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What Are We Really Looking at?

The Future-Orientation of Video Game Play

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This article looks at the specificity of the image within contemporary video games and examines what might be thought of as the distinct qualities of a game gaze that is different from the cinema gaze. This necessitates a consideration of the specific temporality of video game play where the aesthetic is generated in a maelstrom of anticipation, speculation, and action. Video games prioritize the participation of the player as he or she plays, and that player always apprehends the game as a matrix of future possibility. The focus, always, is not on what is before the player or the "what happens next" of traditionally unfolding narrative but on the "what happens next if I" that places the player at the center of experience as its principle creator, necessarily engaged in an imaginative act, and always orientated toward the future.

Keywords: *computer games; video games; aesthetics; cinema; the gaze*

Throughout 2005, the publisher Electronic Arts produced television adverts for the Sims 2 series of cross-platform games that provided what amounted to an interesting commentary on the difficulty of presenting the experience of play to a television audience made up of existing players as well as potential consumers. Each advertisement was composed of three segments of what appears to be specific and individual play experiences that were then given attribution to a particular named player. A short film of in-game action, with individual Sims engaging in a range of activities from surfing with friends to siring many babies after a string of dates, is

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followed by a single still black-and-white shot of a player and the slogan "The Sims: Played by." A final shot of text then asks the question "How do you play?" and gives the address of a Web site (simsplayedby.com) housing all 20 individual segments for download along with biographies of the players. There are many messages here—about the variety (and even the ordinariness) of existing players, about the accommodation of many different styles of play, and about the range of activities that can be a feature of the play experience, from the design and building of a Sim's domestic environment to organizing his or her social and family life. Electronic Arts also makes use of members of the player community not only to endorse the game but also as a feature of the game itself—play the game, it tells the viewer, and you can join this happy community of difference, unified by their shared playing of Sims 2 but not by any prescription of activity or bar on the grounds of race, gender, ethnicity, or nationality. The bright colors and exaggerated actions of the world of the Sims inevitably act as an appealing counterpoint to the stillness and drabness of the monochrome location of the players.

Such an advertisement is still somewhat unusual in making the role of the player clear. It even bears comparison with the advertising for children's toys, where a toy is rarely shown in a static state except for in an opening or final shot communicating product information but are rather more often seen as the location of play in the hands of happy children. The basic dilemma of the toy manufacturer and advertiser will be familiar to the video game industry. They both need to ensure purchase of a product that might differ from others within the same genre in only minor ways (and the genre of the child's infant doll is as fixed and lacking in any but the most superficial variety as that of the first-person shooter or the platform game, even if the addition of features such as "authentic suckling action" takes the place of a new feature of a game engine in using technology to establish product differentiation), but it is the future possibility of a play experience that will drive the purchasing decision. Buy the product, as so much advertising claims, to access an experience and not just acquire an object. Will Wright's often commented on observation (Bittanti, in press) that his Sims games should not be seen as games but as "software toys" seems to have filtered through even to the promotion of the franchise—these are objects to be played with and (like the Sims themselves) are only brought to life by the presence of players. World-weary cynicism might suggest that the featured players are being exploited for commercial gain, but this is also a gesture of recognition and even of gratitude toward the player community. With much previous television advertising for games there has been no such mention of a player, and game footage (either from apparently live in-game play or prerendered cut-scenes) is more unproblematically presented to the viewer as if it can be straightforwardly representative of the experience of play that is after all what the consumer will be paying for. Of course, to the gaming literate at which most such advertising is directed, it is obvious that the visual spectacle of game footage for Halo or Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas or Brothers in Arms implies a player, but that player is absent from a screen that seeks

to impress instead with the promise of spectacle and the quality of the visual image. The key claim of such advertising depends on a prioritization of games as visual experience—what you see in the advertisement is what you see in the game, be it waves of armored aliens, cars cruising the streets of San Andreas, or squads of GIs moving through the fields of Normandy. It is almost possible to forget that video games involve their players doing something and not just seeing something.

If the problem confronted by any advertising agency seeking to promote games through the medium of the television screen is what is it that they should show, then a related problem for the academic critic is to identify what it is that we see when we look at games. And it is obvious that the images we see in circulation around games, be they in-game footage or static screenshots, are not unproblematically representative of the experience of play. As Espen Aarseth (2004) pointed out in his essay "Genre Trouble," we are in danger of privileging the representational apparatus of games in a manner that misrepresents what is essential to games, a possibility that he ascribed most forcefully to those who come to games from disciplines used to the analysis of other visual media, and particularly film studies. As Aarseth noted,

> The pleasures of video games, as James Newman (2001) has pointed out, comparing Tomb Raider to cartoonish-looking Super Mario Kart, are not primarily visual, but kinaesthetic, functional and cognitive. Your skills are rewarded, your mistakes are punished, quite literally. The game gaze is not the same as the cinema gaze, although I fear it will be a long time before film critics studying computer games will understand the difference.

Aarseth is certainly correct to assert that our collective attention as critics might be misplaced if we focus too much on the video in video game to the exclusion of any understanding of games as systems of simulation, and particularly if we do so by simply lazily transporting our understanding of this visual experience from our understanding of other visual experience. As critics of games, we must surely be more interested in the action of play with our equivalents of the child's infant doll in the full motion of play and not with the aesthetics of the object alone as if we are only looking at the dolls on the shelf of the collector. In the context of a transition between console generations where it is possible to characterize the strategies of two of the three current major players (Microsoft and Sony) as essentially concerned with foregrounding the graphics capabilities of their new hardware while only Nintendo prioritizes the game play potential of its "Revolution," we certainly need to question the significance of the visual experience to any theorization of games and wonder if we should be careful not to confuse video games with other visual media.

If we take such care we might certainly begin to address Aarseth's (2004) call for a proper understanding of the game gaze, and this article is an attempt to begin to frame some initial thoughts about the specificity of that gaze. That the gaze itself

remains of importance to any full understanding of contemporary popular games is taken as a given here—there are commercial and noncommercial games that have depended on sound, or the stimulation of other senses, to communicate and provide feedback to their players, but the commonplace understanding of video games, as is apparent in the term itself, is inevitably tied up in the primacy of the visual image.[1] This is not to blindly fall into some kind of entrapment by the traditions and specificities of film or visual studies however. If we are to begin to approach games in a quest to understand the specifics of their aesthetic qualities, then we might well have to be prepared to at least question whether their aesthetic is in any meaningful sense a visual aesthetic, or whether it might actually be counterproductive to evaluate video games as a primarily visual art, but we must at least acknowledge that the image is a central component of so many of the games that we study and play.

The intention here is not to simply interrogate specific images or combinations of images or to bemoan or celebrate the increasingly sophisticated visual spectacle of contemporary triple-A games but to attempt to interpret the nature of the role of the image in mainstream video game play. It is possible even that in this form of popular media text where common sense apparently tells us that the emphasis should always be on the visual representation before us that we are actually confronted by something that is invisible to the human eye, that will not show itself however intently we stare at the screen, and cannot be coaxed, however hard we try, into revealing itself. In the limited context of this article, it is necessary to point out that the gaze of the gamer is one that is voracious in its demand for a novelty of visual experience.[2] It will not be satisfied, unless it is primed to expect nostalgia, with what has already been seen. It is, as I shall argue, always an impossible gaze, a gaze focused on an as-yet unseen future, on what is yet to be revealed, and on what might only always remain just out of reach but tantalizingly close to realization if only we could manipulate the interface sufficiently well to capture it. Should we ever complete our circuit of visual desire and capture the elusive image, we will then move on and fix that game gaze on another not yet seen impossible object. In this way, I will demonstrate, the game gaze is always firmly fixed in a future-orientation and not on the realized or rendered image. It is this suggestion that I offer as an early and provisional response to Aarseth's (2004) expressed fear that it will be a long time before the difference between the game gaze and the cinema gaze will be addressed.

Looking at Graphics Versus Game Play

It is as well to remember that it is not just the academic critic who has wrestled with the place of the image in video games and that we can learn much from the established conversations already underway among both developers and players. To

return to a brief consideration of the sloganeering of marketing, we might well be skeptical of the graphics chip manufacture Nvidia's claim that their products represent a privileged means of access to "The way it's meant to be played," but to ignore the consumer's and the player's desire for access to ever more sophisticated visual experience as part of (rather than distinct from) play experience is to ignore the reality of those high-budget contemporary popular video games that compete for attention on the major games consoles and are the video game equivalent of the blockbusters of the cinema multiplex. And in our early academic discussions about the distinction between those who would focus on the "kinaesthetic, functional, and cognitive" characteristics of games and those who focus more firmly on graphical representation, we can locate something that echoes a long-standing and ongoing debate in the popular discourse surrounding those who would self-identify as gamers discuss games—as a contest between game play versus graphics.

This contest has to some extent dominated discourses of reception in recent years, with those who champion game play (and who would claim not to be distracted by the frippery of graphics) adopting the position of a form of cognescenti able to see the true value of games. It is still possible to produce a commercial game such as Darwinia, which harked back to the aesthetics of early wireframe and sprite-based graphics and had no dedicated artist on its development team, but its public profile is as nothing compared to a game such as Doom 3, for example, which was released some 6 months later and (significantly) had kept a large and expectant audience on tenterhooks as to the power of its engine to produce stunning images, rather than necessarily stunning game play experience, right up to the moment of its release.[3] It is a potential source of irony in the history of the ongoing contest between graphics and game play that Doom 3 was to satisfy some of the expectation for providing a novelty of visual experience while being criticized in some quarters for lacking in satisfactory game play. In *Masters of Doom*, David Kushner (2003) reminded us of an earlier contest between John Carmack (the programmer responsible for the production of the Doom engine) and John Romero (responsible for the overall design of the early iterations of Doom) on the basis of game play versus graphics that was effectively won by the producer of the engine in the case of the first outing of Doom. The absence of Romero and the free rein given to Carmack in implementing his vision for the new Doom 3 engine did not result in some final victory for game play over graphics however, and Doom 3 is a self-consciously visual spectacular. The move to 3-D that was in a large part engineered by Carmack opened up a wealth of game play opportunities for the original Doom—there was no such paradigmatic leap in game play possibility enabled by technological advance evident in Doom 3. Instead, the process has been one of (albeit impressive) refinement of the visual experience that has been criticized, despite its effective and innovative use of normal mapping and dynamic lighting, for its low numbers of onscreen adversaries and restricted environments, for sacrificing that nebulous sense of game play to what might be achieved graphically.

What we, and Id Software, are confronted with here is the expectation of an audience not schooled to expect the near undetectable refinement of visual quality and effects, as in cinema, but to rapid technological improvement by leaps and bounds. Darwinia looks back, and there is a substantial and appreciative audience drawn to it at least partly for reasons of nostalgia, but the mainstream video game audience expects to be wowed at every turn by something both familiar and novel, that allows them to deploy their existing game literacy to know how to play but expresses a desire to experience something new. This is an audience sold its play experience through the currency of images, whether on the television screen or the glossy screenshots that dominate the games press. The commercial imperatives are clear, even if they are not necessarily welcomed by a significant proportion of committed gamers—graphics sell units.

Another example taken from game development however might appear to demonstrate the continuing validity of continuing to frame this as a confrontation of graphics versus game play. At the Games Development and Technology Conference in Liverpool in 2005 the lead programmer of Wipeout Pure offered a postmortem of the development experience of an antigravity racing game that was a successful release title for the U.S. launch of the PlayStation Portable (PSP) handheld console (Burrows, 2005). It was clear that the developers considered a working methodology that would appear to subordinate graphics to game play as a major success. A process by which there had been potential for conflict between the art team and the track design team where tracks were only playable after significant work had been completed by an artist who might then be asked to make major changes on game play grounds was eliminated by developing a custom tool plugin for the modeling software Maya. A designer would lay down a basic spline (the most basic geometry of a track) inside Maya with all the relevant game play features attached to it (camber, height, width, AI splines, etc.) and move it quickly into a playable build of the game. Only when game play was considered effective was the track handed to an artist to introduce art assets and textures, in effect providing the set design and dressing to the scene. A potential case seems to be made—there is a clear distinction made by Sony's Studio Liverpool between the game play and the art

It is interesting to note however that any imaginary participants in the game play versus graphics debate might look at Wipeout Pure and claim to have common sense on their side as they establish their respective positions. It is obvious that an advocate of concentrating on game play above all else is correct to do so—the game is fully featured at a point before it gets into the hands of its art team, its qualities as a game (its rules set, its negotiable outcomes, its challenges, etc.) are all discernible. It is a game, and that game is Wipeout Pure in the sense that any analysis of the final shipped product in the same terms will return the same results. We can (and perhaps should) recognize that we can produce useful and informative critique of Wipeout Pure the game qua game most productively when we are not distracted—as good ascetic humanist scholars, perhaps—by the vibrant graphics or its brash soundtrack. Denuded of its

graphics but retaining its game play, this might even be the "purest" form of Wipeout Pure. But it is also common sense to point out that this was not the game that was shipped to retail and was never meant to be put into the hands of the final consumer. Any imaginary advocate for a concentration on an analysis inclusive of graphical representation might reasonably argue that the production not only of something approaching PlayStation 2 (PS2) quality game play on the PSP but of PS2 quality graphics was essential to the success of Wipeout Pure as played experience. This is particularly evident when we remember that so much attention was given to the screen quality and screen size of the hardware and its ability to play high-quality video as an important feature of Sony's initial marketing push to establish an installed base. Its "look" would be as important as its "feel" to its commercial success, and is inseperable from it, and Sony was making a hard-nosed practical decision in investing significant resources in its art team as well as its programming team.

Even if such a young field as the study of video games might seem too fragile to withstand it, perhaps it is already necessary to consider acknowledging a bifurcation of attention between two potential schools of game studies (whether or not we need the neologism of ludology) and video game studies, where the latter must also attend to the specificity of the image and the gaze if they are to adequately account for the object of their attention. Part of Wipeout Pure's success can be attributed to its unique selling point of downloadable content. Consisting of new tracks, playable vehicles, music, and skins that alter the look of the management screens, much of this content did not affect the core game play significantly. The game play remains the same on the new tracks, and the handling characteristics of the new vehicles slot neatly into the rules set already established by the initial release. New skins for the front-end of the user interface have no effect on game play, and there can be nothing less significant for game play than having additional trackside hoardings in game. They are nevertheless perceived as having value by the players of the game who download them and by the developers who invest their time and resources in their manufacture. In part this is because they allow Wipeout to sustain, at least while new packs are being made available for download, its future-orientation and its offer of a continuing novelty of visual experience. A major contributory element to the visual aesthetic of Wipeout Pure is something that is crucial to a wide range of games—it depends on the operation of spectacle simultaneously delivered alongside an implied claim that "You ain't seen nothing yet."

Looking at Play

Things get a little messy in video game criticism if we attempt to make sweeping definitive statements about all games. Imagine for a moment that we are standing behind and slightly to one side of a player of a contemporary video game. Such an

act of imagination already begs a series of questions. Is the player standing at an arcade machine, sitting before a personal computer, relaxed on a sofa in front of a television set, holding a mobile phone or other device for handheld gaming? Are they alone or in company? Are they online and engaged with other human players or locked in solitary communication with the artificial intelligence of the machine? Is the interface a keyboard and mouse, a touch-sensitive screen, an alphanumeric keypad, a USB camera feeding the image of the player back to him or her as the controller, a joystick, a mat placed on the floor that translates foot movements into instructions, one of a range of proprietary gamepad controls for the various consoles, or even one of the more exotic controllers now available, from lightguns to maracas and bongo drums? It is as well to remember whenever anyone claims to be speaking about video games in universal terms that they are often attempting to force into a single category a huge range of phenomena that differ one from another in the most obvious and radical of ways. It might even be comforting that the variety of possible forms of video game play are both obvious and visible while we ask ourselves what it is that is unseen that binds these forms of play together.

For the moment however, I want to focus on the screen before the player. That at least, despite variations in size and the specific technology deployed, would appear to remain a constant presence in what is usually referred to when we claim to be considering video games. There is nothing if not a potentially vast variety of different sights that might greet us on that screen, even among commercial games that do not make any claim to radically reinvent the medium or push the boundaries of its possibilities of representation. Everything from film noir, Japanese anime, the abstraction of Tetris, and the universe of Barbie has been realized within games. As technological limits on games are lifted by the increase in brute processing power, there is less and less expectation that one game need necessarily resemble another. The days of the limited color palette and small pixel range of sprites of the 8- and 16-bit computing era are long gone as anything other than voluntary and self-imposed restrictions. And yet there is something about the transmission of information about the game being played through the medium of the screen that ties all such games together in the popular imagination, whether they be 2-D or 3-D, have the vast art team resources of Electronic Arts or Id Software behind them, or have an absence of formal artists, as with the team behind Darwinia.

If we draw back a little further and shift our attention to the player of games we are likely to see something far less varied but something that nevertheless reinforces an assumption that we should address questions of vision and of seeing when we attempt to understand video games. Even if we simply look at a player of games we will realize the importance of the gaze to the experience. In all but a handful of games and genres of games, the eyes will be fixed on the screen with what is a potentially almost disturbing level of concentration.

Games played out in real time demand a constant renewal of attention on their screens. The question we should ask ourselves however is what it is that fixes the player of games so firmly to his or her screen. What the spectator sees from the outside even

risks missing the whole function of the observation of the screen within the temporality of video game play. In a very real sense, any possible observer is out of synchronization with the player of the game. The screen does not represent the present, let alone the future, on which the player is focused. Rather, the screen represents the past of play. It presents us with a report that conveys information about the game state that is essential to successful play, but the player's gaze actually lingers elsewhere. The player is not fixed on the image that has been revealed as anything more than a confirmation of the success or failure of past action, or as an indicator of possible futures that may yet be revealed. To the outsider the screen may appear more or less visually interesting, more or less aesthetically pleasing: To the player it is full of rich possibilities of future action, pointing always off to the moment at which it will be replaced by another image and then another. Its purpose, if it fulfills its function, is to insist on its own erasure as it prompts the player to move on and look elsewhere. If it is not able to demand its own extinction, and the screen no longer spurs him or her to action, then the game has failed or the player has failed in his or her cooperative construction of an experience that is never static and can never be captured effectively on a screen as anything but the fossil record of play. Instead, the image seen within play is always one that invites intervention and choice and produces a fleeting stream of swiftly changing images.

It is in the lack of any clear understanding of this very space where image meets action, and image is essential to the generation of action, that confusion can be generated and video games as visual experience can be most profoundly misunderstood, particularly by those who do not play. To restate what is probably obvious to us as games scholars, video games are not something that we primarily watch and observe like film or television but are something that we engage with through the action of play. Games are also temporal events that exist only in their dialogic relationship with a player, and a video game without a player is just so much dead code. An image may remain on screen without the input of a player, but it means nothing in terms of game experience unless it prompts a player to erase it and return the screen to a fluid and mobile state of play. Some video games might still go into "attract mode" as arcade machines always have, where the screen shows a simulation of play or a recording of actual play, but the source of that attraction is not so much on what is seen, the achieved image presented before us, but the invitation that the image presents that we may see something different and something other if only we were to insert a coin and take up the controls or pick up the gamepad. And that possible future of a vast array of potential images is accessible only to the player and not to the spectator. We must do much more than simply observe.

Video Games Seen in the Gallery

Any discussion of the visual aesthetics of video games would do well not to restrict itself to an examination of commercial and popular understandings of games

and also acknowledge the way in which some artists, and particularly some visual artists, have begun to incorporate games into their work. When the artists Jodi showed a new work for the first time at the FACT gallery in Liverpool in 2004 they seemed to seek to challenge an understanding of all video game play as necessitating the conformist rehearsal of prescripted (and prescriptive) action that would be familiar to those critics of games who would see the practice of playing video games as demanding little in the way of the imaginative intervention of the player. Their installation *Max Payne Cheats-Only Gallery* was largely made up of a series of video recordings of events manufactured inside the game space of the commercial game Max Payne by the artists manipulating both the conventional controls of the game and the command console through which more radical manipulations (the cheats of the piece's title) might be accomplished. These interventions were then played back on monitors from which the viewer was deliberately distanced and excluded. Peering through small circular holes in a whitewashed corridor, the visitor was able to see moments at which the encounter between the artists and the game had led to a collapse of the integrity of Max Payne as a three-dimensional virtual space open for navigation and exploration that Henry Jenkins (2004) would describe as its "narrative architecture." Flaws in the illusion of this as a consistent space were exposed as bodies were caught in impossible poses and positions. The flat planes of triangles that make up the scenery were revealed in a way that the game's producers could not have foreseen as possible, or certainly desirable, in the normal process of play. Animations faltered and sound effects were caught in stuttering loops within the restrictive corridors to create audio confusion.

In a very real way, Jodi were not obeying the rules or playing the game. In doing so, they showed what players who are fully cognizant of the rules system they are confronted with in such a game might do to counter the tyranny of rehearsed action. Jodi certainly sought to present this as a work of resistance and subversion. The game might demand that the player conform to its expectations if they are to be rewarded with progression through its twin structures of narrative plot revelation and movement from level to level, but Jodi chose to play with the game rather than to simply play the game. What the visitor to the gallery had access to in turn was a record of this play with the game as object. As visual artists they had disallowed the game gaze and reconfigured the raw material so that it be understood according to our understanding of the cinematic or painterly gaze—this was an essentially static image open to interpretation and deconstruction, but it did not point to any future possibility that would be accessible by a player.

What the visitor did not have access to was the experience of play itself. There was no keyboard and mouse or gamepad controller attached to these monitors that would allow the visitor to engage with the game. In fact, the game itself was absent, with no computer or console present on which the code was actually running. All that was within the gallery was the record of event in which the audience was able

to trace the play of the artists. In using the game as the source material for their own display of playfulness, Jodi had erased Max Payne as a game. Something was absent, and that something was directly related to what makes video games so appealing to their players—the imminent possibility, always, that the player may intervene to manufacture his or her own aesthetic experience.

This is related in turn to the problems that academic critics of games face when they attempt to articulate what might be meant when video game players or developers discuss game play. Most essentially concerned with the question of the experience of playing and the feelings of satisfaction generated (or not) by the actual practice of being in control of the game, *game play* remains a difficult term when attempts are made at precise definition, but it might be usefully thought to refer to this invisible crucial element in any video game's aesthetic that functions through the game gaze. Whether successful or not, game play rests somewhere between the imagination of the possibility of plural future outcomes inherent in any game space, whether they are the cluttered film noir spaces of Max Payne or the austere asteroid belt of Asteroids, and the physical action of the manipulation of the interface of control. As the core experience of play, the moment of game play is born and dies again and again in that impossible Aristotlian moment of the indefinable present as the player exists within a constantly renewed loop of action that alters the observable game state.

In this space between the way games have begun to enter the gallery as (visual) art and the ways in which the practice of play demands a different aesthetic understanding, we can locate a potential misapprehension of games as something other than played experiences where the aesthetic is generated in a maelstrom of anticipation, speculation, and action. Video games prioritize the participation of the player as he or she plays, and that player always apprehends the game as a matrix of future possibility. The focus, always, is not on what is before us or the "what happens next" of traditionally unfolding narrative but on the "what happens next if I" that places the player at the center of experience as its principle creator, necessarily engaged in an imaginative act, and always oriented toward the future. In effect, the game gaze might appear to rest on the image on the screen, but the player sees through and beyond the screen and into the future.

The Present of the Future

In his essay "Towards Computer Game Studies," Markku Eskelinen (2004) rightly focused on the function of time in computer games. What he termed the dominant temporality of the intersection between "user time" and "event time" certainly describes the action of play, which recognizes the twin activities of manipulation of the game interface in user time (whether it is the engagement with the controller, the

joystick, the keyboard, or the mouse) and the feedback of the consequences of that manipulation in event time (on screen, through the vibration of the controller, and through changes in audio content). As a means of describing the activity of play this works well and achieves Eskelinen's stated desire to show the specificity of games when compared to traditional forms of print and cinematic narrative. We might take his model of how games work a little further however and recognize that there is a third temporal category that must be more clearly foregrounded: that of the present of the future. It might seem a little extreme to turn to the philosophical musings of a Christian saint and bishop to account for our experience of time as it relates to computer games, but the threefold understanding of time offered up by Augustine (397/1991) in book XI of the *Confessions* might usefully cast light on how games function. Augustine might have been focused on how psalms are sung, but his wrestling with the problem of how the present (which as Aristotle had noted has no discernible duration) links with the past and the future offers an intriguing model of how experience of the computer game both resembles and differs from other experiences. It is all too tempting for the critic of games to recognize the present of the playing, or the past of having played, but we also need to remember that these combine in the action of event only because of our anticipation of the future.[4] As Peter Brooks (1985) explained, for Augustine, "There is a present of the past, in the form of memory, and a present of the future, in the form of anticipation or awaiting" (p. 328). How games differ from psalms and from other forms of experience such as television and film is in the prioritization of the present of the future and the ways in which that future is always negotiable, always subject to intervention by the player who can act to affect it. Video games are all about anticipation, they always have a future-orientation.

Games such as Doom 3 make it abundantly clear that their orientation is always toward possible futures in a way that would not be sufficiently accounted for unless we recognize that any concentration on *ends, goals, outcomes*, or even *winning conditions* needs to acknowledge the plural status of such terms. Everything about contemporary triple-A games, including the frequency of sequels that promise always more than previous incarnations, points toward a future of plural possibility. They inhabit, and we inhabit as we play, Augustine's present of the future. Our memory of the past always conditions how we anticipate the future, but that future is both predictable and unpredictable, always potential and unknowable until brought into being by the action of playing. This orientation toward the future is evident in terms of the promise of technological advance inherent in any new game engine or processing technology, in the building of anticipation through the release of teaser screenshots and video as part of the marketing plan, and in the relationship between the games themselves and the promise they hold out (even before release) for the user mods, downloadable content, and expansion packs that will propel them once again into the realm of anticipation of what it might yet be. The contemporary video

game presents itself to its potential players through a rhetoric of future possibility, whether that be focused on shader and lighting effects, new and previously unseen spectacle, or tools that will enable user modification of the game to produce something else. And the game gaze is always subject to future-orientation.

Notes

1. For examples of playable games that depend on sound for their feedback mechanisms, see the archive kept at Audiogames.net at http://www.audiogames.net. Accessed November 2005.

2. I have explored the extent to which games are essentially iterative and confined to a basic structure of repetition with difference elsewhere (Atkins, 2005a). There is not space to rehearse these arguments here, but they rely on what I have termed an *aesthetics of iteration* where the novelty experienced as we play games fragment by fragment, level by level, and stage by stage depends on this aesthetic renewal of iteration.

3. See Atkins (2005c) for a detailed examination of the role of prerelease screenshots and video in feeding this desire for the imagination of what Doom 3 might yet be.

4. The relevant chapter is book XI, "Time and Eternity," pp. 221-245. For Augustine (397/1991), our knowledge of the past constructs the future, where he claims that "Suppose I am about to recite a psalm which I know. Before I begin, my expectation is directed towards the future" (p. 243). The key difference in the playing of the computer or video game is that the whole is unknowable even if we have played the game or the level before.

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