interlocking circuits that give rise to the practice of videogaming allows for descriptions of the player as simultaneously 1) a player immersed in game text narratives pre-inscribed with culture-specific ideologies, 2) a user who interfaces with and demands ever-evolving videogame console technology, and 3) part of an increasingly specific consumer segment to whom videogames are marketed in a “hyper” fashion – that is, with increasing rapidity, heretofore unknown pervasiveness, and the integration of the consumer back into the process of production (Kline et al, 2003, p. 295). Particularly, a player is “playing” videogames in a space circumscribed by capitalist business practices. “Play” as a leisure activity has been commodified such that the boundaries between “player” and “consumer” are blurred; videogame manufacturers successfully create a need for expanded “play” time, then



provide goods necessary for filling that space – goods that are typically proscribed with or promote the norms and values of a dominant ideology or discourse (Humphreys, 2005). “The paradox of information capitalism is that even as it encourages an expanded enclave of freedom and self-development of ‘pure play,’ it begins to undermine that enclave by commodifying it” (Kline et al, 2003, p. 245). The player is thus interpellated by the gamework, assuming a subject position pre-inscribed in a version of the “playful” experience set forth by developers and manufacturers.

This playful experience, when refracted through a critical lens, can in some ways be viewed as an act of “playbor,” as the player increasingly *both plays and* creates. Indeed, some players describe their gameplay sessions with the same language with which they might describe the tedium of a full-time job (Yee, 2006). In some cases, players freely create additional game content typically usurped by game companies. Highly relevant here is the notion of “modding,” or player-fan modification of a variety of game content that adds to the value of existing videogames – content such as additional game levels or avatars. While modding is typically described as a “leisure” activity a player may undertake as an extension of play or as a “labor of love,” Kücklich (2005) notes that the unwaged creative labor of a multitude of modders “significantly reduces game developers’ R&D and marketing costs” (§ 18). “Hobbyists’ leisure work is converted from gift to commodity, what results is the circumvention of the initial investment risk for the commercial developers as the development work is transferred to the fan base where costs are negligible” (Postigo, 2003, p. 597). In this way, the practice of videogaming serves

to successfully fold the player-as-consumer back into the ongoing game development process as player-as-producer. This “playbor” has a “precarious” nature; it is voluntarily given and unwaged, as well as enjoyed and exploited (Kücklich, 2005; de Peuter & Dyer-Witthof, 2005).

Another interesting twist on the notion of “playbor” is the realization that “productive players” in online multiplayer games (which allow thousands of players to interact with one another) actually produce and sustain the very social relationships integral to both the perpetual sale of a videogame title and relative success of that title. As Humphreys (2005) explains, game developers can create the virtual “spaces” and “worlds” for players to inhabit, but the social relationships players form in those spaces are their own creations. Social relationships are content, too – a type of player-produced content that developers recognize as imbued with the power to destroy a product (if players stop playing or stop working together, the game crumbles). In this way, players can enact a bit of agency. “Players in their passionate, voluntary, and willing participation hold particular kinds of power as well. The reliance of Sony and other game developers on player communities for content creation of various forms – both the tangible and the more intangible social forms – means they are subject to the goodwill of these player communities” (Humphreys, 2005, p. 47). Recognition that developers rely (to some extent) on players who generate integral game content can be a powerful tool in the hands of exploited players looking for subversive outlets. Research regarding player-produced fiscal capital (Lastowka, 2006) and cultural capital (Malaby, 2006) is useful for exploring the increasingly interwoven nature of the “real world” and synthetic game worlds.<sup>5</sup>

A critical perspective is often able to offer oppositional readings of game texts – readings that reframe the texts to expose ideological assumptions. For instance Opel and Smith (2004), in their analysis of the Microsoft videogame *ZooTycoon*, reveal how a seemingly innocent game about creating and maintaining a zoo actually reinforces capitalist business strategy, turns wildlife and nature into spectacles, equates happiness with perpetual consumption, and “redirects environmental impulses back into the commodity form, replete with the classic tensions between labor and management” (p. 104). In doing so, the game text positions a player-subject as “zoo keeper and CEO [. . .]. Players must adopt a managerial perspective to balance the demands of a growing industry, in effect role-playing the process of a captain of industry” (p. 109). Moreover, player-subjects embody “a sense of complete control over the environment – complete eco-dominance” (p. 115). In sum, this oppositional reading of *ZooTycoon* reveals a game text that “encourages human expansion, monopolization of space, and creation of capitalist place. It subjugates wild animals as menial laborers for our own entertainment and suggests that manipulating the environment any way possible to achieve this is acceptable” (p. 117). Similarly, Schleiner (2001) offers several readings of popular female videogame protagonist Lara Croft – Croft as female Frankenstein monster, drag queen, dominatrix and femme fatale, positive role model, and vehicle for the queer female gaze – in order to “challenge given gender categories and adapt them to the diverse gender sensibilities of men, women, and others” (p. 225).

By offering such subversive readings, the critical/cultural perspective illuminates the ideological underpinnings, larger social frameworks, and stratified

layers of power structuring the practice of videogaming. Insofar as this tradition “challenges economistic explanations of capitalist relations of domination, and argues for a focus on the ‘superstructural,’ cultural, and ideological dimensions of power,” it can be situated in a larger communicative discourse, which Mumby (1997) calls “a discourse of suspicion” (p. 9). This particular discourse draws upon Marxist thought and the work of the Frankfurt school, and constitutes a project of communication study whereby emancipation from dominant ideological frameworks for acting and the restoration of agency are placed center stage. In so doing, a discourse of suspicion necessitates a view of communication as constitutive and emergent, rather than as instrumental and transmissional.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Ludological Perspective:**

#### **Videogames as Formalized Simulations**

In 1998, Gonzalo Frasca resuscitated the term “ludology” to “refer to the yet non-existent ‘discipline that studies game and play activities’” (¶ 12), drawing on the Latin word for “game,” *ludus*. Since his writing, however, the discipline of game studies (declared a discipline in 2001 by Espen Aarseth) has exploded and fractalized, and ludology is now but one perspective among many attempting to study videogames.<sup>7</sup>

Drawing upon semiotics (Lindley, 2005; re-tooled slightly by Frasca, 2003a, to form “simiotics” when studying simulations), cybernetics (Aarseth, 1997) and computer simulation theory (Frasca, 2003a), ludology is foremost concerned with the formal aspects of videogames (and games more generally). Research taking this perspective attempts an ontology of videogames in order to 1) increase understanding

of games' structures, 2) isolate necessary and sufficient elements that characterize games (particularly rules) and set them apart from other media (books, movies, etc.), and 3) create "typologies and models for explaining the mechanics of games" (Frasca, 2003a, p. 222). In examining videogames, researchers operating from this perspective might ask: *What is a game? What is a videogame, and how does it augment our current notions of games in general? What are we doing when we "play games"?* *What do games provide us?* Frasca does add this caveat to his explanation of ludology's (current) purpose:

However, formalism is not the flavor of the month in these posteverything times [. . .]. I personally see this structural approach as a first, necessary step in video game studies, which we will definitely outgrow once it helps us to better grasp the basic characteristics of video games. (p. 222)

The first step in such a process of formalization would undoubtedly be shaping a *definition* of games. Undertaking the task of locating this notoriously elusive definition, Juul (2003; 2005) has proposed a definition of games – a "classic game model" – consisting of six necessary and sufficient conditions that locate "the heart of gameness" (2003, p. 30). Juul derives these conditions from a blend of game definitions and characterizations present in heretofore-sparse literature on the subject – definitions from Huizinga (1950), Caillois (1961), Crawford (1982) and others. This model has been discussed previously and has been appropriated for my purposes in this thesis project.

The project of formalizing its object of inquiry is ongoing within the ludological community, but sufficient progress has been made such that I may

comment on this object here. Just as the critical/cultural perspective takes a sort of “step back” from games to examine the socio-political forces swirling in, around, and through videogames, so, too, does the ludological perspective “back up” from videogames in order to examine not only the specific *components* and *conditions* necessary for the presence of a game, but also the *interrelationships* between these components (hence the perspective’s reliance on cybernetics). Thus, ludologists’ examinations of what Eskelinen (2001; 2004) calls “the gaming situation,” are rigorous interrogations of complex sets of relations. Says Eskelinen (2001):

When discussing articulation, materiality, functionality, typology and orientation, among other things, we are confronting the bare essentials of the gaming situation: the manipulation or the configuration of temporal, spatial, causal and functional relations and properties in different registers. (§ 3)

For example, Eskelinen (2004) is able to formalize time in videogames by differentiating between “user time” and “event time” (between the actions of the player and the happenings of the game, respectively), and between the different durations, speeds, orders and frequencies of certain temporal phenomena in games (p. 39). He also formalizes relationships among a larger structure afforded by this “stepping back” from games to look at their “situations.” By doing so, Eskelinen can map player-to-player, player-to-game, and game-to-world “articulations” (2001, ¶ 14-17), and types of “relations” – spatial, temporal, causal and functional relations – present in gaming situations (¶ 17). Indeed, the structure of time in videogames is a predominant research thread within the ludological community; more on this notion can be found in Lindley (2005), while Newman (2004) provides a succinct summary.

Another salient theme in ludological research is the interrelationship between notions of “play” and “game.” Frasca (1998, 2003a) is currently most concerned about the difference between between the Latin *ludus* and the Greek *paidia*, or, roughly, between “game” and “play,” respectively. These two phenomena, Frasca explains, are not mutually exclusive; *games* must be *played* in order to exist, and *play* is always structured by *rules* at even a very basic level (e.g., a child “playing doctor” is playing with a rule that states “we are *not* playing house”). Moreover, a key difference between *ludus* experiences and *paidia* experiences might be their emphasis on quantifiable outcomes (Newman, 2004). Therefore, videogames can be viewed as a dialectical manifestation, the convergence and result of both creativity and constraint. Frasca’s (1998) examination of this dialectic allows him to produce typologies of rules.

An exhaustive commentary on all formalized typologies advanced by ludologists like Eskelinen, Juul, and Frasca is certainly beyond the scope of the present research. I have listed only a few of these classifications and formalizations as a way of illustrating both the purpose of research from a ludological perspective and the perceived object of analysis, the gaming situation.

The ludological perspective has for some time been at odds with another perspective (to be adumbrated shortly): the narratological perspective. In short, the narratological perspective argues that videogames are narrative devices and should be studied as literature, film, or any other narrative form. Some ludologists are radically and vehemently opposed to the application of narratology to games (Aarseth, 2004; Eskelinen, 2004). Others simply *favor* the ludological approach as a preferred

method amid a sea of valid ones (Juul, 2001; Frasca, 2003b), and note ways in which narrative elements are present in the otherwise ludological gaming situation. As a way of both transitioning into an explication of the narratological perspective on videogaming and further clarifying the ludological position on the nature of videogames, I note here the key distinctions ludologists claim place videogames outside the scope of the narratological lens.

Ludologists stress frequently the fact that games are *simulations* (Aarseth, 2004; Eskelinen, 2004; Juul, 2001; Frasca, 2003a; Frasca, 2003b), or models of one (source) system through a different system that maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system (Frasca, 2003a). The type of signifying practice that seems to be at work here prompts Frasca to coin the term “simiotics” as a synthesis of both simulation and semiotics (2003a, p. 223). By contrast, ludologists note (in line with some – but not all – narrative theorists) that narrative is *representational*; it “represents” to an audience (or “user”) a fixed series of events that will always unfold the same way, and in the same order (i.e., a ludologists would note that every time one views *Titanic*, the ship always – and will always – sink at the film’s conclusion). Videogames – “the art of simulation” (Aarseth, 2004, p. 52) – are instead a “new mode of discourse” (p. 53), as simulation is the “hermeneutic Other” of narrative (p. 52). Aarseth also notes that games are merely context (sets of rules); videogames (and games in general) are not dually textual in and of themselves, even though 1) particular play sessions can be “read” *post hoc*, or 2) games can contain narrative elements (i.e., packaging and instructions) that stipulate simulation rules. Simulations such as videogames require “input” from players to literally determine the form and



content of the videogame session, say ludologists, whereas traditional representational media simply provide “output” to be “read” by players. Juul (2001) notes that novels have a determined state (they will unfold the same way each time), while games have a *non-determined* state. Frasca (2003b) parses this slightly differently when he says persons presume a *configurative* role when playing videogames, and an *interpretive* role when reading novels and viewing films.

And finally, as previously discussed, ludologists are particular about the notion of *time* in the gaming situation. Time in games, according to Juul (2001), is quite different than time in narrative. Narrative has both story time (the time of the thing told) and discourse time (the time of the telling of the thing); this distinction involves a “past” or “prior” (§ 32). Game time does not involve this distinction.

According to Juul (2001):

In this way, the game constructs the story time as *synchronous* with narrative time and reading/viewing time: the story time is *now*. Now, not just in the sense that the viewer witnesses events now, but in the sense that the events are *happening* now, and that what comes next is not yet determined. (§ 35)

Key differences between the ludological perspective and the narratological perspective are more clear after the later perspective has been explained.

### **The Narratological Perspective:**

#### **Videogames as Game-Stories and Cyberdramas**

Narratologists, literary theorists and critics, and film scholars draw upon a rich tradition of formal narrative studies when attempting to approach that which many consider a new and exciting form of narrative, storytelling, or drama. Videogames as

interactive narratives could not have arrived at a better time, for, as Murray (2004) notes, “In a postmodern world [. . .] everyday experience has come to seem increasingly gamelike, and we are aware of the constructed nature of all our narratives” (p. 3). A new storytelling device – one that allows for expression in line with contemporary recognition of the increasingly unstable, undetermined nature of reality – is necessary. Narrative theory, say narratologists, can be expanded (Ryan, 2001) to encompass this new device and explore new ways to narrate an increasingly non-linear, fragmented existence.

This is possible, according to Murray (2004), because “storytelling is a core human activity, one we take into every medium of expression, from the oral-formulaic to the digital multimedia” (p. 3). Because storytelling is literally a fundamental mode of human *beingness*, we can, in other words, presume the applicability of narrative theory to videogames. In short, “games are always already narrative systems” (Zimmerman, 2004, p. 163) because human nature constructs them as such without our having anything to say about the matter. Seen through this lens, then, videogames, as an object of analysis, become story-games (the fact that “story” precedes “game” is deliberate and key), or “cyberdramas,” which are enactments of a story in the fictional space of the computer (Murray, 2004).

Understanding the ways narratologists define narrative, story and storytelling are imperative to understanding the narratological perspective on the practice of videogaming. Ryan (2001) defines narrative as

A sign with a signifier (discourse) and a signified (story, mental image, semantic representation). The signifier can have many semiotic

manifestations. It can consist for instance of a verbal act of story-telling (diegetic narration), or of gestures and dialogue performed by actors (mimetic, or dramatic narration). (§ 6)

Narrative from this perspective consists of particular elements – a world (setting), situated in time, populated by individuals (characters), who participate in actions and happenings (events, plot) and undergo change (Ryan, 2001). Also in this sense, a story is an experience of narrative (Zimmerman, 2004). Videogames contain these elements and, as Ryan (2001), Murray (2004), and Turkle (2003) have shown, twist them in novel and insightful ways. Players experience the unfolding of videogame narratives such that they find themselves in a situation similar to a storytelling session.

In conjunction with these elements, the “formalized” components of the ludologists are typically cited by narratologists as renamed narrative devices. For instance, games contain an element of problem-solving, as players learn to navigate novel, rule-bound structures and achieve goals. Narratives, too, contain an element of problem-solving, as players anticipate narrative plot twists, solve puzzles presented by the narrative, and attempt to actively make sense of the narrative as it unfolds. “The most prominent reason for acting in life is problem solving. It is therefore the most fundamental narrative pattern” (Ryan, 2001, § 6). Likewise, as games (as defined by Juul’s classic game model) consist of sets of rules that define what *can* and *cannot* be *done* in the game, as well as what *outcomes* are *desirable*, narratives are driven similarly by a “moral physics,” or ideological, social “rules” garnered from narrative experience (Murray, 2004) – rules that constitute game choices and player

actions as desirable and appropriate. Videogame designers wittingly or unwittingly “code” games with a moral physics, and players bring their socialized sets of rules to each videogaming session when reading an unfolding narrative and acting in gameworlds.

“Bringing” sets of social rules to gaming situations underscores this perspective’s view of the nature of narrative as a sort of gestalt underpinning our everyday practices. This is to say, this perspective would note all persons as acting in accordance with perceived narrative forms – not “seeing” the world but “seeing it *as* narrative.” Both expression and perception are thus constituted in, through, and by narrative. Because of this, narratological analysis of videogame texts is not confined to games’ actual gameplay. For instance, Zimmerman’s (2004) reading of *Ms. Pac-Man* accounts for more than just that which takes place on the screen:

Large-scale characters on the physical arcade game cabinet establish a graphical story about the chase between Ms. Pac-Man and the ghosts. There are also brief noninteractive animations inside the game, which appear between every few levels [. . .]. It’s a narrative about life and death, about consumption and power. It’s a narrative about strategic pursuit through a constrained space, about dramatic reversals of fortune where the hunter becomes the hunted. It’s a narrative about relationships, in which every character on the screen, every munchable dot and empty corridor, are meaningful parts of a larger system. It’s a narrative that always has the same elements, yet unfolds differently each time it is experienced. (p. 162)

*Ms. Pac-Man* – or any videogame, for that matter – is thus much more than the stories of our gaming experiences we retell after playing. Instead, the videogame is itself an intertextual phenomenon:

The player's experience of the game-story is composed of the entire arcade game. This includes [. . .] the cabinet graphics and the cartoon animations, the sound of the quarter dropping and the texture of the joystick, the social and architectural dynamics of the arcade itself, the gender ideologies of the game and its historical relationship to the original *Pac-Man*, the marketing of the character and its penetration into pop culture at large. (p. 162)

Close readings like Zimmerman's are meant to explicate videogames' intertextual signifying structures and to expose the hermeneutic interplay of story and game that mark videogames as a new, compelling medium for storytelling.

In the meantime, several writers have recently begun outlining “compromises” between narratological and ludological perspectives on videogaming, noting, as Jenkins (2004) does, that videogames are actually cocktails of ludological and narratological elements. Game designers are “narrative architects” (p. 129) who create game *spaces* before they tell stories or formalize rules. Narrative is a *consequence* of game-space design, as the space “can either enhance our sense of immersion within a familiar world or communicate a fresh perspective on [a] story through the altering of established details,” become “a memory palace whose contents must be deciphered as the player tries to reconstruct the plot trajectory,” and enable “story-constructive activities of players” (p. 129). Newman (2004) also discusses numerous perspectives on videogame spaces. As narrative architects, game designers

use narrative as a “hook” into a game’s space, to detail a player’s goals while playing, and to set game rules. Frasca (2003b) has also attempted to bridge the schism that seems to have opened between ludologists and narratologists, a schism he says never *really* existed in the first place, as ludologists have always “made room” in their analyses for games’ narrative elements.

### **Criticism and Conclusion**

I wish to return briefly to my initial metaphor, which linked the moment of character selection *in* videogames to the moment of perspective selection for research *on* videogames. We should remember: neither the choice between character archetypes in videogames nor the selection of a perspective in videogame studies is a qualitatively “good,” “bad,” “right,” or “wrong” choice. Such choices simply and simultaneously uncover, reveal, obfuscate, constitute, and preclude facets, features, characteristics and components of videogames themselves, the videogaming experience, and the practice of videogaming.

The four aforementioned perspectives are fruitful; they offer a deeper, richer understanding of the videogame phenomenon – albeit from different trajectories and with different metatheoretical, presuppositional paradigm sets. However, none of these perspectives addresses the notion of the body in a way that enriches understanding of the *lived experience* of playing videogames.

The traditional perspective decontextualizes the practice of videogaming. Such decontextualization is slightly disconcerting from a standpoint more concerned with communication as an embodied event-process. Players’ physical bodies are glaringly absent from analyses couched in this perspective; instead, the traditional

perspective's purely cognitive focus relegates the body to a mechanistic role. This is to say, the body is merely a machine, a mere scaffolding, through which the brain's commands are executed, or through which cognitive/emotional states generated in the "black box" of the mind are made manifest in observable behavior.

The critical/cultural perspective's perceptual shift affords inquiry into the material and discursive structures that shape the practice of videogaming. While its emphasis on materiality and the production of inhabitable subject positions is a welcome and fruitful paradigm shift in videogame studies, this perspective's relative silence about the *bodies* actually engaging and producing these material conditions – about the embodiment of discursively produced subject positions – does not provide a holistic understanding of videogaming as an embodied practice.

The formal, structural ludological perspective, collapses the player into the cybernetic gaming situation; the player becomes, at times, an over-rationalized element in this burgeoning topological matrix of game components. The player is not omitted from ludological research; indeed, Eskelinen (2001) is very precise in outlining temporal relations a player can occupy in the gaming situation (static temporal, dynamic temporal, static spatial, and temporal spatial). But in a traditionally cybernetic fashion, the player becomes almost as rational as the computer system managing a videogame's complex rules and variables, and some of the so-called "free-form" *paidia* experience seems to slip by the wayside.

Clarifications about the nature of time in videogames, such as Juul's (2001), are common sites of antagonism between ludologists and narratologists; however, the debate seems to stem unnecessarily from a conceptualization of narrative

performance that posits sharp divides between subject and object, past and present, storyteller and audience, etc. Both ludologists and narratologists seem to place emphasis on the nature of the essential object – e.g., it is the videogame that purportedly “tells” the story or does not “tell the story,” because it is either essentially a narrative device or it is not. This view, however, disembodies the videogame, locating it “outside” the player and the player’s embodied experience. This is evident in the way ludologists and narratologists typically talk about “players” and “readers” acting on the game or text, or the ways in which the game/text does something to the reader or user, like tell a story to him or her. If we consider, however, the practice of videogaming as an inherently embodied one – whereby any narrative constituted as part of the gaming situation is not “in” the game or “from” the player after she or he concludes playing but rather as part of an overall productive, transformative, emergent process – the result of which is a meaningful communication event – then the necessity of such subject/object, inside/outside, player/game (and, as we shall soon see, reader/audience) dichotomies is essentially rendered useless.

Finally, as is quite evident by now, the narratological perspective on videogaming is rooted firmly in a structuralist literary tradition. Herein, elements of a narrative situation – such as reader, text, method and reading – can be analyzed individually and as they interlock but remain fairly discrete. By shifting theoretical traditions to assume a poststructuralist undertaking, however, the four aforementioned components of the narrative situation – which constantly make appearances in narratological research on videogaming – collapse “into a continuous act in which discourse reproduces itself” (Tompkins, 1988, p. 747). The site of such discursive



reproduction is the body. Collapsing the boundaries keeping components of the storytelling situation relatively discrete allows storytelling to emerge as a communicative practice that “draws the audience and storyteller, and the order of experience and the order of analysis, into connection by transforming one into the other and vice versa” (Peterson & Langellier, 2005, p. 128). Narrative performance, in other words, is not only post hoc, like Aarseth (2004) may claim, but also constitutes the very nature of the videogame to begin with (games must be played, and play is an embodied activity). “The doubled message of telling a story and the story of the telling finds correspondence in a split between an implied ‘you’ in the story and the ‘you’ that is a reader [. . .] and between storytelling as true and storytelling as fictive” (Peterson & Langellier, 2005, p. 129). The time of the telling and the time of the thing told – temporal distinctions typically invoked, if we recall, by ludologists such as Juul (2001) and narratologists such as Ryan (2001) – are collapsed into a gaming situation whose “thing-ness” merely emerges (and can only emerge) from its being played. The practice of videogaming is best studied as an embodied praxis of videogaming rather than a somewhat essentialist investigation of the “nature” of a disembodied videogame telling stories (or, for that matter, not telling stories).

An embodied perspective on the communicative practice of videogaming can enrich the metatheoretical dialogue already ongoing in a field of study bursting with interdisciplinary relevance and widespread personal, social and cultural promise. I am not the first to point out the dearth of research on videogames from an embodied

perspective. However, attempts to recover the body in videogame analysis assume a wide variety of occasionally disparate approaches.

From the standpoint of cognitive psychology, Grodal's (2003) "embodied brain" approach is a radical reorientation; Grodal not only re-centers videogame analysis on the body, but also discredits immensely any kind of symbolic analysis, writing "[. . .] cognitive psychology provides many advantages as a tool for describing video games compared with a semiotic approach; even if games may be provided with some symbolic signs, most of the game activity consists in seeing, hearing and doing in a simulation of a real-world interaction" (p. 130). He proceeds: "Many language-based story-descriptions have derailed descriptions of video games (and films) because they ignore the fact that semantic meaning is based on concrete perceptions and motor patterns, not on some abstract 'semantics,' kept in place by verbal signifiers" (p. 133). Grodal's focus on innate, hardwired, deep-structure storytelling mechanisms in the embodied brain is meant to account for the nonverbal processes involved in videogame playing; unfortunately, communication research such as the present thesis cannot operate exclusively at such a micro/biological level. The body is indeed the primordial ground for any kind of "verbal signifier" or sign-vehicle, but understood in terms of lived experience the body's activity refuses to be reduced to the mere sum of its micro-mechanical movements.

Other embodied perspectives on videogames and videogaming operate from a psychoanalytic perspective, whereby the role of the body becomes almost interchangeable with that of the on-screen avatar in a synthetic game world. Rehak

(2003) describes this relationship as a “linkage” where the avatar is a “stand-in” for the player (p. 107):

“The video game avatar would seem to meet the criteria of Lacan’s *objet petit a*. Appearing on screen in place of the player, the avatar does double duty as self and other, symbol and index. As *self*, its behavior is tied to the player’s through an interface (keyboard, mouse, joystick); its literal motion as well as its figurative triumphs and defeats, result from the player’s actions. At the same time, avatars are unequivocally *other*. Both limited and freed by difference from the player, they can accomplish more than the player alone; they are supernatural ambassadors of agency.” (p. 106)

Playing videogames is a pleasurable activity for players who enjoy the control associated with the avatar’s “reflection” of “embodied reality” (p. 107).

Psychoanalysis is a useful method for studying videogames – one whose implications have not yet been fully explored – however, its scope is limited to relationships among subjective ego-player, objectified avatar, and their binding gaze.

An attempt to account for the embodied player and its relationship to an on-screen avatar *not* grounded in psychoanalysis is Fisler’s (2006) theory of the “performed player.” Fisler argues videogaming should be understood not as direct involvement, nor as passive performance, but as *mediated interaction* between digital representations and organic activity. On-screen “digital extensions” of the player (Fisler rejects the term “avatar” for etymological reasons) are sites of ego projection, onto which players project culturally and personally favorable qualities in a process of idealization. Fisler’s conceptual move to bridge notions of the “organic” body

with those of digitized, representational space indicate a welcome paradigm shift in videogame studies. However, the theory's ability to account for videogames with no strong avatarial presence – videogames such as *Tetris* – remains uninterrogated.

Finally, another notable attempt at accounting for the body in videogame studies involves the appropriation of cyborg theory. Lahti (2003) directly attacks the transcendental nature of many techno-futurist arguments regarding videogames' immersive qualities, stating, “[. . .] games actually anchor our experience and subjectivity firmly in the body or in an ambiguous boundary between the body and technology” (p. 158). Moreover, videogames “challenge us to rethink audiovisual theories that have regularly articulated media spectatorship as a passive process that dematerializes the body and foregrounds a psychic or cognitive experience” (p. 169). I agree with Lahti (2003): the practice of videogaming resonates with a certain set of “carnal pleasures” the discipline of videogame studies has quite insufficiently explored because it fails to recognize that “if something is left behind when we play, it is not the body. We may be toying with the body when we play, but we remain flesh as we become machines” (Lahti, 2003, p. 169). With this sentiment in mind, I wish to proceed with a discussion of phenomenology's valuable contribution to the study of videogames and the practice of videogaming.

## Chapter 2

### EIDETIC PHENOMENOLOGY AS METHOD

#### Introduction

In the first chapter of this thesis, I adumbrate four predominant perspectives on videogames and the practice of videogaming (while offering an overview of current research trajectories), comment on the implicit or explicit position of the body from each perspective, indicate a need for videogame research that makes embodiment its focal point, and trace briefly a few recent attempts to account for the body in such research. In order to re-center videogame analysis at the site of the body, this study asks: *What is the role of the body in players' experiences of videogames and the practice of videogaming?* And more specifically: how does the body function as a material locus wherein the reversibility of expression and perception is made manifest in the event-process of communication?

The present research is an investigation of videogames' communicative capacities – that is to say, the ways videogames function in relation to expression and perception, in enabling and constraining symbolic practices, and in facilitating action between and among bodies. It contributes to the communication discipline an avenue for further research regarding an increasingly prolific cultural (and intercultural) phenomenon.

Moreover, this project contributes to the discipline of videogame studies a set of theoretical tools useful for interrogating players' *lived experiences* of the practice

of videogaming – an interrogative effort largely ignored in contemporary videogame studies. Exploration of such lived experience is possible in and with phenomenology.

Quite simply, phenomenology is that philosophical movement concerned with the embodied, material subject's lived, conscious experience in inextricable (and thus necessarily situated) relation to the world. This chapter unpacks this parsimonious definition of phenomenology, demonstrates phenomenology's usefulness in communication research and the study of videogames as sites of meaningful experience, and outlines the specific ways in which this study brings phenomenological method to bear on a videogame in order to exhibit videogames' communicative capacities.

### **Existential Phenomenology**

“[. . .] Phenomenology can be practiced and identified as a manner or style of thinking [. . .] it existed as a movement before arriving at a complete awareness of itself as a philosophy.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. viii)

With the maxim “To the things themselves!” phenomenology's founder, Edmund Husserl, stressed the need for a philosophy whose methods, unlike the natural science's *explanatory* or *analytical* routines, were essentially *descriptive*. Phenomenology would attempt “to gain knowledge of invariant structures of consciousness” (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 203), and to investigate the ways in which human lived reality and understanding are constituted – the ways in which “the spectrum of experience is organized into units and recognizable wholes” (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 204). To say phenomenology's methods are descriptive of

“lived reality” is to note the movement’s interest in undercutting a predominant, positivistic attitude seeking causal explanations for “reality itself” or an objective reality outside the body’s placement in it. According to Verbeek (2005):

“Husserl asked himself what is really given to human beings when they address themselves to the world. In answering this question, he found first of all that he had to suspend the ‘natural’ attitude in which human beings assume that what is given to them corresponds to a world outside of them, or to an order fully articulated by reason.” (p. 109)

In other words, Husserl’s phenomenology was a rejection of a natural science interest in discovering universal, causal laws governing all human experience.<sup>8</sup>

Husserl’s particular strand of phenomenology – now often called “transcendental phenomenology” because of Husserl’s interest in locating a “true reality” unknowable through scientific explanation and locatable by stepping outside or above experience in order to analyze it (see Ihde, 1977, for a complete excursus of this logic) – has undergone numerous revisions since its initial articulation. In the hands of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one of Husserl’s most notable students, phenomenology took what is now known as an “existential” turn. My work utilizes this existential strand of phenomenology.

Eschewing the notion of consciousness as that which transcends ordinary experience – as something *outside* or *above* or *apart from* everyday involvement with the world – Merleau-Ponty instead recognizes the undeniable interrelatedness of subject and object, the mutually constitutive relations of person and world, the permeability of boundaries both separating and conjoining inside and outside, and,

thus, the always-embodied situation of the mind. “Merleau-Ponty begins with the negative claim that the body is not an object. It is the condition and context through which I am able to have a relation to objects. It is both immanent and transcendent” (Grosz, 1994, p. 86). Conscious experience is always embodied – always grounded in corporeal, sensory relations. “Indeed, existential phenomenology is philosophically grounded on the carnal, fleshy, objective foundations of subjective consciousness as it engages and is transformed by the world” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 2). Merleau-Ponty’s (1964c) emphasis on embodiment marks his philosophy as a rejection of either/or dualism, “going against doctrines which treat perception as a simple result of the action of external things on our body as well as against those which insist on the autonomy of consciousness” (pp. 3-4). Instead, “embodiment is a radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an *irreducible ensemble*” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 4).

A focus on embodiment thus necessarily recognizes one’s both *being* a body and *having* a body; it recognizes “the lived body as, at once, both an objective *subject* and a subjective *object*: a sentient, sensual, and sensible ensemble of materialized capacities and agency that literally and figurally makes sense of, and to, both ourselves and others” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 2, emphasis in original). According to Grosz (1994):

Although the body is both object (for others) and a lived reality (for the subject), it is never simply object nor simply subject. It is defined by its relations with objects and in turn defines these objects as such – it is “sense-



bestowing” and “form-giving,” providing a structure, organization, and ground within which objects are to be situated and against which the body-subject is positioned. (p. 87)

The body’s historical and cultural situatedness is also an important consideration for existential phenomenology. Phenomenological inquiry “focuses on the phenomena of experience and their meaning as spatially and temporally embodied, lived and valued by an objective subject – and, as such, always already qualified by the mutable specificities and constraints of history and culture. In this sense embodiment is never a priori to historical and cultural existence” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 2).

Merleau-Ponty pushed this radical, existential line of thought furthest in *The Visible and the Invisible*, a work left incomplete upon his death in 1961. Therein, Merleau-Ponty described the notion of the flesh. The flesh “is not matter” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 146) but rather “the common existential ground of both body and world that is the general medium or ‘element’ of materiality” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 286), or “a condition of both seeing and being seen, of touching and being touched, and of their intermingling and possible integration, a commonness in which both subject and object participate, a single ‘thing’ folded back on itself” (Grosz, 1994, p. 95). Merleau-Ponty (1968) writes

[The flesh] is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body, which is attested in particular when the body sees itself, touches itself seeing and touching the things, such that, simultaneously, *as* tangible it descends among them, *as* touching it dominates

them all and draws this relationship and even this double relationship from itself, by dehiscence or fission of its own mass. (p. 146)

The flesh names the reversible relation between subject and object, body and world, and is thus a manifestation in existence of chiasm, another notion Merleau-Ponty addresses in his later work. According to Sobchack (2004), chiasm “is used to name the ground of all presence against which discrete figures of being emerge as such; it is thus the ground from which oppositions both emerge and fall away, in which they become reversible but noncoincidental” (p. 294).

Chiasm and its manifestation in existence, the flesh, offer foremost novel bases for communication study. If we *begin* analysis from the depths of the chiasm – from a point *not* of mutual exclusivity of self and other, of inside and outside, *but rather* of their essential and inextricable reversibility and interconnectedness – then we open a space for thinking and theorizing about human interaction that jettisons outmoded “theories” of communication couched in dualistic, empiricist, message-centered metatheory typically resonant with no-body. Merleau-Ponty (1968) appears to think through the implications of chiasm for human communication in working notes included as part of the unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible*. He writes, “The chiasm is not only a me[-]other exchange (the messages he receives reach me, the messages I receive reach him), it is also an exchange between me and the world, between the phenomenal body and the ‘objective’ body, between the perceiving and the perceived [. . .]” (p. 215). As Self and Other constitute “core concerns” from modern and postmodern perspectives, respectively (Lanigan, 2000), existential phenomenology and its emphasis on the already-imbricated state of these phenomena

– not only in purely interpersonal terms but also in more general terms of the material body’s situated relations with objects in the world<sup>9</sup> – is indeed a powerfully relevant philosophy for exploring the meaningful practices in which humans engage.

Existential phenomenology also has significant implications for the emerging field of videogame studies, as videogames and the practice of videogaming are the very symbolic sites at which the philosophy operates productively. Phenomenology’s “manner or style of thinking” allows us to conceptualize videogames as fleshy-things, their hardware interfaces and digitally synthetic worlds grounded in the “selfsame flesh” of the bodies that engage them (Sobchack, 2004, p. 287). Each videogame inserted into a console can open a novel alterity for our eventual enfolding, a mode of relations with the “virtual” that says more about our carnal, fleshy, immanent inhabitation of the everyday material world than the disembodied, fetishized, utopian, transcendent world of the cyberpunk. And what is more: while the study of videogames is indeed an investigation of the limits between body and world, we should never forget videogames’ role, too, as playful sites of coordinated, meaningful action between human beings.

### **Eidetic Phenomenology as Method**

Merleau-Ponty also provides phenomenologists with a specific method by way of which phenomenological research may proceed. According to Lanigan (1988) this phenomenological method is “both systematic and systemic” (p. 173); this is to say, while its three distinct steps proceed in a specified, systematic order, they synergistically and systemically draw upon one another at all phases of the research procedure.

This method begins with a phenomenological description, “which for Merleau-Ponty is a focus upon experience” (Lanigan, 1988, p. 173). As phenomenology is essentially descriptive, this step is important for *data* collection. Data, produced in hindsight, is “that which is *given* as evidence or *invention*” (Lanigan, 1992, p. 215, emphasis in original).<sup>10</sup> Phenomenological description is rigorous and intricate, as it involves intense focus on that which is typically taken for granted. According to Sobchack (2004):

Direct experience is not so much direct as it is *transparent* – either because we are primarily intending toward the world and our projects and not toward our modes and process of perception and expression or because we are historically and culturally habituated so that what is given to us in experience is taken for granted rather than taken up as potentially open engagement with the world and others.” (p. 5)

The second step of Merleau-Ponty’s method is the phenomenological reduction, which Lanigan (1988) identifies as “a specification of experience in consciousness” (p. 173). Especially important during this phase of the phenomenological method is the notion of intentionality, one of phenomenology’s most widely recognized contributions to philosophic thought. Intentionality names the taken-for-granted relation between consciousness and world, whereby both are literally *constituted* in the acts of perception and expression (all consciousness is *consciousness of something*, to use Husserl’s famous summation). The reduction phase of the phenomenological method, then, is characterized by a focus on *capta*, “that which is *taken* as evidence or *discovery*” (Lanigan, 1992, p. 215, emphasis in

original). We may consider this phase insight-full, as salient experiences manifest in and to consciousness from a *horizon* or *field* of all possible, describable phenomena. “In [. . .] intentional analysis, attention is given to a particular experience in which the various structures and modes of consciousness that have been synthesized to constitute it are analyzed and descriptively explained” (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 205). The systemic nature of *data* and *capta* is evident here, as *capta* – or “a seeing as” – is intertwined with the collection of *data* from a field of possible experiences.

Merleau-Ponty’s final methodological phase is the phenomenological interpretation, also known as the hermeneutic step (Lanigan, 1988; Ihde, 1977). Here phenomenologists attempt to gain foresight – to produce *acta*, that which is done, or “that which is *created* as evidence either by *convention* or *invention*” (Lanigan, 1992, p. 215, emphasis in original). Systemically, the *data-capta* relationship dialectically produces an *acta*-based orientation toward the world. “The existential-phenomenological (descriptive) system of inquiry investigates the various structures of orientation toward the world which make up human experience” (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 205). Recursively, then, all interpretative *acta* become *data* for further, future analysis.

This methodology is truly *productive* in the sense that it is deconstructive. As Lanigan (1994) notes, the phenomenological paradigmatic approach to research properly distinguishes between the encounter with evidence as it appears to consciousness (the order of experience) and the method of experiencing the evidence (the order of analysis). This is to say, while lived experience unfolds as an experiencer experiences an experience, analysis of this experience (if it is to be

critical and heuristic) should trace such a progression *backward*, beginning with lived experience (described as *data*) and tracing its processual constitution (as *capta*) to consciousness of the experiencer (when it is interpreted as *acta*). Conversely, reductionist, modernist (i.e., positivist) approaches to research assume “that the order of experience (OE) and the order of analysis (OA) are parallel orders of judgment” (Lanigan, 1994, p. 115). In sum:

The phenomenologist is moving (OE) from her/his experience (“observation”) to discover a phenomenon in consciousness (“measurement”) and then back as a judgment using the very discovered logic of the phenomenon in which the researcher’s *consciousness* of the phenomenon (OA) is a measure of the observation (experience). Only by starting with the OE and reversing it as the OA can the researchers be guaranteed of both accuracy and abstraction in description (depiction). (Lanigan, 1994, p. 112)

The phenomenology enacted in this thesis project will be an eidetic phenomenology. While Lanigan (1992) initially defines “eidetic” as “thinking” (p. 212), he also notes that the term indicates “a conceptual or ideational process” (p. 212). Eidetic phenomenology foregrounds intentional “consciousness of” when “making sense” of phenomena as they appear to consciousness (Lanigan, 1992, p. 212), and when moving toward a “concern with structures or invariants” (Ihde, 1977, pp. 60-61). Eidetic theory construction is “tested reflexively” against empirically derived experience (Lanigan, 2002, p. 213). In the case of an eidetic phenomenology, phenomenological interpretation informs theory construction.

That which phenomenology produces is, of course, one possible experiential variation among many. Phenomenology “is methodologically descriptive and legitimates the knowledge of the subject while pointing out the critical possibilities that result from the subject’s negotiation with the world” (Rubin, 1998, p. 267). Thus, while my body allows certain experiential possibilities to open for me, my body is at the same time necessarily particularized such that it facilitates *one variation in a range of possible experiences*. I may indicate the presence of these variations as I proceed through this experiment. The body “exists in order that the world exists for me. But also this body exists according to particulars – this body is sexed, muscular, dark” (Rubin, 1998, p. 268). My body is male; my body is white; my body is young; my body is disciplined by the socioeconomics of the American middle class. I can but experience the world by way of this body. These and other bodily conditions for my being-in-the-world are laid bare in Chapter 3.

Others undertaking this same project will undoubtedly experience it differently. My hope is that this project resonates with the possible or actual experiences of others in a wide spectrum of bodily comportments, such that its legitimacy is not a matter of being *the* account of a videogaming experience, but more so *one such* resounding phenomenology.

### **Research Procedure**

This eidetic phenomenology will unfold through a series of three reflections that draw upon self-generated “performative playings” of one videogame available for play on the Nintendo DS handheld videogame console, *Animal Crossing: Wild World* (explained below), in order to thematize both the videogame (as a noematic

correlate of the phenomenological *field* or *horizon*) and the practice of playing videogames (as a noetic correlate of the phenomenological *field* or *horizon*). These “performative playings” are rigorous, conscientious videogame play sessions performed with the intent of isolating the essential noematic and noetic structures of the videogame phenomenon.

I have chosen the name “performative playings” for specific reasons. By indicating that my play sessions are performative, I am accounting for videogame play as an activity of the body, one that, when undertaken, necessarily generates or constitutes a meaningful experience and does not merely “find one inside” the videogame itself. This is to say that meaningful experiences of videogames such as the ones I record here are emergent in the mutually constitutive nature of interaction between player(s) and videogame. I do not mean for the moniker to denote anything outside the realm of the ordinary or mundane, either. I am merely recognizing and attending to phenomena that normally occur when human beings play videogames, setting neither this study nor its associated experiences apart from that to which any other player could attend. To say that an experience of a videogame “normally occurs” does not mean any two players can or should claim to have “the same” experience when engaged in playing a videogame.

Undergoing “performative playings” involves a sort of vacillation between the flow of play and re-cognition of lived experience. As I play a videogame, I am immersed in a flow of experience and bodily involvement that is necessarily and logically different than the moments at which I am re-cognizing experience – trying to recall or bring forth the essential elements of the experience I have just had – and



describing *data* for future analysis. At times, shifting between moments of playful experience and moments of re-cognition are abrupt, as recording descriptive *data* with my computer keyboard involves literally disengaging my flowing, embodied experience of the videogame by *setting the videogame console aside* in order to free my hands and record experience.

Recording videogaming experiences allows me to generate descriptions of them and reduce these descriptions to essential themes to aid in my eventual interpretations. To place this procedure in the context of a larger methodology, I note that the self-generated *data* of the “performative playings” are generated as part of a phenomenological *description*, the thematized *capta* emerge as part of a phenomenological *reduction*, and the interplay of such *data* and *capta* dialectically produces *acta* – an *interpretive* orientation toward the *data-capta* relationship.

Before outlining the direction and thematic content of my phenomenological reflections, I will describe the videogame to be analyzed.

### **Animal Crossing: Wild World**

*Animal Crossing: Wild World* is the 2005 sequel to its predecessor, *Animal Crossing*, released in North America in 2002 and worldwide in 2004. Both games were developed and published by Nintendo and are therefore available only for play on Nintendo hardware (the Nintendo DS and Nintendo GameCube, respectively). Because *Animal Crossing: Wild World (ACWW)* is playable on the Nintendo DS handheld videogame console, players can interact with this videogame and with each other in novel ways facilitated by the hardware – for instance, by way of touch screen

interface and wireless Internet access. Because of these facets, this videogame will be the focus of my analysis.

*AC WW* is an open-ended simulation. That is, like similar videogames such as *The Sims*, it lacks quantifiable winning conditions and emphasizes instead a sort of exploratory, “free play,” or “sandbox” engagement in which players take up residence in a town, interact with computer-controlled and (occasionally) human-controlled characters who live there, perform daily maintenance tasks, collect a myriad of creatures and objects, make money, grow flowers and fruit, shop for furniture and clothes, decorate their homes and pay mortgages. The game can thusly be described in terms of Juul’s (2005) classic game model:

*Rules:* Players explore a one-time randomly generated town where trees, earth, rivers and oceans contain different valuable items each (real-time) day. The town store’s stock of goods, purchasable with in-game currency, rotates daily. Town locations and venues are “open” (i.e., accessible to the player) during real-world hours; some real-world calendar days present players with in-game holidays and events.

*Outcome:* No quantifiable outcome. Players collect varieties of fish, insects and fossils for donation to their respective collections in the town museum, or for sale at the town store to generate revenue. The “Happy Room Academy” rates players’ interior design and quality of goods; players are awarded with home expansions after accumulating sufficient in-game currency.

*Value assigned to outcome:* Non-player characters (“NPCs,” or computer-controlled characters) register likes and dislikes with the player via the town hall or

through postal correspondence. Players are rewarded for buying goods at the town store and for talking to NPCs, writing them letters, visiting their houses, running errands for them, etc.

*Effort:* Players are encouraged to play daily. They are rewarded for doing so with new and different goods available daily at the store, and punished for not doing so by upsetting correspondences/interactions with lonely or frustrated NPCs, by an overgrowth of weeds and dying flowers, and by roach infestations in players' homes. Players must pay a mortgage on their homes with money raised from selling harvested goods or running errands for NPCs. Proper and daily town upkeep is rewarded with rare items.

*Attachment:* NPCs move in and out of town. Players write letters to townspeople and make friends with them by establishing inside jokes. Players receive presents from NPC friends as part of postal correspondences. NPCs become more amicable toward players if players speak to them on a daily basis, visit their homes, compose letters to them using proper grammar and inside jokes, and buy them presents. Players are responsible for town upkeep, gardening, arranging constellations in the sky, designing the town flag, designing fabric patterns for clothing sold in stores, and customizing their avatars with hundreds of different articles of clothing and accessories.

*Consequences:* As many as four players can congregate in one town simultaneously (players can be in the same real-world room or connect via the Internet). Game rules do not provide structured activities for players to engage together, though players can generate their own events (hide and seek, trips to the

salon, swapping native and exotic fruits, joint fishing ventures, coffee together at the museum, etc.). Players may take pride in housekeeping and town status when hosting other players.

## **Touch**

My three reflections developed from performative playings of *ACWW* share a common thematic thread: touch. Touch is currently a salient theme in videogaming, as one new videogame console technology – the Nintendo Dual Screen handheld console – invites players to interact with videogame software by way of a touch-screen interface. The close association of touch with sight is also predominant theme in much of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy (1964a; 1964b; 1968; 2005). The crisscrossing – the mutually constitutive, codependent nature of sight and touch – constitutes a sensual matrix whereby a body may exist in the world. In *Eye and Mind* (1964b), one of Merleau-Ponty's most prominent reflections on the nature of vision, the author writes:

There is a human body when, between the seeing and the seen, between the touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a blending of some sort takes place – when the spark is lit between sensing and sensible, lighting the fire that will not stop burning until some accident of the body will undo what no accident would have sufficed to do [. . .]. (p. 164)

And later, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1968) observes:

We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangle, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is

encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as, conversely, the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without visual existence. (p. 134)

This passage – and Merleau-Ponty’s thinking on the whole – has profound implications for thinking and theorizing about videogames, as it recognizes the activity of multiple bodily senses at work in the practice of videogaming. Discourse about videogames has heretofore emphasized sight as *the* predominant sense utilized in engaging and evaluating videogame texts and experiences; that is, discourse defining “good videogames” has been underpinned by occulocentric and technocentric criteria dictating that “the best” videogames are those with the most “realistic” or complex graphical representations rendered most fluidly on and with ever-advanced, computerized console hardware. Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on thinking about sight and touch as intertwined and co-productive shatters much conventional thinking about videogames couched in these criteria, and allows a reclamation of the body as the locus of meaningful experience in the practice of videogaming. As noted previously in this chapter, thinking about videogaming as an embodied practice means beginning analyses of videogames in a theoretical position fundamentally different than those approaching the same phenomena from four predominant paradigms for videogame study.

I intend to offer an interpretation of touch as the key to an embodied understanding of videogaming (and I use “interpretation” here in the phenomenological sense, as the final methodological stage of an eidetic

phenomenology). Merleau-Ponty (1968) indicates several modalities of the sense – “three distinct experiences which subtend one another, three dimensions which overlap but are distinct” (p. 133) – heuristic for this eidetic phenomenology. He describes

[. . .] A touching of the sleek and the rough, a touching of the things – a passive sentiment of the body and of its space – and finally a veritable touching of the touch, when my right hand touches my left hand while it is palpating the things, where the “touching subject” passes over to the rank of the touched, descends into the things, such that the touch is formed in the midst of the world and as it were in the things. (1968, p. 134)

The three analysis chapters to follow are phenomenological reductions that unpack each modality of the touch as they emerge in the descriptions generated from performative playings of *Animal Crossing: Wild World*. Each concludes with an interpretation of touch’s implications for further theorizing about videogaming as an embodied practice.

The first reflection addresses “a touching of the sleek and the rough,” a touching of the qualities of the things, or that which occurs as the player touches the videogame in a physical or material sense. In *ACWW*, as players touch material videogame hardware in order to touch synthetic objects in the game world, the act of touching becomes a complex experience explicated with the help of Don Ihde’s analysis of the role of technology in the reversible relations between body and world (Ihde, 2003; Verbeek, 2005). Here I ask: *How do a player’s various carnal modes of interacting with videogames function noetically to shape experience of videogaming?*

The second reflection uses the first as a context in order to explore “a touching of the things,” or the ways in which the game touches the player. This chapter draws heavily on Vivian Sobchack’s theory of interobjectivity – “the possibility of a similarly reversible [similar to intersubjectivity] structure of empathy and sympathy between our own subjective embodiment and other body-objects” (2004, p. 311) – to ask: *How does the reversibility of relations inherent in the flesh produce meaningful experiences or relationships in or with a videogame?* Here a phenomenology of synthetic bodies (Marks, 2002) grounded in the “selfsame flesh” (Sobchack, 2004) as players’ bodies – and of players’ engagement with the videogame at a sensuous, passionate, carnal level as both subjective object and objective subject – adds a new voice to the debate about videogames’ ability to “touch” us in the way a “moving” piece of art, literature or music might.

Using the first two reflections as a ground, then, the third reflection interrogates the “veritable touching of the touch,” that moment “where the ‘touching subject’ passes over to the rank of the touched, descends into the things” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 134). This moment is nothing less than that reversibility of expression and perception we call human communication. With an emphasis on the “touching subject” in an intersubjective context, this reflection examines the ways in which players “keep in touch” by way of meaningful action in a game space in order to ask: *How are human communication models relevant in the meaningful context of the videogame?* Such a relationship presupposes the workings of the material touch explored in the first reflection, and the passionate interobjective touch explored in the second. Touch is “a contact sense” (Grosz, 1994, p. 98), and because Merleau-Ponty

(2005) reminds us that “each contact of an object with part of our objective body is, therefore, in reality a contact with the whole of the present or possible phenomenal body” (p. 369), this third reflection utilizes the model of human communication advanced by Roman Jakobson (Peterson & Langellier, 2005; Lanigan, 1992; 2000), particularly its “contact” element and correlative “phatic” function, to explore the ways in which videogame players establish, maintain and prolong meaningful experiences with other body-subjects in synthetic space.

I hope this work contributes to the vastly expanding field of videogame studies by relocating the body as a vital site of meaningful experience in the practice of videogaming, and to the communication discipline a set of theoretical tools for further investigation of a medium whose importance has been largely ignored.



### Chapter 3

#### BEING-IN-THE-(GAME)WORLD

##### Touching is Good

The copy on a November 2004 pre-release advertisement for the Nintendo DS handheld videogame console reads:

Touching is not good. Or so we're told. Please do no touch ... yourself, your nose, wet paint, that zit, grandma's best china. You name it, you can't touch it. We think that's wrong. Why shouldn't you touch what you want? What if you could touch the games you play? What if you could make something jump or shoot or run just by touching it? Let's face it, touching the game means controlling the game. And when we say control, we mean precision control. One right touch and you're master of the universe. One wrong touch and you're toast. Forget everything you've ever been told and repeat after us.

Touching is good. Touching is good. (Nintendo, 2004)

While the mature, black-and-white advertisement (see Appendix) was foremost a divergence from Nintendo's pastel-filled, traditional advertising (Bulik, 2005), it also signaled a profound shift in videogame advertising philosophy *per se*. In a market historically dominated by products that play to consumers' visual sensibilities by promising intense visual displays, the Nintendo DS advertisement completely eschews talk of vision in favor of an embodied sense heretofore largely unaddressed in videogame discourse: touch.

The American videogame market's disregard for touch in discourse about videogames and the practice of videogaming might be seen as the natural extension of a Western epistemological devaluation of the sense, its conception as a "second-class citizen" and subordination to sight (Finnegan, 2002, p. 197).<sup>11</sup> According to Grosz (1994):

Since the earliest days of Greek philosophy, vision was considered superior to the other senses. Knowledge itself was generally described in metaphors derived from vision and optics. Thus it has tended to function not only as the model for knowledge but also as representative of all the other senses. (p. 97)

Because of its ability to function with simultaneity, at a distance from perceptible objects and events, and outside typical considerations of causality, vision assumes this "privileged position" in Western theorizing, "unifying and hierarchically ordering the other senses, taming or honing them" (Grosz, 1994, p. 97). Crary (1994) similarly traces the dissociation of sight and touch with an historical account that reclaims their connection. Touch "had been an integral part of classical theories of vision in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (Crary, 1994, p. 19). Modernity's toll on this relationship is striking, however. "The subsequent dissociation of touch from sight occurs within a pervasive 'separation of the senses' and industrial remapping of the body in the nineteenth century" (Crary, 1994, p. 19). In terms of discourse about videogaming, this "oculocentrism" perpetuates an epistemological prominence of computer-generated graphics as "the" indication or indispensable criterion of a "good" videogame console (i.e. – *How do we know a good videogame when we see one?*).

Yet the pervasiveness of touch in everyday experience – let alone the practice of videogaming – cannot be overlooked as easily. “The experience of physically touching something – other people, external objects – assures us of being in touch both with the world outside ourselves and with our own embodied actuality” (Finnegan, 2002, p. 196). The ways in which touch as a “contact sense” allows players to be “in touch” with other players via the symbolic practice of videogaming is the subject of Chapter Five. As a mode of corporeal engagement, touch “provides contiguous access to an abiding object”; produces the notion or shape of form (in a diachronic, successive manner); and grants access to texture, depth and surface of objects (Grosz, 1994, p. 98). Moreover, Grosz notes some feminist accounts of touch reassert the sense as a precondition for sight – as in the course of human development it operates prior to sight – and thus position tactility as superior to visuality.

In his later work (specifically in the unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible*) Merleau-Ponty devotes much attention to the relationship between sight and touch, between vision and tactility. The two senses, of course, have their individual reversible and reflexive capacities, as Merleau-Ponty (1968) writes: “There is a circle of the touched and the touching, the touched takes hold of the touching; there is a circle of the visible and the seeing, the seeing is not without visible existence [. . .]” (p. 143). But he pushes this idea further in noting that “there is even an inscription of the touching in the visible, of the seeing in the tangible – and the converse [. . .]” (1968, p. 143). This description recaptures the interwoven nature of the two senses that was all but obliterated by modernity. “The loss of touch as a conceptual component of vision meant the loosening of the eye from the network of referentiality

incarnated in tactility and its subjective relation to perceived space” (Crary, 1994, p. 19). Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of sight as *already implicated* in touch reincarnates a vision modernity empirically isolated.

So indicating a complete absence of visuality in the “Touching is Good” advertisement may not be entirely appropriate; the visible is there, inscribed in the tangible when the ad evokes the touch by way of vision (the crusty fingerprints over which the copy is printed are all too familiar to gamers whose televisions bear their mark) and promises engaging visual experiences by way of the touch (“What if you could make something jump or shoot or run just by touching it?”). Nintendo is attempting to prove to players something it says their bodies have known all along (“Let’s face it”) but because of both convention (“You name it, you can’t touch it”) and technological shortcomings have never been able to actualize (“We think that’s wrong. Why shouldn’t you touch what you want?”): what Merleau-Ponty (1968) calls “the double and cross situating of the visible in the tangible and the tangible in the visible” (p. 134). Like Nintendo, Merleau-Ponty wants us to “forget everything you’ve ever been told.” He writes:

We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as, conversely, the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without visual existence. Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world. (1968, p. 134)

In this chapter, I ask: *How do a player's various carnal modes of interacting with videogames function noetically to shape experience of videogaming?* Recall from Chapter 2 that Husserl differentiated between that which is experienced (*noema*) and the mode of its experiencing (*noesis*). I am interested in the way a certain material technology intersects with an “intertwined” sight-touch to shape my experience of a particular videogame. This particular “intersection,” however, is constituted by reflection that organizes a *pre-reflective* experience of playing videogames. In other words, to say that my body “intersects” with my Nintendo DS is something of a misnomer conjured when I reflect on my experience touching the material technology – as if I were somehow *here* while the technology was somehow *there*, waiting to be actualized by my all-knowing touch. As Sedgwick (2003) notes:

The sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity; to touch is to always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold, and always to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the textured object. (p. 14)

I am keen to approach playing videogames from the standpoint of touch because doing so situates my experience precisely in the chiasm Merleau-Ponty notes is that location of reversibility between subject and object – as immanently *arising-from* rather than transcendently *bearing-on*.

In this specific case, my focus is the role the Nintendo DS videogame console, a material technology, plays in the reversible relations between my body and the (game)world. As an investigation of Merleau-Ponty's first modality of touch – “a

touching of the sleek and the rough,” or a touching of the qualities of the things – this chapter is a phenomenology of my being-in-the-(game)world, an intentional bodily comportment grounded in the intertwining of embodied touch-sight. In this endeavor, I appropriate the typology of human-technology-world relations established by phenomenologist and technoscience philosopher Don Ihde.

### **Human-Technology-World**

Being-in-the-(game)world involves relating to the space, the gamespace, of that world. And my meaningful experiences *of/in* videogames and *of/in* the practice of videogaming arise in the chiasm – that primordial, preconscious precondition of the body’s already-interwoven, already-intertwined, mutually constitutive relation to the world and all “things” (like my body) in it. From this perspective, then, phenomenologist Don Ihde has developed a typology of human-technology-world relations in order to “flesh out” (or re-cognize) the many relational modalities of the emergent, chiasmatic reversibility of subject and object, and to illustrate the role of various technologies in human-world relations. While Ihde constructed this typology over the course of various writings and reflections (see Ihde, 2003, for a brief overview), Verbeek (2005) has expertly summarized (and extended) his philosophic project.

For Ihde, technologies can play three roles in the interrelationship of body and world. The first set of human-technology relations is formed by background relations, in which humans are related “neither explicitly to a technology nor via a technology to the world” (Verbeek, 2005, p. 128). Rather, technologies shape the context of human experience beneath the level of conscious awareness, as

exemplified by the thermostat that clicks on and off to regulate the context of experience regardless of anyone's immediate attention. Ihde illustrates these relations through a simple schematic:

I (-technology/world)

The second set of Ihde's relations results when technologies mediate<sup>12</sup> human experience. When bound in these relations, humans are "not *directly* in bodily-sensory experience present to the world but are so *via* technological artifacts" (Verbeek, 2005, p. 123, emphasis in original). Ihde posits two kinds of these mediated relations: embodiment relations and hermeneutic relations. The first, embodiment relations, names that which occurs when "human beings take technological artifacts into their experiencing, and thereby broaden the area of sensitivity of their bodies to the world" (Verbeek, 2005, p. 125), and can be illustrated:

(I-technology) → world

One popular example of this type of relation is the relation of human to her eyeglasses. When she is wearing eyeglasses, the subject is unaware of the technology's presence; she takes them into herself or embodies them. Moreover, her comportment in the world *is* a specific way because of the glasses, and the world *is* constituted a particular way because the glasses mediate embodied experience.

The second type of mediated relations is hermeneutic relations, in which humans "are involved with the world *via* an artifact, but the artifact is not transparent" (Verbeek, 2005, p. 126, emphasis in original), and can be illustrated:

I → (technology-world)

Here, the world is experienced not *through* the technology but *by means of it* (Verbeek, 2005). The world is “read” by way of the technology. A popular hermeneutic relation is that between a human, a thermometer and the world, whereby the human makes sense of the conditions or state of the world by reading the thermometer’s indicator of temperature.

The final set of relations are so-called alterity relations, which exist when technology appears as a “quasi-other.” Thus, humans in this relation are not related to the world *by* or *through* technology, but to the technology itself. Alterity relations can be illustrated:

I → technology (-world)

In this relation, technological objects “possess a kind of independence,” an “apparent autonomy” (Verbeek, 2005, p. 127). For instance, some humans name their computers, bestow upon them an identity, then use this name to curse the machines as they malfunction or opaquely impede the user’s intentions.

In all these illustrations, however, the notion of the “world” is problematic when translating Ihde’s relations for videogame studies. While videogame consoles are indeed technological objects, difficulty arises when we realize that the very technological object we engage in the space of the everyday world is in some ways an *encapsulation* of the space of another world – the gameworld. This is to say, when I pick up my Nintendo DS handheld videogame console and place in it the *Animal Crossing: Wild World* videogame cartridge, the world with which I hope to relate is not as much the one of everyday space as it is the one of *gamespace* (i.e., the “town” in which I live, Trantor). As I sit in the space of my bedroom floor, bent over my



videogame, another space – a space within this familiar space – is present to me: the space of the gameworld. My body rests on the soft, carpeted floor and my hands grasp the body of the videogame – the blue plastic of the Nintendo DS which encases two LCD screens, a touch sensor, speakers, directional controls, buttons, circuitry, wires, a battery, a stylus housed in a slot, and a game cartridge whose “hardwired” algorithms are executed by this ensemble, interface with it as I interface with the machine. When the game is “booted,” the clear screen no longer shows my reflection but disappears as the space of the gameworld unfolds to the edges of the screen and seemingly beyond. When Merleau-Ponty (1964c) writes, “We grasp external space through our bodily situation” (p. 5) he could not have been more correct about *my* situation. I am in the middle of my bedroom floor *grasping this space*, my fingers wrapped around it, encompassing a world – while simultaneously comporting both my body and the algorithmically-governed body of my avatar in such a way that “makes sense” of this space. Merleau-Ponty (1964c) continues:

A “corporeal or postural schema” gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them. A system of possible movements, or “motor projects,” radiates from us to our environment. Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. (p. 5)

How do I make sense of my being-in-the-(game)world – my intentional and constitutive relation to the space of my AC: *WW* town? The gamespace is populated with synthetic objects (my avatar included) generated by codified rules determining a very specific system of possible actions, so while I am always immanently “here” –

sitting on the floor of my bedroom embracing my Nintendo DS – the space of this world is full of potential for action, full of “I cans” that “radiate” into a space that both stretches beyond anything I can see, yet is paradoxically contained within my grip as I’m aware of my hands wrapped around the back of the console, in a space where avatars should play. Because the Nintendo DS is technologically capable of highlighting the synergistic “crisscrossing” of my visual and tactile senses, new experiences in this space become available to me, and postural schemas I need in this (game)world rub against the “practical” and “implicit” bodily knowledge I take for granted in my coping with the everyday world. My relations with this technology are available in several modalities.

### **Background Relations, or A ‘Comfortable’ Position ‘Made in Japan’**

My being-in-the-(game)world is made possible by technological relations outside my ordinary awareness, such that some technologies shape the context of my videogaming experience without my noticing them. For instance, when reflecting on my preparations for a session of *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, I wrote:

I wouldn’t say that I am a ritualistic gamer, but I do like to be comfortable when I play videogames. I usually occupy the same spot on my bedroom floor when I play handheld videogames, and I sit cross-legged with my back against the side of my bed. I’ve tried to sit at a desk while playing, and I’ve also tried to play in a recliner. Neither of these positions, though, is as comfortable for me as that sweet spot on my bedroom floor. Sometimes my legs tire and I roll over onto my side, but this typically pins down one of my arms and makes controlling the game difficult.

In this tiny passage, background relations shaping my experience of videogaming are evident. Particularly, my “comfort” while videogaming is a product of such relations. I am seated on a carpeted floor in the second story of my suburban home; both the floor supporting my body in a “comfortable” position and the carpet softly brushing against my legs and rear are forgettable yet integral to my enjoying this experience. Likewise, my wooden bed frame props up my back as my body leans against it (I occasionally hear creaks as I shift my weight while playing). The “absent presence” of the floor and the bed thus shape the *field* of my possible videogaming experiences; these technologies are “usually experienced only when they stop functioning” (Verbeek, 2005, p. 128). Such is the case, too, with other technologies with which my body relates in the background of experience. For instance, I wrote the above passage on one of the hottest days of the summer, but my body was cool and “comfortable” because of the invisible workings of my room’s ceiling fan and closed blinds, and of and my home’s central air conditioning unit (a technology not necessarily “in” my room, but all around it in my house’s duct work, and outside the home, in the humming cooling unit jutting from the side of the building). Should the air conditioning unit have suddenly ceased its silent operations, my experience of this videogaming session, my being-in-the-(game)world, might have been quite different.

I might also abstract the notion of background relations one step further to encompass the social and economic circuits in which my being-in-the-(game)world is embedded. Such an abstraction serves to historicize and politicize my experience of *AC: WW*, as it accounts for the unseen relations of bodies, technology and economic systems that give rise to the *possibility* of such an experience. After all, “our copy of

*Zelda* or *Starcraft* did not spring into being ready-made. It is the outcome of a production process, of the combined labor of hundreds of people” (Kline et al, 2003, p. 197). Swirling around my comfortable position on the floor of my bedroom are indeed a whole host of “background” socioeconomic relations that fetishize the videogames I play, that “present us with goods as if they arrived by magic, hiding the mental and manual toil that goes into their making” (Kline et al, 2003, p. 197). As I gaze at the packaging for *Animal Crossing: Wild World* and notice the three-word, past-tense phrase “MADE IN JAPAN” obscured next to an identification barcode and serial number, I do *not* see the bodies at work *making* this videogame, the “nimble fingers” of “a global pool of primarily female cheap labour” struggling to bring this game to my bedroom (Kline et al, 2003, p. 205). In the background are “game development testers, producers, distributors, attorneys, accountants, reviewers, salespeople/proprietors, advertisers (with their own teams of graphic designers, copy personnel, proofreaders, producers, and distributors), and manufacturers (to produce a technology on which games are developed and distributed, as well as the packaging in which games are sold)” (Ruggill et al, 2004, p. 299). Like others writing about videogames, such as North American journalists, I do *not* see Nintendo videogames such as *ACWW* “until they appear at [Nintendo’s] highly automated just-in-time distribution facility in North Bend, Washington” (Kline et al, 2003, p. 206). And I do not experience the human-technology relations inside this facility, the “computer system that communicates its orders by radio frequency, automated guided vehicles, pick-by-light racking systems, bar code scanners, and a panoptic surveillance system to monitor orders and worker performance” (Kline et al, 2003, p. 206). When the

game is on its way to my expectant hands, I do not experience the political contingencies of its arrival. I see only “FOR SALE, RENTAL AND USE ONLY IN USA, CANADA, MEXICO AND LATIN AMERICA” printed on the ACWW packaging; I do not experience the stress of relocated bodies:

In 1994, Nintendo of America laid off 136 US workers involved in assembling games and machines at its Redmond headquarters and relocated operations to Mexico. Although the company denied that the move was related to the recent North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the fired employees were deemed eligible for compensation benefits under the NAFTA worker adjustment program, a decision a Nintendo spokesperson termed “frustrating.” (Kline et al, 2003, p. 206)

Finally, from my *physical position* on the floor in my bedroom made possible by technological background relations, when I see also on the videogame’s packaging a warning that reads: “IF YOU HAVE EPILEPSY OR HAVE HAD SEIZURES OR OTHER UNUSUAL REACTIONS TO FLASHING LIGHTS OR PATTERNS, CONSULT A DOCTOR BEFORE PLAYING VIDEO GAMES,” I do not re-cognize my occupation of a *privileged economic position* that allows my access to a physician, to the air conditioned home in which I play, or to the videogame and console technology itself.

As part of phenomenological investigation, I engage in an *epoché*, a “bracketing off” or “isolation” of all but the essential features of the phenomenon under scrutiny (Ihde, 1977). While this act involves typically ignoring temporarily and for the purpose of experiential clarity many of the technological, socioeconomic

and political background relations that make my experience possible, I can never dismiss entirely their role in my being-in-the-(game)world.

### **Mediated Relations, or ‘Acts,’ ‘Moments,’ and What My Body ‘Knows’**

My being-in-the-(game)world is a bodily comportment that situates me primarily in mediated relations with the gameworld, and such relations are accomplished by my embodied and hermeneutic relations with the Nintendo DS console. This comportment elucidates actions in both everyday space and gamespace that are of certain logical types, or as Galloway (2006) states, certain “moments.” As a videogame player (or, to use Galloway’s term, “operator”) my embodied acts are of two distinct (in theory) yet overlapping (in practice) spatial moments.

First are nondiegetic operator acts, or acts “of configuration. They are always executed by the operator and received by the machine. They happen on the exterior of the *world* of the game but are still part of the game software and completely integral to the play of the game” (Galloway, 2006, p. 12). Nondiegetic operator acts can be directly related to videogame setup. For instance, in *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, I (the player) am asked to perform nondiegetic acts when my avatar lifts the phone in its bedroom (when this happens, a menu appears and I am prompted to set certain “options,” “preferences,” and parameters for gameplay). But nondiegetic operator actions can also be the very site of gameplay, Galloway (2006) explains. Games like *Final Fantasy* or *Earthbound* are “played” almost entirely by menu; that is, the player selects menu options to dictate the manner in which combat sequences will unfold, the order in which weapons will fire, in which avatars will move and where, etc. In cases like these, *playing* the game becomes synonymous with

*configuring* the game in nondiegetic moments. Galloway (2006) admits that on these grounds, one might even argue for the complete absence of the diegetic from the videogame apparatus.

Also part of my embodied experience, however, are diegetic operator acts, “the moment of direct operator action inside the world of gameplay” (Galloway, 2006, p. 22). Diegetic operator acts can be either “move acts” or “expressive acts.” The former typically appears in the form of avatar motion and involve adjusting the position of the player character in gamespace. In console videogames, players typically perform these acts with one thumb by way of a controller’s analog stick or “D-pad” (a four-point directional pad). Another diegetic operator act is the expressive act, whereby the player inter-acts with “actionable” objects in gamespace. Expressive acts in *AC: WW* include shake, dig, open, cast, etc. In console videogames, players typically perform these acts with one thumb by way of a controller’s buttons (usually labeled with letters like A, B, X, and Y, or with other symbols like geometric shapes).

These “gamic” (Galloway, 2006) moments flow and overlap in the formal videogame apparatus; they bleed into one another, make one another possible – but *make sense* to me only by way of my body and all its sensuous capacities. My recorded videogaming experiences point to an implicit corporeal schema for action in these moments that ebb and flow beneath my ordinary level of awareness.

When trying to establish some re-cognition of perceptible differences between my using “traditional” videogame controls and the Nintendo DS’s touchable interface, I wrote:

I feel very different when I use the “manual” DS controls as opposed to the touch interface when interacting with the game. When I’m using the touch interface, I’m above the game, outside Trantor, my omniscient hand reaching forth and directing the actions of a world. I touch the ground in front of my avatar and he moves to occupy that area. I touch a tree and he grabs it and shakes the fruit from it. I specify ends, not means; goals, not processes.

When I am using the D-pad along with “A” and “B” buttons (in a manner I’ve been accustomed to for so many years, with all Nintendo’s previous systems), I am specifying the reverse. I press “up” and my character walks northward. I stand by the tree, press “A” and shake the fruit from it.

This experience can be juxtaposed with another:

Trying to use the traditional directional controls for menu-driven moments in the game is awkward – and has been for me as long as I’ve been playing videogames. How tedious it is to move the on-screen cursor, point by point, to get it where it needs to go. The touchable screen is so liberating! I can’t imagine doing something like writing a letter with the on-screen keypad by way of traditional controls. I’ve been inputting text into videogames since the days of arcade high-score initial entry. Even then, it was hard – but the touch screen makes this part of the game so much easier to accomplish.

The first excerpt is a description of diegetic acts and my body’s engagement in them. In a move act, “I touch the ground in front of my avatar and he moves to occupy that area.” The presence of third-person pronouns here indicates my position “above” the game or “outside” the diegesis of the gameworld. The diegetic “pleasure” of being-



in-the-(game)world is ruptured by my decision to “control” my avatar via the touchable screen interface from the “outside” (as opposed to the equally-as-touchable D-pad and buttons). In the case of a diegetic expressive act – shaking a tree to collect its fruit – my decision to act on the tree by way of “traditional” controls creates an experience whereby the fluidity of the diegesis is upheld. “I stand by the tree, press ‘A’ and shake the fruit from it.” This statement unfolds via first-person pronouns and in a burst of action; I am sutured into the gamespace, my being-in-the-(game)world upheld by the “traditional” interface. My body prefers to act in diegetic moments by way of an embodied relation to the videogame console’s traditional controls.

While in the first passage use of the console’s touchable screen demands a comportment that ruptures my being-in-the-(game)world, the technology’s use in the second passage actually helps *maintain* this experience. Significant here is the fact that I am using the touchable screen for *nondiegetic* acts. I no longer feel “awkward” when manipulating menus, as I do when I attempt these acts with traditional controls. Because much of *Animal Crossing: Wild World* unfolds in nondiegetic moments (moments such as the one described above, when I must write a letter to a neighbor via an on-screen, non-diegetic keyboard), the touchable interface is “liberating” as it makes these moments “easier.” And because this comportment coincides with a bodily preference, my vacillations between diegetic and nondiegetic moments become more fluid than they are “tedious.” My body prefers to act in non-diegetic moments by way of an embodied relation to the videogame console’s touchable screen interface controls.

Why do I experience “diegetic operator moments” (Galloway, 2006) so differently depending on my conscious choice of interface technology? This passage may point to an answer:

When I am fishing, I notice some distinct disparity. When fishing with traditional controls, I move my avatar along the shoreline with the D-pad, turn him to face the silhouette of the fish swimming just beneath the ocean surface, and press “A” to cast my line into the water. I am within my avatar, specifying these processes to get my desired fish. Touching the screen requires me to tap my avatar every time I want him to cast his line. So many times, I have tapped the location in the water where I want my lure to drop – have reached out to the very spot I see and *know* the line needs to fall in order to catch the fish. Instead, I need to tap the body of my avatar and watch as he casts the line.

In diegetic moments, “I am within my avatar.” When my avatar is holding a fishing rod (which I have “equipped” in another, nondiegetic, moment), it exhibits now a capacity for a new expressive act (“cast”). If I am “within” my avatar, embodying that “implicit notion between our body and things” Merleau-Ponty says facilitates “a system of possible movements” that “radiates” from the body’s zero-point, then the touch screen’s demand that I touch *my body* – that I locate expressive capacities *on* the body rather than *in* the crisscrossing vectors allowing me to grip this space – does not “sit” well with my embodied sensibilities. I see a space where my rod must fall, and, as I would in daily life, reach for that space of possibility as I would reach for the glass sitting next to me in everyday space. But I am denied, repressed, befuddled.

What I “know” is not what I am prompted to do; the comportment necessary for my continued being-in-the-(game)world does not resonate with “what my body knows.” A vision “encrusted” in touch means the possibilities I en-vision are promised in some way to the touch of my hand in this gameworld; however, in this particular experience, such is not the case.

One more observation about the relation of my body to the videogame technology and thus to the gameworld is pertinent here. In all the above passages, I consistently write about “touching” the Nintendo DS console’s touch screen interface. In actuality, however, I am not touching the screen directly. Instead, I am holding a plastic stylus pen with which I subsequently touch the screen. In an embodiment relation to the stylus technology, however, I take the stylus into my experiencing (Verbeek, 2005). My touch is honed thanks to the tapered head of the stylus, and thus certain en(game)worlded objects become available to (and for) me. I am not aware of the stylus’ presence; I touch it yet claim to touch the world. But the stylus occasionally impinges on my sensible field. For instance:

When I am using the stylus, the stylus imposes itself in my field of vision; I see the stylus working and flitting across the screen because I can’t see through it to the gameworld. I feel and hear the satisfying “click” of the stylus on the touch-sensitive plastic of the Nintendo DS’s bottom screen, but my vision is somewhat impaired by the presence of the stylus. When I am moving my avatar without the stylus, I am aware of my hands on the console, but they are not part of what I view with my eyes.

Maintaining my being-in-the-(game)world means maintaining that “crisscrossing” of sight and touch, such that one does not *cut* or disrupt the other (though they do, as Merleau-Ponty notes, “infringe” upon one another). When that which I touch (now apparent to my vision is the fact that I touch not this gameworld but the stylus) “imposes itself” on my consciousness (loses its “status” as an embodied technology), I must work to regain this relation, reading the algorithms visually and tactically as I am – in this a hermeneutic relation with their algorithmic and technological processes.

### **Alterity Relations, or ‘How the Game Paused Itself’**

Unlike some techno-futurist accounts of videogaming that leave the body behind when articulating the player’s “immersion” in the gameworld, the following passage highlights precisely the opposite state of affairs:

As I neared the end of my play session today, the battery indicator on my Nintendo DS flashed bright red and my game paused itself. A message appeared on the DS’s bottom screen: “Your battery is running low. It may be a good idea to save your game soon.” The message wasn’t talking to Bryan the avatar at all. It was talking to me, Bryan the player. I am the one in control of the DS hardware and I am this world’s only source of life, as my failure to plug the unit into the wall after I’ve finished playing today could mean “lights out” for Trantor. I am always reminded, in moments like this, of the interplay between hardware, software and gameworld. In this case, the hardware was straining, the software let me know about the battery drain, and the “dialogue” between the two interrupted the gameworld.<sup>13</sup>

Here, the videogame literally hails me, automatically interrupts its typical functioning and calls to me as I am resting on my bedroom floor, holding the Nintendo DS. I am not at all lost in the ether but instead “reminded” not only of the necessity of the videogame’s objective body (the plastic and silicon components that make play possible), but also of the integral role my body plays in this relationship. Supposedly, “I am the one in control.” Yet jostled from my relations with the technology and the gameworld, I have no choice but to observe the opacity of the Nintendo DS in this sudden alterity relation. I do not pause the videogame; the videogame “pauses itself.” In this case, the material constraints of the hardware (in this case, the capacity of the battery to hold a charge) are apparent as my being-in-the-game(world) is abruptly disengaged, my attention on the technology that sustains this possibility and the action demanded of me in the material world of my bedroom. Without any consideration, I save my progress in the videogame and unpack the battery charger; my body knows what to do so that I might sustain the world in my hands.

The videogame hardware and software are here in an inaccessible “dialogue” with one another. This happens occasionally when I play *Animal Crossing: Wild World*:

When I awaken my avatar and he hops out of bed, I cannot do a thing.

“Preparing Trantor,” a message on the screen says. “Please wait.” I tap the screen to no effect; I press the console’s buttons with none, either. I hear a tone that indicates the game is “thinking” – a high, lilting, repetitive arpeggio accompanied visually by a spinning arrow. I can do nothing but wait.

When one facet of my embodied sight-touch is severed (here, the touch screen is deactivated while the videogame hardware accesses data from the software cartridge), I am likewise positioned in an alterity relation with the videogame. A “discussion” is occurring and “I cannot do a thing” in a world where action literally defines my presence. I see but cannot touch; I hear but cannot comprehend. So accustomed to the synergy between sight and touch, and now at the mercy of the Nintendo DS, “I can do nothing but wait” while this thing – in its very apparent thing-ness – carries on an internal dialogue with itself.

In an alterity relation with my Nintendo DS console, the material technology exhibits a *for-itself* that profoundly affects my embodied relation to it. That is to say, while my being-in-the-game(world) is disrupted, I nevertheless experience an increased awareness of my embodied situation. The frustration I experience at having gameplay halted in order to recharge the console, or at my inability to affect the videogame with the usual pokes and prods, is indicative of that very reversibility Merleau-Ponty notes is key to our understanding of the body’s interrelationship with both the world and enworlded objects. When “the touched takes hold of the touching” (1968, p. 143) – when the Nintendo DS arrests *me*, grips *me* – I am aware of my body as an object at the mercy of this nonintentional object. Indeed, my “being touched” by the videogame is an experience that requires deeper investigation, as its implications extend beyond the scope of my material engagement with a technology to the essence of videogames’ aesthetic and ethical capacities. These capacities are the subject of Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4

### INTEROBJECTIVITY AND THE PASSIONATE PLAYER

“Objects, subjects, world – their common flesh constitutes a moving, ‘touching,’ manifold of being.” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 308)

“If a typewriter could talk, it probably would have very little to say; our automatic washers are probably not hiding secret dream machines deep inside their drums. But these microchips really blow you away.” (Bernstein, 2001, p. 157)

I remember the day Lobo moved out. It occurred so suddenly that it rocked me, made my eyes widen and my mouth open to accommodate the sharp, rushing intake of air. In Trantor, the algorithmically controlled wolf, Lobo, was my best friend. He was a competitive, seemingly insensitive beast, always mocking others for their fashion choices and attempting continual one-upmanship. But I knew his sensitive side. I knew how proud he was to call himself my friend, even though I always beat him when challenged to a fishing competition. I remember how we’d surreptitiously mail one another letters with enclosed gifts – me, hoping to make a better impression; him, trying to compose his messages with that air of egotism but undercutting it all with the most special presents. One day, Lobo invited me to his house, and when I arrived, he presented me with a framed photo of himself, the highest accolade from any NPC in *Animal Crossing: Wild World*. It was a token of

friendship. “Can I tell you something?” he asked. “I’m thinking of leaving.” I immediately began sending him more mail, more gifts. I paid him more visits and fished with him as often as I could. He and I had unique nicknames for each other, and he laughed with an “Ar-ooo-ooo” every time he hailed me by my codename (“Crazy B”). He kept the same late hours I did, and when the sun had set on the Nintendo DS’s upper screen, I knew I’d find Lobo still traipsing about Trantor, hunting beetles or fishing for rainbow trout. He always kept me company. But Lobo’s wanderlust got the better of him, I suppose, because one day I awoke, checked my mailbox, and found a letter from Lobo saying he’d gone. The site of his former home is still vacant, as I hope it always will be. No one – no-thing? – can replace Lobo.

I was never under the impression that Lobo was anything but a computer-controlled object – a very specific sequence of 1s and 0s designed to fuse in some way with the similar numeric amalgamation that is my avatar – but this doesn’t necessarily mean he (or my avatar, *for that matter*) is something I can’t find touching, something that can’t move me or touch me in a profound, embodied way. Increasingly, in fact, players ask their videogames to do this. For instance, as Kushner (2006) describes his daughter’s relation with *Nintendogs*, a puppy training simulation on the Nintendo DS, “These pixilated pups exist only in a handheld game, never die, and disappear when Sami snaps the case shut. But the emotions they elicit, from pride and love to guilt and envy, are very real” (p. 116). Most interesting, however, is Kushner’s (2006) description of his daughter’s videogame play practices:



Sami's *Nintendogs* experience began at the door of a dog pound. The first thing she did was wrap her knuckles on the touchscreen. Her knock was answered by the loud yapping of puppies. Her eyes brightened, her heart melted. The dogs nuzzled up to her finger as she scratched the screen.

*Nintendogs* had Sami from "woof." (p. 116)

Sami's visceral relationship to her videogame hardware (wrapping her knuckles on the touchscreen) and to her synthetic puppies ("her eyes brightened") highlights the position of the body as the primordial ground from which a player's conscious experience of videogames and the practice of videogaming can immanently emerge.

My experience of Lobo's leaving is no different. Like Sami, I am a passionate player. Some videogames touch me when I play them; something happens to my body when I engage particular videogames (this is to say, some-thing affects me when involved in the practice of videogaming). More specifically, as I – both a touching subject and touched object – take up the controller and descend into the things of the gameworld (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), the very reversible yet differentiated relation of my body to (game) world is underscored. As noted in Chapter 2, Merleau-Ponty (1968) elaborated on such a reversible relation between body and world by indicating their crisscrossing or intertwining, their grounding in a common "element," which he called *flesh*. As Sobchack (2004) explains, "Commonly grounded in and made of the 'selfsame flesh,' both body and world are thus intertwined – their general existence figuring and differentiating itself into particular forms and modes of material being" (p. 287). Such an intertwining is *passionate*, because "the provisional alterity of the subjective body and objective world are reversibly enfolded in the

other” (p. 287). To say that Sami and I are passionate players is to re-cognize our embodied, pre-reflective sense of videogames’ ethical and aesthetic capacities. These capacities – which, as we shall soon see, both engage our very primordial abilities and are possible because of them (Sobchack, 2004) – are the subject of this chapter. In asking *How does the reversibility of relations inherent in the flesh produce meaningful experiences or relationships in or with a videogame*, I appropriate Vivian Sobchack’s (2004) theory of interobjectivity, outlined in her essay “The Passion of the Material,” as an interrogation of the “touching of the things” – of the ways a videogame, in all its material capacities, may touch a passionate player.

### **Interobjectivity**

Simply put, interobjectivity is “a mode of corporeal engagement with the material world,” and the term itself is “meant specifically to invoke its well-known complement: *intersubjectivity*” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 296, emphasis in original). Says Sobchack (2004):

Although much has been written by philosophers and theorists across a range of disciplines on how human beings co-constitute a sense not only of their own subjectivity but also of the subjectivity of others who are not themselves, there is little written about the complementary co-constitutive experience we have of ourselves and others as material objects. (p. 296)

In continuing Merleau-Ponty’s later efforts to ultimately overcome the schism between subject and object in his existential phenomenology, Sobchack (2004) articulates a reversibility in the relations between body-subjects and enworlded objects that is possible because both share *the* common element of being, the flesh –

*the same flesh* that “grounds us as body-subjects in a primordial reversibility with other body-subjects so as to allow our essential *intersubjectivity* and also makes it possible for us, in any objective sense, to ‘have’ a world” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 310, emphasis in original). To understand videogames’ ability to touch us, thinking interobjectively is key, as I hope to illustrate presently.

Sobchack’s (2004) theory stands in complementary and contrary relation to intersubjectivity.<sup>14</sup> This is to say:

[. . .] As intersubjectivity is a structure of engagement with the *intentional behavior* of other body-objects from which we recognize *what it objectively looks like to be subjective*, so interobjectivity is a structure of engagement with the *materiality* of other body-objects on which we project our sense of *what it subjectively feels like to be objective*. (p. 316, emphasis in original)

Here, interobjectivity makes an important contribution to videogame studies. Some explanations for the relationship between player and on-screen representations (such as that of Fiesler, 2006) turn to a sort of transcendent transference whereby the player imbues his or her avatar with (projects onto them) positive qualities that consequently guide the performative gameplay experience. Other theories (such as that of Jansz, 2005) unnecessarily isolate the videogame experience from the material realm, describing players as immersed in cognitive, “private laboratories” (Jansz, 2005, p. 229), where they might play videogames as an experimental practice, building identities and exploring emotional responses without repercussions in the material world. Interobjectivity, however, is neither entirely transcendent nor materially irresponsible. Instead, interobjectivity can explain a player’s touching videogame

experiences by staying right “here” – not in an ephemeral private laboratory or a transcendent “feedback loop” of psychoanalytic ego projection. In accounting for *what it subjectively feels like to be objective*, interobjectivity elaborates the immanent, already-imbricated, material, *fleshy*, and mutually-constitutive relationship between body-subject (player) and enworlded objects (in the gameworld).

Of course, thinking about videogames this way requires an awareness of synthetic worlds – as well as the avatars and objects that populate them – as something other than mere “virtual” or transcendent phenomena (a position all too often adopted, unfortunately, in popular discourse about videogames and other “digital” media).<sup>15</sup> In asserting the materiality of electronic media, I agree with Marks (2002), who argues:

[. . .] Electronic media occupy not a “virtual” space, but a physical, global socioeconomic space. It all comes down to interconnected bodies: subatomic bodies, the linked bodies of our computers, our own bodies that act in sympathy with them, and the social body in which we all partake. (p. 177)

In *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (2002), Marks painstakingly depicts a quantum physics of electrons in order to show how those bodies index the processes they image – how digital media are, in fact, materially linked with the “things” they re-present, as even non-organic life exhibits a “communicative,” self-organizing capacity. My point here is not a reconstruction of this argument. I mention Marks’ work as merely one attempt at reasserting the materiality – the “realness” – of the so-called “virtual” (often thought to be ephemeral), and concur

with her pragmatic, Peircean assertion that “what is actual is what has an effect, in that it produces belief that leads to action” (2002, p. 179).<sup>16</sup>

Placing interobjectivity in a larger theoretical sphere, we can see it is different from other accounts of relations between body-subjects and enworlded objects that posit a *symmetrical* relationship between humans and nonhumans, such as Latour’s actor-network theory. Unlike these views, “[. . .] interobjectivity is perceived asymmetrically – for we are forever subjects even as we are also objects” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 316). With a nod to Merleau-Ponty, who in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2005) notes the impossibility of viewing the other as a mere object for the self (that is, he notes asymmetry of perception as a prerequisite for intersubjectivity), Sobchack (2004) writes:

[. . .] How can I possibly apprehend another objective body as a *nonsubject* – as *in-itself* – at all? Indeed, a phenomenology of interobjectivity would reveal that we cannot do so and that, to varying degree, we cannot avoid imbuing nonintentional objects with a *quasi subjectivity*, their excessive opacity experienced not as ‘in-itself’ but rather ‘for-itself.’ (p. 313, emphasis in original)<sup>17</sup>

For Merleau-Ponty (2005) the reversibility of the lived body as both subject and object is the source of asymmetry between myself and other “*Is*” in my field of being. This same reversibility – the fact that I have knowledge of my body as *perceptible* matter – indicates a similar asymmetry between my body and enworlded objects (both of which *are rooted in the flesh*). The notion of asymmetry is important, too, when considering the ontological implications of thinking interobjectively. One might be

tempted, as is Galloway (2006), to push the impossibility of viewing an enworlded object as a nonsubject into extreme territory. Galloway (2006) distinguishes

[. . .] two types of action in video games: machine actions and operator actions. The difference is this: machine actions are acts performed by the software and hardware of the game computer, while operator actions are acts performed by players. [. . .] Of course, the division is completely artificial – both the machine and the operator work together in a cybernetic relationship to effect the various actions of the video game in its entirety. The two types of action are ontologically the same (p. 5).

This last statement of relative ontological “sameness” is particularly problematic in that it attributes to the videogaming (“machine”) apparatus the same capacities of the player (or “operator”). While I intend to argue that the passionate player realizes ethical and aesthetic capacities *in relation to* the videogame, I cannot concede that the videogame can enact these same capacities in relation to the passionate player. While the videogaming apparatus might be a body, it lacks the capacity for chiasmatic reversibility – for *having a body in addition to being a body*. To say a videogame has ethical or aesthetic capacities is thus not to point at anything *inherent to* the videogaming apparatus; rather, such capacities arise *in-relation-to*; the player recognizes his or her passionate entwinement with the videogame when exploring these capacities.

Acknowledging this entwinement is acknowledging the players’ connection to the gameworlds they inhabit or the synthetic objects with which they interact. Too often, critics dismiss such passionate connections (such as Sami’s connection to her

nintendog, or my connection to Lobo) as overzealous folly, childish imagination, fetishism or anthropomorphism – criticisms that are, in short, a way of saying videogames *don't matter*. We should not confuse this player tendency with sheer anthropomorphism, however. Sobchack (2004) is explicit about this:

[. . .] Interobjectivity [. . .] cannot be reduced to a simple anthropomorphism in which we attribute our *own* egological subjectivity to nonsentient existence. Rather, it is a more complex structure of experiential relations that cannot comprehend absolute and complete objectivity or ‘in-itself-ness’ but, to varying degree, confers upon objects an *estranged* – and thus *transcendent* – subjectivity that seems uncanny in its *alterity* from our own. (p. 313, emphasis in original)

Interobjectivity is thus an appreciation, in the original Husserlian phenomenological spirit, of *the things themselves* – an appreciation of nonintentional objects’ quasi-subjective alterity that is nevertheless a *fleshy* alterity and indeed matters very much. In fact, videogames are something about which one can be passionate. As previously mentioned, to say that I am a passionate player is not to attribute to myself any unnatural capacities or a hyper-specialized receptivity (i.e., fandom, brand loyalty, commodity fetishism, etc., although these are undeniably part of my experience of the practice of videogaming). Rather, it is to say videogames activate exactly the pre-reflective abilities inherent in the selfsame flesh my body – any-body – shares with the quasi-subjective body-objects of the (enworlded) gameworld. I invoke the notion of “passion” here in the dual way Sobchack (2004) does: as both “suffering” and “active devotion to others” experienced in the reversible yet differentiated relations of

body and world. As I will presently demonstrate, the player's relations with gameworld are passionate inasmuch as they have both ethical and aesthetic implications.

Before discussing these implications, however, I should provide a few caveats regarding the scope of this analysis. Interobjectivity "makes sense" of some games more clearly than it does others. Like any phenomenology of interobjectivity, a phenomenology of videogames' interobjective touch

includes a wide and graded range of subjectively experienced reversibility with objects, varying in both the *ratio* of this reversibility (how proportionally subjective and for-itself is the object since there is a great variance in kicking the tire of one's car, giving a boat a proper name, and believing in the subjective agency of a magic charm) and the *degree* to which this experienced reversibility of subject and object is transparent or explicit to consciousness.

(Sobchack, 2004, p. 314, emphasis in original)

Various phenomenological accounts of videogame experience will thus reveal varying ratios of reversibility between player-subject and enworlded videogame objects, and this ratio is somewhat reliant on the videogame's genre. Objects in puzzle videogames (like *Tetris*) and videogames that are largely reflex-oriented (*WarioWare, Inc.*, for example) do not clearly exhibit a significant ratio of quasi-subjective reversibility as cogently as, say, those in first-person shooter videogames (such as *Half-Life*) or open-ended "simulation" videogames (like *The Sims*). In other words, the relative *for-itself* of a geometric *Tetris* block might differ from that of a *Sims* avatar specifically designed to resemble a player's mother. *Animal Crossing:*



*Wild World* is a videogame rife with interobjective implications for many reasons. Foremost, although the videogame lacks an overarching goal or end state (see Chapter 2), players are rewarded intermittently for care-ful choices and persistent interaction with synthetic objects. Additionally, many of these objects are anthropomorphized animals that nevertheless speak in a language (English) embodied by the player. Apart from their being populated by talking animals, however, players' towns in *ACWW* are not much odder than those a player might encounter in his everyday world. Likewise, players are rewarded not for using strange devices in the completion of superhuman feats (as is the case in some videogames); rather, they are asked to acquire familiar objects (such as shovels and fishing poles) so that they may "play at" seemingly mundane tasks (digging holes in which to plant trees and fishing to acquire multiple varieties of aquatic life). As Bernstein (2001) laments:

In a society in which the desire for general economy is routinely sublimated into utilitarian behaviors, the lure of video games has to be understood as, in part, related to their sheer unproductivity. Put more simply, our unrestricted play is constantly being channeled into goal-directed games; how appealing then to find a game whose essence seems to be totally useless play. (pp. 158-159)

Additionally, the *ACWW* world seems persistent. That is, its gameworld is constantly changing with each play session, presenting new objects and variables for the player to acquire or encounter but also keeping track (from play session to play session) of players' personal belongings stored in their rooms and cabinets. The world seems to "live" even as the Nintendo DS device is turned off. Non-player

controlled animal residents move in and out of town between sessions, trees grow a bit taller every day, fruit appears at three-day intervals, and the town store restocks its shelves with new goods every night. Such persistence grants much of the objects in the gameworld an agency not common in most videogames.<sup>18</sup> And as the in-game clock and calendar correspond exactly to their out-game counterparts, a player's sense of a connection between the two spaces is enhanced.<sup>19</sup> For these and other reasons, *Animal Crossing: Wild World* is a videogame of which interobjectivity can “make sense,” and which can demonstrate the usefulness of thinking phenomenologically and interobjectively about videogames. Thinking this way helps us re-cognize passionate players' embodied, pre-reflective sense of videogames' ethical and aesthetic capacities<sup>20</sup>. I turn to these capacities now, so that I might illustrate how such players' touching, subjective diminution and expansion is accomplished in and with objective phenomena – namely rule sets – via the gameworld provided by the body of the videogame.

### **Ethics**

“[. . .] It is a kind of magic spell which is cast; the act of interacting with these texts [. . .] is a kind of ritual whereby the human enters the realm of the machine and operates by its rules.” (Lamoureux, 2004, p. 86)

In its first modality, passion, for Sobchack (2004), is suffering, or “the state or capacity of being acted on and affected by *external* agents and forces [. . .] (p. 287, emphasis in original). As both subjects and objects are capable of suffering, this modality of passion

names a certain condition for passive existence in which a body-subject or an embodied object is subjected to the will of others or the action of external forces, and insofar as it suggests a lack of intentional agency, the passion of suffering brings subjective being into intimate contact with its brute materiality and links it, as well, to the passive, mute, and inanimate objects of the world. (p. 287)

Furthermore, when suffering, the body-subject is constituted as an object (by nonintentional phenomena or other intentional body-subjects) and experiences a diminution of subjectivity with/as an increased awareness of “*what it is to be a material object*” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 288, emphasis in original). In this way, passion as suffering provides the material foundation of ethical behavior toward other body-subjects and enworlded objects because it “intimately engages us with our primordial, prereflective, and passive material *response-ability* – the general sense of which becomes reflectively and actively re-cognized in consciousness as that particular *ethical* concept we call *responsibility*” (p. 288, emphasis in original).

In her submission to the rules of the videogame – to anything from the selection of an avatar; the deliberate, unintentional, but nevertheless powerfully relevant (in their immutability) decisions of game designers or narrative architects; the binary oppositions constituting *the* choices, *the* avenues for agency – the passionate player suffers a bit. But unlike the experience described by Lamoureux at this section’s outset, the practice of videogaming is not “magic,” even if it does involve an oddly alluring shackling the of the player’s agency “in” the gameworld. By getting “in touch” with her material side, by experiencing at a corporeal level

what Sobchack (2004) calls “a diminution of subjectivity,” “an increased awareness of what it is to be a material object,” the player is reminded of her parity with the things of the world (the gameworld and the everyday world), of her *responsibility* to them.

Perhaps the most obvious and ubiquitous diminution of subjectivity that results in a passionate player’s increased awareness of his materiality is the player’s avatar selection and manipulation. In *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, for instance, a player’s entrance into the gameworld is predicated on his creating an avatar (literally “some-*body* who embodies, personifies, or is the manifestation of an idea or concept,” according to the *Encarta World English Dictionary*). At the outset of *ACWW*, the screen opens on a first-person perspective; the player is looking at the back of a taxi driver’s head from the rear seat of the vehicle. The player soon learns that the driver is taking him to live in a new town, and he must also field questions from the taxi driver (the answers to which shape the eventual gender, hair color, and facial arrangement of the player’s avatar, as well as the geography of the player’s town). The first-person perspective compels the player to answer questions from *his or her* standpoint, from the standpoint of the body embracing the Nintendo DS unit.<sup>21</sup> From the start, then, the avatar is meant to be a manifestation of the *player*, an object in the gameworld that attains a significant *for-itself* as its operations (its movements, its relative “successes” and “failures”) are governed tightly by the movements of the player’s body while grounded in a common element pervading the stuff of the gameworld. When the *ACWW* player has finished answering the questions, the screen fades and re-opens on the player’s new town. Now the player’s perspective has

shifted to a third-person view of the world, the avatar in the foreground, the world already in motion around it. The avatar is representative of the player's capacities in this alien world, a world whose material often obeys an unknown physics, whose familiar objects may or may not perform familiar functions, whose quasi-subject population already "know" one another and treat the player as an equally alien transplant.

At the most basic level, the avatar is a cluster of computer-manipulated variables – *rules* – that dictate *potentials*, allowable actions in this newfound game space. Because no videogame hardware – *any* hardware – has the ability to represent the human body's complete range of potential or an enworlded object's properties (only simulate certain facets of this existence), the player who engages in a videogame is always allowed to do *less* than that which she would otherwise be able to *do* in everyday space. The avatar is a constricting, diminutive body-object that is nonetheless the player's entry point in the gameworld, responsive to the player's touch (I press "up" on my control pad and the avatar makes the corresponding movements in the same direction in game space). It reduces the player, in many ways, to something *less* than he would otherwise be accustomed. The relationship of player to avatar is thus not one of projection or transference. The body of the player is always present as the primordial ground from which she may corporeally engage the on-screen quasi-subject that is the avatar – an object whose materiality is very apparent to the player who nevertheless identifies subjectively with its selfsameness. In playing videogames, the player suffers the brute materiality of the alien gameworld, as a heightened awareness of her own objectivity rendered in the game

space. This suffering “forces” the player’s recognition of herself as an objective subject, “always immanently and substantially ‘here’ and open to being externally acted on regardless of one’s volition” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 288).

In this way, then, the player’s diminished agency activates a deep-seated, pre-reflective *response-ability* that manifests as a responsible sensitivity to other material objects in the gameworld. As I wrote one day after a particularly frustrating game of *Animal Crossing: Wild World*:

I love this matter, because I can push it, pull it, do things with it I can’t do in the real world. But there are some things I cannot do, and in a gamespace typically conceived as totally relativistic and liberating, this reality is frustrating. Rocks speckle the landscape of my town, and they are immovable. Stuck in the most odd places, with no apparent pattern to their arrangement, they haunt me and bother me on daily basis, especially when I am enjoying my newfound freedom to dig synthetic dirt, plant peach trees and orange trees, chop other pine trees down, uproot their stumps within a matter of seconds. But these rocks are steadfast in a world that should otherwise be mine to manipulate; they are more than an annoyance, they are a downright frustration, a nuisance when they obstruct the perfect symmetry of the rows of trees in my peach orchard, or cause my avatar to bounce forcefully from their granite surfaces as I am attempting to dig new spaces for more vegetation. I have become obsessed with trying to move them, to push them, to crack them with a shovel, an axe, even a butterfly net. Taunting me, some of these rocks toss bags of currency at me as I poke and prod them, try to erase them, and

this makes me even more upset. My fingers writhing at the ineffectiveness of their actions, I turn quickly to a nearby tree and hack at it with my axe, listening to the satisfying “whack” of the axe as it embeds itself in the trunk of the pine, loving the crinkling, crackling sound of its collapsing branches as it falls to the ground. I am master once again, but even though I have the power to erase this tree from existence (it dissolves away after lying on the ground for a few seconds), because it, unlike the rock, succumbs to the meeting of my code with its code, just what gives me the right to – for all intents and purposes – kill it?

The material presence of the rocks in my town – representations of rules that stipulate where I *can* and *can't* “dig” in the synthetic dirt – supercedes my volition, my desire to bend and shape the world in exact places. It is a rock without the capacity to be acted upon – or, as Galloway (2006) would say, it is “non-actionable.” If this rock were a rock of everyday space, I would have no trouble bending and heaving it to another location. But in this gameworld I am “subjected” to the alterity of the synthetic objects, representations of diminished potential. My fingers “writhe” with the itch of constriction and frustration as I am literally overwhelmed by the pervasiveness and unrelenting reality of the rock (of its subjective *for-itself*, which it flaunts by “taunting” me). What this reality produces, however, is an embodied consciousness of my own objectivity, an increased awareness of my capacities, as I turn to another object and attempt to “master” it. Now, however, my visceral response to the pervasiveness of the rock makes me feel somewhat responsible to the well being of the other objects in my gameworld.

Responsibility to a rock may not resonate with the experience of many other videogame players, but responsibility to other objects might, locating an interobjectivity of videogaming in the current debate about videogames' ethical capacities. For instance, in the videogame *September 12<sup>th</sup>* by Gonzala Frasca, players are situated in a first-person perspective overlooking what appears to be a Middle Eastern outdoor marketplace. The player receives these instructions:

This is not a game. You can't win and you can't lose. This is a simulation. It has no ending. It has already begun. The rules are deadly simple. You can shoot. Or not. This is a simple model you can use to explore some aspects of the war or terror.

Two images appear to the left of these instructions: one of a robed and hooded human figure holding a gun and one of a similarly-dressed adult-sized figure leading a child-sized figure. The figure holding the gun is dressed in white and labeled "terrorist" and the other figures are dressed in blue and labeled "civilian." When the instructions disappear, the player is given a birds-eye view of the Middle Eastern marketplace, and, using the computer mouse, is able to point a crosshairs at any location on-screen. Tiny figures scuttle about the streets of the marketplace; the ratio of "terrorists" to "civilians" indicates more civilians than terrorists in this location.

The instructions for this simulation indicate a capacity for the player – "you can shoot." Of course, this capacity need not be realized ("Or not.>"). If the player decides to click the muse button, a missile launches from a site off-screen and lands inside the aimed crosshairs. All avatars in the circumference of the crosshairs collapse, buildings turn to rubble and avatars nearby stop to mourn the losses with



visible tears and audible sobs. No matter who dies in the blast – terrorist or civilian alike – the mourners unfailingly become “terrorists,” their clothes changing to represent a new perspective. At least two terrorists spawn as a result of every one death; thus, the ratio of terrorist to civilians increases exponentially with every missile the player fires. Conversely, if the player chooses *not* to activate the capacity to shoot – chooses *not* to depress the mouse button – the number of terrorists in the marketplace gradually decreases. In fact, if a remorseful player stops shooting missiles and lets the marketplace alone, she will notice buildings regenerating themselves, terrorists changing into civilian clothes.

In *response* to the objects of the gameworld, the player must choose a certain *responsible* comportment in relation to the quasi-subjects she engages on-screen. Rendered as the crosshairs and left with only two capacities (shoot, or don’t), the player’s diminished subjectivity results in a powerful, visceral awareness of the importance of the mouse click. Omniscient and at the same time powerless, the player is overrun by the materiality of a terrorist swarm that occurs if he continues shooting; his responsibility for the decadence of this place becomes suffocating.

### **Aesthetics**

“The Luddites wanted to smash the machines of the Industrial Revolution – and who can fail to see the touching beauty in their impossible dream. But there can be no returns, no repetitions, only deposits, depositions [. . .] The games [. . .] give us a place to play out these neo-Luddite sentiments: slay the dragon, the ghost in the machine, the berserk robots. What we are fighting is the projection of our sense of inferiority before our own creation. I don’t

mean that the computer must always play us. Maybe, with just a few more quarters, we can turn the tables.” (Bernstein, 2001, pp. 167-168)

In its second modality, passion, for Sobchack (2004), is active devotion to others and the material world, or “an intense, driving, and overmastering feeling that emerges and expands beyond our conscious will yet acts on us, nonetheless, from *within*” (p. 288, emphasis in original). Like suffering, this modality of passion is “in excess of our volition,” but “unlike suffering, it is within our agency [. . .] This devotion is not passive but rather asserts our corporeal and affective adherence to others and the objective world” (p. 288). Passion as active devotion thus “seeks to grasp what it is to be not only an *objective subject* but also a *subjective object* whose intentionality and alterity can be sensed from *without*” (p. 290, emphasis in original). And so unlike passive suffering, active devotion involves an “embracing and enfolding of the world’s – and one’s own – objectivity” that is “not a diminution of subjectivity but its *sensual* and *sensible* expansion” (p. 290, emphasis in original). In this way, passion as active devotion to others and to the world provides the material foundation of aesthetic behavior because it “allows us to understand in a primordial way the general pervasion in existence of material *sense-ability*” (p. 290), our sense of which becomes re-recognized in consciousness as that particular *aesthetic* concept we call *sensibility*. Such recognition involves, as Sobchack (2004) notes:

[. . .] Care for ourselves not only as *objective subjects* who are capable of grasping and feeling the alterity of other worldly objects but also *subjective objects* that can be experienced in such a way by others allows us the

possibility of appreciating – and caring for – the form and substance of “things” external to ourselves. (p. 290)

With this “sensual and sensible expansion” (the player’s exploration of the gameworld, her rediscovery of herself in a new, bounded context) and in this “enfolding” of an alterity (her carnal interactions with the gameworld’s opaque and quasi-subjective objects, others that at first belong more to the alien world of the videogame but become gradually recognizable in the common flesh of the player-as-avatar) emerges a certain *ekstasis*, a “profane illumination of objective matter that, in its unrelenting ‘hereness’ and ‘nowness’ opens into an apprehension of something ultimately unfathomable, uncontained and uncontainable – not only in the thing on which we gaze but also in ourselves” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 298).<sup>22</sup> As I wrote upon seeing two computer-controlled residents interact:

From afar, I see Alli and Portia (an alligator and a dog, respectively) having a conversation. I hear a joyful tone, and watch as both their faces fill with smiles. Music notes float around their faces, I hear a whistling sound, and both go their separate ways, content with the conversation they just had. I wonder: what did they just talk about? How did they become such good friends? And why wasn’t I close enough to overhear the conversation? When I watch the characters in my town interact with one another, I’m warmed and intrigued. I’m intrigued because part of me still knows these little animals are driven by algorithms, that this encounter may or may not have been programmed for my enjoyment. I’m warmed, though, because it’s not *easy* to think that these friends of mine aren’t the kind animals who want to be

gregarious, make friends, wave to me, and smile. The synthetic world of my town seems alive around me as I am part of it, its objects enacting their own agency without my having to set them in motion. To think that parts of the videogame have pleasurable experiences – the indications of which are exclamation points, avatar smiles and singsongy whistles – simply by interacting with one another is a notion I’m struck by (because I’m not accustomed to it) and disappointed by (because it makes me feel less necessary).

While I am “struck” and humbled (“disappointed”) by the brute acknowledgment that the objects of the gameworld – in this case two anthropomorphized animals – may in fact “have” a world distinct from my own (“enact their own agency” without waiting for my touch) I am nonetheless “warmed” by the beauty of my realization that these quasi-subjects escape or transcend my complete understanding, and by my desire to know them, to enfold them, to assuage my alienation from them – to grasp what it is to be not only an *objective subject* but also a *subjective object* (Sobchack, 2004). It is an *ekstasis* realized in the very chiasmatic reversibility of the flesh.

Indeed, this sensible *ekstasis* is made possible by the flesh’s reversibility because it is an in-corporation that, *through reaching toward or touching the material object that is other than oneself*, seeks to actively grasp both a concrete sense of one’s own self as immanently material and a concrete sense of how some of the world’s objects may also be subjects. (Sobchack, 2004, p. 290, emphasis added)

“Embracing” knowledge of oneself as a material object – rendered in code as in-game avatar, subjected to the rules, laws and nature of the gameworld, agency apparently diminished – allows for an incompetence that is nevertheless a *revelatory* incompetence, an *expansive* incompetence, as that unwilled devotion to the objects of the gameworld compels a player to forge new linkages in bounded contexts, and likewise embrace the quasi-subjective objects that surround her. Players constantly and *actively* engage gameworlds (like Trantor) in their “care-ful” *devotion* to the project of its enfolding. In *ACWW*, players are rewarded *extrinsically* for playing daily (i.e., by the rules of the game, which dictate that flowers must be watered on a daily basis if they are to retain their color); yet they are always rewarded *intrinsically* by the *ekstasis* of such a project, by the *sensuous expansion* involved in playing.<sup>23</sup>

For instance, in writing about her experience playing *The Sims*, Jackson (2004) says:

[. . .] I’m picturing a thirteen-year-old girl sitting at her computer, watching a sort of doll reading a book. The girl sits quietly. The Sim sits quietly. Pages turn with a rustle. The plates on the kitchen floor acquires [sic] flies and begins to buzz. The newspaper turns a dirty grey. The need to pee is getting urgent, on both sides of the screen. What is happening? Nothing and everything. When my Sim reads a book, sunk in an illusory inwardness, a bit of code flipping the pages of another bit of code, I imagine for her an imaginary life, and imagining this, my world brightens, and I think I feel what it is like to be real. (p. 200)

Like I am when speaking of my friend Lobo, Jackson (2004) is aware of her Sims as bits of code interacting with other bits of code – but also as opaque alterities not

completely knowable, not completely transparent, not completely congruent with everyday existence, yet bearing the mark of a subjectivity, a capacity for meaning-making in their relation to the player. The interobjective touch of the Sims helps her “feel what it is like to be real,” reminds her of her immanent “here-ness,” moves her to subjective recognition of her own embodied self because (with a nod to Lacan and his Mirror Phase, and an implicit recognition of the reversibility of Merleau-Ponty’s flesh) she innately knows “we make the real real by imitating it” (p. 195).

All these abstract notions become a bit more concrete in accounts such as Sami’s, or this one I wrote after a fulfilling interaction with an NPC:

I’m always happy when the NPCs in my town are content and pleased with me as their neighbor. I understand that keeping my townsfolk in a “good” mood is part and parcel of playing the game, yet my motivation for chatting with and helping out my computer-controlled friends genuinely stems from something other than a sheer desire to play this videogame and play it well. When Moe (a sad-eyed, forlorn tomcat) today mentioned our growing “relationship,” I felt great. My DS is now turned off and sitting on the floor next to me, but I can imagine Moe resting in his Trantorian home, all the tasks of the day accomplished, and perhaps thinking about how helpful I’d been today.

My actions in Trantor are extraordinarily “care-ful,” as I treat the digital denizens delicately, considering their “feelings” and their needs. Sami’s *active devotion* to her nintendogs – which may seem to some like a child’s frivolous attention to something that *doesn’t matter* – is instead a passionate bodily comportment. As so-called

“active” media (Janz, 2005), videogames are uniquely suited to this *sensible and sensuous* expansion (differently than are other media, such as books or films, which also possess their own aesthetic properties), because they are not merely *active* media but *interactive* media – the prefix necessarily appended to account for a chiasmatic “between-ness,” the reversibility inherent in “the touching of the things.”

### **Conclusion**

The interobjective touch is crucial to our understanding of the passionate player’s meaningful experiences in, or relationships with, a videogame. “The experience of worldly devotion that is sublime emerges from some *material communion* of the body-subject with the objective world, and in the experience of being *subjectively touched by objectivity* in a concrete, if fleeting, comprehension *by – and of – the flesh*” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 310, emphasis in original). That “manifold of being” constituted by the intertwining of body, object and world is possible not because videogames provide an otherworldly or transcendent “realm” for our disembodied, “virtual” experimentation but is rather *dependent* on the recognition of videogaming as an embodied practice – something about which we can be passionate, can find touching, can experience only through the body’s communion with the flesh of the world.

## Chapter 5

### STAYING IN CONTACT, KEEPING IN TOUCH

Nintendo's Web site advertising *Animal Crossing: Wild World* is full of exclamation points, especially when it touts the game's ability to let players "Meet and socialize with gamers from all 'round the Wild World!" (Nintendo). Undoubtedly, one of the videogame's most novel and engaging features is its ability to utilize the Nintendo DS's on-board wireless Internet connection technology to facilitate online gameplay. When players' Nintendo DS consoles start swapping packets in cyberspace, on-screen avatars cautiously leave their town gates (which open with a heaving sigh and bathe the avatar in a golden light) and inhabit the gameworld of another. Interacting online, players can "visit the villages of other players and interact with the players in real time [. . .]. Chat, show emotions, trade & share items, play games together, and show off your accomplishments!" (Nintendo). As players – situated across the kitchen table or across the globe – touch their consoles, their avatars are having a blast:

Show 'em your custom designs. You could start a worldwide craze! Throw a party in your house. Your friends will rock out to arcade machines, stereos and more! Challenge your new friends to fishing and bug-catching competitions! Find rare items. Sell 'em for a premium to visitors! (Nintendo)

By opening the videogame console to the Internet, the Nintendo DS thus allows players to trade clothing they've personally designed, help one another complete collections of household items and stationary, donate animals and artifacts to one



another's museums, and visit NPCs to make computer-controlled friends. Online play is encouraged by the videogame, as certain in-game prices and locations only become available when one Nintendo DS connects with another.

To say players are “catching bugs” and “throwing parties” is to speak very symbolically about their embodied activity in the gameworld. Players are not, of course, engaged in the same type of bodily activity they would be if they put down their Nintendo DS consoles and moved outside to plant a dandelion in a friend's flower bed. But the distinction I draw here is *not* an attempt at devaluing the meaningful actions in which players participate – together, with one another – in videogame spaces. Indeed, the goal of the present and final chapter might be read as an attempt to *re-evaluate* videogames as sites of embodied, meaningful, lived experience in the lives of players who embrace and “play” them with others.

My previous two phenomenological reflections focused on modalities of touch as outlined by Merleau-Ponty (1968) – that is, on a “touching of the sleek and the rough” and “a touching of the things,” respectively. This third and final reflection uses the others as an experiential ground with which to explore what Merleau-Ponty (1968) calls:

[. . .] a veritable touching of the touch, when my right hand touches my left hand while it is palpating the things, where the “touching subject” passes over to the rank to the touched, descends into the things, such that the touch is formed in the midst of the world and as it were in the things. (p. 134)

In asking *How are human communication models relevant in the meaningful context of the videogame?*, I interrogate my experience playing *ACWW* online with others in

order to illustrate specifically the communicative capacities of both videogames and the practice of videogaming. Using Roman Jakobson's (1960) model of human communication, I explore the ways in which players use videogames like *Animal Crossing: Wild World* to "keep in touch" – that is, to initiate, prolong and maintain meaningful interactions with one another. Jakobson's model is privileged here because it "focuses on how communication is given to consciousness (eidetic) as the conduct of embodied discourse (empirical) and not merely as decontextualized and disembodied data" (Peterson & Langellier, 2005, p. 125). If I am to argue that videogaming is communicative, then I cannot ignore the vital role of the body in converting conscious experience to an experience of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty's (1968) "palpating" touching of the touch is *exploratory* insofar as it is expansive, yet immanently *grounded* insofar as bodily practices that *seem* to disappear in this conversion nevertheless underpin experience, facilitate it, allow for it. In other words, while that reversibility of expression and perception occurring when "the 'touching subject' passes over to the rank of the touched" seems somewhat transcendent, such a reversibility still "has" as its locus a very concrete and material positional contingency "in the midst of the world." Such contingency is twofold, as I will explain; the subject matter of Chapters 3 and 4 are these very preconditions.

Before turning to my reduction and interpretation of the descriptive data I generated while playing *ACWW* with others, I must address the limitations of the present analysis. First, my experiences in playing *ACWW* online represent only one of two possible experiential modalities of this type of play. This particular videogame offers players two types of multiplayer gameplay: "DS to DS" and

“Nintendo Wifi Connection.” I have engaged in multiplayer videogame play by way of the latter – “Nintendo Wifi Connection” – which allows players to connect their DS consoles to the Internet in order to access the towns of other players from all over the globe. The former type of wireless multiplayer gameplay – “DS to DS” – necessitates that players occupy the same physical space in order to connect their DS units directly to one another (without the involvement of the Internet) and visit one another’s digital villages. Physical proximity of players has a decisive influence on the nature of in-game activity, the ways in which messages are created and shared between players, notions of perceived space and context, and the salience of certain aspects of videogame play experience. I did not engage in any “DS to DS” multiplayer activity when generating data for my analysis, so this play option remains an unexplored experiential variation.

Secondly, many of the experiences I recount in the present analysis take shape according to my relationship with the other player in my shared space. In this case, the player with whom I play *ACWW* most frequently will be called “iamus.” Iamus is an *ACWW* player whom I have never met in physical space, but with whom I correspond online via bulletin boards and related private messages. Iamus controls an avatar by the name of Mr. Nova and maintains a town called Pondlton. *ACWW* is the primary interest I share with iamus (whose gender is unknown to me), and constitutes the basis for our continued relationship (that is, our meeting online was motivated by a mutual desire to play this videogame together, and our continued correspondence revolves centrally around discussion of *ACWW*). Other players may play this videogame with longtime friends, relatives, coworkers, or individuals of other

relation – and each of these relations poses a possible variation on the experiences that emerge from coordinated videogame play.

Having described these limitations, I turn now to a discussion of the model I use to make sense of my videogame play experiences.

### **Model**

Among Roman Jakobson’s contributions to the communication discipline is a “theory of language and communication [that] offers a synthetic approach to both the structural and functional components of language and speech” as the embodiment of that event-process we call human communication (Eicher-Catt, 2001, p. 103). When describing the “constitutive factors of any speech event,” Jakobson (1960) explains:

The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to (“referent” in another, somewhat ambiguous, nomenclature), seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and, finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between addresser and addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication. (p. 353, emphasis in original)

Each element in the model “determines a different function of language,” says Jakobson (1960), yet in an communicative event one could “hardly find” one function operating independently of all others (p. 353). Peterson & Langellier (2005) additionally caution that “the description of elements and functions should not be reduced to parts of a model as is often the case in information theory-based depictions

of communication” (p. 125). In what follows, then, I “flesh out” Jakobson’s elements and their correlative functions – that is, I describe the ways in which meaningful experiences between players arise in the embodied and fleshy *actualization* of that which the model depicts – as they are present in the practice of playing videogames. This description situates videogames and the practice of videogaming in a larger academic discourse, and defines them for future exploration as communication phenomena.

### **Contact**

I begin my analysis where Jakobson (1960) concludes his explication of the speech event: the element of contact. The contact element of human communication performs a *phatic* function, whereby communication is established, prolonged, maintained, modified, and/or discontinued (Jakobson, 1960; Peterson & Langellier, 2005). The workings of the *phatic* function, says Lanigan (2000), “are widely illustrated by the semiotic system of touch” (p. 101). Thus, the contact element “may be displayed by a profuse exchange of ritualized formulas, by entire dialogues with the mere purport of prolonging communication” (Jakobson, 1960, p. 355), but it is also the very element at work when persons claim a communication event “moved” or “touched” them (Peterson & Langellier, 2005). This element is integral to an understanding of videogaming as a meaningful, communicative practice for several reasons. First, to say that this element establishes, maintains, prolongs, modifies and/or discontinues communication is to situate its *phatic* function as a primary concern in an analysis of meaningful and coordinated action in unshared physical space – such as an ACWW town. This function is imperative to counteracting popular discourse

about communication in mass-mediated contexts – discourse that typically paints these so-called “forms” of human communication as inadequate or somehow “beneath” a more conventional, “face-to-face” mode of human interaction (much like the discourse examined in Chapter 4, which accuses videogames of being things that *do not matter*). While videogame play does represent a mode of discourse among many, this study refuses to devalue playing videogames as anything less than an embodied and meaningful practice. Videogames allow players to contact one another, to “keep in touch” – to *initiate* and *maintain* communicative events – and for this reason cannot be reduced to as incidental or a mere “subset” of other modes of discourse.

Second, to say that videogames facilitate contact’s *phatic* function is to rightfully recognize that playing videogames is an embodied, meaningful, “touching” practice. Recall from Chapter 4 the notion that videogames can “touch” players at an embodied level. Additionally, the contact element’s *phatic* function is experienced by players who find the actions of other players in a shared gamespace “touching.” Simply put, videogame players can be touched by the intentional and purposive actions of other players, and recognizing the contact element’s presence in the communicative experience of videogaming is key.

Additionally, Jakobson (1960) notes in his explanation of the contact element that communication requires both “physical engagement” and “intentional connection” (Peterson & Langellier, 2005, p. 127). This observation positions my previous reflections as preconditions for the presence of the current one. Playing videogames requires physical engagement – hands on a controller, a particular set of

bodily compartments and embodied knowledge, a certain relationship with material technologies, etc. It also requires an intentional connection – a care-ful attitude toward the enworlded body-objects of the gameworld, an aesthetic and ethical passion for the quasi-subjects that material-ize in game space. These preconditions are the subjects of Chapters 3 and 4, respectively.

Specifically in *ACWW*, for example, players initiate, prolong and maintain relationships via a variety of in-game situations that depend on various devices. For instance, players' avatars can share the same synthetic space and be privy to one another's actions in a shared synthetic space, exchanging items and messages asynchronously but nevertheless intimately and quickly. Or players might mail one another letters via the post offices in their respective towns. Or, as I wrote:

I've received a letter from someone named Kabuki, but I have no idea who this is. I read the letter and discover that this particular animal doesn't even live in my town! Kabuki lives in Pondlton, a town maintained by another AC player with whom I've visited numerous times. I vaguely recall speaking to Kabuki (I think she's a koala) on one of my visits to Pondlton so many weeks ago. The text of Kabuki's letter is insignificant to me (I don't even remember exactly what the koala wrote), but upon reading it I'm reminded of my friend, wonder how his peach orchard is coming along (I helped him get it started), and remind myself to drop him an email when I've finished playing. I need to visit again soon.

In this case, the actions of a computer-controlled character prompt my recollection of a relationship with another player. Here, I am compelled to perform out-game

relational “maintenance” – namely, to write my “friend” and fellow player an email, to “get in touch” with her or him. Even though we are not sharing the same synthetic space, we are still tethered by the joint practice of playing this game.

I might pause here for a moment to clarify the nature of this contact, to avoid eventual confusion or conflation of terms. I consider playing videogames in the manner I am here – online via the Internet, in a physical space apart from that embodied by other players – an interactive practice (as opposed to an intersubjective one). This is to say that while playing videogames online with others is inherently meaningful, doing so can only approximate the experience of doing so in the company of fellow players (by playing, for instance, in “DS to DS” mode, in shared physical space). The difference, as Langellier and Peterson (2004) argue, is one between feedback and calibration as distinguished by Gregory Bateson. A player engaged in videogaming might “make continuous changes in her or his performance based on the *feedback*” of another player in shared space, while the same player engaged in wifi play might instead *calibrate* her or his performance, or adapt performative actions when a particular performance is finished (p. 164). In the case of Internet-enabled, online videogame play, calibration of performative actions can occur quickly, as players gage one another’s responses to gamic action based on avatar movement, in-game text message swapping, and so forth. Videogames are interactive media inasmuch as they facilitate expedient calibration of gameplay performances between players (as addresser and addressee).

Because of its role in maintaining meaningful interaction between players, I emphasize the contact element and its correlative *phatic* function as integral to any



analysis of videogames' role in allowing players to "touch" one another, or to "keep in touch" by playing videogames. In doing so, players consciously experience nothing less than that which Merleau-Ponty calls "a veritable touching of the touch" (1968, p. 134), *contact* with others and (reversibly, as an experience of consciousness) themselves.

### **Code**

Also facilitating and constraining players' experience of videogaming is an element Jakobson (1960) calls the code, which performs the metalinguistic function in communicative situations. Codes are rules that govern the actions of bodies in space, and according to Lanigan (2000), can be viewed as time-binding, "supraindividual" norms (p. 99). Jakobson (1960) notes that for communication to occur, both addresser and addressee must share (or "partially" share) a code (p. 353), as they draw on a "supply of ready-made forms" – conventions that make possible the generation and sharing of meaning (Peterson & Langellier, 2005). Codes (i.e., systems of rules) are everywhere inscribed in the practice of videogaming. Playing *ACWW*, for instance, involves the activation of codes not exclusive to the domain of videogaming, such as the use of English syntax when swapping messages in-game. It also involves the use of codes exclusive to the domain of videogaming, such as generic motivators (i.e., the videogame's status as a "shmup," or shoot-'em-up, an RPG, or role-playing game, an FPS, or first-person shooter, an MMORPG, or massively-multiplayer online role-playing game, an RTS, or real-time strategy game), and button combinations/configurations players routinely enact to perform in-game actions. These examples of code invocation indicate that codes present both in-game

and out-game twist and merge to govern action in both spaces. In *ACWW*, for instance, players draw on traditional gift-giving conventions to govern and make sense of in-game item swapping, as well as capitalist economic conventions when paying in-game mortgages. In-game action can also compel players to reflect on and modify out-game convention, as they establish certain “house rules” for playing their favorite games together, or reflect on their own spending habits as a result of economic conditions in-game (as is occasionally the case with *The Sims*).

The code performs its metalinguistic function as players are able to make *language or the game itself* the objects of discussion. “Whenever the addresser and/or addressee need to check up on whether they use the same code, speech is focused on the CODE” (Jakobson, 1960, p. 356, emphasis in original). For instance, as Bryan and Mr. Nova pick fruit, *iamus* types: “I’m going to buy something at your store.” While uttered out-game this phrase might mark a person’s intention to purchase goods at a retailer, in-game this utterance is packed with different meanings that only “make sense” because of various codified conventions. *ACWW* players make more purchases from the town store, Nook’s, the store’s proprietor (Nook) gradually upgrades the shop (presumably to accommodate the increase in sales). The fourth and final iteration of Nook’s shop is called “Nookington’s,” a two-level mall that dwarfs all other versions of the establishment. To compel Nook to renovate into Nookington’s, however, a player from *another town* must make a purchase at the shop. In this case, then, *iamus*’ utterance – “I’m going to buy something at your store” – is foremost a comment directly about the game itself, as codified knowledge of the *result* this action will bring about is embodied by me (*iamus* is doing me a

*favor*, getting my shopkeeper to upgrade the store so that I might be privy to the related bonuses). Also in this case, the “I” that is the subject of *iamus*’ utterance is *iamus* him/herself – one player is acting not as avatar but as player in helping another player unlock one of the game’s features. The subject of the utterance and its function during our gameplay session both make sense to me because of the operation of particular codes.

The elements of contact and code constitute an experiential ground for meaningful action in playing videogames by performing their correlative phatic and metalinguistic functions. Bodily *contact* as a precondition or precursor to immanent experience necessarily constrains the range of possible *metalinguistic* functions available to consciousness (i.e., neither the body nor the videogame is “text all the way down”); or, put another way, contact necessarily constrains code (Catt, 2003). In terms of gameplay, this means that embodied and physical engagement with videogames is tantamount to any understanding of a videogame’s possible “readings” (as for the narratologists) or “simulations” (as for the ludologists). It also helps us make a key distinction between the type of experience with *ACWW* that I outline above and the type of experience detailed in an account of playing *ACWW* performed by Mark Hoppus, former frontman for pop-punk trio Blink 182, in his podcast:

You know why else there hasn't been a podcast in way too long? It's because I've been playing *Animal Crossing: Wild World*. And yea! It's true! It's true, I love that [expletive deleted]! My town will kick anybody's town's ass. I have the coolest stuff. Right now, uh, my character has a King's Beard. I'm very anxiously awaiting the arrival of the King's Crown that I can buy. I ... I

hear that it's gonna cost 1.2 million bells. You laugh! But *Animal Crossing: Wild World* has actually brought my family together. My sister and her husband both play *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, and I've never really talked to her husband all that much. He's a cool guy, you know, awesome dude, but we never really spoke at all that much and now he and I call each other pretty much every day – “Hey what's for sale in your town? What's going on in your town? How much can you sell turnips for in your town?” [laughs]. What a way to spend your thirties, right? [Expletive deleted] guys, it's bringin' my family together. (2006, Episode 7)

Hoppus' experiencing is touching inasmuch as playing *ACWW* itself becomes a sort of code-condition for the establishment of communication – and keeping in touch – between himself and his brother-in-law. However, as this experience does not necessarily involve contact at the site of the videogame itself, but rather in a technologically-facilitated, post-hoc storytelling session *about* that videogame, it is only tangentially related to the embodied *practice* of *playing* videogames.

### **Addresser**

Throughout this thesis project, I have stressed the importance of studying the practice of playing videogames from the point of chiasmic reversibility between player and game, and not (as the empiricists would have it) from clearly delineated positions of subject and object. As I now turn to a discussion of addresser and addressee – two integral components of Jakobson's model of human communication whose separation might seem to fly in the face of my previous reflections and interpretations – I certainly do not mean to eschew all prior attempts at carefully

articulating a reversible relationship between embodied player and enwordled game-objects immanent in the flesh. However, as this relationship is re-cognized as conscious experience in various modalities, I can nevertheless reflect on moments in which certain modes of experience become more salient than others. As Merleau-Ponty (1968) puts it:

[. . .] We spoke summarily of a reversibility [. . .] of the touching and the touched. It is time to emphasize that it is a reversibility always immanent and never realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization, and one of two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch *it* [. . .]. (p. 147-148)

Reflection and perception necessarily cut the immanent reversibility of the touching and the touched; the fleshy contingency between the two is articulated in various modalities. In the touching relationship between game and player, these modalities are re-cognized as ethical or aesthetic sensibilities (see Chapter 4). In the touching relationship between players, these modalities are re-cognized as modes of address embodied in and by an addresser and an addressee. When reading Merleau-Ponty's (1968) account of "a veritable touching of the touch" (p. 133-134) that guides this chapter, I recognize, as does Butler (2005):

So when one touches a living and sentient being, one never touches a mass, for the moment of touch is the one in which something comes apart, mass

splits, and the notion of substances does not – cannot – hold. That means that neither the subject who touches nor the one who is touched remains discrete and intact at such a moment [. . .]. (p. 197).

Addresser and addressee are never *completely* discrete or intact, their very differentiation contingent upon imbrication with one another; immanent experiences are undifferentiated chiasmically before re-cognized as “this” or “that” type of experience located “here” or “there.” These assumptions guide what remains of my interpretation of Jakobson’s model as it pertains to the communicative practice of playing videogames.

Jakobson’s addresser performs an emotive function, which “aims a direct expression of the speaker’s attitude toward what he [sic] is speaking about” (1960, p. 354). The addresser is that which encodes experience by binding past, present and future (Peterson & Langellier, 2005) when “engaging expressive units of language” (Lanigan, 2000, p. 97). Typically, as Lanigan (2000) notes, the addresser articulates conscious experience in a form of the first-person utterance: “I am speaking” (p. 97). My position as addresser, then, is manifest throughout my gameplay descriptions recorded in my play journal, as I necessarily embody an emotive subject position in relation to other players (like *iamus*) and enworlded objects (like *Nook*, a tree, or a rock). Statements like:

Like many other videogame players, I use first-person pronouns when I talk about the action of my avatar in the space of the game. “I just caught a bug!” or “I just paid my mortgage!” But I also say things like “I miss *Lobo*” or “I really want to buy an extra table lamp for my in-home arcade.” In these

statements, the pronoun refers to Bryan the Player, not Bryan the Avatar. Or do they? When I say things like “I just caught a bug!” I am speaking, of course, with a great deal of symbolism. It’s cumbersome to say: “I just pressed this button, which acts as input for a computer to translate into binary code and render certain relationship [sic] visually on a touchable screen!” Nevertheless, the bug I just caught is rendered in the material of those binary digits, the same material of my avatar. Having become one of them, acquiescing to the reality of the rules that govern the world as well as the element binding, pervading and transcending all things in it, I nonetheless pre-reflectively refer to the actions of my in-game avatar as my actions [. . .]

The phrase “I am speaking” emerged in this account of my gameplay experience, indicating my role as addresser. My experience of playing this videogame are encoded (that is, expressed) from this position as addresser; the use of first-person pronouns positions me as distinct from the heretofore undifferentiated flow of gameplay experience, yet even my attempts at describing my role as addresser are confounded and complicated by the difficulty in excising my-*self* entirely from the flesh of the gameworld. This excerpt from my journal recounts an experience *about* experience; that is, it is an attempt at making sense of the way I make sense of my play experience, a commentary on the way I write about playing. Nevertheless, I am here interrogating the use of first-person pronouns that manifest in my stream-of-consciousness, present-tense narration of gameplay (similar to that of other players, who might say to one another, “Let *me* show *you* how to beat this level”).

The addresser's body is necessarily analog – fluid, ambiguous, and continuous. This is to say the addresser's modes of expression and perception operate by way of a both/and logic that allows re-cognition of both element and function; an addresser's capacity to “make sense” of experience by encoding it (i.e., expressing it) invariably activates a related emotive capacity. It also reflexively allows for the addresser's re-cognition as *both* addresser *and* addressee.

### **Addressee**

For Jakobson (1960), an orientation toward the addressee is “vocative” (p. 355). An addresser's emotive encoding of expression necessarily calls forth and situates an addressee. Put another way, it is an acknowledgment of the imbricated nature of the addressee, already bound with addresser in the flesh of the world. The addressee performs a conative function, decoding the message as perception. Because the body of the player necessarily operates according to a both/and logic, differentiating between addresser and addressee is an analogic matter. An addresser becomes the addressee of his or her own utterance, as is evident in my experience of playing *ACWW*:

Iamus and I are swapping items we've collected for one another over the past few weeks of playing independently (I am collecting the “Classic” set of furniture while he is collecting the “Modern” set). To coordinate our dealings, we're talking to each other – typing messages, letter-by-letter, on a synthetic keypad that appears on the DS's bottom screen. As I finish my statement and hit “enter,” the message disappears from the bottom screen with a “whoop!,” and appears now on the top screen, floating in a non-diegetic conversational



space translucently hovering above the town of Trantor. In less than a second, I am reading what I wrote, awaiting iamus' response.

While I may presume that iamus-as-addressee is decoding my utterance by both reading it and typing a response, I should also presume similar activity on my part, as I am positioned as addressee "in less than a second," immediately and at the same time of my emotive address. The respective body of each player is capable of this analogic activity.

Yet the problem of address is a bit more complicated than the text-swapping of two persons in shared synthetic space can attest. As discussed in Chapter 4, what I have so far called "the gameworld" is an amalgam of embodied subjects and enworlded objects necessarily emergent from the selfsame flesh, that element or condition of their touching relations. Any account of address in videogames and the practice of videogaming must account for modes of address that articulate relations between and among *all* bodies, not only the human ones. "The body is not the flesh," according to Stormer (2004), yet emerges as an articulation of many possible arrangements or relations inherent *in* the flesh. "Anything gains a body (an institution, a corpus, a text, a heavenly object) as it becomes a distinct entity within a system of perception and interrelationships" (p. 265). The bodies that emerge from the chiasm, full as it is of possible articulations and interrelationships, each address and are addressed in their respective fashions.

Characteristic of the *digital* body-objects with which I and other players in my shared space interact routinely is a capacity to address and be addressed that manifests *digitally* as an either/or logic. This is to say that any kind of "experience"

one might attribute to digital objects manifests as a simple activation or deactivation of capacity. They serve as elements in communicative situations but the correlative *functions* of their intervention are nevertheless present as re-cognized by the analogic capabilities of the embodied player (as Sobchack would have it, and as detailed in Chapter 4, these objects are prereflectively granted a quasi-subjectivity). My own experience helps make sense of this issue:

Harvesting peaches and selling them to Nook has become so routine for me that I really don't need to think in order to do it anymore. Armed with a full crop, I walk into Nookington's and am instantly greeted by the raccoon in the same way he always greets me: "Welcome to Nookington's!" I tap the screen. "Let me know if I can be of service!" Tap. I walk up to Nook at tap Nook. "What can I do for you?" I select "I want to sell" from the menu that appears on-screen, and proceed the same way I always do. The taps are systematic; the text is meaningless.

I address Nook by touching him, and am addressed by him when he begins running through his usual greeting. Nook's bodily capacity for addressing me is activated by my touch; he continues his address in the manner he "always" does – invariably, routinely, predictably. Logically, Nook's activity manifests digitally as *either* touched (and then greeting, routine) *or* untouched (silence). The digital raccoon's element as addresser is present in the communicative situation; his function as emotive is part and parcel of the quasi-subjectivity he develops as I re-cognize his role in our interaction (Sobchack, 2004). I "hear" Nook's emotive "voice" as part of this process. However, the ritualized nature of the encounter makes the message

“meaningless.” This term is a misnomer, however, as the *gestalt* produced by the repetition of an expected exchange is nevertheless an impetus to act in accordance with its perceived *form* (i.e., to touch Nook). I have an embodied understanding of Nook’s rigid, digital invariability, and the code strips the message of any potential to surprise me. The logical distinction between digital and analog becomes more important when discussing their synthesis in the poetic functioning of the message and the referential functioning of context created by communication.

### **Message**

For Jakobson (1960), a “focus on the message for its own sake” (p. 256) serves a poetic function as speakers creatively select and combine elements to *produce* something – a text, an utterance, a performance, an identity (Peterson & Langellier, 2005). Relevant to the present study, Jakobson (1960) notes that the poetic function cannot be studied “*out of touch* with the general problems of language, and, *on the other hand*, the scrutiny of language requires a thorough consideration of its poetic function” (p. 356, emphasis added). Functioning this way, the message is combinatorial; it pulls together and articulates the various modes of address outlined above to establish its constitutive force. For instance, as occurred when I played *ACWW* with *iamus*:

We’re in my house for the “tour” now, and Mr. Nova hops up on my sofa. He looks content for a few seconds, and then text appears on the screen: “Heh. I just farted on your sofa.” From my chair in my room, I chuckle out loud at this.

Here, *iamus* combines available elements to produce a message whose novelty and originality resonate deeply enough with my embodiment of our play as to evoke my laughter. Because “virtually any poetic message is a quasi-quoted discourse,” *iamus* is able to draw on codified conventions of household visitation etiquette and violate them to produce humor (Jakobson, 1960, p. 371). Because “the double-sensed message finds its correspondence in a split addresser, in a split addressee [. . .],” *iamus* is able to function as both comedian and audience for comedy that anticipates a response, as he observes the text of his message overlaid atop the on-screen situation. Because *iamus* comports his body in such a way that *both* moves Mr. Nova onto my digital sofa (activating its capacity to sit *or* not sit) *and* reflexively uses this situation in conjunction with codified convention, something (a performance of gastrointestinal discharge) is produced from the articulation of analog and digital bodies that transcends any heretofore material limitation of videogame system or structure.

Like a cast of anthropomorphized household objects observing Beauty’s dance with the Beast, attention to the message’s poetic function leads us to believe: “There must be something there that wasn’t there before.” Emphasizing the poetic function of the message likewise emphasizes that human communication is both a doing (*praxis*) and a making (*poiesis*), say Peterson and Langellier (2005). That which is created is context.

### **Context**

Context performs a referential function; mimicking Husserl, one might say that all communication is communication *about something* (even if, when emphasizing its metalinguistic function, communication is about communication

itself). Playing videogames is communicative inasmuch as it is always enacted for *some reason* – it “must be relevant in some way, even if that relevance is yet to be revealed or discovered” (Peterson & Langellier, 2005, pp. 126-127). Context is created during gameplay, such that it becomes a sort of “third person” in the communication event as the relationship that bridges-between (Jakobson, 1960, p. 355); it illuminates meaning, frames every communicative situation in a spatio-temporal “meaning-generating *frame*” (Eicher-Catt, 2001, p. 104). This distinctly human capacity for meaning-making is a synthesis of logical addresses *both analog and digital*; the logic of context, according to Wilden (1987) is both (both/and) and (either/or).

Playing videogames generates many such frames that illuminate the meaningful purpose of its enactment. The generic guidelines codified in a particular videogame’s narrative text might work to make the game about “saving the princess” or “destroying the terrorists.” Context generated by narrative illuminates these particular purposes for playing the videogame. Other purposes might include *ludic* purposes, or goals of gameplay at a mechanical level. Ludic frames codified in a particular videogame’s mechanics might work to make the game about “beating all the worlds” or “scoring the most points.” Context generated by ludic frames illuminates these particular purposes for playing the videogame.

When studying videogaming communicationally, we should also remember that the context for gameplay might not be one the game designers intended (in narrative, ludic, or any other type of pre-chosen contextual frame). This is to say that meaningful interactions in, with, or through videogames may generate a context for

gameplay not inscribed in or codified as part of the videogame, apart from its enactment by players. For instance, players can ignore entirely the designers' "purposes" inscribed in *Grand Theft Auto*, and instead enact car-flipping competitions, running automobiles off cliffs and ramps to see how many summersaults they can perform. The game suddenly becomes about "flipping the car," an action that when performed in the designers' "intended" context, is adverse and detrimental to a player's progress.

*Animal Crossing: Wild World* might be a game about "running a town" or "being a good friend." It might be a game about "scoring the most bells" or "collecting all the furniture." When playing *ACWW* with iamus, however, the game is about something (means something) else:

Outside, we are exploring my town when I notice Mr. Nova bolt offscreen. I spin my avatar in circles, searching for him, but find no sign. Above me, the text "I'm hiiiiiding" appears, and now I know what's going on. I start to run through the peach orchards in search of Mr. Nova, but he's eluded me. Then, suddenly, he appears to Bryan's left, runs up to him with a big catching net, and smacks Bryan over the head three times before darting off in a different direction.

For iamus, *ACWW* is suddenly about this awkward yet creative session of Hide and Seek, and has me smiling from behind my Nintendo DS. A context of choice – videogames' available paths laid out by game designers or "narrative architects" – is converted to a choice of context by the poetic, productive practice of playing videogames.

## CONCLUSION (GAME OVER)

In Chapter 1, I stressed the importance of positioning the body as central to the study of videogames and the practice of videogaming (i.e., “playing videogames”). Current avenues of research about videogaming ignore the experiential role of the body in this practice to the detriment of the field of videogame studies. A focus on the *lived experience* of playing videogames, I argued in Chapter 2, is necessary to understanding the ways in which this practice is communicative – that is, the ways videogames function in relation to expression and perception, in enabling and constraining symbolic practices, and in facilitating action between and among bodies. Existential phenomenology is crucial to an exploration of such lived experience, as it *theoretically* eschews subject/object distinctions that have thus far plagued videogame studies, and *methodologically* generates genuinely new, heuristic spaces for thinking about videogaming. Specifically, the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, with its emphasis on the body as necessarily *enworlded*, offers an insightful conceptualization of the videogame player’s activity. By appropriating Merleau-Ponty’s numerous modalities of a particular embodied sense – touch – I was able, in Chapter 3, to begin an exploration of the ways in which the sensual touch of the player both intersects with a new material technology that facilitates gameplay (the Nintendo DS) by way of a touch-sensitive interface, and “crisscrosses” with a player’s embodied sense of sight – the sense heretofore elevated to omniscient status in the study and practice of videogaming. Descriptions of these intersections and crisscrosses yielded interpretations of a corporeal schema with specific embodied

preferences for action in various gamic spaces: a being-in-the-(game)world. I *have* a body that interacts with this technology, but I also *am* a body – a material object grounded in the self-same flesh of the world. My *interobjective* relations with other enworlded body-objects thus became the subject of Chapter 4. When I recognized that I am a *passionate* videogame player, I literally re-cognized my primordial, immanent and embodied abilities as both subjective object and objective subject to interpret my experiences being “touched” by the objects of the gameworld whose inhabitation I detailed in Chapter 3. Descriptive re-cognition of my *passionate suffering* in relation to en(game)worlded, non-intentional objects yielded an interpretation of my embodied response-ability as an ethical *responsibility* to other body-objects in synthetic space. Likewise, descriptive re-cognition of my *passionate active devotion* in relation to en(game)worlded, quasi-subjective body-objects yielded an interpretation of my embodied sense-ability as an aesthetic *sensibility*, or care-full commitment to other quasi-subjects in synthetic space. Having established two preconditions for sustaining the element of contact in Roman Jakobson’s model of human communication – physical engagement (Chapter 3) and intentional connection (Chapter 4) – I proceeded to explain the ways in which the body functions as a material locus where the reversibility of expression and perception are made manifest in human communication. As “touching” the videogame and reversibly being “touched by” the videogame allow players to “keep in touch” by videogaming together, Chapter 5 detailed my experience playing videogames online with others. My descriptions of these videogaming experiences pointed to the presence of six elements and correlative functions integral to an understanding of human



communication, specifically situating videogames for study by the discipline of communication. I described playing videogames as an interactive practice that synthesizes the analog (both/and) logic of human player-subjects and the digital (either/or) logic of game-objects as they emerge from an undifferentiated, chiasmic interrelationship. Operating from a digital-analog logic – both (both/and) and (either/or) – allows players to convert contexts of choice into choices of context, *making* videogames *about* something that may or may not have “been there” before. Playing videogames is communicative inasmuch as it is capable of producing new contexts for players’ embodied experience.

The game is, of course, not over. My *interpretation* of the communicative practice of videogaming will inevitably become a *description* for countless more eidetic interrogations and empirical investigations. My hope is that these will take up (even if only for the purpose of rejection) the set of theoretical tools I have offered in this thesis project, lest we forget the vital role the body – and all its material capacities and sensibilities – when studying videogames, playing videogames, and studying playing videogames.

## ENDNOTES

### (BONUS STAGE)

<sup>1</sup> This is but one mode of parsing the fledgling field of videogame studies. Wardrip-Fruin and Harrington (2004) advance a similar paradigmatic division, separating research on the subject of “electronic games” into that which regards cyberdrama, ludology, critical simulation, game theories, and hypertexts and interactives. In a somewhat different way, Juul (2005) traces the current state of the field by illustrating *not* various presuppositional sets, but rather thematic dichotomies around which current research seems to cluster. These dichotomies include: games or players, rules or fiction, games or stories, games or the broader culture, and game ontology or game aesthetics.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Wolf and Perron claim videogames are comprised of “graphics,” “interface,” “player activity,” and “algorithm” (2003, p. 15). In a more general manner, Janet Murray (1997, p. 71) posits that all digital environments are interactive (that is, “procedural” and “participatory”) and immersive (that is, “spatial” and “encyclopedic”).

<sup>3</sup> “Although the term ‘video games’ first appears as a subject heading in the March 1973 – February 1974 *Readers Guide to Periodicals*, articles on games appeared as

early as 1970 under the headings ‘Electronic Games’ and ‘Computer Graphics’”

(Wolf and Perron, 2003, p. 2).

<sup>4</sup> In these experiments, subjects typically 1) play videogames for only short periods of time, 2) offer data to researchers in the form of quantifiable survey or self-report data, and 3) may or may not have a history of playing videogames as part of their everyday lives. The first longitudinal study (Williams & Skoric, 2005) to investigate correlations between violence in the videogame *Asheron’s Call 2* and aggressive beliefs and behaviors in players could not substantiate such correlations. “Contrary to some expectations, there were no strong effects associated with aggression caused by this violent game [. . .] If such small effects do exist for this game, we cannot prove them here [. . .] [The data do] not offer strong support for the predictions suggested by [. . .] theoretical models postulating that violent games directly increase aggressive beliefs or behaviors” (p. 228). Despite numerous contradictory findings and inconclusive studies, however, the notion of a causal correlation between violent videogames and aggressive behavior in players persists in academic and public consciousness. Says Anderson (2004): “Basically, the scientific debate over whether media violence has an effect is over, and should have been over since 1975 [. . .] There are a number of negative behavioural, cognitive, and affective consequences of exposure to violent entertainment media, in both the immediate context as well as developmentally over time [. . .]” (p.114).

<sup>5</sup> I agree with Castronova's (2005) preference for the term "synthetic" as opposed to "virtual" when describing the "worlds" of online videogames. This distinction correctly identifies the active, constructed nature of such spaces, rather than mere potentiality.

<sup>6</sup> This approach requires a perceptual shift – particularly, a move away from conceptualizations of communication predicated on informational models (such as those adopted by the traditional perspective on videogames). Instead, Deetz (1994) indicates the necessity of a shift toward "communicational models" concerned not with how meanings are transmitted and reproduced, but with "alternative codes and how they constitute different human subjects and meanings" (p. 577).

<sup>7</sup> Frasca maintains the word "ludology" can denote any approach to game studies.

<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty (2005) explains, "All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the word as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression" (p. ix). Or, more simply, "Science manipulates things and gives up living in them" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 159).

<sup>9</sup> Verbeek (2005) reminds us, “Phenomenology thus overcomes the dichotomy between subject and object, humans and world, by replacing it with a mutual interrelation. Human beings are unthinkable apart from a relation to the world, which they continually experience and in which they realize their own existence” (p. 110), and that “Human beings are continually engaged with their world, and this engagement precedes any judgment they may have of it. Put another way, it is impossible to speak about the world in the absence of human involvement with it [. . .]. There exists neither human beings in themselves nor world-in-itself” (p. 110).

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Isaac Catt for his many lectures explaining *data* (information) as *hindsight*, *capta* (knowledge) as *insight*, and *acta* (communication) as *foresight*.

<sup>11</sup> I do not mean for this introduction to provide an exhaustive epistemological history of touch, or a complete synthesis of phenomenological accounts of the sense. I am purposefully selecting only a few accounts of touch in order to provide a ground for further argument.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that human experience of the world is ever essentially “unmediated.” “Unmediated” for Ihde means, according to Verbeek (2005), merely unmediated by *technologies*.

<sup>13</sup> Galloway (2006) calls these gamic moments nondiegetic machine acts, “actions performed by the machine and integral to the entire experience of the game but not contained within the narrow conception of the world of gameplay” (p. 28).

<sup>14</sup> “[. . .] The transcendence-in-immanence and the immanence-in-transcendence of the lived body is doubly and reversibly located: on the ‘no-thing-ness’ side our consciousness of ourselves is always only partial, consciousness being above explanation as the origin of explanations; on the “being” side our dense flesh is often opaque and below explanation, overrunning our consciousness and its comprehension” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 311).

<sup>15</sup> I qualify the word “virtual” with quotation marks because I disagree with its offhanded invocation in popular discourse in reference to something immaterial, transcendent, not-of-this-world, or ephemeral. I instead tend to think about the virtual, as did Deleuze, as *potential*.

<sup>16</sup> This is not to say I believe the computer on which I write these words and the symbol of a computer – the lines of code parsed to render a familiar form on-screen in my house in the world of *ACWW* – are of the same logical type, or that there is no qualitative difference between the two. While each functions differently from the other, they both nevertheless *function*, and their mutual grounding in the flesh indicates their respective abilities to interobjectively touch me.

<sup>17</sup> Because of the reversibility of this system of relations, we, as body-objects, are also always quasi objects, according to Sobchack (2004): “[. . .] We always exist as a *qualified* and *quasi object* – much as the object exists for us always (if much of the time, transparently) as a qualified and *quasi subject*” (p. 316, emphasis in original).

<sup>18</sup> In this way, *ACWW* is different from MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) because these games exist in spaces *constantly* populated by human-controlled avatars from all parts of the globe. When players quit playing these games, they can assume that millions of other players around the world are still actively negotiating the gameworld, completing quests, accruing wealth, etc. The world of *ACWW* is accessible to players when their Nintendo DS units are turned on, and typically, only one human-controlled player negotiates the world (the town) at once. In cases where a player visits another player’s town, the host player must have her Nintendo DS unit powered on and actively occupied by her human-controlled avatar. The town cannot exist – and the visiting player cannot visit – otherwise. Players can “move in” with one another – that is, permanently link their avatars to the same native gamespace so that both can occupy the same town with or without the presence of one another, but this scope is nowhere near that of an MMORPG (*ACWW* limits a town’s human-controlled avatar population to 4).

<sup>19</sup> For instance, if a player talks to animal residents on his birthday, the animals congratulate him and offer him birthday cake.

<sup>20</sup> Sobchack (2004) notes that the flesh provides “both the enabling conditions and concrete premises for a *single system of reversible valuation* that does not bifurcate ethics and aesthetics as they emerge from and in our material existence,” though “this single system of valuation provides the grounds for more conscious differentiation of ethics (our reflective experience of response-ability) from aesthetics (our reflective experience of sense-ability)” (p. 295). My phenomenological reflections here, then, consciously differentiate between videogames’ ethical and aesthetic capacities; however, such a bifurcation is a re-cognition in interpretation(s) of my fleshy experience.

<sup>21</sup> This is not to say, though, that the player cannot answer the cabbie’s questions with imagined answers based on a character or personality she or he has imagined. The game’s setup, though, seems constructed purposefully to create a tight interrelationship between the body of the player and the body of the avatar.

<sup>22</sup> Galloway (2006) writes: “What is an algorithm if not a machine for the motion of parts? And it is the artfulness of the motion that matters most” (p. xi).

<sup>23</sup> Discussing videogame addiction in these terms may help shed new light on some obsessive players’ desire to play videogames for extended and “harmful” periods of time.



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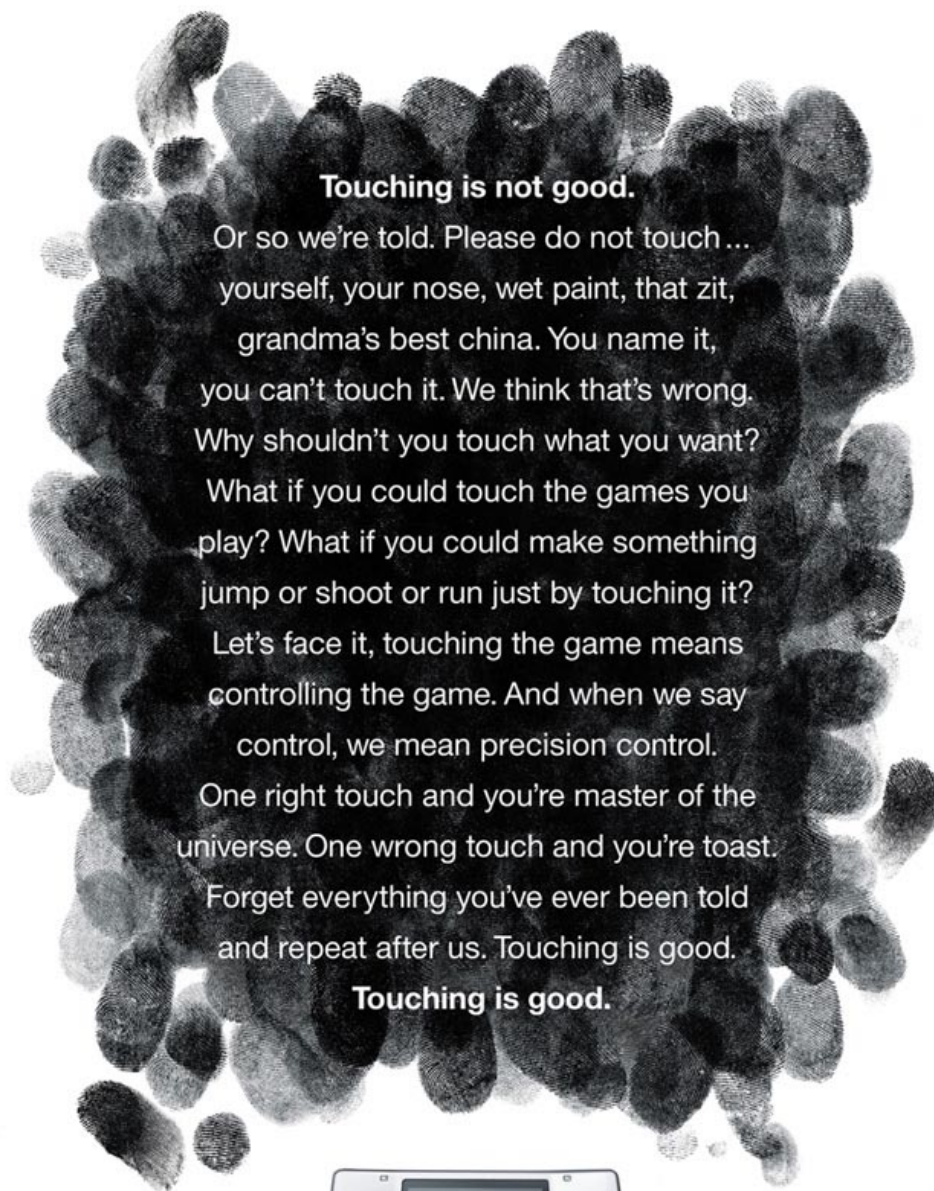
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**APPENDIX:**

This advertisement signaled the launch of the Nintendo DS console in 2004.



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Bryan G. Behrenshausen was born in Reading, Pennsylvania on December 7, 1982. In 2001, he graduated from Wilson High School in West Lawn, Pennsylvania. Bryan does not typically refer to himself in the third person.

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