

**Baudrillard and Gadamer Are Dead:**

**Exploring Play and the Virtual Through Hermeneutic Conversation.**

**Benjamin Curtis**

**A Thesis**

**In the Department**

**of**

**Sociology**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Sociology) at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

**© Benjamin Curtis April 2010**



Library and Archives  
Canada

Published Heritage  
Branch

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

Bibliothèque et  
Archives Canada

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file* *Votre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-67221-1  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-67221-1

**NOTICE:**

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

**AVIS:**

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

  
**Canada**

**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY**

**School of Graduate Studies**

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Benjamin Curtis

Entitled: Baudrillard and Gadamer are Dead: Exploring Play and the Virtual  
In Hermeneutic Conversation

and submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts (Sociology)**

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

\_\_\_\_\_ Chair  
\_\_\_\_\_ Examiner  
\_\_\_\_\_ Examiner  
\_\_\_\_\_ Supervisor

Approved by

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_ 20

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean of Faculty

## Abstract

Baudrillard and Gadamer are Dead:  
Exploring Play and the Virtual in Hermeneutic Conversation

Benjamin Curtis

The work of Jean Baudrillard propounds a dilemma for social theory and research concerning digital games. On the one hand, the influence of what Baudrillard terms *the Virtual* threatens traditional social forms and modes of understanding. It insinuates its systematic logic into everyday life through the ubiquity of digital technology. On the other hand, playfulness and game-playing are held forth as a critical alternative comportment against this totalizing system of *the Virtual*. Research into digital games must address the paradox of virtual play in order to answer Baudrillard's challenge.

Seeking an alternative reading of the situation surrounding digital games, this investigation employs the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer on hermeneutics, play and understanding. Against the horizon of massive online digital games as a novel social circumstance in which character-play is expressly possible, players of the *World of Warcraft* were enjoined in conversation.

Through the situated hermeneutic interpretation of these conversations, play emerges as a dynamic negotiation of circumstance, society, mechanical resolution and tradition. The situation of playing a character in a digital game is revealed as containing the possibility of a critical alternative consciousness.

## **Acknowledgements**

None of this would be possible without all the dear friends and colourful characters who have been kind enough to play with me in this and every other imaginary world we share.

*I have striven to depict a feeling by which I am constantly tormented;  
I revenge myself upon it by handing it over to the public.*

*Nietzsche*

## Dedication

For my Parents, whose love and compassion go beyond all my efforts to interpret or  
understand.

*You taught how I might youth prolong  
By knowing what was right from wrong;  
How from my heart to bring supplies  
Of lustre to my fading eyes;*

*How soon a beauteous mind repairs  
The loss of chang'd or falling hairs;  
How wit and virtue from within  
Can spread a smoothness o'er the skin.*

*W.B Yeats*

## Table of Contents

List of Acronyms		vii
Introduction		1
Chapter One	The Challenge of Baudrillard	6
	Deterrence, The Virtual and Play	6
	Game Studies Investigates the Perfect Crime	17
	The Danger of the Separative Cause	27
	Playing at Games: A Waste of Time?	33
	Character Play as an Alternative Compartment	41
Chapter Two	Language and Possibility	48
	Intuitions of Language in Other Game Research	56
	Horizons and Understanding Tradition in Social Action	67
	Hermeneutic Conversation	83
Chapter Three	Conversations About Dying in <i>The World of Warcraft</i>	87
	Explaining to Your Grandmother How You Were Eaten Alive	93
	A Mechanical First Impression of the Inevitable	97
	Dying Together	102
	A Common Standard	110
	Re-situating Death, Grief and Murder in Play	116
	A Mortal Relationship	124
	Giving Up and Dying in a Virtual World	132
Conclusion		146
References		149

## **List of Acronyms**

DPS: Damage Per Second

LFG: Looking For Group

MMORPG: Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

PuG: Pick-up Group

PvE: Player Versus Environment

PvP: Player Versus Player

WoW: *The World of Warcraft*



## Introduction

This project is an exploration of the work of Jean Baudrillard and its relationship to contemporary situations which combine technology, representation and social action. As an object of research, digital games provide an excellent example of such entanglement between technology, representation and action. Baudrillard holds that the emergence of digital technology and its deployment in the world have consequences for our everyday apprehension of the world and our social lives. Depending as they do on contemporary technologies, and providing a space for social action, digital games for Baudrillard can highlight concerns about a feature of the world he terms *deterrence*.

Deterrence is not a new or specifically contemporary feature of the world, but it is a curiously human one. As long as we have been representing the world, the possibility of deterrence has been present. Roughly put, any system, whether of representation, valuation, or organization is deterrent if while active it conceals its own action and deflects attention away from its situation within a dynamic world.

A child who has their heart set on a specific toy against all others, or a creature of habit who fastidiously avoids surprises and sticks to routines long held, are both subject to a deterrence-effect which they themselves originate. The child spoils its chances to enjoy any other toy, and the curmudgeon never learns anything new. But neither child nor curmudgeon is necessarily aware of this lost possibility. Their investment into a system of valuation, or regulation conceals the other choices that could be made. This deters alternative points of view from consideration, let alone adoption.

All levels of contemporary society can readily provide diverse examples of systems from the abstract to the concrete. The structure of a child's preferences or an old

man's daily routines are vastly less complex than the system of law or the system of resource extraction and distribution in the petroleum industry, but each system organizes the world for those invested into it, and this organizing-action can preclude recognition of alternatives. The system which most interests Baudrillard, and which best fits my aim of exploring digital games, is the emerging global system of communication and computation.

The ubiquity of computer and communication technology in our everyday lives is for Baudrillard part of the action concealing its character as a system of interconnected systems, the whole complex of which can have dramatic deterrent consequences. When the action of a system is deterrent, it also conceals its own limitations, and the alternative positions of understanding which exist outside it. Baudrillard worries that a system which aims to include everything, a totalizing system, will evacuate important possibilities of understanding and social action in the world. For Baudrillard all systems are finite, mortal and impossible to complete. A totalizing system seeks to conceal this worldly situation of which it is a part and from which it arises.

One proposed solution to totalizing systems is to be found in play. Baudrillard holds that through playfulness and investment into its dynamic, a critical possibility is made available to players that undermines the claims to completeness in a totalizing system. Play is a form of social situation that has its own values and regulations, and its form of organization does not pretend to totalization. Quite the contrary, for Baudrillard playfulness revels in its own finitude. Play acknowledges itself as separated from the everyday world, but is profoundly worldly. Play contains the possible understanding of all separation within its action, and this alternative is not yet fully absorbed by a

totalizing system. Digital games thereby occupy a strange and paradoxical position within the complex of systems which support their possibility. They are complicit in the global systems of communication and representation Baudrillard fears may eliminate all alternatives, and simultaneously a location for the possible overcoming of deterrence through playfulness.

Since digital games occupy a tense position in the complicated entanglement of technology, representation and social action I have chosen to employ the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer to explore their dynamics. Gadamer's hermeneutic is a form of investigation which pre-dates Baudrillard's concerns and may appear to be a retrograde approach, but I feel that its explicitly non-totalizing character makes it uniquely suited to answer questions concerning deterrence.

Gadamer's hermeneutics treats all knowledge and understanding as a situated action, not a stable state or an accumulation towards 'complete' knowledge. It opposes any trend towards totalization or progressively ameliorated knowing with an approach that relates actors to their situation. Hermeneutics considers knowledge to arise in negotiation with tradition and circumstance. Understanding is shared in the express use of language in public conduct. This approach tries to illuminate the constant tension within all human endeavours aimed at understanding. Knowing and understanding take place in time. Each instance of knowledge is impacted by previous understanding actions, and predictions about future situations are shaped by the perception of the current circumstance.

The form which hermeneutic action takes is also unlike that of deterrent or totalizing systems. Conscious of its own provisional character, and striving to be aware

of its position amidst a tradition of knowing action, hermeneutic understanding openly acknowledges the need for constant re-consideration. Each interpretation or understanding action provides a possibility of re-consideration in new circumstances. Knowledge requires constant re-vitalization by cultivated action, and the range of interpretation grows rather than shrinks as the volume of knowledge increases.

These mortal and finite features of an hermeneutic approach to understanding are in accord with the character which Baudrillard attributes to play as a critical alternative. In the engagement of their action, hermeneutics and playfulness both permit reflection on the timeliness and inventiveness of human endeavours. The constant interplay between tradition and situation is apparent when playing games which have long histories, but less clear when considering new forms of game-play like those emerging with digital technology.

Consideration of digital games in their proper tension, demands a conscious consideration of the role of language in understanding. Language is important to both Baudrillard and Gadamer because language also has the mortal, situated and traditional features which play and understanding share. A hermeneutic investigation participates in public language in order to come to a new shared understanding. Baudrillard's play can be understood as a worldly action which is not like the rest of the world, but takes place both within and apart from it. Play has a time and place and duration of its own. Gadamer's hermeneutic knowledge is similarly within the world, and unlike it. Knowledge and understanding are bound to a time and a place and thereby situated. When understanding action shares knowledge, it produces public language. Once knowledge is formulated in such a fashion, it becomes open to interpretation and

negotiation by becoming part of a tradition of knowing.

For this exploration of digital games public language emerges in situations of conversation with players of a popular contemporary digital game called *The World of Warcraft*. Through the interpretation of this situated expression, this project aims to illustrate that the critical potentials which exist in play can be explored in a fashion which does not propose a totalization or serve a deterrent system.

## **Chapter One: The Challenge of Baudrillard**

### **Deterrence, the Virtual and Play**

As a Master's Candidate in Sociology, contemporary social theory has been my greatest fascination. Among the theorists which I have engaged, Jean Baudrillard stands out from the rest. His work appears to me as an open challenge to would-be theorists and researchers in the social sciences. His critical concerns with technologies of representation, and their impact on the systematization of thought and understanding made my introduction his most famous work *Simulations* (1980) particularly interesting. The world explored by social researchers is one of increasing everyday entanglement in the technologies of communication and representation. Hoping to explore digital games, I cannot ignore how Baudrillard's description of contemporary social situations challenges a common-sense as well as theoretical understanding of the world. To explore his challenging position and its relationship to the difficult conception of deterrence I begin with an example drawn from *Simulations*, even though my aim is expressly to move beyond the text for which Baudrillard is most renowned. Working through or with Baudrillard means grappling with the threat of a totalizing system, and understanding how it can disarm critical efforts in both theory and practice.

Even in the early 1980s changes in the way the world is presented and re-presented through technology provoked Baudrillard to see theme parks such as Disneyland as filling an unexpected function in the organization of the world. They played for him the double-role of a deterrent, at once revelling in and concealing systems of technology and reproduction that shape how we construct our world. The 'escape' theme parks offer is paradigmatic of the problem of deterrence in *Simulations*:

Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation. To begin with it is a play of illusions and phantasms: Pirates, the Frontier, Future World, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to be what makes the operation successful. But what draws the crowds is undoubtedly much more the social microcosm, the miniaturized and *religious* revelling in real America, in its delights and drawbacks...

The objective profile of America then, may be traced throughout Disneyland, even down to the morphology of the crowd. All its values are exalted here, in miniature and comic strip form. Embalmed and pacified. (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 23-24)

On the surface, Disneyland appears to be a place of escape. A location devoted to entertainment and a relief from the everyday. But Baudrillard sees more at work here than the physical incarnation of storybook tales in rides, shows and amusements. All these 'imaginary' objects are not meaningless or trivial escapes which merely allow park-goers to hide from their real lives:

To be sure. But this conceals something else, that "ideological" blanket exactly serves to cover over a *third-order simulation*: Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America, which *is* Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral).

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyper real and of simulation. It is no longer a question of false representation of reality (ideology), but concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus saving the reality principle. (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 25)

Understood in this way as *deterrence* and not merely entertainment, an escape to Disneyland deters the possibility of escape from society's actual circumstances. When it acts as a deterrent, an amusement park occupies time and resources, and its status as an entertainment conceals the investment that it demands and the systems it supports. For Baudrillard, deterrence in this fashion remains effective because the theme park is not as it appears to be. Theme parks are not apart from the everyday work world, they are a place of work and an industry, paid for by work in the everyday. A trip there is purchased

at a cost in time and through an investment into the system it pretends to permit an alternative to:

The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false; it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile degeneration of this imaginary. It is meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the “real” world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere, particularly amongst those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions as to their real childishness. (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 25-26)

The disarming of opposition which Disneyland enacts is effective in bringing about beliefs which conceal its situation, both in the imagination and in practical activities. When effective, theme parks take deterrence to a higher level. Constructed intentionally by a system for its own concealment, a theme park can be considered a *deterrence-machine*. A deterrence-machine is *intended* to protect the claims of a totalizing system.

Video games today may be no different in their function than theme parks in the 1980s; for Baudrillard both can be deterrence-machines. Digital activities of all sorts are entangled in technology, and are often reduced to mechanical or operational conditions. Games in particular, as an alternative to the everyday and an entertainment share many features with Disneyland. Even during the era of theme parks when deterrence-machines were still spatially localized their impact depended on a system larger than themselves:

Moreover Disneyland is not the only one. Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain, Marine World: Los Angeles is encircled by these “imaginary stations” which feed reality, reality-energy, to a town whose mystery is precisely that it is nothing more than a network of endless, unreal circulation—a town of fabulous proportions, but without space or dimensions. (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 26)

Digital games certainly seem to take up the role of these “imaginary stations” and give them a new appearance. Consumers can now have at home, a game console or personal computer on which to explore a new form of 'vacation' from the everyday.



These alternatives in a contemporary form, called massive multiplayer online games, now provide access to persistent online worlds. Digital games today seem to be precisely “the same scenario as Disneyland (an imaginary effect concealing that reality no more exists outside than inside the bounds of the artificial perimeter)” (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 26). The dominant system which constructed Disneyland as a deterrence-machine depended on reality as its paradigm. The network of communication technology out of which digital games emerge is often colloquially called *virtual reality*. But the material conditions of computer networks are no less actual than the steel and stone used to build amusement parks. It is not through the recent use of digital technology, but a long standing effect of organizing the world through systems that on Baudrillard's view has moved them and their deterrence-machines beyond a dependence on the real. Expressed by the communication and representation technologies which Baudrillard worries strive for a totalizing system, digital games depend on a distinct set of conditions which had not yet presented themselves at the time of *Simulations'* publication. To grasp them more clearly, I must consider what the Virtual is for Baudrillard, since it is more than merely the connection of computer systems and the technologies of communication. For this reason I here leave aside *Simulations*, as a first way marker on my course towards describing Baudrillard's role in critical understanding, and turn to a less famous and more contemporary text.

Disneyland depended on the role of the automobile in the material action of its deterrence. The family road-trip led to another world and back home again. Meanwhile, the car which provides transportation to and from the theme park demands a constant investment into the everyday work world in order to maintain it. Digital games are

available to contemporary agents through communications technologies which displace transportation technologies at the centre of their access. The laptop with a wireless internet connection now plays the role of the automobile in allowing agents to “get away from it all” and keeps them eager to return to work to afford a new or better vehicle. Baudrillard has already described the destination of these sorts of evasions: “A town of fabulous proportions, but without space or dimensions.” The situation of digital games certainly appears to take place somewhere that fits that description. More than the network of connected computers that permits their play; digital games are Virtual locations of possible social action. Fortunately, we have a guidebook from Baudrillard for just such a new location, and the book is called *Passwords* (2000).

Any effort to evaluate digital games with an understanding which addresses Baudrillard's concern about deterrence-machines must come to grips with his particular description of the Virtual. Written twenty years after *Simulation*, I will be emphasizing the insight that *Passwords* provides us towards a contemporary Baudrillardian view of the development of the Virtual. Just as Disneyland is more than merely a tourist-destination, the Virtual for Baudrillard is more than the latest technological expression of communication or representation:

In its current sense, the virtual stands opposed to the real, but its sudden emergence, through the new technologies, gives us the sense that it now marks the vanishing or the end of the real. I have already said that, as I see it, to bring a real world into being is in itself to produce that world, and the real has only ever been a form of simulation. We may, admittedly, cause a reality-effect, or a truth-effect or an objectivity-effect to exist, but, in itself, the real does not exist. The virtual then, is merely a hyperbolic instance of this tendency to pass from the symbolic to the real – which is its degree zero. In this sense, the virtual coincides with the notion of hyper-reality.

(Baudrillard, *Passwords* 39)

Theme-parks were occasional and spatially distinct deterrence which helped to conceal

the short falls of a system which depends on the conception of the real. What appears as a sojourn into fairy-tale lands hides the situation of society from apprehension. The everyday absurdity of life is shown to be a mature and honourable necessity—particularly if one wants to afford another 'escape' next year.

Insinuated into our everyday lives by the abundance of technologies we deploy, the Virtual is the newest and most encompassing system. Its action installs a multiplicity of effects at our fingertips, effects which used to depend on ideas of space and organizations of reality which no longer limit them. Now we can find facts instantly on Wikipedia pages instead of going to a library. We can find information or company in the form of news or social networking sites; we can witness the progress of economic markets by watching real-time stock quotes from bourses around the globe. The Virtual proposes that frequencies replace freeways as preferred routes to these alternatives. Connection speeds and hardware specifications now operate to reduce 'travel time' to and from the Virtual by taking the place of plane tickets and hotel reservations. With a few minutes at lunch, an office worker can access a digital game, 'depart' the cubicle for the battlefield, wage digital war and be back on the job before the boss is any wiser. But this escape is perhaps functioning like a visit to a theme park. It can deter a possible insight into the systems which organize our world, but only to those with a sufficient investment in the everyday. One must afford computer technologies and leisure time by dint of work in the market, just as the theme-park going family had to earn their automobile and their two weeks' vacation. But for Baudrillard, the Virtual is more than the latest strategy by which contemporary deterrence-machines operate. It is more than simply an amplification of strategies to recover the real:

Virtual reality, the reality that might be said to be perfectly homogenized, digitized and 'operationalized,' substitutes for the other because it is perfect, verifiable and non-contradictory. So, because it is more 'complete', it is more real than what we have established as simulacrum.

The fact remains that this expression, 'virtual reality', is positively an oxymoron. We no longer have the good old philosophical sense of the term, where the virtual was what was destined to become actual, or where dialectic was established between these two notions. The virtual is now what takes the place of the real; it is the final solution of the real so far as it both accomplishes the world in its definitive reality and marks its dissolution.

(Baudrillard, *Passwords* 39-40)

The Virtual is on this account the system that perfects systems. It proposes the imperfection of the system which depended on reality, and is therefore limited by space, time or other worldly features. Predictability, reliability and effectiveness were once exemplary attributes of 'the real world system.' Now the Virtual claims to offer more of them than 'the real world' can itself produce. The Virtual as a totalizing system seeks to out strip all previous systems by ubiquity. Once zoos presented 'wildlife' more faithfully than museums (the animals are still alive after all) and more reliably than nature (as there is nowhere to hide in that cage!). Now the Virtual offers a new order which is more than merely effective, it is how a system would sustain itself if it could 'go beyond' the limited, worldly and finite character of human actions. The Virtual offers to 'solve' problematic features of the "world-as-real" including many of the difficulties of being a subject. It does this in a manner unlike past totalizing systems, because it has new strategies as well as new technologies at its disposal:

At this point it is the virtual which thinks us: no need now for a subject of thought, a subject of action; everything happens by technological mediation. But is the virtual that which puts an end, once and for all, to a world of the real and of play, or is it part of an experimentation with which we are playing? Are we not playing out the comedy of virtual to ourselves, with a hint of irony, as in the comedy of power?

But if our world is indeed inventing a virtual double for itself, we have to see this

as the fulfilment of a trend that began long ago. Reality, as we know, has not always existed. We have talked about it only since there has been a rationality to express it, parameters enabling us to represent it by coded and decodable signs. (Baudrillard, *Passwords* 40)

Considered as the system *non plus ultra*, the Virtual also proposes augmented facilitation by useful technologies. For each choice or worry which confronts social subjects in the Virtual system there is offered a specialized technology, ready to be deployed on your behalf to alleviate any strain. All these new inventions to save time and reduce strain could lead social subjects closer to grasping the creative basis of objects and systems in the world. But many of them are employed as deterrence-machines. Their purpose is to conceal the action which Baudrillard feels is the danger of totalizing systems. Effective deterrence performs a reduction of possibility. Some subjects are pre-occupied with the objects produced by the Virtual system. While among other subjects an elevation in the value of the Virtual can occur alongside the successful application of its concomitant technologies.

On such an extreme account, everything we encounter threatens to emerge through the same technologies, the same networks and system of systems. But within the efforts of the Virtual to become a perfect system there remains an ironic possibility for Baudrillard. Social agents may well be experimenting with the Virtual—systematically and consciously embracing its transformation of possibilities.

This is one way that digital games have the possibility of revealing or concealing the action of the Virtual system. If they are grasped as more than deterrence-machines, then reflection on their play can lead to an awareness of the Virtual *as a* system. Games can also make explicit the constructed character of 'the real world' by displaying themselves as a revealed system which eliminates usual forms of evaluation. Play does

not judge, it enjoys. The Virtual does not judge, it *calculates*:

In the virtual, we are no longer dealing with value; we are merely dealing with a turning-into-data, a turning-into-calculations, a generalized computation in which reality-effects disappear. The virtual might truly be the reality-horizon, just as we talk about the event-horizon in physics. But it is also possible to think that all this is merely a roundabout route to an as yet indiscernible aim.  
(Baudrillard, *Passwords* 40-41)

Everywhere digital games are played, the installation of the technology associated with the Virtual has already taken place. Nevertheless, Baudrillard is not yet certain what the outcome of the Virtual will be for social subjects.

Taken exclusively as deterrence-machines, digital games help to conceal the artifice of bringing about an organization of the world. Divorced from a location, and for many synonymous with the expanding network of communication technologies, digital games may in fact be more efficient deterrents than theme parks ever were. They are accessible and reliable to a different degree than theme parks. At their most effective, the deterrence-machines of the Virtual system can seem to trick agents into accepting behaviours that rob them of positive possibilities in their social action. The explosive popularity of cell phones, Facebook and Twitter both give new communicative access to social agents thanks to the Virtual, and simultaneously eliminate options which take more time or effort to employ. If its efforts as a totalizing system succeed, Baudrillard fears Virtuality would be an epidemic form of alienation—one which terminates all future alternative systems.

But the action of the Virtual may eliminate the problem of alienation in two fashions. If it becomes a total system, and is able to devise a technology to replace all our necessities, the actions and evaluations of subjects as we know them would disappear. Alienation would follow. On another account, the Virtual may reveal to subjects the

constructed nature of identity and consequently alienation. Revealed as systems, values regarding authenticity and alienation are subject to change and challenge. Past conceptions of alienation can in this way be seen as inventions, not necessities. We are perhaps offered by the Virtual an alternative to the burdens of tradition, in which we design and invest our own systems of value:

There is a positive fascination today with the virtual and all its technologies. If it genuinely is a mode of disappearance, this would be an – obscure, but deliberate – choice on the part of the species itself: the decision to clone itself, lock, stock and barrel, in another universe; to disappear as the human race, properly speaking, in order to perpetuate itself in an artificial species that would have much more efficient, much more operational attributes. Is this what is at issue?  
(Baudrillard, *Passwords* 41)

Baudrillard sees the extremity of a circumstance where the Virtual system comes to fruition as one where the human species willingly creates a replacement for itself through extraordinary technology. This line of thought clearly has a definite cultural and creative appeal. For decades, the dangers of our increased dependence on technology have emerged into popular cultural forms. But this is not what is most readily at hand. While science fiction enjoys a story about a world over-run by machines, the Virtual is not synonymous with the technologies of communication and representation that it employs. Baudrillard is not seriously concerned with the threat of a technological replacement for mankind. Rather he sees a potential within the technologies alongside the Virtual system to move towards a more flexible understanding of value as one system among many.

Leaving science fiction behind, we can only note, after all, the peculiar irony there is in the fact that these technologies, which we associate with inhumanity and annihilation, will in the end, perhaps, be what frees us from the world of value, the world of judgement. All this heavy moral, philosophical culture, which modern radical thought has done its metaphysical utmost to liquidate after a back-breaking struggle, technology expels pragmatically and radically with the virtual.

(Baudrillard, *Passwords* 41-42)

The Virtual can be seen to argue against the necessity of traditional values. This is not to say that it proposes any solutions of their sort. It may well be that the Virtual dissolves problems previously taken to be insoluble. But it does so by elimination. If technology displaces moral traditions, questions of theology are for instance, no longer necessary to ask. This sort of action does not solve the problems, but removes them *as* problems.

These forms of elimination are part of the ambiguity which the Virtual still holds for Baudrillard. New organizations of the world eliminate elements of past systems, others re-install abandoned elements. Our contemporary understanding of the world depends on the elimination of many traditional problems from our register of concerns. What this reveals is that totalizing systems like the Virtual are a danger particularly if they threaten the possibility of actively crafting another system:

At the stage we are at, we do not know whether technology, having reached a point of extreme sophistication, will liberate us from technology itself – the optimistic viewpoint – or whether in fact we are heading for catastrophe. Even though catastrophes, in the dramaturgical sense of the term – that is to say, endings – may, depending on the protagonists, assume happy or unhappy forms.

(Baudrillard, *Passwords* 42)

Many endings can be found in my reading of Baudrillard's challenging concepts of deterrence and the Virtual. A totalizing system spells the end of 'the real', of authenticity debates, of essences and inviolate categories, of the weight of tradition as a burden which 'must' be borne. All these are endings that can be liberating. My investigation is challenged by the ambiguity of outcomes still within the Virtual as Baudrillard understands it. I intend to carefully and reflexively enquire as to the ways which this challenge can be answered by turning more directly to the consideration of digital games and their strange situation as play within the Virtual system.



Digital games are entangled in both symbolic and material processes which Baudrillard reveals about the Virtual. They are an express technological result of its success as a system. But as a technology as well as an activity for social agents, the situation of games is still ambivalent. I consider games to provide the social situation of *play*. This means that they must on my view be treated as ambiguous, not merely as deterrence-machines concealing the Virtual. The particular understandings of Baudrillard on games and the Virtual most productive to my goal must now be made clearer by further joining Game Studies to the position we have so far described. The Virtual poses these challenges as not-yet-fully-realized; this incompleteness provides space for a variety of readings in the pursuit of game studies.

### **Game Studies Investigates the Perfect Crime**

There is a temptation to simply accept, at face value, a reading of Baudrillard which abandons the usual situation of the world so profoundly as to appear 'otherworldly.' Game studies is after all concerned with games which take place in 'unreal' locations and obey 'fantastic' metaphysics like those in which magic remains possible. A special issue of the journal *Games and Culture* (2.4, 2007) gathered together contributors who shared concerns about how to employ Baudrillard's challenging work in studying digital games.

According to one of the special issue contributors, Patrick Crogan, researchers in Games Studies can only do Baudrillard justice by remembering that: "The challenge to critical thought that Baudrillard's writings on simulation presents cannot simply be ignored as one cites them in another interpretive project" (*Remembering (Forgetting) Baudrillard*, *Games & Culture* 2.4 2007). I do not assume that the 'simulation character' of digital

games is their most compelling feature. Nor does my position entail that digital games exhaust their possible action exclusively in deterrence. Rather my aim is to approach digital games as a novel situation of play with an undefined outcome for their participants. Emphasizing deterrence permits me to foreground its centrality in Baudrillard's challenge to theorists and researchers of the Virtual, over that of simulation *per se*. This emphasis is shared by Crogan:

The question of computer games is always a question about their status as deterrence machines; let us see how this challenge pans out in pursuing this question. Computer games, as a leisure-activity, one involving engagement in simulated fictional worlds—such as hypothetical and historical theatres of conflict; spaces with alternative physical, biological, and evolutionary dynamics; and so on—could...be operating to deter us from perceiving the “serious” world outside of computer games as an ensemble of pre-designed, interactive experiences regulated by operational objectives and challenges devoid of authentic stakes or significance. Critiques of the values represented by elements of game design, of the politics of online community formation around particular games, of the stakes of the political economy of the computer game business, and so forth would in this perspective be only means through which the “reality principle” would be maintained as an appearance for the purposes of this deterrence function.  
(Crogan 2007)

Investigations into games that employ Baudrillard's work on deterrence can move beyond the traditional categories of value. To do so means to go beyond emphasizing the specific technologies which represent games to their players, or the situation of games as one product among many for sale in the world. Focusing on deterrence re-emphasizes the systems of organization surrounding games are more than merely material. The uncertain consequences of playing a digital game are both internal to the game's own resolution and the situation of its player. The outcome of play is sometimes inconclusive. This sort of indeterminacy means allowing digital games to retain their ambiguity is important to my reading of their relationship to Baudrillard's Virtual.

Digital technology is unlike past forms of technological mediation. Games played

in the Virtual system explore this difference by combining two different modes of mediation at work in the technologies of representation which make them possible. Players are able to play a digital game on a practical or operational level due to the distributed computer networks that supports it. There are diverse inputs and outputs available to the player on this level. But another and also interesting level of mediation is that of the social or cultural dynamic which digital games permit by taking part in the Virtual system. Gerry Coulter has an excellent description of the social situation of digital games:

Baudrillard's writing on games and the virtual points in two compatible directions:  
Gamers are possibly a new social form (*homo fractalis*) and they are also the explorers of our age, traversing the cool universe of digitality.  
(Coulter 2007)

Along with the novelty of media rich games and communication technologies, the Virtual allows for unheralded social forms. The Virtual system permits players to present themselves simultaneously in many distant locations. But this presentational element of Virtual social activity is mediated not only by the technological devices or game specific commands. It also depends on and influences the situation and experience of the player as a social actor. The rules of good conduct within a game are not identical with the rules of the game itself. Learning to play the game and learning the culture of game-play are two distinct ways that digital games reflect the operational and social demands of their mediation.

Gamers can be considered a sort of explorer then. Exploring not through billion dollar space vessels, but through personal computers, contemporary game players can again make new maps of social worlds. Coulter's reading is one which inspires hope for the gamers who participate in the Virtual. More is happening here than can be captured

by the obvious action of a deterrence-machine. But even this approach is not without a challenge, one which derives from Baudrillard's personal relationship with games:

Baudrillard was no gamer; or more accurately, his game was writing, and in it he often liked to play with games and gamers. (Coulter 2007)

The temptation to use *Simulations* to 'exhaust' the terrain of digital games would fall prey to a specific kind of deterrence in action. Baudrillard allows the language of his theory to mingle with and entangle the everyday language of our world. The features of digital games which derive from their current operational mediation by communication technologies can lead to an insight into the social mediation which takes place via the same devices.

My decision to deploy *Passwords* (Baudrillard 2003) as the primary text of this investigation hopes here to escape from the treatment of Baudrillard's contribution to understanding the Virtual as exhausted by his analysis in *Simulations*. I take my strongest clue as to *Passwords* critical potential from the preface on how to approach Baudrillard with the guidance of Baudrillard:

Doubtless one should put oneself in the position of an imaginary traveller who came upon these writings as if they were a manuscript and, for want of supporting documents, subsequently strove to reconstruct the society they describe. (Baudrillard, *Passwords* ix)

Coulter's description of gamers has already cast itself in the light of exploration. Since games take place on both the operational and social level the situation they present is at the same time material and imaginary. Digital games can illustrate their imaginary with the technologies of representation, but their play is still a situation which unfolds in time along with the presence of social actors.

Many forms of alternative social organization have histories in the world that

precede the Virtual, or at least they appear to. Digital games are novel in some fashions and traditional in others. The Virtual is a novel system, but still bears similarities to previous organizations. Baudrillard sees this relationship to past systems in violence:

Illusion, dreams, passion, madness, drugs, but also artifice and simulacrum were the natural predators of reality. All these have lost their energy as if they were suffering from some incurable surreptitious disease (that might very well be reality itself). One needs then to find an artificial equivalent for them. Otherwise, once it has reached a critical mass, reality will spontaneously destroy itself. It will implode by itself—which it is already doing now, making room for the Virtual in all its forms. The virtual is the ultimate predator, the plunderer of reality. Reality has generated the Virtual as a kind of viral and self-destructing agent. Reality has become prey to virtual reality. The ultimate consequence of a process that started in the abstraction of objective reality ends in integral reality.  
(Baudrillard, *Violence of the Virtual and Integral Reality* 2)

The situation of framing systems always eliminates elements from alternative organizations. The Virtual is a particularly effective system in this fashion, and it makes ample use of deterrence which closely resembles simulation.

The following example from digital game play quickly illustrates a new situation that the Virtual can propound: Actions called heroic in digital games always merit recompense by the system which describes them. If the king offers you a reward to kill a dragon, then killing the dragon (who was really *evil*) always saves the princess (who is beautiful *but chaste*, and never any worse for her ordeal), and earns the rewards promised (which will help slay *even more evil* dragons). Living up to the code of a real-world moral system is a difficult but valid and important alternative to living without such a commitment. But the pursuit of abstract values in the real world does not promise such consistent, predictable and always available satisfactions as the actions of a Virtual system produce. Again a problem for social subjects in the real world is eliminated in the Virtual. The question of how to be morally good is set aside, but not solved by the

actions and rewards within the Virtual system that apes goodness. Pursuit of an alternative to the everyday world still requires an ironic investment into everyday effects, an investment that cannot assure results with the confidence of the Virtual.

This circumstance of digital games appears to illuminate deterrence in a new light. Their ensemble of communication and entertainment elements threatens to deter an alternative understanding of their potential. Digital games are deterrence when their pursuit pre-empts action in the world by providing a Virtual spectacle and offering their players diverse but fruitless possibilities of self-presentation. In order to possess an alter-ego who can slay dragons, cast spells, and turn the tide of epic battles between good and evil, players must labour in the everyday world. The fantasy heroes who undertake these challenges depend on disenchanted work in the world of global capitalism, to make possible their magical power. The computer hardware, internet connection and game software necessary for a Virtual adventure are each afforded by commitments to and expenditures in the very contemporary conditions that don't appear in these other-worlds. Enormous real-world companies make sizable profits from these imaginary exploits. When digital games operate in this fashion on behalf of the Virtual system, they fit well into a description which Alexander Galloway gives of deterrence at work:

Baudrillard here posits a model of repression through expression, a stunting of the drives through the very facilitation of those drives into new control spaces. A new ambiance permeates the social field. The masses are not repressed, no never, they are allowed to dream!

(Galloway, *Radical Illusion (A Game Against)* 2007)

Galloway's reading of the contemporary emergence of the virtual expands the operation of deterrence. By providing an alternative possibility for the expression of self, digital games and other forms of online social networking again employ deterrent effects. The

constant availability of expression in regulated modes other than that of the everyday curtails unexpected outbursts from the social subject. Contemporary social actors are intended to be left speechless after so many instant messages, emails and teleconferences. The attraction of the Virtual and its regularity of reward are set against the obligation and contingency of everyday self-interest in society. After the emergence of the completed Virtual system authenticity itself appears as an antique conception which depends on constancy and development. Authenticity's traditional form does not satisfy the demands of a Virtual realm of constant re-presentation and dynamic identification through *expression*.

When deterrence effects were still localized in theme parks, the dream of a Disneyland vacation was a distant and limited reality, whose attainment demanded everyday investment into the contemporary world. Now we have manifold alternative worlds into which game players can vanish at the blink of an eye and the click of a mouse. The Virtual when using games as deterrence-machines proposes an expanded and simplified possibility of self-expression. But such utterances can be reduced to a neutralizing algorithm expressed in the terms of the system.

Positive possibilities of action and expression are here given over to alternatives presented by the Virtual. For each difficult, materially-localized, personal and contingent expression of self, the Virtual proffers an alternative. We invest our time in the Virtual, and reap its peculiar harvest of satisfactions in what seems to be an alternative to our everyday efforts. It is easier now and perhaps more satisfying to live a fictional heroic life in the Virtual than to find and pursue real avenues for change in an unsatisfying everyday world.

Under the sway of the Virtual something disconcerting has happened to the everyday conditions of exchange and evaluation, more than merely their evolution into a new representation or unifying principle. At first glance, it appears to have traded in past systems of evaluation and exchange for new tenants of the same practice. But as Baudrillard is wont to remind us, the apparent action of a system may well conceal its operation by means of deterrence.

Much of Baudrillard's early writing was heavily influenced by the dominance of the capitalist system (and its market-effect) in contemporary society. Understood only as a form of exchange, market systems still appear to operate according to traditional principles. With the rise of the Virtual and its ascendancy as a totalizing system we have gone beyond a transformation of exchange or evaluation: through this totalizing action the Virtual threatens to commit *the Perfect Crime*.

The perfect crime would be the elimination of the real world. But what concerns me, rather, is the elimination of the original illusion, the fateful illusion of the world. We might agree that the world itself is a perfect crime: it has in itself no motive, no equivalent, no alleged perpetrator. So we may imagine that from the very beginning we are already in a criminal enterprise.

But in the perfect crime, *it is the perfection that is criminal*. To perfect the world is to finish it, to fulfil it – and hence to find a final solution for it.  
(Baudrillard, *Passwords* 61, my italics)

Like other totalizing systems before it, the Virtual seeks for a kind of organization that eliminates all alternatives. Furthermore, it seeks completeness and perfection in a human domain, contrary to the finite and limited situation in which human agents are found. As a final elimination of alternatives and a submission to an impossible demand for perfection, all totalizing systems are “criminal.” These inhuman systems pre-ordain our robbery. They reduce the respect given to the contingency and possibility which ground



social action. The overcoming of strain with the assistance of technology typifies escape into Virtual worlds through digital games. The completion of “the perfect crime” by the Virtual would further divest subjects of the need for action. Technologies of communication seek to present the world as completed by the reliability and constancy of their expressive dimension. This “crime” threatens violence against the everyday world.

Faced with a world that is illusion, all great cultures have striven to manage illusion by illusion – to treat evil with evil, so to speak. We alone seek to reduce the illusion with truth – which is the most fantastical of illusions. But this ultimate truth, this final solution, is the equivalent of extermination. What is at issue in the perfect crime perpetrated on the world, on time, on the body, is this kind of dissolution by the objective verification of things, by identification. This is equivalent to eliminating death, as I have already said. For what is involved here is no longer death, but extermination. Literally, to *exterminate* means to deprive something of its own end, to deprive it of its term. It is to eliminate duality, the antagonism of life and death, to reduce everything to a kind of single principle – we might say a *pensée unique* – of the world, which could be said to express itself in all our technologies, particularly today our virtual technologies.  
(Baudrillard, *Passwords* 62)

Here then is the threat which was posed by the Virtual through the deployment of technology. The danger of this crime is its perfection and its completion of the world by an immortal system with no alternative. Vacations end, theme parks close, political parties lose power; in this way past forms of deterrence were ephemeral. An occasional and localized abandonment into strategic alternatives was only an imperfect disappearance, one the Virtual seeks to perfect:

So, it is both a crime against the real world, which becomes a useless function, but, more deeply, more radically, it is a crime perpetuated against the illusion of the world, that is to say, against its radical uncertainty, its duality, its antagonism – everything which underlies the existence of destiny, conflict and death. So, by eliminating every negative principle, we might be said to end up with a world that is unified, homogenized, totally *verified*, as it were, and hence, as I see it, exterminated. Extermination might be said, from this point on to be our new mode of disappearance, the one we have substituted for death.  
(Baudrillard, *Passwords* 62-3)

Within this emergence, digital games provide a front-line exemplar of the transformation of the world by the Virtual. A totalizing point of view sees activities and 'escapes' in the realm of digital games as *disappearance*, as an elimination of the world unless it can be made calculable. The range of possible imaginaries which games present is manifold, but each participates in the Virtual system which threatens to negate them:

Such is the story of the perfect crime, which shows itself in the whole current 'operationality' of the world, in our ways of *realizing* those things that are dreams, phantasms, utopias, transcribing them digitally, turning them into information, which is the work of the virtual in its most widely accepted sense. This is the crime: we attain a perfection in the sense of a total accomplishment, and that totalization is an end. There is no longer any destination elsewhere, nor even any 'elsewhere'. The perfect crime destroys otherness, the other. It is the reign of the same. The world is identified with itself, identical to itself, by exclusion of any principle of otherness. (Baudrillard, *Passwords* 62-63)

It is critical to remember that Baudrillard is "playing the end" for both theory and tradition. He presents a situation in which the Virtual attained to this perfection so it can become clear to see why this "realization" is an extermination of alternative possibilities.

The force of alternatives to the world in which we live depended for Baudrillard on the illusion of the world. It was based on the mutual resistance and conditioning of what is and what we wish would be. Inherent to these understandings were both irreducibility and an obstinacy of the other: the everyday world could not 'simply' be transformed into another. Change required effort, challenged failure and promised somewhere "else" as a destination. The Virtual dissolves difficulty, offers unlimited second chances and dismisses any questions of an alternative. The fate of the Virtual is not yet certain of itself, but its potential impacts are of concern to the researchers of digital games. Considering the sort of reasoning which tends towards perfection or totalization:

Elsewhere he christens this “meteorological” thought, that is, a way of thinking that works entirely within a logic of statistical modelling, prediction, risk analysis, pre-emption, and so on. Instead, Baudrillard (2000b) suggests that thought “must make uncertainty a rule of the game. But thought must realize that it plays without a possible conclusion, within a definitive form of illusion or play-making [*mise en jeu*]” (pp. 101-102)  
(Galloway 2007)

In order to avoid the crime of seeking perfection in knowledge, the challenge is to remain at play in thought and in theory, resisting any implied exhaustiveness. To continue to look for an understanding of the situation in which the Virtual holds our possibilities, but has not yet eliminated them. But this possibility and challenge are not easily evident in the contemporary world. In his reading of Baudrillard's impact on Game Studies, Galloway explores in detail an understanding of the dangerous operation-towards-extermination which typifies the rising Virtual and would be a perfect crime.

### **The Danger of the Separative Cause**

In order to frame the challenge that Baudrillard and deterrence pose for research into digital games, I have addressed the development of deterrence-machines as well as the Virtual itself. The atmosphere of discussion around the Virtual remains charged with gravity despite its potential to alleviate strain and give unexpected insight into the construction of our world. Galloway argues that the symbolic-material relationship Baudrillard locates in our bringing-about-a-world is currently under the sway of an operation which, like a deterrence-machine working for a totalizing system, conceals itself and obviates alternatives:

Summarize it like this: *Exploitation is material, liberation is semiotic*. The material is the realm of political failure; the social is the realm of utopian compromise. In Baudrillard, the principle of separation is the principle by which the two are segregated and divided into distinct domains, the one to play the fool for the other.

(Galloway 2007)

The deployment of expression as a realm of apparent individual choice installs systematic mechanisms of entanglement by material control. Video games and social networking sites re-situate deterrent effects to the individual level; what Galloway calls the *principle of separation* installs itself as the paragon of integration. It may announce the arrival of the completed Virtual. This is a form of totalization. Here its eliminations act to disarm any alternative by involving and implicating all actions and effects in a double-strategy. Always-already occurring together, the action of the separative cause can be understood as involving two effects:

In Step 1, the given phenomenon, which exists primordially as an undivided problematic containing both progressive and reactionary political impulses, is first separated into (a) a material modality and (b) a social modality.

The principle of separation occasions the phenomenon first through an alliance formed between the progressive political impulse and the domain of the social or public sphere. A progressive moral horizon of significant magnitude invests itself in the social sphere. This moral plane develops its own independent logic and will likely experience a flourishing cycle of achievement and resolution but always within the “symbolic” realm of the social or public sphere.

In Step 2, the progressive political impulse is *negated* and as negation finds its home in the domain of the material. Thus a reactionary political project blossoms within the realm of the physical world. This project realizes its ends, developing the necessary mechanisms required to continue and grow.

(Galloway 2007)

According to this understanding of the fundamental processes at work in Baudrillard, Galloway presents us with a more nuanced reading of “the perfect crime.” Under the reign of the separative cause, the constitution of the world is radically unified: “All sides unify together, but only at the cost of a complete and incontrovertible segregation between the symbolic and the material” (Galloway 2007). This segregation dissolves potential emancipation in advance. Like any perfection seeking system, the principle of

separation appears to have an unlimited capacity for generating deterrence effects. It conclusively divides the world into symbolic and material halves. Expression is offered only to exhaust the energies of opposition in the semiotic realm. At its most pronounced the principle of separation unveils brutal paradoxes for the progressive political agent:

In today's world, it is structurally impractical if not outright impossible to be an environmentalist in any true sense. Imagine: An activist drives to a rally against global warming. The contradiction is clear. His actual spiritual liberation is undercut by the tailpipe fumes of his own expression. His intentions are good, but there is a physical base—that depraved automobile contraption—that creates conditions of impossibility that are symbolically if not practically insurmountable. Of course, many today refuse to participate in the global system...but this comes at the cost of complete withdrawal from the world-system, a price too high to pay for most. Like the computer at the heart of today's planetary organization, the costs are thus *binary* in that they offer an all-or-nothing option, but only an “option” insofar as the nothing is reified into material reality and the all spins on into oblivion. (Galloway 2007)

The player of a video game is in a bleak position from this perspective. Their intentional dis-engagement with the situated circumstances of the material world permits an expressive freedom in the systematic realm of the Virtual, but the freedom is fictitious and the gratification of expression can deter the agent. Each successive foray into the Virtual demands an increased investment of actual resources. Time and material costs are entailed to fully experience the game or properly express oneself online. Each new game demands more powerful computers, faster internet connections, and a fresh temporal investment. The more passionately players seek magic, myth and adventure in the Virtual, the more inextricably bound to the mundane world they become. When expression operates this way in 'new control spaces' it is the compliment of material exploitation and driven by the separative cause. Coulter gives game-particular detail to Galloway's reading of the danger of expression as deterrence:

So with a nod to the political economist, we must recognize that the game should

not take so long to master that it would interfere with the next round of the production of games. Like a drug that kills too many users, such a game would be against the interest of the system. The flow of games, like the flow of drugs, must not stop; the effects may be profitable and brutal but not fatal.  
(Coulter 2007)

When acting as proscribed by the separative cause, games disarm opposition to the contemporary culture by providing an express alternative. This deterrent option itself demands participation in the contemporary culture, and simultaneous withdrawal from its higher order benefits. The sort of recognition produced by the digital adventure, remains locked in the Virtual, perhaps even counts against recognition offline. The binary divisiveness of the separative cause is here re-lit, decimating any attempt to translate virtual valour into actual achievement.

At the same time as it allows expression free reign but denies it any potency, the dual action of the separative cause threatens to invest a dangerous social-positivism into any research into games. Both in their content and their deployment, games-to-an-end-outside-themselves drive directly into the danger that Bart Simon illuminates in his introduction to *Games & Culture* Issue 2.4 2007:

Consider that part of what games scholarship does it to make games serious...When games become serious, they lose much of their triviality and arguably they are made to fall more easily into the dominant mode of production. In this sense, they become banal. No longer acting as 'ludic gadgets,' games are made to be about something; games are made to definitively refer. They are tamed and made positive.  
(Simon 2007)

This is another way in which totalizing systems like the separative cause can eliminate in advance alternative possibilities. A conscious public embrace of the inherent lightness of games threatens the sort of semiotic-material divide indicative of the separative function. Games researchers and investigators of the Virtual in general must

remain open to diverse positions on the role of games in the system of its effects. Simon's concern is then reflexive upon those who would invest in games through research, theory or their pursuit, and stakes out a desirable ambiguity against either grave seriousness or silliness. This ambiguity recalls the critical possibility which play itself offers. Gerry Coulter hints at this sense of ambivalence from the point of view of the gamer:

Unlike reality, which incessantly demands we believe in it, the illusion of the game (which the gamer never really believes in) does not hold such a requirement. For Baudrillard, it is precisely because the gamer does not believe in the game that he or she *enters into a more necessary relationship with the rules of the game*. Here society and the law are replaced by a symbolic pact with the rules—a series of ritual obligations (Baudrillard, 1979)—that are, for Baudrillard, an order of fate. (Coulter 2007, my italics)

Willingly accepting the rules of the game, the player re-installs the connection between semiotic and material causes, while remaining conscious of the unreal nature of the game. Game-playing is committed to the faithful pursuit of a comportment which reveals fractures in the totality of the separative cause. Comportment refers to the complex of action, attitude and cultivated knowledge that underlies ways of social being expressed through time. I will return to the importance of this conditioning and cultivation of a gaming-consciousness as a comportment which I take to be playfully serious/seriously playful. In the same ironic function that sees both positive and negative potentials in all eliminations, the submission to an order of fate permits the player to divest themselves of the weight of actuality:

In place of liberty in today's society, Baudrillard (1979) finds instead the game and reminds us that our very passion for games and rules parodies all ideologies of liberty.

The gamer thus plays for the charm of the game, its seductiveness, and as such embraces repeatedly the catastrophe of losing the game. The gamer accepts the

arbitrary rules of the game for what Baudrillard (1990) calls "ceremonial purposes"—for the ambivalent pleasure of play and of playing in a realm away from the contractual and regulated legal exchanges of society (pg 153)...The purpose of playing the game, or of gambling for Baudrillard, is not in believing that one can win but in escaping the system of rationality outside of the game. (Coulter 2007)

The embrace of catastrophe, of meaninglessness and of waste, all count *for* play as against the perfection of the Virtual system. Those for whom play is most clearly 'wasteful' play perhaps most fully, for their evasion of the system outside the game has the greatest possibility of grave consequences, and yet nonetheless they play.

Remaining open to ambiguity, and with the guidance of Simon's concerns, Coulter's view here needs a reflexive turn. Players gain access to a system which offers perfected knowledge about the rules of the game they are playing. This is a second seduction, and one that can slide digital games towards deterrence if the rules of the game appear more reliable than those of the world. On the other hand the artifice of the systems is here potentially revealed to the playing-consciousness. Discrete, obligatory and accessible, the rules install gamers into roles and relations which Baudrillard reckons as distinct from the perfection of the Virtual, and not yet absorbed by the separative cause:

Perhaps we are always in a dual morality... there might be said to be a moral sphere, that of commodity exchange, and an immoral sphere, that of play or gaming, where all that counts is the event of the game itself and the advent of shared rules. Sharing rules is something quite different from referring to a common general equivalent: to be able to play, one has to be totally involved. And this creates a more dramatic type of relation between the partners than commodity exchange. In such a relation, individuals are not abstract beings who can be substituted for another: each has a singular position with regards to the stakes of victory or defeat, life or death. *Even in its most banal forms, the mode of entry into what is at stake that gaming forces upon us is different from that imposed by exchange.*

(Baudrillard, *Passwords* 11, my italics)



The perfection, unity or completeness offered to us by the Virtual or other totalizing system cannot absorb the potential for ambiguity in play. Nor can any concatenation of technologies undo the social mediation of a play-contract. Games, as play, remain innocent of any criminal perfection seeking. As with other totalizing systems, while widespread and manifold in its capacity to re-capitulate, the systematic reduction of Galloway's separative cause is not seamless. At one of the possible ruptures lays the sort of intentional-fateful rule-adoption and role-entailment which gaming demands of those who play. Games-as-deterrence still threaten play and the possibility of a playful submission; how this possible-playfulness emerges and what opportunities it presents remains situated, and as such unable to be prefigured exhaustively. Before I can investigate the expressive possibilities of submission to the game, a more profound interrogation of play, both in game studies and in Baudrillard is warranted. What form does this playful possibility take if it is a rupture, but not a separation? I shall begin to explore from the usual experience of social life, working my way towards Baudrillard's distinctive view of play.

### **Playing at Games: A Waste of Time?**

Throughout our lives, games give us opportunities to adopt shared rule-sets with other individuals. Like the forms of representation, exchange or evaluation which we have discussed, these selective adoptions of a rules-set are subject to their own reasoning, a rationale which does not necessitate any lasting eliminations. Common sense gives us a picture of play, but Baudrillard is critical of any everyday position. We can see how it is easy to believe that players 'in' the game are clearly separated from 'the everyday' by

adhering to rules and strictures which are not of the order of exchange. This intuition has been explored before.

Huizinga's concept of the "magic circle" of play first appeared in *Homo Ludens* (1938). It is one example of this traditional separation of play from the everyday, albeit taken to a modernist extreme. Games on Huizinga's account lie outside normal significations; they are not yet infected with the evaluations of a totalizing system. They furthermore still entail a real potency extending from the semiotic to the material realm: the rules reflexively install actions in play by the game's own logic.

On this account, to play is to both invest and divest oneself, to be both distracted and engaged at the same time. The players of the game invest themselves within the shared rules-set and ex-centric temporality in doing so they adhere to its regulation (both by themselves and others). This investment demands a withdrawal (however temporary) from the usual situation of the world. This withdrawal, from the world-at-large towards the world-as-it-is-played allows the players to 'forget' the everyday. They are able to 'abandon' themselves to the 'seriousness' of play. The situated game-player is not to be concerned with the immediate condition from which they entered the play-sphere. They are distracted from the concerns dominating contemporary life, and instead concentrate on a faithful performance according to their selected rule-set. A sort of bubble or "magic circle" appears around the game-as-played, isolating it from the world. Baudrillard would disavow much else of what Huizinga attributes to play, but the 'magic' of his circle is echoed by the shared rules of role relations mentioned above. Rules and role relations reveal another aspect of play, related to the conscious submission of players and their actions to play-itself.

While this engagement with a shared-rules set has priority, the sort of interactions which players can have with other individuals and groups is always already limited, arbitrarily and for the purpose of the game-as-such. This limitation of agency by algorithms of game-order is, according to Coulter, a submissive *seduction* drawing players into the game. In return, instead of the exchange-value distinctions, or market forces, players are bound to situated telic roles and the game-specific processes that these roles inform. Playing games takes part in a purposefulness evacuated from everyday life by the threat of the Virtual to traditional evaluations.

These ends-oriented restrictions are such that Baudrillard says: "In such a relation, individuals are not abstract beings who can be substituted for another: each has a singular position with regards to the stakes of victory or defeat, life or death" (Baudrillard, *Passwords* 11). In this way the players of games recall the importance of heroes and villains in traditional stories which still frame a world which claims to have eliminated heroism and villainy in the name of efficiency. One cannot constitute a full game without players for every position, no two of whom are reducible to or exchangeable with one another. This ends-oriented character of the role adopted to play a game recalls traditional determinations from worlds which were crafted long before the rise of the Virtual.

Even under the sway of totalizing systems like the separative cause, we are familiar with heroic, purposeful descriptions of activity which emerge from our cultural traditions. The grounds by which we once justified action may threaten to fall away, but the habit of searching for a determined foundation for such justification has not. The violence of the Virtual against the illusion of the world has not yet run its full course.

The vital (role of) illusion in Baudrillard demands an engagement with this vanishing tradition of justification. That which remains is still available to us in the *seduction* of play:

Seduction is a more fatal game, and a more dangerous one too, which is in no way exclusive of pleasure, but is something different from *jouissance*. Seduction is a challenge, a form which tends always to unsettle someone in their identity and the meaning they can have for themselves. In seduction they find the possibility of a radical otherness. Seduction seemed to me to cover all the forms that elude a system of accumulation, of production.  
(Baudrillard, *Passwords* 22)

The seductive lies outside the usual system of effects and challenges its meanings. This challenge can reveal the symbolic forms of social situations in a new light. An experience apart from that of the everyday, but thoroughly invested in the symbolic imaginary of the world becomes available. While games and their players do not pretend to transcendental or primordial truths, they can attain to a specific and novel meaning through their comportment as players. A situated knowledge reveals itself in thoughtful participation. A 'truth' appears which does not pretend to completeness or perfection:

Play generates singularities. Play bucks the competing influence of systems of exchange. Commodity exchange is a "moral" sphere for Baudrillard because it creates criteria for winners and losers, not because the system itself is morally defensible. Thus in entering an "immoral," or metamoral, state, one is able to experience the artifice of the real in all its seductive beauty.

In this sense play is a general critical methodology in Baudrillard.  
(Galloway, 2007)

While providing the possibility of social action, play remains situated, critical and effective. Digital games embody a particular possibility of play which remains ambiguous as long as it threatens to be reclaimed by the separative cause or other totalizing system. Like an environmentalist, the players' alternative expressions of self depend on nugatory material conditions: to make magic they acquire the technologies of

calculation which inherently deny all enchantment. If however, game-play can be seen in a light that avoids an obligatory reduction to deterrence, it illuminates the symbolic-material relation at the root of artfully constructing a world.

On the one hand, games of all sorts provide a seductive role and rule-structure which players can submit to. The more developed the role of the player is, the more unlikely that they will be able to be replaced by 'just anyone.' Their playful comportment is an individuating action, even as they submit to the arbitration of a ruleset. Enforcement of those rules can however operate to eliminate alternatives, just like the material entanglements which the game demands in the form of specialized tools, training or equipment. It is difficult to play tennis without a racket, or digital games without a personal computer. These are substantial necessities which can neutralize the productive possibility which play offers. We can read this along with Galloway as another example of material exploitation curtailing the possibility of semiotic expression afforded by game-play. When games are also 'about something' in the sense which worries Simon, their social and creative potential is radically truncated. Alternative readings of games are eliminated by a rigid pre-conception of their purpose.

The pick-up game however is of a more buoyant spirit; it need not be played by the letter of the more formal game it substitutes for casually. Game-demarcated spaces are often employed alongside particular roles and combine to form more complicated arbitration. The rules of soccer permit only one player on each side the use of their hands, but even goalies must remain within their specified area to avail themselves of this privilege. On an unmarked pitch, or where players alternate positions without official regulation, this could quickly become a source of contention among the players. But the

playful comportment implied by the adoption of shared-rules sets often has a further entailment of 'good sportsmanship'.

To play well means learning to play fair, to win and to lose graciously. The spirit of involvement here is not however one of gravity. Sportsmanship is a comportment which partakes of the levity of knowing one has adopted a rule-set outside the everyday. This alternative remains available to play, even though game values are neutralized after the actual contest. The play of the game emerges alongside the comportment of the agents performing. Each player's comportment is a complex of attributes that derives from investment and cultivation over time. It is quickly apparent who is 'too serious' about winning or losing after the fact, even if everyone is earnest during the pursuit of the game. These distinct demands of comportment allow play and games to remain tensely ambiguous even while totalizing systems threaten many alternatives.

When completed, the pessimistic circumstance of any totalizing system eliminates alternatives. Considering the separative cause, its completion would reduce digital games to the status of symbolic, deterred pursuits which have no material impact. Gaming would invariably be seen as repetitive impractical action with no meaning in the real world. Time and effort are decried as wasted on play and games. This waste is not the alternative to efficacy. Rather it is relegated to the ineffective moral sphere; it is a failure within, not a rejection of, the system which the separative cause would perfect.

Automatically lauding or lamenting the time and effort invested into digital games, eludes the problem of the separative cause and other totalizing systems. If an approach assumes in advance the non-ambiguity of games, their evaluation has already fallen prey to seriousness or ineffectiveness. Assenting in advance to the completeness of

such a perspective on digital games deters further reflection on them or the Virtual system.

Another difficulty in trying to oppose a totalizing system like the separative cause occurs because of its capacity to eliminate and re-capitulate alternatives. Opponents to a perfect system cannot know with any certainty that the strategies they promote can still produce the effects they desire, or if the system they seek to undermine has already overcome the distinction they are making.

We are today in what I would call a 'Moebius-strip' system. If we were in a face-to-face, confrontational system, strategies could be clear, based on a linearity of causes and effects. Whether one used good or evil, it would be used as part of a plan, and Machiavellianism would not lie outside rationality. But we are in a completely random universe in which causes and effects are piled one upon the other according to this Moebius-strip model, and no one can know where the effects of the effects will end. (Baudrillard, *Passwords* 34)

If play is to remain as a possible critical alternative in the face of totalizing systems, then the kind of playful comportment which supports that possibility is unlikely to be found in professional sports, television game-shows, lottery drawings or gambling. The money generated in the pursuit of these recreations is only one of many ties directly to the everyday world. Paid play, just like serious games, can be put to use as deterrence. Nonetheless, professional sports provide an example of the frailty of divisions between the play and everyday sphere when a totalizing system is operating.

While professional athletes are 'at work' playing their games, the shared-rules-set is supposed to take priority over any financial circumstances. Playing well and playing well with others are elements of the comportment which professional sports still share with unpaid games. Whether you win or lose the essential seriousness of playing a game, even in professional sports is a tense relationship between the rules of the game and the

social context of its pursuit with others.

A valorous illusion reigns during the course of a professional sport since the lowest paid individuals on the playing field are almost always the officials. Superstars must submit to their judgement in order to excel. But the tension in the division between players and officials grows more pronounced as the actual disparity in material rewards mounts. The authority officials possess over the arbitration of the shared rules-set appears to derive from the play-contract, not a totalizing system outside the game. The tradition of 'good sportsmanship' can be sorely tested when financial rewards and consequences are added to the game's own rules.

Gaming might also be said to be of the order of this form of exchange [Potlach or immoral], in so far as money no longer has any fixed value within that sphere, since it is always put back into circulation according to the symbolic rule—which is clearly not the moral law. In this symbolic rule, money won must in no circumstances become commodity value again; it must be put back into play within the game itself.

(Baudrillard, *Passwords* 16)

Players should not in good conscience allow a system of evaluation from outside those of the shared-rules set to guide their comportment; to do otherwise is often cheating, and always bad sportsmanship besides. Likewise, no one expects to take Monopoly money to the bank when the game ends.

Professional sports are a case where the separation of play from deterrence generated by a totalizing system, is obscure at best, forsaken at worst. Only the most elite and determined players, only those who are serious, become professionals. The professional form of play does not have the same limited and provisional character that gives other playfulness a critical possibility as alternative to a totalizing system. The tradition from which digital games emerge into their current massive multi-player online



means that they do not generally have a professional/non-professional distinction in their play. They are not free from deterrent possibilities, but digital games are not already entangled by a financial motive on the part of their players.

### **Character Play as an Alternative Comportment**

Pen and paper role-playing games (RPGs) are the pre-digital ancestors of modern computer role-playing games, including Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMORPGs) like *The World of Warcraft*. The first pen and paper role-playing games formally emerged in the late 1970s from a situated context in which statistics, historical re-enactment, miniature modelling and fantasy literature co-mingled to produce a distinct form of entertainment. E Gary Gygax and Dave Arenson's *Dungeons and Dragons* has become synonymous with role-playing games; each and every game in the genre listed on Wikipedia descended from their original creation.<sup>1</sup> From out of this peculiar domain, emerge conventions and abstractions, traditions and novelties which all revolve around role-based relations and playful comportment in a shared rules-set. In the sword and sorcery genre of role-playing games, which typifies *Dungeons and Dragons* as well as *The World of Warcraft*, an arbitrary rule set accorded mutual assent defines the space of action for players adopting the role of heroes in a circumstance of life and death. Stakes are high, but the destiny of the players' characters unfolds in a world-imaginary apart from the everyday. While the province of amateurs in basements and around kitchen tables, role-playing presented the sort of alternative system of gathering that Baudrillard called meta-moral or seductive. It was not long before digital alternatives to pen and

---

<sup>1</sup> [Http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_role-playing\\_games\\_by\\_name](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_role-playing_games_by_name): As compliment to Marx, Weber and Durkheim game studies can propose Gygax, Arenson and Jackson as roots for our tree of thought.

paper role-playing games emerged. These changed the conditions of traditional role-playing games and expanded their capacity to be employed as deterrence-machines. No longer in isolated basements and libraries, the terrain of role-playing came to include an impossible constellation of screens across the world.

Like most forms of entertainment available to us today, role-playing games exist and are distributed as commodities. Their evolution into to the vast electronic world of online role-playing video games is not one which took place outside of the trends to totalizing systems. In fact, these games have always been self-contained abstract systems for the pre-figurative modelling of behaviours known in real life to be unpredictable or chaotic. Principles of probability in tabletop RPGs are frequently embodied by polyhedral dice, systems whose causation is operand and evident. The possibility of adopting a persona or role emerges after the assent to a system of (often intricate) shared-rules. The stakes and the spaces of game-play are pre-established, but by mutual assent and practical endeavour, not by a singular unifying model or common general equivalent. Re-negotiation of the rule-set by the situated participants was expected in pen and paper games like Dungeons and Dragons; house-rules predominate even in circumstances where there are multiple official alternatives. These rules openly admit to arbitrariness, inconsistency and reductionism yet form the basis for a non-impossible exchange; they offer the seductive possibility of submission to those who would embrace it. We must look closely to see whether this seductive possibility still exists once localized pen and paper games give way to vast interconnected digital realms—the threat of the spirit of gravity goes hand in hand with the further incorporation of games into business.

A world subject to a totalizing system like the separative cause described by

Galloway would have to abandon games to the status of yet another deterrence-machine. In such a world, where everything is always already transformed in advance by the separative cause, digital game play no longer proposes an alternative. However, the playful comportment of games which involve character role-adoption shows that there are still positive possibilities contained in play. Seth Giddings article *A 'Pataphysics Engine: Technology, Play and Realities* also sees positive and creative potentials in play.

While remaining fully conscious of the danger which deterrence or a nihilistic Baudrillardian perspective entails, Giddings emphasizes the creative and generative possibilities of games, possibilities which he feels are overlooked by an interpretation like that which Galloway uses to underpin the action of the separative cause:

In the face of his persistent claims for the loss of any alternative, here Baudrillard hints at the generative nature of integral reality, the fantastic reality of simulacra. The suggestion is that hyperreality is not so much a substitute for a lost reality as a distention of reality as it is commonly understood, its runaway production in a monstrous spiral of positive feedback:

“Reality having lost its natural predators is growing like some proliferating species. A little bit like algae or even the human race in general.” (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 27).

If reality is artificial, constructed, then new realities can also be fabricated (as of course they are; every second a new baby or a new oncomouse is made). There is a fierce irony here but we are not yet done with 'pataphysics. (Giddings 2007)

In playful engagement with a digital game, play emerges in novel configurations beyond the purely actual; this accords with play-as-generating-singularities. This exceptional generative power has been threatened, by Galloway's separative cause, but not quashed. A new challenge poses itself in this possibility: how to think 'pataphysics at all? For this research, characters in a digital game like the World of Warcraft hold the key. Created and artificial, they give players access to new playful comportment. Transmitted through

the Virtual system, they still depend on the mediation of social situations within the pursuit of the game. As comportment guided by an order unlike the everyday, playing a character in a digital game can give the happy intuition that other orders are not impossible. In this way 'pataphysics can help research into digital games rediscover the mortality, the obstinacy and the unpredictability of the play at the same time as they undermine claims to totality by the action of a system like the Virtual.

The idea is to turn it back on itself; it is in this fashion that reality is demolished. In the opinionatedness of Ubu, our will, importance, faith, all the things that are carried to paroxysm where we perceive quite naturally that they are made up of breaths from our flatulence, from meat which we make the candles and ashes, from bone with which we make false ivory and false universes.

(Jean Baudrillard *'Pataphysics*)

Considering Baudrillard's concepts of deterrence and the Virtual has revealed a tension in the situation of digital games, and totalizing systems in general. 'Pataphysics directly considers the impossibility of complete or total systems, and relates the need for alternatives to the mortal situation of social action. Because of the frailty which 'pataphysics reveals in formalized systems, positions which corral video-games into a definitive reference are at root new forms of 'objectivity' and seriousness which Giddings rejects:

The ambivalence of play and games has always entailed their machinations in the persistence and reproduction of social orders and hierarchies (from rituals to play-grounds) as well as in their subversion or transformation. The symbolic, the authentic and play can also be cruel and conservative.

(Giddings 2007)

No particular incarnation of play is exhaustive. Concerted effort to install video-games conclusively into a pre-existing category or to invariably treat them as deterrence does not address their creative possibilities. Giddings highlights the incompleteness of the action of totalizing systems on play in an ironic fashion, through the exploitation which

can take place through the authentic and play. Games are not essentially harmless, nor are they essentially harmful. Games are ways to make active kinds of social comportment that embrace the ambiguity of their outcome. This is part of the reason why Giddings rejects positions which establish a necessary connection between video games and deterrence:

Against this I would maintain the productive ambivalence of play and simulacra: their generation of new realities and their maintenance, inversion or destruction of existing ones. This ambivalence serves to counter both the consistently benign vision of video game culture that characterizes game studies, and the left pessimist subsumption of play and games to the instrumentality of consumer passivity and capitalist accumulation (or a totalizing integral reality).  
(Giddings 2007)

Playing digital games offers a creative possibility within a system like the Virtual. But this possibility is never automatically realized. The threat of deterrence goes hand in hand with digital games' employment of technology which often serves the totalizing efforts of the Virtual. The contingent formulations that an inspiration from 'pataphysics provides means opening an ambiguous space for games allows either positive or negative interpretations. The sort of playful comportment that characters in a digital game can permit their players is never separated from the possibility of deterrence. Playfulness is challenging when a totalizing system seeks to dominate alternatives. If Baudrillard leads us to agree that "Ours is an existence of unceasing illusion" (Coulter 2007) then our approach to digital games must embrace the potential for manifold possibilities to emerge when we discuss playful comportment. Intuitions like those in *'Pataphysics* demand circumspection and restraint while investigating near or alongside a totalizing system. Just as players must learn how to become a good sport and adapt their comportment to the situation, researchers of digital games embrace catastrophe in taking an active part

seeking alternatives:

Play, therefore, is firmly connected to seduction and thus is also at the heart of a more hopeful, or shall we say, politically progressive, wing of Baudrillard's thought. The play of thinking will destroy the perfect crime of positivism, he suggests.  
(Galloway 2007)

This return of the seductive possibility rooted in play can have positive consequences for thought about totalizing systems. Playfulness can perhaps give thought access to a different order than that of a totalizing system. To see how play and thought can be joined in creative alternatives to systems like the Virtual, Galloway treats another dimension of play and thought. Language is the dimension which connects playful and thinking comportment despite any elimination that a totalizing system may have already performed:

Like Derrida and Roland Barthes, Baudrillard sees language as the seat of play: "Fundamentally, the use of language is how we meet up with, not an instinctive animality, but a radicality of forms. While belonging to the domain of illusion, language allows us to play with that same illusion" (Baudrillard, 1997b, p. 84). Thus an illusion does not mean that one is playing with the real, for this would position Baudrillard within an age-old philosophical tradition of falsehood versus truth, ideology versus enlightenment. No, illusion for Baudrillard means that one is playing *with play*.  
(Galloway 2007)

The possibilities available by playing digital games are at risk of deterrence while their pursuit occurs through computer technology which mediates communication. Still, the playfulness which games make available can also be mustered forth into language. Language is a part of the second form of mediation in which digital games continue to participate as a possible social comportment. Language is another element of the situation through which to gain insight into digital games despite their concurrence with the arrival of the Virtual. Galloway comes to a conclusion concerning play as a form of

critical alternative:

[Baudrillard's] notion of play is an internally redundant one. It is tautological rather than normative. 'The play of the seducer is *with himself*' (Baudrillard, 1979, p148). (Galloway 2007)

When read differently, the seductive possibility of play can also be reflexive. Digital game players in games like the *World of Warcraft* are comporting themselves as characters in a Virtual system. They can be lead to a new understanding of what it means to play with as well as within a system, or they can be deterred and distracted by the seduction of the game. What occurs in each case of play is ambiguous. Research into digital games that takes Baudrillard's concerns about deterrence seriously can approach this ambiguous and situated playfulness by emphasizing the role of language.

## **Chapter Two: Language and Possibility**

Seeking to explore the concept of deterrence, the contemporary circumstance of the Virtual and the tensions around playing digital games, I have explored some of the challenges which the work of Jean Baudrillard presents. In the first chapter, play emerged as a critical methodology. Through its comportment I found intuitions guiding an enquiry into the generative possibilities of play that the Virtual and system-effects cannot evacuate—if we remain open to ambiguity. Aiming to avoid pre-judging digital games into a fixed category by disavowing the completeness of totalizing systems like the one described by Alexander Galloway's separative cause, my concern was to locate a point of access which remained present “at-play-in” digital games. I hoped in this way to find a position that eluded the levelling effect of the Virtual and engaged the social mediation of playfulness. Throughout the first section I deployed authors particularly concerned with digital games, deterrence and play. Bart Simon's warning against “taking games seriously” illuminated tensions surrounding the positive possibilities for play in our contemporary technological society. To answer Baudrillard's challenge, I found the need for a theoretical approach to the Virtual as seen in digital games, which did not implicate my project in committing the 'perfect crime' of completing reality on behalf of a totalizing system.

Seth Giddings suggested the goal should not be a perfect system that exhausts alternatives, but rather one that deploys intuitions from ‘pataphysics about the artificial as a creative destructive and regenerative power. Noting the often overlooked relationship between irreverence, the imaginary and the creative, Giddings sees positive consequences to discovering ourselves constructing an artificial world. He suggested that 'pataphysics



teaches us perfect or totalizing systems are impossible to complete, but possible to destroy and remake. To retain the possibility to generate new realities 'pataphysics demands an understanding of completeness and perfection—like the total calculation of the world, or its reduction to ones and zeroes—as ex-terminations of possibility which obscure creative action. One such challenge is to explore what elements of game-play resist reduction to an absolute system, what living traditions are not yet exhausted in its technological embrace. What Baudrillard suggested was language. My intuition about the relation between playfulness and language is one I share with other researchers.

Games appear to offer access to positive possibilities of creation and ambiguity in playful action. Through the emergence of game-language and the seductive character of playfulness, these possibilities remain present wherever people gather together to play games. Digital games provide this possibility, and while mediated by technologies of the Virtual, they remain open to the ambiguity of their social and linguistic potentials.

Even if the final outcome of a perfected system-effect (such as the Virtual) would mean that for each and every value-possibility a place-holder is calculable, for each individual there remain particular investments of incalculable value. Tacky souvenirs, personal opinions, acquired tastes—are all worthless, priceless or worse, both at once. These exceptions to the system-effects create strange attractive centres, about which value swirls, but whose determination is personal and non-systematic. In asking about the situation of digital games like the *World of Warcraft*, I seek for such exceptions, ruptures and outliers to the system. Generated by playful comportment and brought forth expressly into language by those game-players who develop them.

Reflexive and playful, language emerges or is re-tasked, devoured or adulterated;

it lives on despite any attempts to embalm it. Living-language even seduces those who would artificially calcify the 'meaning of video games' into one valence—whether dangerous nihilism or harmless positivity. Playful talk bubbles through the matrices of expression in ways which explode its semiotic-material divisions; language is the lock and key, the gate and the guardian, the path and the goal.

I proceeded in my engagement with Baudrillard, deterrence, play and the Virtual by the action of interpretation, an action embedded within a tradition and situated in language. Through particular interpretive actions, I have found the status of games as deterrence machines, as well as the operation of the totalizing systems like the Virtual remain imperfectly realized. The games of language and a reflexive understanding of playfulness as a critical method present themselves as alternative avenues for understanding digital games. To continue this interpretive action demands an engagement with players of digital games, so that I can take advantage of the possibilities which they have generated in language through their game-play. I want to know how to speak in a realm of fantastic and intangible actions it is only suitable that I ask those who have made habitual such forms of play. I am hoping that they will reveal the passwords which will illuminate the realm of playfulness in the Virtual in a new light:

Passwords – the expression seems to me to describe quite well a quasi-initiatory way of getting inside things, without, however, drawing up a list. For words are bearers and generators of ideas – perhaps even more than the reverse. As weavers of spells and magic, not only do they transmit those ideas and those things, but they themselves metaphorize and metabolize into one another by kind of a spiral evolution. It is in this way that they are 'passers' or vehicles of ideas.  
(Baudrillard, *Passwords* xiii)

Baudrillard here demands research recognize the evolving and transitory relationship between language and meaning. My intentional ambiguity allows me to treat words as

unfamiliar when they bring ideas from novel circumstances forth under apparently inherited signs. I need not assume that an apparently familiar phrase retains its meaning in new circumstances of deployment. The language of game-play partakes of everyday terms as well as neologisms. What's more, now that communication has supplanted transportation as the technology of access to play it is a sort of vocabulary which takes the place of itinerary. How far and how fast one can travel now depends on the flexibility of ideation, multi-tasking and bandwidth. This novel alternative is cultivated, over time by learning a new language:

Words are extremely important to me. That they have a life of their own, and hence, are mortal is evident to anyone who does not claim to possess a definitive form of thought, with ambitions to edify. And this is my own case. There is in the temporality of words an almost poetic play of death and rebirth: successive metaphorizations mean that an idea becomes more – and something other – than itself: 'a form of thought'. For language thinks, thinks us and thinks for us at least as much as we think through it. And in it an exchange takes place: an exchange which may be symbolic, between words and ideas.  
(Baudrillard, *Passwords* xiii)

Words matter, not as fixed elements of a grammatical system, but rather as the game of communicative action played with and through acting social subjects. Language takes part in the game of the world which is played with us. Language owes its vitality to its mortality; to the constant interplay of ideas within the world. It is by pursuit of the living-character of language that a playful opportunity to engage in creative social action presents itself. My reflection here implies a necessary relation to time and circumstance, to culture and tradition, resides in the playful action which we negotiate through language.

Around the emerging social spaces and circumstances of the Virtual, language retains possibilities like those which Seth Giddings identifies through 'pataphysics: the

deployment of new alternative realities and the reconfiguration of tradition. Language understood as part of the living situation of social possibility also provides my search with an alternative vision of the activity of words. This approach to language is not without 'violence'—one which Baudrillard so often inflicts on any usual understanding:

Just as the photograph (the image) connotes an erasure, the death of what it represents, that which gives the photograph intensity, what gives intensity to writing, be it the writing of fiction or the writing of a theoretical fiction, is emptiness, an underlying nothingness, an illusion of meaning, an ironic dimension of language, which is corollary to an ironic dimension of the facts themselves, which are never what they are—in all meanings: they are never more than what they are, and they are always only what they are—a perfect amphiboly.  
(Baudrillard, *Radical Thought* 3)

Baudrillard's writing has helped us understand the critical role of play. I must take an active role in this game to establish how to approach language. Even pursuing the tense, living character of language in this research, I concretize and objectify it into writing. In the act of writing I give over to the world as text what I would have others understand in reading. Being so made, into an object, language threatens again to become 'serious' and 'definite'.

Because, here everything is stucco and fake... even a tree made of wood—and this intense bluff that facilitates the rising of the dough of phenomenon—nothing prevents that this catabase towards the stucco and the fake and the blah began well before the form that so-called true objects have taken today... and that everything, before being born, was at the cancerous and imaginary state—can only be born at the cancerous and imaginary state—which doesn't prevent things from being less false than we think—  
(Baudrillard, *Pataphysics*)

But Baudrillard suggests this alternative intuition. The idea enters into a compact with the word and their complicity explodes the completeness or perfection of a system totalizing system. My expression is dragged along by its own words—out of thought and irrevocably into the world, where it can be interpreted by others. Speaking is a seduction

to a shared set of rules, whose outcome is indeterminate; in this way it is playful.

The mortality and playfulness of language are 'imperfections' which the Virtual cannot extinguish; the lifespan of words depends on their situated action in the world. Meaning re-acquires a situated character, and the possibility of novel understandings persists through a mortal emergence of language. The possibility of error does not stem from a misapprehension of the world—it is instead to be seen as the condition of possible imagination of all worlds.

To find again the sort of playful comportment that, while linguistic, is not merely scripted in advance. This investigation is not of the measurable and enumerable features of language, but the development of language alongside and through social situations at play in digital games. My investigation through language of the *World of Warcraft* seeks to find what mutual understanding emerges around the novel situations of comportment in the Virtual. I hope to discover the alternatives to a totalizing system in playfulness, as it can be expressed in the 'natural language' of the game being played. This interest in engaging with those who take part in the experience of virtual game-play distinguishes my particular concern from Baudrillard's as such:

Baudrillard, it seems, wished to pass beyond both the real and the virtual, and his ambivalence rests on the fact that he had little interest in participating in either. Writing, of course, was another matter. The world of gaming and all forms of virtuality were, by the end, merely things he wished to pass beyond, and writing is how we get to the next horizon.  
(Coulter 2007)

Within games, alongside language, playfulness emerges into the world as an alternative to the Virtual system. This may reveal how the rules of the game rise to ascendancy, and with them how the individual attains to a new significance: within the play of the game, uniquely implicated in the concert of efforts towards mutually adopted goals. Mutual

participation in language will help find playful words for roles and tasks better suited to heroes of myth, than actual human beings. These alternative incarnations of self, even entangled within the Virtual and its attendant technologies, demand intentional—novel—comportment and language.

Reality in general is too evident to be true. It is this ironic transfiguration through language which constitutes the event of language. And it is on a restitution of this fundamental illusion of the world and language that thought must work, without however taking language in its literality, where the messenger is mistaken for the message, and thus already sacrificed.  
(Baudrillard, *Radical Thought* 3)

Again Baudrillard reminds us we are challenged to re-mystify the world, to avoid the perfect crime of totalizing systems by re-deploying illusion. It is within language and playfulness that we may find our new alternatives. An intentional engagement with the participants in digital games, to provide an account of their playful comportment brought forth in language is my effort to extend the activity of radical thought into a particular research project. Maintaining a suspension of judgement about the valences of possibility in digital games has allowed an approach to a social circumstance which is still emerging in contemporary life. An approach to language-as-event, as a social situation, strives to unveil the particular imaginary possibilities in digital games, to go beyond Baudrillard:

Baudrillard spent a life working to exceed the limits of his thought. He did not wish to play to the end game. He knew his concepts would become banal, and tried to extinguish them (or at least become indifferent to them). Baudrillard could have played in game studies, but he would have been a “griever”  
(Simon 2007)

For Simon, Baudrillard was constantly in the process of incitement, of challenging himself and others to go beyond their usual understanding and fixed conceptual relations. With work to go beyond the limits of our everyday thought, and by availing myself of the

reflexive possibilities at play in language I may come to a new understanding. Engaging with the language around the *World of Warcraft*, I will explore one of the actual-Virtual entanglements which form new social spaces, and the relationship that play and its traditions bestow upon this new situation.

Through the first chapter I arrived at the importance of language in theory which remains aware of the challenge of deterrence, and its possible use in exploring digital games and the Virtual. I need now to explore a complimentary position. To approach playful language, conscious of those possibilities which are abandoned in the totalizing system, I turn now to another thinker who emphasizes the unique play of language and demands a reflexive critical engagement with our usual understanding of the world:

Not only is the world 'world' only insofar as it comes into language, but language too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is re-presented within it. Thus the original humanity of language means at the same time the fundamental linguistic quality of man's being-in-the-world.  
(Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 401)

Gadamer approaches language from a position which seeks to illuminate understanding as an activity of human agents, not simply as a problem of epistemology. The intimate relationship he establishes between language, tradition, and the world derives its force from an extended meditation on the role that hermeneutic reasoning plays in the activity of understanding. I will explore Gadamer's project as it relates to my research by comparing it to other efforts which have interrogated digital games, and produced social theory through the passwords offered by language.

### **Intuitions of Language in Other Games Research**

The particular inspiration for Gadamer's investigation in *Truth and Method* was to elucidate conditions commonly relied upon to understand human experience of the world. Proceeding from familiar but scientifically problematic modes of knowledge such as aesthetics, Gadamer aims to explore the phenomenon of human understanding in a way which is not beholden to abstract-absolutes which transcend time, place and the circumstances of the agent. For Gadamer, non-scientific, non-systematic, experiences form the vast majority of our practical understanding. Most actual decisions are not objective, repeatable or impartial. Activities which depend on understanding, on the meaning of experience, emerge in particular circumstances. This circumstantial character is indicative of the situated temporality of all understanding; it illuminates the mortality of meaning as well as the vivacity of continued interpretation in new contexts (Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 298). Gadamer's presentation of understanding as an activity is thus not of the same systematic order as those which Baudrillard sees imperilled by the totalizing system of the Virtual. For Gadamer, activities are situated and finite, so too is understanding.

Gadamer hereby aims to allow for the force of experience to remain valid in practical and social terms. In *Truth and Method*, particular loci emerge which enable us as social researchers to grasp hold of and follow Gadamer on his course. The first among these is the conception of hermeneutic reasoning. Undertaking an exploration of aesthetics, Gadamer seeks to demonstrate that diverse experiences that generate meaning are of the same constitutive order. They depend on the situated understanding action of individuals, and share the same reflexive form. It is this activity, of hermeneutic-interpretation, which



forms the basis of all human ways in which Gadamer argues we may understand the world:

The classical discipline concerned with the art of understanding texts is hermeneutics. If my argument is correct, however, the real problem of hermeneutics is quite different from what one might expect... In fact, hermeneutics would then have to be understood in so comprehensive a sense as to embrace the whole sphere of art and its complex of questions. Every work of art, not only literature, must be understood like any other text that requires understanding, and this understanding has to be acquired. This gives hermeneutical consciousness a comprehensiveness that surpasses even that of aesthetic consciousness. Aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics. This statement not only reveals the breadth of the problem, but is substantially accurate. Conversely, hermeneutics must be so determined as a whole that it does justice to the experience of art. Understanding must be conceived as a part of the event in which meaning occurs, the event in which the meaning of all statements—those of art and all other kinds of tradition—is formed and actualized.

(Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 157)

On my account Gadamer's hermeneutics treats all knowledge and understanding as situated forms of social action, not as stable states or accumulations towards perfection. It opposes totalizing systems with an approach that relates actors to their situation in a negotiation with traditions and the express use of language in public comportment. Hermeneutics tries to highlight rather than conceal the constant tension in all human endeavours. Their finite, temporal and mortal character is shared by knowledge. The past situations of understanding agents actively shape their current circumstance of knowing as well as their expectations for future understanding. Gadamer hopes to restore the connection between contemporary thought and traditional influence in a fashion that does not predispose the subjects of knowledge to support totalizing systems. This challenging description of understanding will later illuminate the unexpected role of prejudice which is also central to Gadamer's difference from past and contemporary theorists. Language, as living praxis and situated in the world, continues to

play games which entangle us in a community and a society.

Important to my current determination, all understanding is on Gadamer's account acquired in action. The role of cultivation and experience in understanding relates to both the fundamental linguistic character of human activity and the creative possibilities bound up in the inherited traditions which furnish individual experience with historical ground. Time is tangled together with the circumstance when meanings are brought forth between active agents.

Consciously provisional and situated in time and place through action, Hermeneutic reasoning also always includes negotiation and therefore a possibility of disjunction, and the re-figuration of tradition. Understanding as an action also takes place through the play of language in a social circumstance. For these reasons I feel Gadamer's hermeneutic is an ideal methodological answer to the challenges that Baudrillard poses to discussing digital games as something other than deterrence in light of the Virtual. In order to see how my interpretation of Gadamer's position differs from others which deploy homologous terms, I shall first engage Julian Kucklich's *The Road Less Travelled: The Case for Computer Game Philology*. (Year unknown, from website [www.playability.de](http://www.playability.de))

Hermeneutic-interpretation is most readily recognized in spheres like philology, law and theology, which are at first glance widely removed from my investigation of digital games. The classical realm of philology is that of ancient textual interpretation; bringing to life dead tongues in living languages and preserving antique literature. Law and theology also employ hermeneutic action to revise and adapt traditional legal standards or scriptural guidance to contemporary circumstances; aiming in both cases to

do 'justice' to the re-vitalized text. Gadamer's position illuminates philology as a particular form of the action of understanding. Philology shares the hermeneutic form of being a situated contemporary negotiation with tradition through language, which lies at the root of understanding. (Gadamer, *Truth and Method* section 3) Seeking to avoid deterrence, and retain a creative ambiguity, leads me to emphasize the understanding which emerges in the language surrounding games-as-played. Also exploring digital games, Julian Kucklich partakes in an intuition derived from a more traditional understanding of philology. This intuition is for him fruitful in avoiding one form of deterrence; reflexive deference in the face of traditional approaches. He believes philology's application means that digital games can be understood in such a manner as to allow us to leap over current theoretical divisions in Game Studies.

Kucklich shares my intuition that language plays a vital role for researchers who seek to understand digital games. He aims to employ the tools of literary analysis, particularly what he sees as philology, to expand the realm of debate in which games are understood. But I see more than the implication of literary analysis in the deployment of philology; along with Gadamer my intuition implicates language through hermeneutics-as-understanding-action. Games go beyond the literary sphere, when treated as possibilities of critical consciousness to be revealed in playful comportment. Kucklich's motivation for philological tools is inspired by his desire to overcome the debate which he sees dividing the 'serious' theorists of digital games; Narratology versus Ludology. In summation:

The narratological view is that games should be understood as novel forms of narrative and can thus be studied using theories of narrative (Murray, 1997; Atkins, 2003). The ludological position is that games should be understood on their own terms. Ludologists have proposed that the study of games should concern the

analysis of the abstract and formal systems they describe. In other words, the focus of game studies should be on the rules of a game, not on the representational elements which are only incidental (Aarseth, 2001; Eskelinen, 2001; Eskelinen, 2004). The idea that a video game is “radically different to narratives as a cognitive and communicative structure” (Aarseth, 2001) has led the development of new approaches to criticism that are focused on video games as well adapting, re-purposing and proposing new ways of studying and theorizing about video games. (*Wikipedia*)

Like Kucklich, I respect this challenge motivates a great deal of theory, but my entry into this study came from neither of these traditions. Kucklich seeks to evade this existing entanglement, and the ambiguity which I hold necessary for research into games precludes my devotion to either camp. The threat of theory-as-deterrence requires I treat any final reductions to a single structural framework, as critical ex-terminations, not foundational characteristics of the understanding action. This restraint occludes passionate debate as to the textual character of games themselves. I seek to extend the interrogation of games outside the realm of internal order which they themselves present. On an hermeneutic account like I seek, language deployed between players about the games they play does not depend only on particular game-textuality, but on a situation of mutual participation and action directed towards understanding. My engagement with the play of language digital games seeks creative generation. My aim is played out through the language which emerges around social game play and denies any claims to exhaustiveness. Neither my conclusions nor those from another research tradition necessarily eliminate all the possible critical perspectives on the role of play in understanding.

Kucklich divines the traditional relationships which digital games must retain to an imaginary which underlies their construction today: he emphasizes the roots of modern fantasy games in traditional pen and paper role-playing, which is itself informed

by a literary tradition, particularly Tolkien. (Kucklich) Many of his observations remain valid for the most popular contemporary game, and content of my enquiry, the *World of Warcraft*. Blizzard Entertainment's wildly successful MMORPG deploys the many abstractions of character potential (levels, hit points, character classes etc) which Gary Gygax codified in *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the denizens of their realm are for the most part recognizable descendents of their Middle Earth counterparts.

Kucklich's particular concerns highlight his historical situation; digital games at the time of his enquiry were not yet massive and multi-player in the sense which *The World of Warcraft* and other subscription based virtual world games are today. Since his article was written, digital games have continued to eagerly taken part in the convergence of media technologies. Even before this happened, Kucklich sees that the ease of access and reduction of strain this new technology can provide for games still cannot unhinge them from tradition:

This virtualization of their material basis makes digital games almost completely independent of space, time and the presence of other players. Pen and paper role-playing games, for example, are equally independent of material objects, and some digital games do require specialized equipment, either in the hardware or software domain. Therefore, despite their differences, analog and digital games have to be regarded as part of the same tradition.

(Kucklich)

Digital games today do demand a vast array of specialized tools and adaptations on the part of their players; more so perhaps than the traditional games which Kucklich sees as encumbered by material demands, such as golf or soccer. The entanglement of games in play traditions is also evident from my perspective. This enquiry aims to uncover public language that gives evidence for new social dynamics which evolve through the activity of game-play. As an approach situated in hermeneutic understanding, I do not share the

intuitions that lead Kucklich into considering semiotics to be a critical feature of games.

My enquiry considers games to be social situations revealed through playful comportment. I consider digital games to take part in the social as a medium of communication and interaction. Kucklich also supports a view on which a theory of communication is central to an understanding experience of games. "This seems to imply that if communication can be regarded as a game, individual games can be regarded as specific forms of communication, i.e. media." (Kucklich) Games and communication are here married together in the course of playful inter-action. Not merely philological-literary-objects, the twofold mediation of games by computer technologies and social systems will reappear as we explore the details of a hermeneutic approach.

We also take games to be medial, and agree with Kucklich that our possibility of understanding an act of communication shows that, "A further parallel between games and media lies in the fact that both phenomena have been described as inherently social in nature, i.e. impossible to conceive in a social vacuum" (Kucklich). Any meaningful understanding of digital games takes place in the action of the network of their mediation, through the participation of players; games' status as a medium is further entrenched on this view by their ability to re-mediate other media. Digital games commonly draw upon a wide variety of past forms of communication, re-presenting television, movies, books and stories of diverse sort: "Television and digital games seem especially alike, since they both achieve a distinct hypermediacy by incorporating different kinds of information (visual, textual, numerical) into one screen" (Kucklich). These technological and representational mediating features of digital games depend on the mutual action of players with their chosen game. On this I can agree with Kucklich, but we must differ on

the role that semiotics is to play in the exploration of language at play in and around digital games.

On my account, the act of understanding which provides possible meaning to game-experiences takes place not only within but around the particular network of their mediation. Not only online and in-game, but in average-everyday language, older forms of media, and even the personal imaginary of each player meaningful understanding is called forth by an activity in language:

So I think my general thesis here – that reaching an understanding is a process that must succeed or fail in the medium of language – actually does not require elaborate demonstration. All the phenomena involved in reaching an understanding, the phenomena of understanding and misunderstanding, which constitute the central focus of what we call 'hermeneutics', clearly involve language. But in the following discussion I will propose something more radical. I wish to suggest that the general process of reaching an understanding between persons and the process of understanding per se are both language-events that resemble the inner conversation of the soul with itself, a conversation which Plato asserted was the very essence of thinking.  
(Gadamer, *Language and Understanding* 1)

To lose sight of this broader prerogative of understanding, and elevate semiotics to a privileged position determining meaning for game studies would merely overlook the ambiguity contained in the situation of their play. Emphasis on the 'mathematical reality' which subtends game-mediating technologies as being exclusively well suited to discussing games limits their possible exploration in advance. Kucklich rebuts critics who emphasize one particular form of understanding games above all others for overlooking alternative perspectives.

The central misunderstanding that causes most, if not all of these problems, lies in the confusion between the hypothetical textual levels of a literary text and the actual semiotic levels of code and interface in a digital game. However, while a literary text is manifest only as the imprint of signs on the pages of a book, a digital game is manifest both as a sequence of numerical data processed by the computer's different components, and an array of signs on a screen interpreted by its human

user, or users.  
(Kucklich)

It is certainly the case that digital games are medial in a novel fashion, and that the possibilities of their investigation are altered thereby. But emphasis on the expression of the motivating algorithms of the game, instead of on the playful comportment of its activity evades the situation as I see it. The slippery character of the language which, while external to the game itself, acts as a set of passwords between players in the everyday world is overlooked. It is this conversational language which carries forth the action of understanding and creative potential for meaning into public places and times.

Neither the noumenon of machine code, nor the translation-device-systems, nor the narrative nor ludological characters of 'digital games as such'—nor even Kucklich's proposed extension into semiological-media-traditions—can suffice to capture the living dynamic of the express language which emerges between in the social setting created by playing together. Play and its meaningful experience are on my view contracts between players in a social situation. The focus must then on my account be on those express and manifest elements of understanding game-play which are shared between its players, on their active use of language about the game they have played.

Kucklich makes another significant observation when describing how he grasps digital games as texts-for-interpretation. When evaluating the role of temporal and spatial structures in the presentation of digital games, he compliments approaches which:

Take into account modes of narration seldom found in traditional literature, but abounding in digital games. Thus, erratic, repetitive and selective readings are the exception rather than the rule in traditional narratives, while in digital games they are the norm.”  
(Kucklich)

Inspired by hermeneutics to consider all understanding to be situated, this investigation is



one which would not overlook “erratic or selective” conditions affecting the play of digital games. I do not find these features to found only in the form of reading attributed by Kucklich to digital game-play. Rather, the sort of evident 'erratic' and 'selective' reading which here makes itself manifest, is the very situated character of all hermeneutic understanding. Derived from a cultivation of experience, embedded into everyday circumstance and brought forth into a public language, an understanding of the world is always only a selective reading. (Gadamer, *Truth and Method* section 4) On this view all human stories are haphazard and all readings are selective and provisional.

The provisional character of an hermeneutic understanding is reinforced by public character of the language which forms the basis of any interpretation. The worldly character of understanding would on my account avoid the calcification of formal semiotics, due to its necessary investment in a social circumstance. The possibility of a shared world-imaginary present in games is played out in diverse spheres of community and immersion. In all of these spheres the obligations of an agent seeking to take part effectively are public forms of practical action— each is a situated comportment.

Kucklich concludes this introduction to a philological approach by declaring that it “strives for a theory of ludic human-computer interaction that uses literary models to understand how games can become media for the processing of complex signs.” (Kucklich) From this I can see that whatever common ground our inspirations towards digital games research sprung from, my path is not shared with this approach. Emphasizing the social character of language employed between players of games, not already beholden to a model or system-effect, Gadamer's form of hermeneutic reasoning does not exhaust itself in philology of this sort. I take philology as Kucklich presents it to

be one particular case of interpretation. Furthermore, all interpretations involve an action of situated understanding, and the form of that action is hermeneutic.

This leads me to demand above all else, an active praxis of communication, in public language, between situated social actors. I must foreground the living character of employed language over the essential determination of formal meaning. While I differ in the tactical formulation of my approach, and find Kucklich's reading of philology is too narrow, I agree, broadly, with his final remarks in this interrogation:

From the literary point of view, the only way games can be read is by playing them. The game cannot be separated from the process of playing it, and this play-process cannot be separated from the player. Only by acknowledging this interdependence can we start to make sense of digital games and their impact on the way we make sense of the world.

(Kucklich)

Efforts to foreground the active and situated language generated in conversation between players of digital games demand I describe the action of hermeneutic interpretation in a more particular fashion. More than simply textual interpretation, hermeneutic-understanding action for Gadamer encompasses the whole range of possible human meaning. More than merely the technique of close-reading derived from a tradition of literary analysis, the hermeneutic circle is the form of possible meaning generation for socially acting linguistic subjects. Intimately tied to the experience of the world, hermeneutic interpretation entails that understanding is grounded in living subjects' situated and contextual social practice. Social subjects' engagement with their situation, in public action, through language, as directed towards understanding corresponds to Gadamer's critical concept of the Horizon. An hermeneutic horizon is more than a perspective, because it aims to describe the situation as it appears at the time and in the circumstances of an interpretation. Meaningful interpretations are most often worked

out in public language, and leave open the possibility of their being re-considered by future understanding actions. While a horizon is related to the point of view which an agent seeking understanding holds, it contains more than is first apparent. Hermeneutic interpretation recognizes the critical role of time and language in understanding action, and the Horizon is its means of capturing this tense relationship.

### **Horizons and Understanding Tradition in Social Action**

Julian Kücklich's approach to video game research presents an example of negotiating newly emerging social circumstances by re-deploying the tradition of philology as literary criticism. These sorts of negotiation, engaged by living agents embedded in situations informed by tradition, are points of access for Gadamer's approach to understanding action. The linguistic character of human understanding helps to explain the temptation to employ literary-critical methods, to treat games or the circumstances of their production as textual. The sort of language-activity which most interests me is not to be found between game-players and the machines of mediation which enable their virtual expression, but between those players in conversation with each other; posing questions and negotiating understanding in language. Asking about the situations of game-play in plain language I seek to uncover the constellation of meaning constructed in both traditional and novel language. These conversations will provide a 'text' upon which to focus my interpretation-in-action, while still retaining an ambiguity towards the results which does justice to digital games uncertain status.

Before I can evoke meaningful expressions from video-game players concerning their playful actions, I must revisit Gadamer's particular conception of language, and

explore how it is that all speech acts directed towards understanding are themselves at the same time situated negotiations with tradition.

Setting aside for the moment all the differences within transcription, I would say that everything in writing, to be understood, requires something like a kind of heightening for the inner ear. This is obviously true for poetry and the like, but for philosophy too I take care to tell my students: you must sharpen your ear, you must realize that when you take a word in your mouth, you have not taken up some arbitrary tool which can be thrown in a corner if it doesn't do the job, but you are committed to a line of thought that comes from afar and reaches on beyond you. (Gadamer, *To what extent does language preform thought?* 551-552)

Language, however it is mediated or transcribed, when deployed in an act of understanding brings the subject into a relationship with tradition. Understanding depends on action by situated subjects and brings with it the possibility of reflection on and negotiation of the tradition of language. This understanding of interpretation is itself part of the negotiation with an inheritance of continental philosophy which Gadamer works to extend, as well as a necessary step in the re-deployment of terms in novel circumstances. Again, here we see the living character of language invoked in a fashion which does not threaten perfection nor render all expressions into binary; instead of leaving aside the desiccated subjectivity of a simulated agent, Gadamer's understanding-activity remains rooted in a situated co-responding. A tension is revealed here, in understanding and action. He continues:

What we are doing is always a kind of changing back, what I want to call in a very wide sense "translation." Think a moment what it means to "translate"—i.e., to transpose a dead thing in a new act of understanding that "reads" it, or even to transpose into our own or another language what was recorded only in a foreign language and given as a text.

The translation process fundamentally contains the whole secret of how human beings come to an understanding of the world and communicate with each other. (Gadamer, *ibid*)

Translation, like interpretation offers an example of the act of understanding

performed when subjects enter into a relationship with language. Gadamer explores the possibilities of understanding in a way which does not privilege system-effects or aim to produce timeless and perfect knowledge. Instead of seeking to complete the world, hermeneutic interpretation aims to re-vitalize the living relation between understanding subjects and their active role in meaning generation. Hermeneutic interpretations hold forth the possibility of re-interpretation, expanding the horizon of possible meanings, not closing it off through perfection seeking.

Experience occurs in contemporary situations but is expressed through a tense negotiation with the traditions of language. Hermeneutic reasoning is not employed to attain to a 'higher' standard of knowledge in each successive application, nor does it more accurately approximate 'authorial intention' as it continues its interpretive work limited to a particularly textual realm. Gadamer contends that hermeneutic interpretation depends on a dynamic relationship between understanding subjects and tradition to express meaningfully the individual experience which is the possible content of communication. At first glance this sort of interpretive action folds back onto itself in a circle. However: there is no viciousness in the circularity of the reflexive turn, as the hermeneutic is on Gadamer's account prior to, not dependent on, the evaluations of predicate logic.

Rather than move beyond the peculiar situation of a living understanding, hermeneutic possibilities illuminate the constitutive role of the knowing agent in their knowledge, and of the situation in its interpretation. It is in the situation of understanding that both the expressing subject and the meaning expressed participate publicly in the act and tradition of language. By means of words, a perspective is generated which allows for comparison and inspection. When experiences emerge into language, and

understanding takes place, Gadamer sees the origin of hermeneutic possibility open up: The Horizon begins to appear.

Exploring Gadamer's innovative position on hermeneutics and particularly interpretation is made easier for me by use of two other readings of his work. First one which helps ground my understanding of the relationship between Hermeneutics and social theory, and later another which presents an alternative reading of Gadamer's usefulness in exploring digital games. Suzan J Hekman, in *Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Knowledge* (1986) undertakes to explore Gadamer's hermeneutics in a way which is fruitful for my investigation.

In particular, Hekman addresses the use of the term 'prejudice' by Gadamer. This term has been a source of difficulty for hermeneutics for reasons derived from the weighty tradition that 'prejudice' carries with it. Intentionally recasting a word which has become charged with negative connotations from the realm of science, where the elimination of particular actors 'prejudices' is part of the ground of proper investigation, Gadamer demands a new situated negotiation of what having a 'prejudice' means. For Gadamer, and those who would follow his vision of hermeneutic understanding action, the possession of pre-conceptions, of prejudices, is the basis upon which meaningful negotiations can take place. Interpretation, translation and conversation all flourish on the basis of prejudices. Hekman explains how Gadamer might intend we see the term:

If interpretations are not arbitrary then criteria must exist by which true can be distinguished from false, correct from incorrect. In this regard, Gadamer is again not specific. He clearly wants to make these distinctions but he does not indicate precisely how they can be made. An answer to this question, however, is implicit in his approach. True prejudices can be distinguished from false prejudices by appeal to the commonly shared meanings that constituted the human linguistic community. True prejudices are always self-reflexive, that is, they reveal us to ourselves; they are prejudices that constitute our way of life and our self-understanding. False

prejudices do not meet these criteria.  
(Hekman 113-114)

I substantially agree with Hekman's reading of the action of hermeneutic understanding; in particular the role of language communities and self-reflexive expression accord with my reading. Just as "true prejudices" reveal the understanding actor in their reflexive appeal to a situation, the playful comportment of a game can reveal the systematic character of a constructed world, and human hands at work in its construction. The valences of truth and falsehood which emerge in understanding action depend on the negotiation of tradition; on the inspection of pre-conceptions and inherited meanings in situated communication. This then is one image of the Horizon: a publicly available set of understandings and negotiations directed towards meaning that emerge in language.

Horizons appear in time, situated by their participation in the traditions that inform them; those of the interpreter or translator and text, between subjects in communication: in short in the expression of action meant meaningfully. The success or failure of understanding, of meaning or expression is not an arbitrary quality of the intentions or subjectivity of individuals, but a public negotiation of tradition and circumstance. I seek an example of this negotiation of language, situation and tradition in conversation, and in so doing risk the catastrophe of misunderstanding. A tension like that intuited from in play here emerges in all speaking. The historical situatedness of all communication means that all hermeneutic determinations retain a provisional character; they do not systematically prefigure future situations in a determinant fashion. Language remains playful and continues to escape from any system tending towards perfection. Hekman further holds that rather than eliminate pre-conceptions which condition

understanding, or overlook the traditional-negotiated character of language use:

What Gadamer's position requires, is that the interpreter is situated in history and time and that this situatedness is what protects against arbitrariness. Hermeneutic investigations are neither arbitrary nor 'objective' but are constituted by the self-reflexive analysis of prejudice from within a human linguistic community...Gadamer's position entails, first, that what determines the meaning of a text is the fusion of the two horizons of meaning – that of the interpreter and that of the text – and that we can determine the horizon of meaning for both participants in the interpretation. Secondly, it entails that we do not determine the correct interpretation by identifying subjective intentions. Rather, the correctness of an interpretation lies in its conformity to the horizon of meaning from which the interpretation is made and the prejudices that constitute that horizon.  
(Hekman 115)

Against those who consider any non-objective position to entail a negative arbitrariness, Hekman positions the active condition of understanding as an event situated within a circumstance: meaning and knowledge do not occur at an instant, but are the result of an extended negotiation by living agents in time and space. The public character of the tense relatedness and negotiation involved in understanding actions on my view foils any efforts which decry the hermeneutics as a subjective or arbitrary approach.

The possibility of understanding is embedded in time, and made public in language. Only by reflexive action from within a tradition, can we determine the 'correctness' of any interpretation which is proposed or suggested. This 'correctness' is also accorded to an extension in time; interpretation does not entail its own future force. More than merely a condition of interpretation for texts, this reflexive form of interrogation can on my account be widened to include any public language-act which engenders meaning. My particular concern with conversation is supported by Gadamer's position in 1970's *Language and Understanding*; spoken or written, meaningful interpretations are active outcomes produced by social actors:

Language is such that, whatever particular meaning a word may possess, words do



not have a single unchanging meaning; rather, they possess a fluctuating range of meaning, and precisely this fluctuation constitutes the peculiar risk of speaking. Only in the process of speaking, as we speak further, as we build up the fabric of a linguistic context, do we come to fix the meanings in the moments of meaning of our speaking, only in this way do we mutually agree on what we mean. (Gadamer, *Language and Understanding* 25)

We come to agree upon meanings in conversation by a mutual negotiation of language; traditional words and forms are re-vitalized by their novel deployment in contemporary circumstances. The possibility of a fruitful hermeneutic reflection emerges when the pre-conditioned associations which language plays out through speech are adapted to the situation; this negotiation allows mutual comprehension to emerge again and again, without exhausting or reducing the scope of meaning. Each active pursuit of meaning engages subjects in the public presentation of their own pre-existing negotiation with language, directed towards an object of mutual understanding: speaking unveils the speaker's Horizon, and gives their situation over to the World in the form of Language. Each hermeneutically fruitful conversation re-negotiates language in social action; a provisional but vital agreement emerges which is rooted in the situatedness of the speaking subjects and their world.

Meaning emerges in situations. Hermeneutic understanding is on my view defended against arbitrariness and a nugatory 'subjectivity' by being embedded in a vital social circumstance and its demand for a playful negotiation of tradition in public language. Gadamer is conscious of the weight that this places upon his form of understanding action. He describes in detail the fundamental limitation that conditions being-situated and propounding a Horizon.

The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence we are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. We always find ourselves within a situation and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished. This is

also true of the hermeneutic situation—i.e., the situation in which we find ourselves with regard to the tradition that we are trying to understand. The illumination of this situation—reflection on effective history—can never be completely achieved; yet the fact that it cannot be completed is due not to a deficiency in reflection but to the essence of the historical being that we are. To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete.  
(Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 301)

Situations engage and involve those who would try to understand them. Any understanding which is reached is worked for and held provisionally. When language is reflected upon, the situation which is illuminated is a tense relationship to the traditions which inform the possibilities of meaning and expression. Incompleteness, provisional and contingent valuations are not hereby a failure of reasoning, reflection or the potency of hermeneutic understanding. They are the polymorphic space into which language and understanding must move as the situation from which they emerge becomes antiquated:

Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of “situation” by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of the situation is the concept of “horizon.” The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth. Since Nietzsche and Husserl, the word has been used in philosophy to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one's range of vision is gradually expanded. A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, “to have a horizon” means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it. A person who has a horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small. Similarly, working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right horizon of enquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition.  
(Gadamer, *ibid.* 301-2)

The vantage point of hermeneutic understanding is unlike that of science. Instead of abstracting out of the circumstances of particular vision towards a repeatable isolation in the experiment, describing an horizon demands the admission and valuation of the situation in its fulsome appearance to a living acting agent who seeks understanding. It is

in this admission and presentation of the contents of an horizon that the preconceptions (prejudices) and ongoing negotiations with tradition are given over to a public space by the playful action of language. Another researcher into digital games has produced just such an interpretation in public language: Arne Kjell Vikhagen in his 2009 paper entitled *Gadamer's Concept of Play* presents a situated interpretation of a Play, and through engagement with Truth and Method, expresses a horizon distinct from my own.

Vikhagen's presentation begins with a statement I certainly endorse:

In order to discuss the relation between computer games and Gadamer's concept of play, the first thing we need to do is look beyond the "play" character of computer games as "just for fun."  
(Vikhagen 2009)

But I do not find anything "paradoxical" about linking play to an unexpected seriousness as Vikhagen does. The sort of critical possibility gathered up in play means to me that the compartment of playfulness is a tense one, not merely a leisure activity. Both his perception of a paradox and the early emphasis on the possible translations of 'spiel' in to either play or game (depending on a degree of formalism) reveal the sorts of negotiation with tradition that any researcher into Gadamer and games must undertake.

In continuing to reveal a horizon of understanding Gadamer's play, Vikhagen is correct to contrast a developed hermeneutic understanding with a more traditional subjective perspective, but on my view does not fully engage with situated action as distinct from 'subjectivity':

Gadamer criticizes what he calls the subjectification of play, instead he focuses on play itself. Play is rather "a mode of being of the work of art itself." It is neither constituted by us, nor is it there for our enjoyment. Gadamer does not look at the player and his intentions or needs for recreation, but rather he concentrates on the seriousness of the game itself; a seriousness that is fulfilled through the players' valid intentions. "The mode of being of play does not allow the player to behave towards play as if it were an object." The player's role is secondary, or more like a

catalyst, a way to instigate play's own purpose. The subjective expression is transposed from the playing subject over to the play itself.  
(Vikhagen 2009)

While Gadamer certainly opposes a reductive approach to the subjective experience of play, on my view it is not the case that his characterization is one of transposition of expression either. Play here is understood through its “mode of being” (*Truth and Method* 102), one which vitalizes and guards its possibility against any objective conception. This is a mode of being much like that Gadamer discloses elsewhere for words and language:

This being-with the word in such a way that one does not treat it like an object that one uses, is clearly the basic mode of all linguistic behaviour. Language contains a self-protecting and self-concealing power, such that what happens in it is protected from the grasp of one's own reflection and remains hidden in the unconscious. When one has recognized both the revealing and the self-concealing nature of language, then one is obliged to go beyond the dimensions of sentence logic and press forward to wider horizons.  
(Gadamer, *Language and Understanding* 26)

On my account, “this being-with the word” and the mode of being of a game or of play itself is always already understood as a situation into which understanding actors are thrust. It is not a reconfiguration of the subjective-objective boundary as Vikhagen takes it to be. Unable to go beyond the binary of this distinction, Vikhagen's horizon of interrogation retains these poles and necessarily ranks elements of the play experience according to their perceived agency in the performance of game-play:

The understanding of play in the work of art comes from an immanent analysis of the artifact itself, which means going to the artifact for answers instead of to the subject that perceives it...Gadamer's notion changes the object of investigation from the subject over to the play itself. What goes on inside our heads when we are playing is of secondary concern to the more primary function of the actual play. This not only reduces the player to a puppet or catalyst, it also enables Gadamer to connect his concept of play to other categories, the most important of these being truth.  
(Vikhagen 2009)

The “wider horizons” Gadamer demands regarding sentential reasoning also apply to reductive concepts of the subject and the situation. Neither play nor the work of art is on Gadamer’s account an atomic artifact of this traditional sort. Both are circumstances of possible understanding action; not encounters with immanent meaning bound up in a timeless object. While the “object of investigation” under Gadamer’s regard is changed by fully revealing its horizon, it is transformed not into the contingent central actor of a dyad, but from a conception of play as experience into play as situation. Situations necessarily engage and demand of their subjects negotiations which go beyond isolated intention, and the acknowledgement of the tense entanglement of actors and their circumstances is not a reduction “to a puppet or catalyst” in a negative sense. Vikhagen’s prejudice concerning the necessary division of agency in any occasion is here revealed, and is one which I do not find to be self-reflective of my task. Despite this tension in the division of causal responsibility, Vikhagen shows the pre-figuration surrounding research into digital games. His incitement to employ Gadamer is not without regard to the ‘usual state of understanding games’:

It is not surprising that research on digital games has had a dominant focus on the understanding of the subjective experience of play. Since computer games are commercial products with enormous gross income worldwide, it is much more important for the industry to understand how people experience these games, that is products, rather than understand play’s relation to ontological explanation. An insight in the subjective experience of playing yields valuable information about their product. In my view, however, which in this case tallies with Gadamer’s, I think that a too narrow on play’s subjective character could prevent the search for the dynamics of play. (Vikhagen 2009)

I agree with Vikhagen that the usual emphasis on subjective game-experience derives from their consideration as a product, and not their potential for revelatory ontological insight. A new horizon has to be described which grasps play and digital games in a

distinct way. The peculiar character of play and its resemblance to language when described according to its mode-of-being is one which I feel Vikhagen mischaracterizes from his vantage point:

“Play fulfils its purpose only if the player loses himself in his play.” The attitude of the player always strives towards play's own seriousness, which can only be reached through unserious play. Here lies an important quality of play that accounts for its fascination: play can never be looked upon as an object from the outside, since it would then immediately lose its own seriousness and purpose. An outside-in-view will implode the structure of play.  
(Vikhagen 2009)

When grasped as a situation of mutual understanding action, play on my reading of Gadamer denies any exterior perspective, since it entangles the players into its mode-of-being as a situation. The seriousness appropriate to any game also lingers in this entanglement, and finds its appropriate bounds are both temporal and situated according to the demands of the play-situation. I find Vikhagen's position on Gadamer unable to move beyond the essential categories of subjective and objective, to embrace a wider reasoning like that of the hermeneutic. It becomes clear just how this relationship with a tradition of games-research sets his horizon apart from my own when Vikhagen declares:

The object of enquiry is neither the player's experience nor the player's reflection on what play is, but rather it is play itself that should be investigated, or what Gadamer calls “the mode of being of play”. Gadamer inverts the relationship between the player and play by giving play the role of the subject. The player then is objectified. Play is independent of the consciousness of the player – it has its own essence.  
(Vikhagen 2009)

The challenging transformation which I take Gadamer to demand is here more than a mere inversion of traditional categories. A new horizon would rather be a rupture based upon apprehending the tension within the “mode of being of play” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 103) as a circumstance for understanding action. Modes of being presume a

complex situation, not merely atomic objects or immanent subjectivity. I introduced Gadamer's concept of the hermeneutic early in this chapter by reference to the subsumption of aesthetic consciousness by the broader prerogatives of understanding action (Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 157). I see here the challenge of hermeneutics demands an elimination of traditional priorities divided between acting subjects and their passive objects of action. When understood as an experience, play, like the work of art can be differently illuminated:

We are enquiring into the mode of being of play as such. We have seen that it is not aesthetic consciousness but the experience of art and thus the question of the mode of being of the work of art that must be the object of our examination. But this was precisely the experience of the work of art that I maintained in opposition to the levelling process of aesthetic consciousness: namely that the work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it. The "subject" of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it, but the work itself. (Gadamer, *Truth & Method* 103)

Neither the experience of the work of art, nor that of play is concretely determined by their relationship to the subjectivity of apprehending subjects. Instead, the critical possibility of new understanding, of transformational experience, lies within the constellation of acting persons and their situation. In this way games and art are not independent of the acting agent in an essentialist manner. Instead I would argue that the interrogation of game-experience is conditioned by the situated social action directed towards understanding. Just as the work of art exists as a possibility of experience-in-situation, even when no people are actively within its circumstance, so to the mode of being of play continues to hold out a critical possibility of re-casting our understanding action in the world. But these possibilities are like those of interpretation, held open by situated action, and held provisionally while they shape the situation of our comportment

with one another.

Vikhagen's horizon of interpretation on my account does not capture this important tension in Gadamer's position. When he considers the relationship of play to self-presentation, he is unable to unpack the critical role of prejudices central to hermeneutic application. Hence his position falls prey to a common misunderstanding: that seductive circumstances like play are nugatory reductions or alterations of a fixed system between subject and object. Trapped by a demand for some element of play to be objective, I feel Vikhagen forces Gadamer's intuitions from language into a form of deterrence, instead of following them as I have argued, back to language-in-situation:

This [metaphorical] connection is not a coincidence for Gadamer, on the contrary, it reveals the objective character of play – that play can exist without the subject's initiative or intervention. The motivation for someone engaging in play would be to take part in an ongoing movement between two states that have no end and renews itself in constant iteration.

(Vikhagen 2009)

Rather than read the tense possibility of situated understanding within play as a relationship to tradition and circumstances, this reading of the hermeneutic dissolves it into the motion of a dialectic function performed on agents by systems. Rather than fall prey to this deterrent reading, I contend that Gadamer's linguistic intuition aims to relate play, art and understanding to being-worldly and the reflexive character of framing an horizon:

The fact that the mode of being of play is so close to the mobile form of nature permits us to draw an important methodological conclusion. It is obviously not correct to say that animals too play, nor is it correct to say that, metaphorically speaking, water and light play as well. Rather, on the contrary, we can say that man too plays. His playing too is a natural process. The meaning of his play too, precisely because – and insofar as – he is part of nature, is a pure self-presentation.

(Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 105)

The possibility of playfulness is on my view held forth in comportment. Modes of being



which open critical new horizons are always entangled in the reflexive demand which they sustain. A demand which, by dint of its constant renewal, can seem eternal and objectified, even insulated from the world outside the game. Like any circumstance of understanding action, playful comportment reveals the relationship to tradition available in the presentation of prejudices. The seduction to an alternative comportment bound up in game-play allows for a new image of social actors:

A person playing is, even in his play, still someone who comports himself, even if the proper essence of the game consists in his disburdening himself of the tension he feels in his purposive comportment. This determines more exactly why playing is always a playing of something. Every game presents the man who plays it with a task. He cannot enjoy the freedom of playing himself out without transforming the aims of his purposive behaviour into mere tasks of the game. Thus a child gives himself a task in playing with a ball, and such tasks are playful ones because the purpose of the game is not really solving the task, but ordering and shaping the movement of the game itself.

(Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 107)

The situation of play cannot on my account be unpacked without addressing the entanglement of the player, and the disjunctive transformation of comportment which playfulness entails goes beyond an objectivity immanent to games as forms of order. The absence of the central role of prejudice in all reflexive understanding action leads Vikhagen to miscast the impact that games can have on the players through reflexive interrogation:

[Players] perform different tasks that are clearly defined within the game's precinct and rules. These tasks are not directed towards anything else than what lies within the game space. Had they been, the game illusion would be broken and the game would cease to be a game. This is what Gadamer means when he talks about games as self-representation, or that the game's mode of being is self-representation. To fulfil the tasks performed in games is not always the purpose of the game, since the purpose of the game is self-representation.

(Vikhagen 2009)

It is not play as object, but as situation, which is here fruitfully revealed. In the self-

representation of the game, its players, actual and possible, as well as its play, in comportment, possibility and reflection emerge into the situated horizon of its pursuit. But an account which exhausts itself in a non-reflective submission to the game as central actor eludes the critical social components of play as a critical locus of understanding. Vikhagen overlooks the constant return to the social circumstance that underlies any actual transformation affected by playful action. When players submit to the rules of a game, and comport themselves with due seriousness within it, a possibility is held open for the recognition of the hermeneutic situation which lies within action directed towards an end. The endless possibility of play is contrasted with the fixed determinations of any particular situation of playing.

Vikhagen concludes his discussion of Gadamer by asserting a connection between art and play which I cannot support. The “essence of things” and “the truthful representation of things” (Vikhagen 2009) are most certainly not the aim of my cultivated understanding action. After acceding to the broader prerogatives of hermeneutic reason as regards the propounding of a horizon, the role of language and the reflexive challenge of the circumstance, I am challenged to describe anew my position on research into digital games. My horizon intends to be bounded by conversation with the players of Massive Multiplayer Online Games. I take conversation to be one of the fundamental hermeneutic situations which allows for the possibility of self-reflection, and one which engages language and experience in social action. Gadamer too finds reason to explore the conversation as a fruitful hermeneutic horizon, and I aim to show how his understanding finally completes my proposed approach to digital games.

### Hermeneutic Conversation

My interpretation of the challenge Baudrillard poses for research into the Virtual led me to consider Gadamer's hermeneutic as an alternative approach. Emphasizing the situated action of understanding agents, the critical role of prejudice and language in the presentation of an horizon, I feel that this approach avoids traditional disputes from within Game Studies while re-engaging social actors as a locus of investigation in the midst of a complex technological situation. The creative possibility of playfulness and the intuitions of incompleteness which 'pataphysics lends to my investigation have allowed me to maintain an ambiguity concerning the situation of digital games research. Here though, I must more concretely stand forth in support of the role that language and conversation can have in a formal hermeneutic enquiry.

It is my aim to employ plain language in conversation, intentionally disarming formal entanglements which determinately pre-figure 'valid' content by means of a coding scheme. My intent is to remain open to the language of the situation, not beholden to the terminology of one or another tradition of game studies or social theory research:

Within the living unity of language, the language of science is always only a moment that is integrated into the whole, and there are all kinds of other ways that words are used, such as those we find in philosophical, religious and poetical speaking. In all of them the word is doing something quite different from just self-forgetfully passing through the world. In words we are at home. In words there is a kind of guarantee for what they say.

(Gadamer, *Language and Understanding* 26)

The action of language in a situation is flexible, and potentially creative. The mode of being of the word is here more clearly illuminated. Abiding within language, we "are at home" and in a fruitful conversation our sort of comportment resembles that of players within the game. In each situation social agents are seduced by the demands of the

circumstance and entangled in mutual activity.

Language is so uncannily near our thinking, and when it functions it is so little an object, that it seems to conceal its own being from us. In our analysis of the thinking of the human sciences, however, we came so close to this universal mystery of language that is prior to everything else, that we can entrust ourselves to what we are investigating to guide us safely in this quest. In other words we are endeavouring to approach the mystery of language from the conversation that we ourselves are.

(Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 370)

By entering into a conversation in this manner, my aim is to re-vitalize an interpretation of understanding action as embraced by language. The intimate relationship between all understanding action and the play of language is the very tension which hermeneutics seeks to uncover in its reflective movement. The question of conversation is always already tied to the situation which demands understanding. A mutual determination challenges forth a conversation. That challenge usually takes the form of a question.

When we try to examine the hermeneutical phenomenon through the model of conversation between two persons, the chief thing that these apparently so different situations—understanding a text and reaching an understanding in conversation—have in common is that both are concerned with a subject matter that is placed before them.

This understanding of the subject matter must take the form of language. It is not that the understanding is subsequently put into words; rather the way understanding occurs—whether in the case of a text or a dialogue with another person who raises an issue with us—is the coming-into-language of the thing itself.

(Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 370-371)

Hermeneutics-in-conversation is centred on the consideration of a subject matter. The situation of understanding allows for the topic of conversation to appear into language. A public horizon of understanding is invoked by this mutual action. Talking to the players of digital games about their play depends on finding a topic which allows for the possibility of fruitful conversation. In this way my investigation of play and the Virtual hopes to discover new perspectives on the situation of MMORPGs, particularly the *World*

*of Warcraft.*

Talking to players of the *World of Warcraft* in this fashion demands a mutual possibility of understanding held forth in language. But this possibility is entangled with the circumstances of game play and the tradition of their playful comportment. It is in part due to my past experience in playing games of a variety of sorts, and particularly my time spent playing *The World of Warcraft*, which helps furnish a common ground in conversation:

The language in which something comes to speak is not a possession at the disposal of one or the other of the interlocutors. Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language.

Something is placed in the centre, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. Hence reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation.

(Gadamer, *To What Extent Does Language Pre-Form Thought?* 371)

I intend to place a subject matter at the centre of my conversations with the players of the *World of Warcraft* that helps address the situation of digital games within the Virtual. To do so without thereby doing our conversation an injustice by forcing my partners in conversation into an unnatural interrogation of sociology, I aim to use the subject matter of death in digital games. Since the emerging social circumstance of play which appears in the *World of Warcraft* revolves around the exploits of a heroic-fantasy genre, characters which are played within the game often experience failure which is represented by a character's death. Understanding how players comport themselves in a Virtual circumstance which negotiates meanings among traditional terms we employ for mortality, is my goal in asking questions about dying during the game-play of the *World of Warcraft*. This sort of interrogation is both intimately tied to an experience of the game, and has a evocative traditional significance; conversations about death in most

traditions of the world are almost invariably serious.

Taking part in a conversation about virtual mortality with the players of a digital game is certainly risking a catastrophic failure of understanding, but the conversation itself is not exhausted by having been conducted. In revitalizing the horizon of these conversations in the following chapter I will seek to reveal how the experience of digital game play can hold forth a creative critical possibility for researchers of games, without relying on an approach which deters the expansion of an understanding horizon that treats games as complex situations.

Baudrillard and other social theorists have spoken at times of the “death of the real” and the “murder” and “extermination” which threaten our contemporary social situation. Gadamer's hermeneutic understanding illuminates the “mortal and provisional” character of all understanding and the temporality of any interpretation. It is not merely a metaphorical co-incidence that both these theorists are concerned with the finitude of expression and understanding, tying it intimately to the conditions of social action. The intuition which I have taken from 'pataphysics about the necessary impermanence of systems has also led me to feel that the mortality of playful comportment can also be revealed as fruitful for the pursuit of theory about games. For these reasons, I feel I address both Baudrillard and Gadamer by asking “What is it like to die in the World of Warcraft?”

### **Chapter Three: Conversations About Dying in the World of Warcraft.**

Interrogating digital games, as a newly emerging social situation, demands that my enquiry have a text on which to perform an interpretation. To find a public horizon of language, I engaged in conversations with players of the game *The World of Warcraft*. In doing this I hope to answer the challenge of deterrence Baudrillard sees inhering in digital games, by application of Gadamer's hermeneutic interpretation to unpack the critical social possibility of play still alive in the Virtual. In this chapter I will present my interpretation of conversations conducted with the players of the *World of Warcraft*.

Hoping to furnish our conversations with a topic which can prompt reflection on the potentially critical character of digital game-play, I chose the subject matter of dying in a massive multiplayer online game called the *World of Warcraft*. This choice is motivated by a desire to engage with an explicitly Virtual possibility, while remaining challenged to negotiate an understanding which depends on traditional conceptions in a new contemporary light. I feel discussing in-game death gives our conversations just this sort of tense situated possibility. The active character of situated meaning and understanding looks to engage all the participants in a conversation in finding a common tongue:

This is not an external matter of simply adjusting our tools; nor is it even right to say that the partners adapt themselves to one another, but rather, in a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.

(Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 371)

The repeated encounters which digital game players have with in-game character mortality are at first glance unlike any circumstance of offline comportment. Character

death is familiar to all but the most neophyte gamers, but alien in its initial presentation to non-gamers. I feel that character death is one possible access to the comportment of playing the *World of Warcraft* that can be hermeneutically fruitful. Because within all playful comportment lies the risk of a catastrophe, and the possibility of an alternative understanding. The critical possibility of new horizons revealed in digital game play must still be untangled from deterrent features which co-mingle with them as social situations for action. Though my intuitions strongly incline me to uphold this critical possibility within play, I may discover that for these players, in their situation, the *World of Warcraft* is embraced for its deterrence. I welcome the necessary risking of my position, in engaged conversation, that I might present more fully the contents of an horizon concerning digital games:

We say that we “conduct” a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, we may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will “come out” of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. Thus we can say that something was a good conversation, or that it was ill fated. All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it—i.e., that it allows something to “emerge” which henceforth exists.  
(Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 385)

Digital games are synonymous to the Virtual for many people, and their explosive emergence over the last few decades has transformed them into a new social circumstance. Conversations concerning this new situation still emerge into language, but their meaning remains obscure and sometimes alien to the non-participant. The words in my conversations will be familiar, even if their newly negotiated sense is



strange. Digital game players appear to speak in impossible terms about fantastic other-places, and treat 'seriously' events which are utterly unreal. But this apparent 'seriousness' is one of the very dangers threatening understanding.

To treat the experience of a virtual endeavour as the topic of mutual conversation, my interviews were very loosely structured. Respondents were each assured of their anonymity, and are referred to by pseudonyms in my interpretation. Each conversation consisted of preliminary tone-setting questions intended to lead towards a mutual reflection on the topic of death in massive multi-player games, particularly in *The World of Warcraft*. Setting between the two participants an object of mutual concern—"What is it like to die in the *World of Warcraft*?"—the aim of these conversations is to allow a new understanding to appear in its own light. Much of the factual questioning and introductory banter was consciously irrelevant to the topic of Death-as-such, intended to guide both the subject of the interview and myself into that realm of shared terms and topics which derived from out of the playful comportment in *The World of Warcraft*.

The hermeneutic character of my exploratory conversations does not pretend to exhaustiveness. It is a localized exploration of prejudices. Prejudices which determine in concert those relations to real world tradition as well as to game-play which emerge in the interviews. My approach regards an intentionally limited sample size as a necessity rather than a short-coming. It is not my aim to define a representative sample or data-set which affords of statistical analysis.

Exploring conversation with MMORPG players in this way has the goal of productively describing an instance of playful action in the Virtual through situated language. A situation is revealed in the mutual construction of an horizon in

conversation, and given accessible form in this case study. The outcome will be an object in public language (itself forming part of a new horizon) which affords both players and non-players of the *World of Warcraft* an opportunity: To productively situate their personal understanding within a particular landscape of life and death as expressed by others in the *World of Warcraft*, and come to a new understanding of the critical potentials that playfulness reveals even in the most Virtual systems.

As both former player and now researcher of these games, my clear secondary aim is to demonstrate in practice the fruitful possibilities that hermeneutic reflection holds for social research into the Virtual. Fruitful even when its subject matter is obscurely entangled with the tradition of language. I take hermeneutic interpretation to be non-deterrent because of and not despite the prejudices and expectations which it bears as hallmark. On my view, the constant recall of situated social practice, and the elliptical poesis of playing-language challenged forth by hermeneutic reasoning render even the most Virtual of situations loci of vibrant humanity.

My reflections on language and play have led me to understand each of these conversations must have its own pace, path and destination. Alternative to the everyday, even talking about Massive Multiplayer Online Games must resemble games themselves. Each conversation came to light under rules agreed upon in concert, and was nurtured to its own unique, inevitable conclusion. Acknowledging the demand for situation-as-determination, each conversation allowed the situation to emphasize those elements which most attracted the action of conversation. The seeking of Gadamerian prejudices in express action precludes uniformity. Rather than demand each conversation attain to the same 'level' of content, introspection or engagement, the peculiar thrust of

hermeneutic conversation gives priority to the situation as it unfolds; not merely as it was intended by myself as a researcher. If my efforts are successful, I will be seduced into a conversation which transforms all who take part. A first, brief word on the sort of game-play experience, which MMORPGs in general and *The World of Warcraft* in particular involve.

To play a character in the *World of Warcraft* is to be given control of a digital persona inhabiting a fantastic setting. As a player you direct the actions of your character through a game-specific interface, and set out to adventure. The choice of species (race) and profession (class) describe your character's potential paths of advancement in the game-world. All these features of 'playing a character' are traditional features of role-playing games in any form; digital games display the shared imaginary, which table-top role-players described together, in a media-rich fashion.

All forms of role-playing game (RPG) combine communication and representation; digital games leverage technology other than books, maps and polyhedral dice. Traditional RPGs demand that you pay for access to the system, for the math which models and govern the game world. The 'graphics' are the free addition of the imagination. MMORPGs ask that you pay for the graphical interface, and are more than willing to put the concealed mathematical burden on the shoulders of a server-structure.

RPG Characters gain power through the accumulation of experience points. Completing quests and defeating monsters in combat both provide experience points, and sufficient experience points allow the improvement of your chosen profession (class). This improvement scale is described by numbered levels. You begin the game as a level 1 character. At the time of my interviews, level 70 was the maximum attainable level in

the *World of Warcraft*, but the level limit or 'cap' has since increased to 80. For example, a player can begin play as a level one gnome warlock, or a level one orc shaman. Each new level attained unlocks new powers and abilities for your character, as well as increasing their resources of health and magical energy. This process is augmented by the acquisition of equipment, the usual trappings of fantasy in the form of medieval and magical weapons and armour.

Characters at any level in the *World of Warcraft* are represented in the game world in ways which reflect these resource acquisitions; players can see the equipment worn by other characters, as well as their character level, name or title. Players tended at the time of my interviews, to evaluate unknown others by means of these evident game-metrics. A character is judged by their level, and their equipment; each challenge in the game world is designed for characters at a certain experience level, using equipment of a median value. Exceptions can be found and optimizations often take place. These level based power restrictions are tied into the system of equipment. Characters must attain a certain level before equipping items with certain powers. Items have a level, much like characters do, and a level 30 character cannot employ level 50 items. Colours are also employed to indicate the relative rarity of equipment. The greater the rarity of an item, the greater its potency when compared to other items with the same level requirements. Magical items have coloured lettering when the player inspects their game-mechanical values. The most common magical items have green text, uncommon items have blue text, and rare items have purple text. A high level character is not necessarily considered 'good' if their equipment is the 'wrong colours'. Fashion and function combined into furious exclusivity and a strange chromatic bigotry emerges around the virtual-magical

gear adventurers sport. Character mechanics and itemization are conventions of the *World of Warcraft* which serve to form its horizon of experience and much of the talk surrounding the game assumes their intimate comprehension. Talking about character death is no exception.

In conducting these conversations, I was myself in the circumstance, part of the situation with these other actors, subject of language which we shared in understanding. This mirrors my relation to history and tradition, as a player of digital and other role-playing games. I am at once part of the situation, the subject of its interrogation and author of its interpretation after the fact. In order to capture the vital connections between these discrete instances of conversation, for the sake of this project, I now recast the terrain we covered together.

### **Explaining to Your Grandmother How You Were Eaten Alive**

Character death is a prominent feature of the *World of Warcraft*. The commonplace nature of character mortality renders it trivial to understand for players in the tradition of digital games. But this same routine appearance has the effect of concealing the complex of interactions that understanding character death in an MMORPG entails for its players. Playfully (effortless) understanding character death seems to imply that players have always already cultivated a relationship the Virtual as well as to games of this sort, a tradition not always available to non-players. Beyond the demand for a common language that frames all efforts to come to a common conception, dying as a character in the *World of Warcraft* is an electronically mediated possibility. This particular entanglement with digital technology can clearly deter understanding by

those who are not 'online':

Twiggy: I suppose it is, it is very difficult to explain something like [dying in *The World of Warcraft*] out of context to somebody who has no frame of reference with the role-playing genre, fantasy genre, or computer games. But like we could be talking about the same thing in *Mario Brothers*; you die there as well. But obviously, when you're dealing with an MMORPG like this, you have, you tend to have a bit more, a bit more invested in the character... sometimes you build up a bit of a personality with the character, like you'll only use certain things, or you'll say certain things all the time... It's a computer game, so it's all virtual, it's all make-believe, I hope...

(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

But there is a curious double-action at work in playing an RPG. I feel a more thorough account of play is unpacked in reflection on the complex compartment which amounts to 'playing a character'.

To play a digital game often means to incarnate your activities as a certain character. Unlike the eternally unchanged plumbers from Nintendo's *Mario Brothers*, characters in an MMORPG are designed and enacted by their players with a greater fidelity and control. As I mentioned in describing the form of play in an MMORPG above, players in the *World of Warcraft* chose an occupation and species. What's more, players can dress their character in a wide variety of equipment, and select new abilities as they gain levels. This control over personalization takes alongside a progression through game content. Each choice made about a character in this fashion alters other choices of interaction in the game world.

In this playful double action, the players, over time, negotiate the situated appearance of their characters according to a variety of mechanical and non-mechanical decisions. Something more than merely the constraints of the rule-set is here also available to motivate playful compartment. Since characters are visually represented, aesthetic preferences can mitigate against 'mechanically optimal' choices; a player may

strongly dislike the silly hat that grants their character increased power, opting not to wear it rather than 'look out of character'. This situated and individuating possibility is held open throughout most of a character's development. At either end of the time-spectrum of play however, desired personalization must come from some source other than the mechanical choices and limits of the game as such.

Starting characters are type identical with other members of the same race and class when considered in game-mechanical terms. They have nearly no resources, equipment or skills: at first all characters are 'balanced' nearly perfectly with each other in 'power' to affect the game world. Only the choices of name and appearance available during character generation can distinguish between similar starting characters: choices which have no mechanical impact on the game's "actual play"

Throughout the development process, as the character gains experience levels and spends an earned stock of 'talent points' which demarcate their selection of powers. A player's particular 'build' allows for a fixed degree of variation between their character and other members of their class. Power access is limited by level just as equipment access is, and characters can only employ powers from within their class selection at any level. (Mages never learn spells to heal with, and Rogues never learn any spells at all.) Until the characters are taking part in 'end game' content, any two members of a class/race combination may be widely disparate in the particular abilities they use to fulfil their class-role in a party. A simple example can be the choice of fire or ice magic for a Mage character. More than merely cosmetic, the two players have different powers at their disposal to meet the challenge of their role in the game. Moreover, as the character advances, the rewards available for achievements in the game suit some characters better

than others. If a new powerful item given for completing a quest only provides benefits to fire spells, a player with an ice-centric mage character may not even undertake such a task. The value of any game-reward is mediated by choices intrinsic to the mechanical resolution of the game, but is at the same time given a situated worth accorded by players' comportment in the game-world which is more than merely efficacious or mechanical. To understand these sorts of negotiations demands an engagement with MMORPGs like the *World of Warcraft* that goes beyond a exclusively subjective or fully operational understanding of game play decisions.

Both maximum level characters and beginning characters find their 'personality' in the comportment of their players, as it is nearly absent in all other regards, due to the mechanical limits imposed upon their play-efficacy-choices. The freedom to 'make-believe' is given over to a serious need to make 'challenges and rewards equal' at both the lowest and highest levels of game-involvement. Only outside the game's enforced metrical actions; while 'not playing' can the player through their character devise and sustain a personality.

The curious double-activity of players and their characters in the comportment of the *World of Warcraft* is on my account at the root of understanding the critical possibility which its playfulness sustains. Not only the mechanical necessity and submission to purposes contained within the game itself, but also the conditioned social activity of its players outside the metrics of game performance condition the understanding of what it means to do anything as a character in such a game. A social situation composed of negotiated positions within a tradition, held forth in language occurs at the self-same time as the playful activity of game conduct mediates purposive actions in common. Players



breathe life into their characters by giving them style. Death is only one of many features of an MMORPG which elicits this double-activity in situation, but one which I take to be particularly fruitful in illuminating the tension at work in understanding play as a possibility of critical consciousness.

**A Mechanical Impression of the Inevitable: Death as Time and Taxes.**

After setting the tone, and talking briefly with each participant about their World of Warcraft biography, I began the search for an understanding of character death in an MMORPG with a direct enquiry. “What’s the first thing you think of when someone mentions Death in the World of Warcraft?” This was one of the few questions which everyone was asked. No one had trouble responding. Most responses fell along two major lines—Time and Money. It was entirely natural to talk about character death in immediate terms, and to think nothing of beginning a conversation about their character by speaking about its demise. After all, in the *World of Warcraft*, everyone’s character has died.

One Warrior’s immediate impression of death is a loss of game currency, a bill he’ll have to pay later:

Mac: Um, repair bill...Well basically in the game whenever you die, the durability value of the equipment that your character was wearing would be reduced by a percentage. And therefore the cost to repair said equipment at a later date would increased based on the, on the durability damage that was done.  
(Feb 5, 2008 Interview)

A Druid actually laughed at the idea of death, since all that happens is harm to their virtual property.

Twiggy: Uh, equipment durability loss (chuckles). Cause that’s pretty much the only negative drawback.

(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

Another Warrior, who died in conflict with other players as well as against the computer governed environment saw death as having two kinds of cost, both repairs and time. But still, their death experience was nothing more than an annoyance or a forced delay to reflect upon failure...

Liane: Um... Dying? I think of gear repairs. Mainly...I mean my experience will work out as kind of two parts... death in terms of when I think of death in PvE situations, it's like gear repairs and you know what did we do wrong on that boss?... But in the PvP stuff, which is mainly what I do, death represents more of either an annoyance, because you get re-spawned back within twenty seconds, at a graveyard, without any gear repairs, so it's essentially just a turnover, but it's also a strategic thing.

(Mar 12, 2008 Interview)

The cost in time, spent recovering from death, occupied many other respondents as well:

Eh!Steve: How long it takes to run back from the graveyard. (Laughs)  
(Jun 25, 2008 Interview)

J-lock: The nuisance of having to run back to your body from the graveyard.  
(Jul 7, 2008 Interview)

Dun: Uh, usually the time it takes to run back to your corpse. So death is usually an indication of wasted time in the game. I mean it's the only time when you are really "just running through the game" back to your corpse.  
(Jan 15, 2008 Interview)

Rufflag: Running back to my body.  
(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

Some remembered specific fatal places in the World of Warcraft or animations:

Lohkee: (Laughs) Gnomeregan! (Laughs)  
(Feb 5, 2008 Interview)

K-rock: Death, My toon dropping. I mean, yeah, when my toon gets smoked...you get pounded on my some creature or other player, and little dude lets out a yelp and he drops on the ground.  
(Jul 23, 2008 Interview)

While one veteran MMORPG player couldn't help but first compare dying in Warcraft to

character death in other online games:

Val: Um, I find, I've always found it too easy actually, it's not much of an inconvenience really, compared to corpse runs in other games. I think they're taking it pretty easy on us, but when you're in a raid, it's a pain in the ass.  
(Mar 13, 2008 Interview)

There is one unspoken agreement in all these first responses, which lends to them their uncanny nonchalance in the face of character death. In the World of Warcraft, mechanically, death is only a temporary condition. The rules of the game demand virtual resurrection, a “magic” by which characters in the World of Warcraft have more lives than any cat. By the time a character has achieved even a middling experience level, they have died and been reborn a positively staggering number of times. Death's preponderance as a mechanic divests it of its usual gravity; dying is so mundanely present in role playing games, so inevitable in an MMORPG, that it no longer matters. Death's very obligatory nature in the game-system makes mockery of its systemic application.

K-rock: Death is not permanent at all. You die, you start up at a graveyard, and you run towards your body, and the map even shows you where you're at. It's not even like you're confused as to where you were, you just follow an arrow. And then, right about when you're like, I dunno, about 100 metres, 'game metres' close to your body it offers you the option of resurrection and you come back to life.  
(Jul 23, 2008 Interview)

Death is a system-effect within the tradition of role-playing games, and players accept that traditional artifact in a particular form. The expectation for nearly unlimited re-incarnation precedes the *World of Warcraft*. Mortality of some sort is expected as a systemic necessity in digital games, from the first arcade machines to the present day, and forms part of an inherited tradition of understanding what it means to 'play a character', even if that character is Pac-Man. World of Warcraft characters are more vibrant, more durable than those early arcade icons. They persist in a space which

constantly holds open the opportunity of social play, but one which is still clearly bounded by game rules and traditions:

Liane: I am coming from a long history of playing lots of video games, so death's a common thing in my experience with games. It's expected that if I die that I don't have to restart, or it's not a terminal ending point... it's just like any other game, death is just one of the game mechanics that you work through.  
(Mar 12, 2008 Interview)

In video and role-playing games, your character dying is a problem to be overcome, not a terminal or end point of the adventure. Since diverse games have varied mechanical resolutions for the same express occurrence, it is commonplace to use other similar games to frame a particular play experience. Another respondent echoed the sentiment that the *World of Warcraft* treats 'dead characters' gently by comparison to other games of the same sort:

Twiggy: [Other games treated death] Perhaps a bit more seriously, there were a bit more negative connotations involved into it. In previous games such as Everquest and all that, there was an experience penalty, and you also had to fight your way back to your body to get your equipment... naked. So it was depending on where you were it was very difficult... you'd have to get people to drag your body back to you... whereas in Warcraft you're like 'ghost-form' so you just run up to your stuff and you have it on.  
(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

My immediate mechanical gloss then, is twofold. First, that all characters in an MMORPG are expected to die and be reborn multiple times. Secondly, that when a character in the *World of Warcraft* dies, the perished character's disembodied spirit appears at a designated in game location, and from there can pursue a variety of options to return to life. Most commonly, running in this 'ghost form', unable to fully perceive or interact with the game world through which you must travel, the distance back to the place of your death. Players expect their characters to die and return to life; nonetheless it is a frustration. In the *World of Warcraft* the penalty for your character dying is

minimal, best seen on this account as a mechanical expense charged for not succeeding at the game, as 'another quarter spent in the virtual arcade'. Some players feel this cost in time more keenly than in the charges associated with damage done to their vital-virtual equipment, and deducted in game-world currency from their stockpiles of gathered treasure. And while the character is divorced from meaningful mechanical impact while 'dead' the player can continue unabated in situated social comportment; player chat functions are not impaired by character death.

After all, the distilled purposes of most digital role-playing games are – to defeat monsters in mortal conflict and take home their valuables and to become rich and heroic through exploits on the field of battle and exploring perilous dungeons. Even if character death is only temporary, it is an expense and an impediment to further adventure. Avoiding death is one reason for the players of the *World of Warcraft* and other similar games to gather their characters together into groups known as “adventuring parties”. The role which each character class occupies in the game relates to the dangers of death and conflict, and the ease of their resolution. While all characters perish and return to action in mechanically similar ways, players struggle to preserve their characters lives and the life of their camaraderie in diverse and creative synergy. A character's class and level help determine their expected contribution to the mechanics of an adventuring party. Playing your character-role in “the party” is playing your role with respect to death, and is a central feature of the experience of the *World of Warcraft*. The dynamic effect that groups of players can have on the non-mechanical features of death are for me another example of the double-action of playful comportment in the *World of Warcraft*.

### **Dying Together: A Social Dynamic of Adventuring Parties**

It can be a serious business, working with other adventurers to avoid death and defeat evil for a tidy profit. The in-game accolades of the *World of Warcraft* accrue in direct relation to the difficulty of the fictitious task you are willing to undertake. And once the stakes reach a certain level, it's practically impossible to make the minimum bets alone. The mechanical difficulty of certain content demands co-operation to exploit mechanical synergies intended by the game designers. Together, parties are supposed to make adventuring easier for all involved. In practice, joining forces with other players changes the mode of being of the game, amplifying the non-mechanical features which inhere in its play. Creative mechanical synergies are possible, but the consequences of your virtual mortality are now shared in a social setting:

Lohkee: Well, dying alone is...it's usually quiet. It's silent. When you die in a group...it's usually a bit more 'edgy'...there's a pressure behind it. Often people blame each other if something goes really terrible and you it's this and that and so yeah... Dying in a group sucks.  
(Feb 5, 2008 Interview)

Beyond its purely mechanical resolution, character death in a party circumstance illuminates a tension. Mechanical facts about character death are joined to an expectation of player conduct; of the 'seriousness of play' emerging at the appropriate times. Accepting catastrophe within each possible mutual adventure is part of the cultivation of understanding. Catastrophe is a tradition which players in the *World of Warcraft* must undertake in their playful comportment. The dynamic of mechanical and social circumstances at play in an adventuring party, is conditioned by the rules of the game, but not exhausted by any set or subset of such rules. What's more, the circumscription of player action by the game-system undermines any recourse to 'good intentions' behind

unsuccessful comportment. Neither wholly within the players' control, nor wholly apart from the character's purposive action, a character's death in the company of other players always offers an insight into the tense, mobile, mode of being of play.

As I have mentioned, each class in the *World of Warcraft* has a particular relationship to the mechanics of death, and the possible combination of classes allows players to overcome obstacles which they cannot face alone. Some characters are extremely tough (Warriors, Paladins, Bear Druids; all 'tanks'). Other characters are able to inflict large amounts of damage to monsters (Rogues, Fire Mages, and Hunters; 'Damage Per Second' classes). Other classes are devoted to healing their allies (Priest, Druid, Shaman), or confounding the opposition in ways that help their team-mates isolate dangerous monsters (Warlock, Ice Mage, Hunters with Crowd Control 'Builds'). Players seeking to form a party communicate through the chat interface integrated into the game. This chat functionality has channels devoted to general conversation, trading character equipment, and *looking for group* (LFG); a channel intended to help players find characters of the classes their adventuring party is lacking. At the most basic level, parties are cobbled together from other nearby characters, or players petitioning in the LFG channel; these are called 'pick-up' groups or PuGs. Informal gatherings of strangers, PuGs are unpredictable social circumstances; even if the collected characters appear able to fulfil their mechanical roles. A PuGs responses' to character death vary wildly:

Lohkee: Pick-up groups, pick-up groups you can have any type of reaction. I mean you have no idea who you're going to be grouped with... you get people who throw obnoxious temper tantrums... then you've got the people who are like "let's give it another try!" Those are the fun groups, more along the lines of what would happen to the guild.

(Feb 5, 2008 Interview)

While many players find the unpredictable social and mechanical temper of Pickup

Groups to be unsuitable to their tastes in play, others find that joining parties with strangers gives them a valuable opportunity to make friends and allies in the virtual world. Discovering other players by risking virtual catastrophe together as characters is an essential seduction of play in the World of Warcraft and other MMORPGs.

Eh!Steve: I like doing pick up groups, because it's a good way to meet people who have different competencies and are useful to the guild. And also because you get a good mix between people who are really hardcore and always want to do something, and just don't have the right people in their guild at the right time to go and play... It's a good way to meet them and see what they are doing.  
(Jun 25, 2008 Interview)

Three major roles are spread throughout the various class choices: Tanking, Healing and Damage Dealing. Each of these roles directly relates a character to death in a way productive for party synergy. Characters designated as Tanks are able to go toe to toe with the toughest monsters in the game world, employing abilities and equipment that reduce the damage they take. Their primary role is to hold the attention of monsters, so that the majority of attacks against the party of adventurers are directed against them. Tanks are tough and 'sticky', but they do not have the ability to heal themselves or inflict massive damage at the same time as they hold the attention of many monsters. For this they rely on the Healers and the Damage Dealers in the party.

Twiggy: If you're the main tank, if you die, pretty much means everybody else dying. Mind you, there's not a whole lot you can do about it; at that point it's up to the healers....  
(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

Eh!Steve: The role of the warrior [tank]... is to essentially keep the other people in your group from dying. The ironic thing is that to do that you need the back up of the other people... while a warrior [tank] can mitigate a lot of the damage that is being done to them due to their armour and themselves in terms of their health, if they don't have someone to actually back them up and heal them, then they're going to be dead quicker than anyone else. And so it's difficult, because you're fully dependant on someone else to keep you alive, when your job is to make sure that everyone else stays alive...



(Jun 25, 2008 Interview)

Both Healers and Damage dealers are intuitive role descriptions. The former focus on restoring the virtual vitality of their allies (their Hit Points), while the latter aim to reduce the enemies hit points to zero as fast as possible. Anyone who isn't a Tank, is to a greater or lesser degree "a squishy": this is reflected both in their smaller Hit Point total, lower defensive statistics, and the visual reminder that while tanks are dressed in full medieval plate armour, healers and DPS characters go into battle against evil wearing dresses.

K-rock: Because they term us "squishies" right? Well, my class is a Mage, and on top of that I'm a Gnome. So people like to pick on gnomes because we're small. They like to pick on mage-squishy character because we don't have much armour, and are easy to kill... well, if you get close to us.

(Jul 23, 2008 Interview)

Rufflag: There's no reason someone wearing rags should die any faster than someone wearing plate... as long as they're playing intelligently, in the manner their character was created to. I've played a shaman, and a hunter, and they all play completely differently. As long as you adapt to the character that you're playing, there's no reason you can't solo whatever you're deemed worthy to solo by the game designers.

(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

Fulfilling your character's role in the party creates a dynamic mechanical synergy between the three primary relationships to death in the *World of Warcraft*. Exploiting the possible benefits of teamwork still depends on a mutual understanding in action, and this is no different online than off. During an adventure in the *World of Warcraft*, characters are placed into circumstances of the game that demand a mutual comportment in understanding between their players. Even in the midst of an expressly virtual game-comportment, mediated by diverse communication technologies, and smoothed by its transparency as a playful system (relieving the burden of initiative), the negotiation of

understanding is tangled in language games. Even once a player has learned to direct their character with great mechanical efficacy, and knows their 'role' in a party, their mutual adventures with other players can run afoul of unfamiliar linguistic expressions and unexpected social demands:

K-rock : In the game there's these dependency things working with particular classes. A certain class has a certain job, and if you don't do that job, when you're in a particular area with a group... people will turn around and they will start mouthing off... And if you just hooked up with them they'll be like "Yo do your job man!" Warrior: always the tank. Pally, tank-healer, Rogue, the sneaky DPS kinda whatever guy, any squishy class is some kind of healer or area of effect type guy. Even then, as a mage, when I first started running instances there was a lot of "Yo! AoE AoE!" and I had to actually learn the language and I didn't know what it meant at first.

(Jul 23, 2008 Interview)

This strange mix of mechanical and terminological keys to understanding recalls the form of insight that Baudrillard divines as lurking in passwords of all sorts. Even with all the 'tools' available; players must still learn the game-language; find their path in this dynamic negotiation to capitalize on a novel space of co-operation. The language in the LFG channel revolves around acronyms, roles and intended consequences of action; each global chat channel has its own style of communication, and private chat channels can be even more peculiar. Communication within the chat spaces of the game takes on the appearance of arcane algorithms, derived from a negotiated space of past action which led to successful social-mechanical habits within the play of the game. Over and over again, the intended simplicities of play in a digital system are tangled in deployed language. As in any understanding action, time must be spent to achieve the cultivation required for fruitful comportment according to the demands of the situation. Play takes on the form of a possibility, of new understanding and transformed horizons, but does so through a demand in time and practice.

One entangled term used by players refers to the computer guided monsters and enemies in the game world: Mob. The situation of this expression recasts the usually plural term as singular. Many computer controlled foes are Mobs, plural. This confusing term is inherited from the earliest text-based multi-player computer role-playing games, whose syntax referred to non-player-character creatures as Mobile Objects. Whether or not they are aware of the term's origin, players in the *World of Warcraft* must soon learn that the proper word for any single foe is Mob and a group of foes are collectively called Mobs. In time this distinction becomes natural, and it is reflected in my conversations about the dynamic situation of party play, where Mobs are the focus of attention for most game-activities.

Tanks invite the attention of evil Mobs in battle, willingly 'absorbing' punishment and protecting their 'softer' allies. Their single-minded focus is bent on retaining the attention of the hostile Mobs. Meanwhile, the party depends on their healer-characters to carefully monitor the health and status of their party members. A healer can be successful while ignoring the condition of the Mobs entirely:

Dun: People generally wanted to play a DPS class, they liked killing things. Seeing those big numbers pop up... "Ahh, I'm doing a lot!" "You know I killed that in one shot!" But my character was not that at all. I barely touched mobs, usually I was hanging around in the back, watching the scenery... if later on, people asked me how a battle went, I had almost no clue... People weren't dying, so I guess it went well. (Laughs)  
(Jan 15, 2008 Interview)

Damage Dealers, aim to maximize the hit-point damage they inflict in violent engagement with opposing forces; their classes are based on "Damage per second" or DPS. While DPS characters are able to produce catastrophic amounts of damage in a very short period of time, doing so would invariably attract the attention of any Mobs not

currently under the complete control of the Tank. In a party, DPS characters must moderate their damage output, so the attention of the opposition remains focused on the much tougher tank character. Attention from the forces of evil, or “Aggro” is another one of the passwords to better understanding in the *World of Warcraft*. It's all about “managing your Aggro.” A player explains why he played a tank-character:

Rufflag: I wanted to be something that is 'harder to do.' Mages can cast fireballs over and over again, and just as long as they're casting their highest level spell, they're going to out-damage lots of other classes, without having to worry about all that much. But the tank has to control all the mobs around him, and make sure that even if other people are doing something stupid with their aggro tables, then you can step in and screw them... well not screw them, but stop their actions right there with the Blessing of Protection, then you can't do anything... so your aggro table is going to go down.

BC: So you'd say tanking is management of other people's idiotic aggroing?

Rufflag: Warcraft is a management of other people's idiocy... you know the people you can trust just like in real life, and then you meet people who live up to their expectations/your expectations, or fail to meet requirements of advancing in the game.

(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

Since they are neither exclusively tanking, nor healing, DPS characters are often required to split their attention between the party and its opposition. If a monster eludes the tank's efforts to corral it, it is often the DPS characters that must react in order to control the resulting aggro towards themselves or the healer. Even considered only in the terms of their attention in virtual combat, character class choices impact their player's play-style and its demands. Both tanks and healers are best served by singular focus, while other party members are most effective with a dynamic focus adapted to changing necessities of battle. Failing to adapt your character's performance to a group situation can lead to a breakdown of the party's needed dynamic synergies. Most often this failure leads to an inability of the party as a whole to manage their Aggro, and as a result the

violent attentions of opposing Mobs are let loose from the control of the tank, and subsequently the virtual death of one or more party members.

Successful team-play in the virtual world depends on elements which underpin all co-operation. Time, comportment, and the situation; grounded in a cultivation of understanding. When *World of Warcraft* adventuring parties fail, the results are mechanically severe and often the characters playing together often die. Sometimes, in the course of a single evening, the entire party will be slain, or 'wiped' many times over. In at least one in-game location, parties are expected to die so often, that a quest is available only to those characters passing through the area in ghost form, on their way to recover their corpse.

Dying with other people is a social convention unavailable to the actual world. But it is one of the many forms of gathering that takes place in the *World of Warcraft*. Character death as a possibility of mutual play is both novel and situated. The game system holds forth a situation, which seems at first glance impossible: Dying together while at play. But within the game-system itself, this possibility is a commonplace feature of play; it becomes a sensible, known quality of comportment. But each instance of this discrete mechanical challenge can rupture systematic expectations; it takes its form not only from within the game, but from the social situation which playing-together always returns us to. Understanding the double-action of being a player who deploys a character is on my view a distinct possibility held forth for reflection by the mechanical occasion of character death. I feel that my conversations reveal this situation as expressly possible only within the virtual system, but invested with meaning from the social tradition of the actual world. Thoughtfully talking about the death of characters in

the *World of Warcraft* can address the challenge of games and their theory as deterrence by the employment of hermeneutic reason.

It's easy to get along when everyone's character survives, and the opposition yields precious loots and gold; but once adventurers start dying, it soon becomes clear: There are some people who you can enjoy dying with. Any co-operation based on mutual risk and role-fulfilment benefits from predictability. In a game like the *World of Warcraft*, play is not bounded by discrete conditions for winning or losing. The possibility of playful comportment is held open in a fashion which turns the challenge of catastrophe back upon itself: The players must make and meet the demands to which their characters actions attain viable in a situated fashion. Finding the right company for such situated action is the responsibility of the players themselves; the game mediates mechanical but not social dynamics which result from extended play circumstances. The demands of players on their characters performance in the game, or the playful attitudes that sustain social cohesion beyond mechanical interaction, cannot always be attained from unfamiliar groups. In a game with millions of subscribers, it is left up to the players themselves to seek out like-minded fellow adventurers, whose company remains enjoyable even in catastrophic virtual circumstances. Those people are your Guild mates.

#### **A Common Standard: Guilds and Raid Organizations Face Death Together**

The scope of an MMORPG, as well as its perpetual availability, lead to larger organizations of players than simple adventuring parties can offer. In the *World of Warcraft*, these larger communities in the persistent world are called Guilds. A character can join and leave many parties in the course of a single play session, but Guild

membership is usually more substantial in duration. Formed by 10 or more players, Guilds are the social organization behind adventuring, just as parties are its situated active pursuit. Guilds are for my interpretation best understood as a situated social location of the double-action of play that surpasses mechanical resolution. Guilds are a location where the horizon of each occasion is revealed. This negotiation of understanding takes place over time and through expression in public language. It reveals the same game operation, like a character's death, as containing diverse interpretations, and the simplicity of the mechanical system is again entangled in a situation of living-with-one-another.

Guilds first and foremost allow groups of friends to communicate and organize themselves. There is often a sense of community amongst guild members, particularly if the guild is small and personal in its organization. Many of my respondents spoke fondly of their guilds as understanding and like minded groups of people.

Mac: Everyone's here more to have fun, there's a social aspect to it when you're in guild. You have a lot more fun. It's less about the game but more about the interactions between the people...

(Jan 28, 2008 Interview)

Knowing who you are adventuring with, or who is available to help you at a moment's notice, allows players to cultivate expectations of their guild members and the way their organization as a whole approaches the expanse of virtual opportunity presented by the

*World of Warcraft:*

Lohkee: The guild would definitely not be serious, but I dunno, not casual either. Kind of a... they were serious about playing and gaming, but weren't a very serious bunch of people about playing the game.

(Feb 5, 2008 Interview)

Playing well together as a guild means a mutual respect for the goals of enjoyment and

the limitations which actual lives place on Virtual endeavours:

Eh!Steve: I mention to people that I am a causal gamer, and that I do have responsibilities. It's the summer and I'm a farmer and something, and it's a good day, I'll say I can't run or do because I have wheat to harvest or I have things I need to do... The good thing about guilds and our consistent gaming-raiding group or whatever, is that they understand that, and they say "Okay, that's fine, that's fine we need a pickup" or "Maybe we won't run today but you know, we recognize why."

(Jun 25, 2008 Interview)

Parties can often live or die on the back of a single adventure, but guilds endure. Guild organizations entitle players to mutual chat channels, and allow players to house an entire 'stable' of characters under 'one roof'. The combined resources of a guild can allow players to tackle obstacles and progress in the game reliably, and do so 'among friends'. Guild members can quickly contact one another and fill roles in parties with less hassle and more reliability than in the looking for group channel. Players active in the game world can even see the names and guild affiliations of any character in their area as 'tags' displayed overhead allowing for easy visual recognition.

Since they play together on a regular basis, characters in any guild are certain to have experienced character death as a collective. The ready availability of alternative characters played by familiar players also reveals the inherent style which players bring to character comportment in game-play. These temporary setbacks and diverse casts of characters do not usually pose any threat to disrupt the larger organization of the guild, but inevitably Virtual collectives find themselves under social strain just as their actual counterparts do. These tensions emerge just as dynamically in the Virtual as in everyday life. In many cases the politics which emerge in a guild reflect the disparate conditions which can be supported by players in diverse invested situations. The smoothness of the Virtual allows otherwise unlikely characters to become allies, but it is no panacea to the



vagaries of situated co-operation amongst the players themselves. Time spent in co-operative activity with other people leads to ground for both understanding and misunderstanding, even when that activity is a playful-virtual adventure.

Twiggy: I play with a fairly mature bunch of people. We're mostly in our, past our thirties...The major problem, we have socially, is in guild and group dynamics, larger groups being guilds, is the whole 'drama' factor, quote unquote. People not getting along with other people, people making disparaging remarks about other people for trivial things..."Oh you don't know how to play your class blah blah blah..." which all get blown out of proportion...  
(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

The expectations of each guild are different, but the goal is to facilitate enjoyable play at the level of 'intensity' or 'seriousness' appropriate for its membership. To tackle the most difficult 'end game' challenges in the *World of Warcraft*, parties of more than 5 players are necessary. These larger adventuring groups are called "raids", and without membership in a guild, players are unlikely to take part in them. Not all players nor all guilds will aim to take part in end-game raiding. Those that do demand an increased level of 'seriousness' and greater time commitment; but even these complex dynamics are subject to prejudice and game-specific tradition. At the time of our conversation, one player was watching their guild split into two parts, across two servers, in response to just such a demand for seriousness in play:

Liane: My guild is transferring to a PvE server, the guild is factioned (sic) in half; half of them want it to be more casual and more family oriented, just playing the game for the sake of the game. Whereas [other members] felt that "well you know if I'm going to be putting my money into this game I want to be hitting top-end, seeing top-end stuff, I want to see end game." The serious gamers chose to move to a more populated raid-heavy server, and the people who wanted to be casual to remain on this role-playing server...  
(Mar 12, 2008 Interview)

A more casual player had never gotten up the nerve to be involved in a guild, seeing them as a form of commitment to the game beyond his level at that time.

J-lock: I guess there's an air of seriousness or something involved with guilds. I mean the impression I get is that certain guilds form in order to be the best at what they do. And then regular groups you've gotta expect that it's just a bunch of random people who you can't rely on or whatever. So yeah, the impression I get is that guilds are serious things, and should be treated as such.

(Jul 7, 2008 Interview)

At least one of the other interviewees confirmed his intuition that some guilds are very serious business indeed. The levity of virtual-immortality can be evacuated by the gravity of a raiding organization with goals measured other than by the enjoyment of play:

BC: How would you describe your guild's reaction to in-game character death?

Val: Well right now the guild I'm in, the old guild we'd laugh about it... We'd have contest for the most spectacular wipes and stuff. But this guild they're not very... they're not so nice... They're very unforgiving and they actually keep track... if you have recurring patterns of either causing death or being just stupid and dying, dying is stupid... Yeah, definitely you'll be downgraded to casual and not invited to raids.

BC: Alright, would you argue that this approach is different in pick-up groups as opposed to guild groups then?

Val: Oh, definitely. I think that in pickup groups people have a lot less patience for dying.

(Mar 13, 2008 Interview)

Even in the midst of reflection on now being observed and graded by her guild as to her performance, this druid remained convinced that Pick Up Groups would be fundamentally less patient with her. The strength of such a perception testifies in part to the preference for familiar features of the horizon, and a mutuality of ends. Since the guild is devoted to more 'serious' gaming, more returns can also be expected for an increased concern about character death and its impact on the social organization of raiding.

The qualities which lend themselves to a good guild – understanding, co-

operation and prioritizing mutual enjoyment – also suffuse raiding alliances and other forms of long-term interaction which take place outside the specific rubric of the guild-interface. Playing-well together partakes of seriousness and lightness in turns, and understands itself in the enjoyment it brings, not according to a particular fixed set of in-game metrics or external evaluations. By according a set of mutually agreed upon rules of conduct a value in the continued enjoyment of game-play, guilds extend a traditional play dynamic into the virtual. Just as players in amateur sports leagues or actors in a community theatre troop develop longstanding social accords, so to can the players of MMORPGs feel collective weal and woe. Over the years of play-time available to characters in the World of Warcraft, many players develop strong social bonds with one another. The durability of such bonds attests to the significance which can be derived by playfully occupying the role-status available in the virtual world. People in distant physical spaces can become close friends by mutual endeavour in play.

Lohkee: You develop online relationships at this point. Some people disagree, and I happen to think, there's some validity to it, that like you know these people and you've don't necessarily, you've never met them in the, in the flesh, you've never seen [them] or looked into their eyes, and whatnot. But you know these people as far as interacting in the game...So you're spending a lot of time with these people is my point. And you're interacting virtually with them, but you know through text you're still communicating. So when you do something with someone you know and they're involved there are a lot of memorable deaths.  
(Feb 5, 2008 Interview)

Emerging from a compartment that is situated and co-operative, these bonds are configured haphazardly with respect to the virtual system, even in pursuing goals expressly possible only within such a confluence of effects. The friendship and trust developed between players depends on mutual endeavour, and the bonds built on enjoyment help establish a mutual understanding. An understanding develops while

'adventuring together' which can remain consciously ignorant of the everyday world and its system-effects which govern offline social interaction. Disparities in age, gender, location, and even spoken language which would prevent any meaningful intercourse in the everyday world, can be transcended in the positive affect of successful adventuring in the virtual. It is outside the power of the Virtual system to pre-figure these social bonds, which gird the continuity of seduction to the virtual alternative presented in the World of Warcraft. Again the dual action of playfulness appears, both within and around the game itself. Players of games like the World of Warcraft have an opportunity to re-imagine the horizon of their everyday social gathering, by dint of its congruent emergence amidst the tense tradition of playing together. This possibility is open to reflection and demands an investment in time; via cultivation of a relationship to the game-play in the World of Warcraft and the situated circumstances of its pursuit with other players.

### **Re-situating Death, Grief and Murder in Play.**

Dying as a character in the World of Warcraft must on my account be understood both through the in-game comportment of its players and their situated social relations which are 'external' to the game-play itself, even if such situations are often mediated by the integrated chat features of the game. Giving the possibility of diverse interpretations for a unified mechanical occurrence, character death allows for the style with which players approach the game to become more clearly personalized. Some players, particularly enjoy being able to abandon the seriousness that character death inherits from real world analogues.

J-lock: I'm already reckless... I don't really care about death... I almost get a sense of joy from dying; at least after realizing "Well, okay death is pretty trivial, and you

know I'm going to level... at what point does this end...?" There's kind of an interminability (sic), you know the game never really ends... There's very little value when you know you can go and try a quest and you can die ten times... I think I do acknowledge to a large extent the triviality of death and I play with that. (Jul 7, 2008 Interview)

Both over-confidence and depraved indifference can blossom in the light of a perpetually renewable character. Some players embrace the challenge of re-configuring the role of death in their character comportment by choosing a mechanical role for themselves within a party; still more laugh in the face of 'treating seriously' anything to do with character death. A sense of invulnerability to harm can have both positive and negative consequences for the social situation of playful comportment that typifies an MMORPG like the *World of Warcraft*.

Causing discomfort for your own enjoyment has a strong tradition in real-world play. Whether a schoolyard game of keep-away, or the schadenfreude glee of watching someone you know harmlessly embarrass themselves, I feel everyone is familiar with someone whose pleasure is derived from the pain of those nearby. MMORPGS like the *World of Warcraft* take the possibility of this torment to a new Virtual level. In a game of unlimited re-incarnation, which allows player versus player combat (PvP), it is only a matter of time before a strong character somewhere decides to pick on weaker characters for their own amusement. This is often called Grief Killing or Griefing.

Liane: On a PvE [Player vs Environment]server grief killing is not something you'd ever encounter on your own. Grief killing is when members of the opposite faction see you in a contested zone and kill you for no reason. And normally this is followed up by something called 'camping' where you sit next to their body and wait for the person to come back to life and kill them again, and again, and again, and again, until they log off. Or they get help or whatever.

Most people think it's, very what's the term... malicious. That you're doing it just for the fun of killing something, and I suppose that is some element of it. But there's more of a functional purpose to it too. You kill them, especially if you kill

people from very specific guilds, knowing that they're a big guild on the server and that they're going to call for help so you can get some kind of action happening. Cause it's the point of a PvP server; you want to see big groups of people fighting big groups of people, not just like three level 60s beating up on one level twenty. It's fun for the first 5 seconds; the Fun thing is that you wait for them to log off and get onto their level 60 alt; and you wait for them to call their level 60 buddies and they come rolling in with ten people...

(Mar 12, 2008 Interview)

This more particular case of character death on my account helps considerably in understanding the double-action of play in the *World of Warcraft*. Again a single operational condition; the death of a character, is given a breadth of interpretation based on traditions of play and expectations of playful comportment in the social setting of the *World of Warcraft*. For the PvP player, Griefing is more than mere cruelty as pleasure. It is an incitement intended to bring about more enjoyable and wider scale inter-player conflict. These results are not always forthcoming, and the actual player response to a character being killed by another player remains concealed from the character committing Virtual homicide. This immediate occlusion occurs by dint of the game-system's regulations: Characters may only fight characters from 'the other faction'; with whom they are not allowed to chat in communicable fashion through the game interface. This, combined with the rarity of grief-killing on non PVP servers, leads to the misunderstanding of its intent, at least when used for incitement of more dynamic battle:

Twiggy: Yeah, but if you don't have that option [of calling for help], and there's a deficit between the [two factions] and there is very little communication besides some basic emotes; so you couldn't SAY "Come on, bring me something bigger that would be a challenge..." he's just basically being an asshat. Or if the odd time, you happen to pwn a noob... you know, he ONLY has a level 23 and it's his biggest guy... And he keeps getting killed by this big guy... that's a pretty negative impact there.

(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

Even in a situation where a character can be reborn an unlimited number of times,

being senselessly killed over and over again is a serious frustration to someone seeking levity and entertainment in their game-play. The 'good intentions' of a PvP player bent on incitement are not immediately available to the horizon of interpretation which their 'victims' can bring to bear on the situation. More than player frustration at the mechanics of the game, a sense of violation of the 'ease -of-being-at-play' is here thrust upon the non PvP player. By virtue of another player's rules-permissible comportment in the game-world, their expectation of play is disrupted. Neither the game nor its mechanical arbitration, but the players who enjoin it are here blamed for the rupture of smooth playing-together. The choice to play any MMORPG thrusts a player into a relationship with acts of virtual violence at the hands of the game and other players. The novel comportment of playing a character that 'dies' can hold open the possibility of critical understanding, but is often obscured by its immediacy as a rupture in play, and overshadowed in mediation by operational attributes of the game.

The curious entangled action of incitement intended by "griefers" in the World of Warcraft is for me illustrative of how to best understand my view of Baudrillard's curious role in social theory: his work is aimed to incite further wide-spread theoretical conflict but is often misunderstood as a termination not an incitement. Deploying the same rules and operating within the same scope as other more traditional theorists, Baudrillard intentionally violates social conventions and inherited conceptions. Turning over pre-conceptions and illuminating prejudices in the public language of its demanded interpretation my reading of Baudrillard's work takes part in violence on the level of understanding. This is for me Theoretical Griefing, a form of incitement like Grief Killing. Like any incitement, it can elicit a wide breadth of responses from those whose

'ease of being-at-play in theory' is thereby ruptured. Just as a player in the World of Warcraft finds themselves frustrated at being foiled by the actions of another player, so to social research is often frustrated by challenging positions in theory which re-deploy the 'rules of the game' in a new tactical light. My solution to this violence has been to deploy Gadamer's hermeneutic, hoping in this way to come to a more reflective position on the situation of social theory; one unafraid of catastrophe.

Just as there are players for whom the heroic possibility of a character's struggle against overwhelming odds is an inspiration and a pleasure, there are 'darker' joys to be derived from the habitation of a world without real death. More than simply a world of constant resurrection, the *World of Warcraft* is also peopled out with characters bent on combat, chaos and virtual murder. One Mage talks of the impact that PvP combat has had on his perception of the game-world as a violent place:

K-rock: Because I've gone up against some of these guys, now and I know what to look for, who to run from, you know... that kind of thing... It's like, it's like what do you call it it's, not tigers and deer, you know what I mean, it's like wildlife...

BC: There is an environment in which there are predators and prey?

K-rock: Yeah, and I'm prey! And I very seldom get to be the predator... But I think another interesting thing isn't necessarily dying, but killing. Yeah, because people love to go killing... I talk to people all the time about playing these online games, especially like rogues and shit like that, who get it down to a science of how to kill somebody. And like, there's no break, I mean, look on one end it's a video game, but you're killing a virtual manifestation of somebody that they've created, put themselves into, and that they might even act as a person through, and you kill this thing, and in essence you're a murderer... You run around and you murder people...

BC: And you take their stuff if you're lucky...

K-rock: Exactly, you take their stuff if you're lucky... And I know that as a human being there is a disconnect between the actual act and the virtual act, 100%. Otherwise, we'd have mass slaughters going on outside, people dressing up as weird characters and trying to do funky weird shit or whatever...



BC: Hoping that you'll drop some gold if they stab you with a sword...

K-rock: Yeah, yeah, or figuring out the science of how to kill somebody, you know in real life... I mean there's psychopaths and sociopaths out there, but it's not like it's occurring on a wide scale... there's still a disconnection and people still realize what it is... But I think on another level, there's I dunno, what kind of level it would be, kind of, I dunno... we've murdered murder. And that's a whole new vernacular in itself... a whole new way of understanding it... contemplating it within your mind...

(Jul 23, 2008 Interview)

New conditions surround this Virtual incarnation of violence. Not terminal or criminal, this 'murder of murder' directly echoes Baudrillard's description of transformed conditions of understanding. Within these new conditions, Gadamer shows that time allows situations to cultivate new language and terms which suit their style of pursuit. The mode of being of language and the mode of being of play are constantly re-vitalized by social agents acting in concert. Even in the expressly fantastic and playful realm of the *World of Warcraft*, these modes of being emerge in a tense tradition with the preconceptions of language and the ordinary offline world. Much of the 'novel' in these situations is stolen from or adapted out of everyday life or related experiences. The system of rewards and effects which the *World of Warcraft* inherits from other games still remains visible to the players, who in suspension of belief, engage in virtual acts for which they do not intend any actual analog. Just as being 'freed to murder freely' can elicit a transformation of understanding on the part of the players of a game like the *World of Warcraft*, so can selectively sacrificing one's Virtual self for the benefit of another character. This is true particularly if that self-sacrifice circumvents restrictions or expectations that the game itself is imposing on the play of individuals.

Lohkee: A druid that I levelled my rogue with; we would often, because we can both stealth and sneak into areas that we definitely wouldn't have been able to live

through or survive through. We could sneak into them so we'd go into these places together, and there would be some sort of goal that a group of people was meant to do. But the two of us would go in and you know she would say "Okay, you go and hit that, and while you're getting killed, I'm gonna complete the goal that I'm here to complete, and then we'll die and we'll run back in and we'll do it again."  
(Feb 5, 2008 Interview)

Being able to go where they are 'not intended to' without other players, by means of their dying-for-one-another, two players formed a close bond which endured for many further escapades together in the game. The mutual understanding which they developed in a playful approach to their characters effective use of death is for me an example of the way in which game comportment can be seen as a social situation. Together, these characters played with the operational features of death in order to enjoy the game itself in a novel fashion unavailable to more 'serious' approaches to dying.

Players active in the end-game of raiding often have a different expectation regarding the seriousness of character death. Once you are organized enough to bring 25 to 40 players together, the time lost to recover from an un-necessary wipe is greatly increased, and the tolerance for such wasted time is slight. When things do go wrong for a raid-level group, the consequences are often spectacular, and usually 'wipe' the entire group at once. Minimizing wipes, and taking the unavoidable failures in stride is cultivated commitment asked of consistent raid members. Saving one's character at the expense of everyone else in the raid is particularly bad form, and a prime example of taking character death 'too seriously' when involved in a dynamic social situation with other players:

Liane: And I remember one guy in this one raid we did, we were about to wipe, and he decided to 'bubble-hearth' [use a power to escape to town unharmed] which more or less got him kicked out of the guild.

BC: And sealed his non-participation?

Liane: Yeah, because he was an asshat to begin with, and his willingness to do that...and Not take the death like everybody else, more or less meant that he wasn't a team player...

(Mar 12, 2008 Interview)

Raid organizations are understandably less flexible about individual approaches to character death. Raids are only necessary to complete the most difficult of the in-game content, and the operational demands of the game are given significant priority: success emphasizes goal-oriented game comportment, not merely playing well with one another. The play-collective's possibility of success in its comportment is undermined by inappropriate recklessness on the part of its players regarding character death. But even serious groups can find occasion to laugh at the game's intended gravity:

Rufflag: There's no excuse for um, well, actions that single-handedly wipe a raid group...[But] some dying is funny... This friend of mine, this, this even though he's really good... he wipes a raid. Like traditionally, he'll just wipe a raid. Because it's his prerogative, and he wants to do it... and I do everything I can to prevent him from wiping the raid, but every once and a while he decides he's going to wipe it... It's funny. Because it's like a running gag. The more it happens the funnier it gets. Because it's like, you know someone who's proved they're capable, and can do everything flawlessly... but sometimes, decides it'd be funny if he just went and wiped it.

(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

Sudden catastrophes like the total annihilation of a group of 40 characters ruptures the continuity of play, and thrusts the players back into a distance from the intensity of collective action-in-character. There is a relief which comes with the temporary destruction of an organization, a moment of peaceful absence from the demands even of the game, when one can do nothing else but run 'in ghost form' back to the dungeon. This time apart from the action of the game is such that I feel it allows for reflection not limited to the operational level of playful comportment in the *World of Warcraft*. Like any possibility of reflection, it is usually entangled with demands to return to the

'everyday'. In the case of a raid wiping, the demand is placed upon players to quickly and efficiently return to the pursuit of ends described by the comportment towards an in-game goal. The explicit pursuit of the sort of understanding which I find evoked by fruitful conversation has its points of access in these lacunae of being-within-the situation of play-without-playing.

Like guilds, raid organizations are durable beyond any single occasion of catastrophe: overcoming character death is a tradition accepted by players of MMORPGs like the *World of Warcraft*. But nonetheless, participation in the virtual alternative offered by such games is itself still finite. Understanding how conclusions come to stories told with immortal characters living in a persistent other-world again casts the players into reflection on tradition, the everyday world and the entanglement of both with the adventure of play.

#### **A Mortal Relationship: Playing a Character and the Situation of Death.**

How else, but through the lens of their actual experience of the world can players of these games arrive with pre-figured understandings of death and its relation to game-play? The inherited traditions surrounding what it means to die, both actually and virtually, marry together in the cultivated comportment of players-in-character. Experienced players understand the triviality of the operational death which all characters will frequently undergo in games like the *World of Warcraft*. As committed fantasists, gamers are all too well aware of the danger at the root of taking a game 'seriously' by extending its action beyond the scope of play.

Such implied misunderstanding on the part of players deters more nuanced

reflection. A position which holds gamers as credulous, duped or necessarily deflected from 'worthwhile' comportment seems rooted in a prejudice which bears no reflection of our comportment to gamers ourselves. It is a stance on the possibility of playfulness which lumps together those who chose to pretend together with those who cannot chose but to pretend.

Actors that play characters who are aliens or raving lunatics would similarly deny identity with the roles enacted on stage or screen. It is not surprising to me that none of my conversations supported a simple equation between real and virtual encounters with death. The idea that 'confusion' occurs between virtual and actual selves is a particularly devious prejudice which no conversation undertaken in this project could justify as 'self-reflective.' Baudrillard's repeated assertion of the game-players consciousness of non-belief is paid out by the consistent demand to treat characters and game-play lightly, even when they are the locus of earnest mutual activity. The players of the World of Warcraft who I spoke with would deride avatar identification "when death is on the line." But a more reflective position like I seek cannot wholly discount the relationship between being a player of games and understanding the world in a different light. The critical possibility of double-action at play in comportment as a character can transform the perspective from which a game-player views their situation in the world as a whole. Nevertheless, many conversations about dying in the *World of Warcraft* necessarily reflect the understanding of death in the real world which players bring with them to this, or any game:

BC: The words "To Die" in everybody else's usual parlance are serious, and important and unalterable problems. Is the kind of language associated with it problematic, or is the experience that is actually happening doing some mimicry of death?

Twiggy: (Sighs) That's interesting, a lot of it has to do with the social stigma against death. Everybody sees it as the final ending of all things. Me personally, I don't...

Death is just a transition. It's passing into something else. Obviously, I'm a bit more into reincarnation and the karmic cycle... I'm a pagan Wiccan.

[Death] is more about the life experiences attained in the life, that you need, you need, to learn this time, before moving on to the next one. So death is definitely a large transition point, but it's not necessarily a bad thing. It's something that happens to everybody, the circumstances obviously around change for everything... like losing one's mother or father is going to be life altering, but you have to try to look at it from the experiences that you can take from that change in your life.  
(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

Alternative beliefs about the finality of actual death find purchase in the lightness of virtual fatalities, at least for this player. The suspension of traditional gravity is here derived from a particular understanding horizon. The meanings of the experiences around death are for this respondent variable by dint of situated belief. Death is not charged with negative significance above all else. This is one sort of reflective proximity to the 'rules of life and death' cultivated over time and particular to a situated relationship with tradition. From an horizon which is modulated by their understanding of the play-experience as distinct from actual mortality, other *World of Warcraft* players I spoke to also reflected on their life-situation concerning death:

Val: Well, see I come from a family where we've experienced a lot of death. So I think I have a healthy attitude towards it. And it's not something I'm scared of, and it's not something I'm uncomfortable with, I mean it's gonna happen and whatever. I'm sure as I age that's going to change, but right now you know it's just not a big deal, so I guess it's compatible with my view of death in the game, where's it just, it's another state of being. Slightly more inconvenient than the other ones.  
(Mar 13, 2008 Interview)

Reflected through a family history where the experience of death is neither alien nor terrifying, the minor discomfort of character demise can be taken lightly. A fatalism

about the signification of death in the actual world, permits an understanding assent to the mild analogy of death in a virtual world. For players with horizons that are less familiar with actual dying, the understanding of in-game death has a different flavour:

Rufflag: Dying is not new to the World of Warcraft. I dunno, I haven't had too much experience with death in real life either... so I mean it's never anything that's really affected me... To me it's not as present in real life I guess... it doesn't have that much meaning to me cause I've never really experienced anything, anything really directly associated me to and somebody's death.

BC: So you feel insulated from it in the real world?

Rufflag: Yeah

BC: And your exposure to it in the World of Warcraft is all in all a trivial level. So is death a particularly apt term for the kind of extermination of monsters that goes on in the World of Warcraft?

Rufflag: No I mean they just re-spawn... you kill them later, or you kill them again, or you let somebody else kill them... they just come back...  
(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

Without a substantial life-experience of death, the operational state of character mortality in the *World of Warcraft* is still understood within a horizon that deflates the game-actions 'in combat' of their usual seriousness. Character death invariably results in resurrection, and slain monsters 're-spawn': The game re-creates them after a fixed time elapses. No character dying has lasting operational consequences. What's more, the language borrowed from the usual experience of death-in-the-world is supplemented by terms from game-traditions. MMORPGs are only one of many ways digital gamers encounter virtual violence; and the habituation of that environment makes some invented terms more appropriate than others.

BC: How do players describe killing things in the game?

Rufflag: Um, Pwned is a popular term, it's just like "Owned" like... "I took him down and I won"... I guess... I dunno, I guess you just look at it as a series of winning and losing...

BC: Do you think that it's sensible to have a different word for defeating a monster in the game, even if the mechanic is visibly "I go stab that thing until it dies"...

Rufflag: I dunno if another word is necessary, when you used to take somebody down in first person, like first person shooters, you'd "Frag" somebody. But I don't want somebody typing in that they "Just fragged a mob!" no... I'm not interested in that.

(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

Actual and Virtual experiences co-mingle in understanding the 'real' relationship between death in the world and character death in the game; diverse forces, of habit, tradition and prejudice still lead to consistent expressions of a fundamental differentiation no player can fail to sustain: You cannot take dying-in-game seriously, if you are serious about having fun. The sort of colourful immortality shared by characters in the *World of Warcraft* spawns its own situation. Players develop concise ways of learning to express a Baudrillardian catastrophe they share in over and over again. Endings proliferate, even if they are conditional and non-terminal, and their extra-operational impact depends entirely on the cast of characters involved in their resolution.

Comedy and tragedy intermingle as the unexpected and the impossible become everyday. Contingently immortal beings, the characters in the *World of Warcraft* can unconsciously mimic the grim fatality of tragic Greek drama. Again and again, epic battles and adventures into the Underworld are brought to life by a company of players. Even though the stories are all familiar, the audience still gasps in horror as the inevitable forces of fate undo the best efforts of mortal men. A sympathetic observer cannot help feel a pang of cathartic grief along with an entire forty person raid, hours into their investment, upset and brutally slaughtered by the Moriae of a sticky key, or forgotten



command. Players understand the possibility of failure lurks within all playful comportment towards an end. The player who scores an own goal at the end of a day-long tournament, or an actor who flubs a line due to the hiccoughs share in this sort of catastrophic possibility at play:

Mac: There was one incident maybe a year ago or so. We were in the Molten Core, which has an overhanging pass over an area which contains one of the raid's, one of the instance's bigger bosses.

BC: So how many people would be on a mission of this sort?

Mac: Forty. It's a forty-man raid. The approach to the overpass has mobs, trash mobs excuse me, that you have to kill. So we're doing that, making our way to one of the other bosses. Someone accidentally hit auto-run while on the overpass and went off. To his death... but at the same time, he aggroed the main boss; which then proceeded to come up the ramp and around the corner and wipe everybody. It's was unfortunate, but it was entirely amusing... I mean you can forgive him it was probably a problem with his keyboard or whatnot...

(Jan 28, 2008 Interview)

Like the actors in a tragedy, players in the *World of Warcraft* are none the worse, but often times wiser for the fatal errors of their characters. They earn an understanding of the inevitable in pitting their and other characters lives against the constant calculation of the machine. Fallibility of all sorts explodes the smooth surface of the Virtual. These explorers and adventurers are familiar with the 'weakness' which human agents still bring into all systems, as well as those which thrive in the system itself. The contingency of playing-well is revealed in its two-fold conditioning of horizons: actively playing any game always risks losing, and the mode of being playful together can transform even the grossest of mechanical failures into a lasting social success or immortality:

Val: I'm really good at causing wipes. And usually it's because of really stupid things. I wiped us yesterday in... what were we doing?...not Tempest Keep... Tempest Keep! Because I died, ran back, hit auto-run, and did not turn off auto-run in time, so I just whizzed by the whole group and right into the room with all the trash... it was yeah, it was really embarrassing But that's happened a lot...

BC: Would you say wiping an entire raid would be more memorable?

Val: Pulling a Leroy! Yeah, definitely that's gonna get you some fame.

BC: Alright, you mention "Leroy"... I imagine you're referring to Leroy Jenkins?

Val: Yes, of course.

BC: Could you explain what this means to non-Wow-Players?

Val: Explain the Leroy Phenomenon?

BC: Please

Val: Well it's just a story of a guy who wiped a whole raid. It's a classic story. I guess what makes it really special is in the video... there is a video... in the video you see all the planning beforehand for this really complex pull, and this guy shows up after they're all done and just runs right into it... All the best laid plans... yeah it was very famous. I think it's famous, because everybody's done it. We've all run into the egg-packs I think...

(Mar 13, 2008 Interview)

It is part the universality of the act, and part the record of it, that led to the "Leroy Phenomenon" as this player calls it. Being captured and shared in a popular video allowed for the constant revitalization of the now long past acts that it recorded. Both the operational comportment of characters in the game and the social situation of playing with each other are on display in this famous recording of a raid wiping because of Leroy. Marking out a new object, like Leroy, in the horizon of understanding the *World of Warcraft* is on my account hermeneutic. Its mode of being is reflexive on the social mediation which the game provides alongside its tools of representational technology. Like their real world counterparts in the realm of value, Virtual objects still require constant dynamic contribution from the players to the culture of the game itself. The life-span of a game and the currency of such escapades depends on the social dynamic of its player-base, and with millions of subscribers, the *World of Warcraft* has been wildly

successful to date at maintaining a situation for playful gathering.

Cultivating an understanding or furnishing an interpretation still takes place over time, even when the events they consider are Virtual. The operational consequence of dying in the *World of Warcraft* is usually trivial – a short delay – and the cultivated response to this virtual catastrophe good humoured. The immediate potential for ‘time lost’ grows with the size of the group, so does the chance of a grave negative non-operational reaction to such failures. Character death is transformed from a moment’s pause, and a short ‘corpse run’ alone, into a social and political event, sometimes memorable, which disrupts the concerted effort of the other players. The spectre of seriousness emerges here as ‘drama’ concerning the time lost or which players are to blame for a raid-wide death experience. It is up to the players to find ways to defuse social tensions which, over time, threaten to undermine the playful comportment of the game. To play well with others means that players must recognize the distinction between the play-in-situation and the operational state of the game being played. I take the mode of being here illuminated to sustain the possibility that playing-well means a social standard for comportment can be chosen, which trumps a purely operational reading of game play. Still, explaining this to people who do not play games is a profound challenge to most gamers.

### **Giving Up and Dying in a Virtual World.**

Like the table-top role-playing games from which it is descended, the *World of Warcraft* often frustrates simple explanations of its ending. No one wins or loses in an RPG, and the game is always being played once it emerges in Massive Online form. The perpetual opportunity exists for gamers to re-explore the content of the game-world with a new group of players, or in the guise of an alternative character. Again a positive hermeneutic possibility in play can be here illuminated: like the texts of philology, the comportment of game-play is a situated social possibility. Play is not exhausted in a singular apprehension or expression, but generates horizons that remain open to re-interpretation. Nonetheless, finitude personifies social endeavours in the Virtual as readily as in our actual daily practice. Character death is an operational tradition in games like the *World of Warcraft*, and is therefore non-terminal. Players had a variety of viewpoints on real terminations of game-play and social organizations in the *World of Warcraft*. Like character death, a player's conclusive break with game-play challenges a merely operational understanding of what it means to play-in-character:

Mac: Well it's you could say it's kind of like a fact of life, I mean everybody dies at some point. In the World of Warcraft it's a game mechanic. It's there mainly to eat up your time, your resources etc. And it's the punishment essentially for failing at whatever you do... So [death is] an annoyance. Essentially that's what it is. It's not an end to [the game], you don't, your character doesn't stop existing or whatnot, they just keep on doing what they do.

BC: You bring up an important point. While the characters seem to die frequently, it's the players who keep coming back.

Mac: Exactly.

BC: In your guild are there any players whose departure has caused a 'real' death for their characters? Players who you don't ever expect to see again? Who you have no way to reach?

Mac: I would say so. Essentially once that player stops playing the game, their character basically just becomes a random storage of data somewhere, right? It's no longer accessible, there's no longer, it's just a name... there's no, there's not the character... the player's personality behind it or whatnot. So, even if you see another character with a similar name or what, it's not the same person, all it is is it's a label...essentially the the character is an extension of the player if the player is not there the character is not there anymore.

(Jan 28, 2008 Interview)

When a player stops returning to the game, their character remains listed on guild rosters, but vanishes from the 'world' of play. Reduced, on this player's view to a collection of data stored on a server somewhere. The absence of the agent motivating the virtual character denudes the character of the vitality which installed its perpetual rebirth and re-appearance: it loses the style which a player once brought to it. Characters can also disappear from 'use' within the game, demoted from an active adventurer to a storage character or 'mule'. A player's preference can dictate a dramatic reduction in life-expectancy, even for a practically immortal character:

BC: So if death is an everyday occurrence—a strong persistent de-buff—isn't a reason to think of a character as ended, under what circumstances would you find someone who has really 'died' insofar as the game was concerned?

Dun: Um, it would have to be if you grow tired of your character. If you grow tired of what your character is doing or don't like the character make-up, death would just be you stop playing that character. So the closest thing to death would be to stop playing the game.

(Jan 15, 2008 Interview)

Like any play-alternative to the everyday world, participation in the World of Warcraft is only one compartment among many. The manifold demands on players who are living in the actual world frequently cause ruptures in the continuity of a character's existence in the virtual. Departures from the game as well as returns to it are coloured by the perpetual availability of the Virtual alternative:

BC: Would you say that characters who cease to be played, either due to the

retirement of their players or just to general disinterest on the part of the person who has them in their account more closely resemble 'real deaths' in one sense; in that they are permanent?

Liane: I guess, I mean, I would I would assume that the notion of real death happens, we had a guy in our guild who recently just retired because he was in the military service and I think he had to go to Iraq.

But, but I mean like that seems more like a permanent death than anything else, just like looking onto your guild list and seeing somebody hasn't been on for six months or something like that, it's just, you just look at it and it's close, to yeah I completely agree... it's as close as you're going to get to real death as you can... but again you can just resurrect your characters, I had a friend who plays massive multi-player online games, he plays everything from UO all the way up to the World of Warcraft, and he continues to play new games coming out just to sample them. So he bounces onto WoW every now and then and his same character pops up as the same person sort of. Again, it's like like a sequel. (Laughs)  
(Mar 12, 2008 Interview)

Like characters in other forms of popular media who come and go from the airwaves or silver screen; a player who returns to the *World of Warcraft* after an absence brings their virtual adventuring persona back into an existence shared by others. New stories can be told involving that character, and their previous absence seems less like mortality than the necessary delay between seasons of television, or franchise summer blockbuster movies. Just like recurring characters in other forms of media, characters in an MMORPG sometimes outlive their entertainment value; within the *World of Warcraft* itself, there is no means of resolving a character's trajectory conclusively.

Something other than operational death needs must overtake the former player. There will come some moment of walking away which ends game play conclusively. This leave-taking is ordained in part by the tradition of games these new digital situations of play seek to leverage into sustained other-worlds. All alternatives to the everyday remain temporary:

BC: Would you say then that the closest analogue to real-world death would be

players who quit playing the World of Warcraft? That their characters are then permanently dead.

Val: Oh definitely! And any time I've quit a character I've had a little you know, not a ceremony, but you know you sell all their stuff, and you set them in a specific spot, and then that's the end. You know there's a certain sense of closure there. You don't just abandon a character I think.

BC: Okay then, this is important. Would you then say, the lack of a mechanism by which to permanently retire a character influences your opinion of Warcraft?

Val: Well, I've never really thought of it, but now I think it would be really cool if there were a way to actually kill your character and leave a trace in the world. You know like, if there was a graveyard for example, you know you kill your character, you're quitting but there's a little gravestone with your character... I think that would be really cool, but I've never thought of it before, that's just something...

BC: If the world of Warcraft were to change the character of death you would be for the possibility of permanent death?

Val: Well, it would have to be voluntary. I don't think I'd be into it if some PvP asshole can just come and snuff you forever!  
(Mar 13, 2008 Interview)

In the *World of Warcraft*, character death's operational impermanence robs it of any ability to lastingly affect the situation of play. The ability 'to kill a character off', once and for all, and leave some sign thereby, would offer an alternative form of ending. Opening up the possibility of second operational condition for character death would on my account result in even broader possible horizons of playful comportment. The range of comportment would be expanded within the scope of the game, and this would be reflected, at the least, by a changed social situation around playing a character to its own conclusion.

Player-characters too have an arc, a trajectory through their unreal firmament; even imaginary worlds are subject to the additive nature of gravity. The arc of any virtual being may well become asymptotic at its outermost extreme; but most equations of

playful comportment return to zero eventually. All collective play demands mutual investment, and the time players have for such investments is finite, even when the virtual system remains perpetually deployed:

Rufflag: I dunno, it probably has more to do with real life and what's going on with that, and not really having time or the opportunity to play, or they have something they'd rather spend their time doing. It's not I dunno, it's just not someone dying, it's someone simply not existing. You know, you don't have any of their stuff, you can't see that they were there, you can't go visit their grave, you can't leave a flower on it or whatever... they're just simply not there. It's not like dying. Because, dying is something that you see everyday, and you just run back and you're up again so, yeah it's the difference I guess between "dying" and simply "not existing"... You don't know, they might come back, you log into town and there they are... You don't know that they ever actually typed "Delete"... Could just be an account floating around, and I've seen people come back. I've seen people go and say they're never coming back, and they reappear again.  
(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

This constant open possibility provided by a character in the Virtual is given vital interest by the social situation of co-operative play. More than just an operational lessening of initiative, playing a character within the *World of Warcraft* and the successful cultivation of 'good gamers' depends on reaching common understanding, and provides a sense of belonging-together through play.

BC: So would you say in general that the dynamic of having a group of people to play with and people who you enjoy playing with regardless of your life and death circumstances, extends the lifetime of your interest in the game?

Twiggy: Oh definitely. Yeah. A lot of the stuff... I've left the game a couple of times, and what brought me back was knowing the people in my guild, and knowing that they were fun to group with and fun to play with and we'd joke around a lot and it was a lot more enjoyable like that.  
(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

The seduction of the social situation of play lies alongside the colourful immortality of characters in the *World of Warcraft*. Over time, traditional social elements of playing together dominate the situation of long-term mutual comportment offered by



the *World of Warcraft*. Not the exclusively mediated by game-operations, gamers and their community breathe life into the operational conditions of play.

Lohkee: I think it's the... I think it's the interaction of the people that that breaks those things down...as much as you do things solo you are interacting with people on an almost continuous basis whether you want to or not, and and some, most of it's by necessity, you simply have to. So you know, I mean there, and and so I think I think it's those those interactions and not, it has nothing really to do with the death. I mean maybe that brings about, that brings about you know words that cause these frictions possibly, I don't know. I mean with a death I suppose but, I don't know... it's the other, the personal interactions that break the game.  
(Feb 5, 2008 Interview)

Living in the world leaves a finite amount of time and energy to distribute to amusements and alternatives to the everyday. The regularity of a digital game character's Virtual immortality does not untangle its players' social circumstances. The situation of play is complicated, either within the game-milieu as 'drama' and 'guild politics', or from outside the game system, as a potentially deleterious impact on a player's real-world social situation:

J-lock : Well, they have a, and this is the impression that I get as well: They have a character which is essentially immortal, that exists beyond them, that persists, no matter what their situation that's going on in their actual lives. And often they neglect their actual lives, and play this game for an extended period of time, project a lot of themselves into this character, and a lot of people I know who've quit this game have quit because it was starting to affect their (knocks wood) outer...their real world existence. So I would say yeah, I would say that people people stop playing, myself included, I only play for a month because I realize if I play more than that then it's a waste of my time because there's a lot of exciting stuff out there in the real world. Yeah.  
(Jul 7, 2008 Interview)

The social conditions surrounding game-play can transform the comportment-at-play from one of amusement, levity, and mutual imagination into a situation laden with gravity, import and obligation. The perpetual availability typical of Virtual systems overlooks the necessary entanglement of play within time. Extending the scope of play

from a limited situation into a constant condition threatens to disarm the critical double action which character-play can engender. On my account, it is within ruptures of playing-comportment that the reflective possibility in games appears. The possibilities found in the operation of the game-itself can fall into the background, as the transformed situation of mutual action fore-grounds the social dynamics of playing with other people. The tense inter-action of players, who are diversely situated outside the game, sometimes violently ruptures the shared Virtual imaginary and playful comportment that furnishes the ground for adventure in the *World of Warcraft*.

Rufflag: I dunno, I think I spend too much time playing it actually.

BC: How so?

Rufflag: Cause it's basically what I do with my evening. My girlfriend watches TV and I play World of Warcraft and we talk to each other in the same room, but we're not actually doing anything together so...

BC: Have you ever thought of trying to get her to play the World of Warcraft?

Rufflag Uh, yeah, that'd never work.

BC: She doesn't play video games?

Rufflag: Nope, she doesn't play video games at all.

BC: No interest in adopting a persona?

Rufflag: Not really, doesn't so much like to use a computer for anything except emails. That's alright, she loves TV, I don't... I like computers.  
(Oct 13, 2008 Interview)

Playing a character in the *World of Warcraft* often partakes of a playfulness which seduces gamers into mutual pursuits. In asking about character death, my intention has been to illuminate the creative tensions which can emerge when the situation of digital game-play is reflected upon. Not wholly limited to the operational attributes of the game,

dying as a character in the *World of Warcraft* reveals the social situation which mutually conditions playful comportment in a Virtual setting. I feel the possibility of transformed understanding that lies within all playful action is a vindication of play as a critical methodology. The problem of exploring digital games in theory and in practice without falling prey to deterrence led me to emphasize the constitutive role of language and mutual action directed towards understanding; in short to the conversation and hermeneutic reflection on its situated import. I see character death in the *World of Warcraft* as one point of access into the double action of playing a character in a social situation mediated by operational goals.

A cultivated understanding of situations of play and the peculiar immortality of characters in MMORPGs has shown the intimate relationship between the situation of the players and the game their characters enact. Neither wholly bound up in the operational nor exhausted by the social, the situation of playing a game together in the Virtual is always only one possibility among many; but all these alternatives are entangled in time. All actual actors have a limited scope of action, and a finite temporal bound to investment, in play or other comportment. Grasped as a situated action, understanding takes time to cultivate. Occasions of novel social comportment, like those presented in an MMORPG like the *World of Warcraft* are often obscure while they emerge. The tense negotiation at the root of play and the playful action of language, on my view means that no games, even the most profoundly Virtual, can emerge into their mode of being without a reflexive dependence on the understanding action of their players. Players are always actually found in circumstances within the world, and bring with them pre-conditions of action and understanding that still depend on their worldly origin.

So the question remains, how 'best' to describe the situation of playing as a character who can suffer operational death in a game like the *World of Warcraft*. Since no horizons are exhaustive, it is a matter of 'style' and 'fit' to finally situate what my project has gained in its explanation. Confronted with a familiar figure of the world and tradition, unfamiliar with this tradition of other-worlds, all but the most reflective respondents stumble. How can you explain dying as a character in the *World of Warcraft* most effectively to your grandmother or other non-game player? On the one hand there is a purely operational sense, limited to the impact of death as a penalty within the scope of game-play:

Dun: Well, it is only a game. Death in a game is certainly very very different from death in real life. The death in the game is totally not permanent at all. I mean if you die and log out if you wait more than a day and log back in, you're still alive. Right? If you die in the game and then run back to your corpse, you're alive again. If you die in the game and somebody comes along your corpse and resurrected, resurrects you're alive again and can keep playing. In real life if you die well that's the end of the game.

BC: Understandably... Would you say then that death in the World of Warcraft is not a permanent end to game-play in any fashion?

Dun: Death in the World of Warcraft, is more like a very strong and non-scaling de-buff.

(Jan 15, 2008 Interview)

Within the *World of Warcraft*, as in any role-playing game, many different effects can be placed on your character. Positive bonuses, like increased speed, regeneration or the like are called 'buffs'. Negative conditions, such as being slowed, stunned, or poisoned are called de-buffs. Understood through the operational dimension of a character's potential impact upon the game world, dying is merely a form of punishment for failure. "Being dead" is the most negative operational effect suffered for failure, during which your interaction with the game is severely truncated while you recover your

body. But this effort at explanation still depends on an shared horizon which includes playing a character in a game such as the *World of Warcraft*. The task of explanation is more difficult again when faced with explaining a video game to someone who lacks the personal experience of their play. The tradition of other games emerges as the immediate substitute to such a blank horizon:

BC: Alright, how would you then describe character death as an experience to someone who doesn't play video games? Who isn't involved in the World of Warcraft? You and I sit here and we've both played the game, we're both aware of the mechanics and the experience, but how would you put it in words for your Mother, or the crossing guard at the local public school?

J-lock: You see it's interesting. You could you could initially, what comes to mind is explaining to them through a game of chess for example. But somebody tends to die in chess, when someone else has reached the goal. Which is obviously not the case in the World of Warcraft; unless the goal of the computer simulation was to kill you...So how would you explain it... hum... If you were to take chess as an analogy, you would say "He took my rook, I'm putting my rook back on the board"... The person would clearly respond with "Well what's the point?" You know, nobody really gets anywhere, yeah. So let's see, how would you explain it... well I suppose in the same sense as I did earlier, where death is merely a nuisance and more or less trivial, and and does not really bear too much on the game-play itself, but only on the social organizations within it... you know the guilds and stuff like that

BC: So do think death then is a sort of trope or a thematic taken out of a particular sort of game structure?

J-lock: I can definitely see it as being something like... well if you compare to like the early Nintendo games, and you have one life and you make it as far as you can and you die; you start all over again. And I think now that what they're trying to do is, and making money off people is another thing, but also so that there is this sense of continuity that extends beyond a a single life, that they've removed this aspect of it completely so that people don't feel inhibited in any way, or you know I guess so that the game can continue without them feeling too disadvantaged for having died.

(Jul 7, 2008 Interview)

Parallels like the capture of pieces on a chess board begin to bridge the gap in understanding character death as a game operation like that of many other games. But

the characters in an MMORPG like the *World of Warcraft* are more dynamic than any single chess piece. The cultivated style of play which character-comportment involves goes beyond the purely operational attributes of 'being a game-piece which is won or lost.' Another collective play endeavour, like sports, can extend the understanding of encountering death as a character in the *World of Warcraft*.

BC: Alright, and a final question: Since both you and I play a great many games and to us the idea of having a character and experiencing death is fairly straightforward in one regard, how would you describe character death to someone who doesn't play video games?

Liane: Somebody who doesn't play video games?

BC: How would you describe it to your mother for instance?

Liane: It's like losing a pawn in chess. Yeah It's just something that happens in the game, it happens all the time and it's it's. It happens in the game and you can actually, I guess again speaking in terms of PvP but I mean it's like losing a piece in a board game or some type of sport or something like that. I guess chess is the best example, but it's like losing a piece, it tilts the battle, it tilts the direction of the arena fight, and or, yeah. Losing your star player to an injury list; losing Shaq to an injury or something like that. It's more akin to that, you know he'll come back but you kinda needed him right then and there.

(Mar 12, 2008 Interview)

The lost value of a star player, more than that of a simple a game-piece brings the analogy of character role and fatality further into the light. The team can continue without the injured or absent player, but it is not the 'team it was' when all the roles on the roster are filled to their best capacity. Injured athletes eventually return to the team, just as deceased characters eventually rejoin party. The continuity of game-play in the *World of Warcraft* finds its locus in the re-appearance of the same characters as well as the co-operation of the same players again and again. Unlike a game of chess or basketball, there is no fixed duration to an adventuring party; the conclusion of a session of game-play in the *World of Warcraft* always installs the possibility of a further engagement. The

sort of punishment in time which the *World of Warcraft* inflicts on its perished characters mimics hockey penalty minutes across the length of an entire season. Players are chastised by the game's rules to discourage certain in-game behaviours, not to eliminate them lastingly from the field of play:

K-rock: Yeah, yeah well, I dunno it's just this online virtual environment of constant like interaction and game-play where like it doesn't matter if you die. It's not like in any other game when you die you die, I mean even in other video games that you play, you die and you start your level over... there's no reset, it's constant, it's always moving forward. And...Although the characters, all the NPCs kind of go about on their little routes, all the non, all the actual real playing characters are like infinite. I can die... I dunno I might have died, I dunno if they've got stats for these things, but I've probably died thousands of times, and like it doesn't affect you whatsoever. It doesn't take away from you, doesn't nothing unless you don't want to waste time to go get your body, they penalize you. You can just die and come back to life and it has absolutely no effect on your character. You just have to go get your body and start again and...

BC: Would a valid parallel be found in something like the sport of baseball, where each inning you can be put out...

K-rock: Yeah yeah...that's perfect

BC: but you keep your position on the team, return to the same sort of situation each game... and there's advancement... the league goes on, scores are tallied...

K-rock: Sure, yeah that's right, numbers are tallied, there are always numbers. Stats, the same thing as in a sport... you can look at any sport like that, whether it be hockey, every period, every game... And it always involves the same kind of rules, the same kind of physics, the same kind of you know like "You can't do that here" I mean yeah, there are rules that you've got to abide by, there are areas you can go and areas you can't.

(Jul 23, 2008 Interview)

The renewable nature of characters in the *World of Warcraft* is one of the game elements that both seduces players to adventure and entangles them into a situation. Players in an MMORPG can invest time into a variety of characters, and the operational penalties associated with death do not aim to 'invalidate' time spent at play. The perpetual availability of a game like the *World of Warcraft* remains open to lightness and playful

comportment in part because the 'seriousness' of death has been evacuated. In-character catastrophes are a possibility to be embraced, not avoided.

BC: So both you and I are familiar with the actual game-play experience of the World of Warcraft, and the experience of having a character be killed, destroyed, fallen, fried, electrocuted crushed and all the rest. So how would you describe to someone who does not play video or role-playing games the experience of character death in the World of Warcraft? Your mother for instance?

Eh!Steve: Yeah, that would be difficult. One of the things that I would do is that I would explain that it is a game first of all; and I would say that because of the sheer level of frustration that it would entail if something happened to your character that you'd been working on for months, that if something happened, a game-glitch...

BC: A lag spike?

Eh!Steve: A lag-spike! You walk, you you you walk into a place and there's something much larger than you thought should be there be, in there, and it kills your character. Because of the, I'd explain the the sort of set-up, that because we're dealing with other people in other places, I can't just re-load the game... Because they want to give them a chance, it's a pain to do that sort of thing, but people get attached to their characters, so a lot of it is to try and draw people to stay in the game, to make them... because it is a product, so there's a mechanic they have to make sure that when your character dies it is frustrating, it's an irritant, it's not designed to mimic real life and death situations. Because it if was, then the game wouldn't be much fun, because you know real world consequences of you get into a car accident because you're driving really fast and you do something stupid, you can just die... and video-games don't have that because if that had to be the case, where everything were perfectly realistic, then first of all why would you be playing the game?

BC: So you would say then I suppose that the death mechanic as an irritant, and in being as divorced as it is from the real-world experience, does it add or subtract to the believability of game-play?

Eh!Steve: I think it subtracts from the believability, but I think that's part of the allure of it. Reality is harsh. And saying that you want all your game-play to be incredibly harsh as well...

BC: Makes it a lot less like game? More like life?

Eh!Steve: More like reality. A game is something you do for fun, it's something you do for maybe enjoyment, you might learn something at it or whatnot, but it's not something you do to instruct yourself in the 'harshness of reality'... which last I checked reality was pretty good at doing that on its own.



(Jun 25, 2008 Interview)

Like a game-piece on a chess board, or a player on a sports team, the characters enacted in the *World of Warcraft* are subject to game-dictated punishments which eliminate them from the field of play for a period of time. Moreover, as with any teammates of long-standing, players can work more successfully in certain roles with other familiar players; the replacements available only capture part of the lost player's contribution to the situation of playful comportment. The development options available in a game like the *World of Warcraft* permit all characters to attain to 'star status' mechanically if they are willing to invest time in the system of rewards. These together with the situated possibility of playing in a particular society and style allows for players in the *World of Warcraft* to develop their personal relationship to a play tradition which in the Virtual embraces a new kind of 'unlimited expression'.

## Conclusion

My final interpretation has moved in its description of playing a character in the *World of Warcraft*—from game piece, through team-mate and onto a situated comportment in a tradition of play—reflects another dimension to the situation of play in a role-playing game. Heroic action in character for the amusement of the participants and their audience readily recalls the form of theatre.

Just as actors become fond of certain roles, and famous for certain portrayals, so to can the characters in a role-playing game become renowned within the precinct of its players. The case of Leroy Jenkins is only one of countless kinds of recognition which playful comportment in character can reveal. The transformation of understanding is at work in this re-cognition, and tensions lie at the root of play as a situation of critical possibility.

Alike to the interpretation through which an actor brings a famous role to new life on stage, characters in an MMORPG like the *World of Warcraft* are given a novel possibility of pursuing the mode-of-being which playing a character demands. This new circumstance of comportment in character enjoins the *World of Warcraft* player into a relationship with tradition and action, in concert with other actors. Through these playful actions, features of social gathering emerge to possible reflection. While enacted through the mediating technologies of the Virtual, games like the *World of Warcraft* depend strongly on their situation as social endeavours with a long tradition at their heart.

I feel the dynamic emergence of possible reflections which playful-comportment can engender are best addressed by an approach which remains aware of the tense situation of action. A fruitful hermeneutic conversation is an investment into the action

of understanding on the part of all its participants, and on my view provides the most fecund horizon for possible future interrogations.

The status of digital games as deterrence remains ambiguous after my interpretation. For most players of the *World of Warcraft*, the choice to submit to the play sphere is a positive seductive possibility. From within the milieu of game-play, players recognize features of the game and its social environment that support my position on the twofold mediation of playful comportment in the Virtual. None of our conversations turned on the technical features of the game, and no mention at all was made of the particular computers, networks or other technologies which allow game-play in the *World of Warcraft* to take place. The primary feature of playing together remains the social situation in which playful comportment is a cultivated risk. Playing well in digital games, like their ancestors, means developing the right combination of attitude, action and expectation. Embracing the creative alternative at the root of play requires reflection, and players in the *World of Warcraft* have an opportunity for such reflection presented to them by the game's own structure. While character death ruptures mechanical resolution and limits in-game actions, the player's social situation constantly informs the possible conditions of their understanding.

Through conversation in the natural language of the *World of Warcraft* many features of digital games emerged as negotiations of traditions in offline play. The novel character of social circumstances supported by a system of communication technologies does not unhinge digital games from the usual welter of the world. The challenges for research into digital games and other emerging social situations is reflexive on those who would stake out such spaces as their own terrain. If interpretation is grasped as an act of

situated understanding oriented towards the production of public language, then its success or failure is not to be found in its exhaustiveness, but in its ability to furnish new and more diverse interpretations. Time for reflection is a demand which hermeneutics makes, and it is through time and the reflection of other horizons along with my own that will determine what future positions this revisiting of hermeneutics will have.

The horizon which I have presented on digital game play as a possible alternative comportment in the face of totalizing systems is only image of the complex of play and the Virtual. Choosing to enter into a negotiation with a tradition not often applied to digital games, hermeneutic interpretation allowed this research to highlight rather than conceal the tensions of play and its situation in the contemporary world. A return to the significance of the subject as a primary source of information about their situation is on my view one of the strongest reasons to re-engage with Gadamer and continental thought in general. A dynamic play between different horizons, consciously expressed in their contingency and mortality can allow for a more comprehensive set of approaches to phenomena like digital games. Employing hermeneutic reason is always risking catastrophe. At the same time it is an embrace of the human elements of understanding instead of an ascent to a totalizing or inhuman system.

## References

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Forget Foucault*. New York: Semiotexte, 1987. Print.
- . *Passwords*. New York: Verso, 2003. Print.
- . "Pataphysics." *www.ctheory.net*. N.p. n.d. Web. 5 Jan. 2008.
- . "Radical Thought." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 18/1-3. (1995)  
pp.41-57. Web. 5 Jan. 2008
- . *Simulations*. New York: Semiotexte, 1983. Print.
- . "Violence of the Virtual and Integral Reality." *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 2.2 (2005): n. pag. Web. 10 Jan. 2008.
- . *The Vital Illusion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. Print.
- Blizzard Entertainment. *The World of Warcraft* (2004)
- Coulter, Gary. "Jean Baudrillard and the Definitive Ambivalence of Gaming." *Games and Culture* 2.4 (2007): 358-365. Print.
- Crogan, Patrick. "Remembering (Forgetting) Baudrillard." *Games and Culture* 2.4 (2007): 405-413. Print.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. "Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics." *Culture and Society*, 2006 Volume 23(1) (2006): 29-56. Print.
- . "Language and Understanding." *Theory Culture and Society* Volume 23(1) (2006):

13-27. Print.

---. "To what extent does language pre-form thought?" *Truth and Method*. New York: Continuum, 1975. Print.

---. *Truth and Method*. New York: Continuum, 1975. Print.

Galloway, Alexander. "Radical Illusion (A Game Against)." *Games and Culture* 2.4 (2007): 376-391. Print.

Giddings, Seth. "Pataphysics Engine: Technology Play and Realities." *Games and Culture* 2.4 (2007): 392-404. Print.

Gygax, Gary. *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Players Handbook*. Lake Geneva: 1978. Print.

Hekman, Susan J. *Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Knowledge*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986. Print.

Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens*. Boston: Beacon, 1955. Print.

Kucklich, Julian. "The Road Less Travelled: The Case for Computer Game Philology." [www.playability.de](http://www.playability.de). N.p. n.d. Web. 15 Feb. 2008.

Simon, Bart. "What if Baudrillard was a Gamer?: Introduction to a Special Section on

Baudrillard and Game Studies.” *Games and Culture* 2.4 (2007): 355-357. Print.

Various Contributors. “Game Studies.” *en.wikipedia.org*. N.p. n.d. Web. 24 Feb. 2008.

Vikhagen, Arne Kjell. “Gadamer's Concept of Playfulness.” *www.scribd.com*. N.p. n.d.

Web. Oct. 21, 2008.