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## **Playing with the Future: Social Irrealism and the Politics of Aesthetics**

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### **Abstract**

*In this paper we wish to explore the political possibilities of video games. Numerous scholars now take seriously the place of popular culture in the remaking of our geographies, but video games still lag behind. For us, this tendency reflects a general response to them as imaginary spaces that are separate from everyday life and 'real' politics. It is this disconnect between abstraction and lived experience that we complicate by defining play as an event of what Brian Massumi calls lived abstraction. We wish to short-circuit the barriers that prevent the aesthetic resonating with the political and argue that through their enactment, video games can animate fantastical futures that require the player to make, and reflect upon, profound ethical decisions that can be antagonistic to prevailing political imaginations. We refer to this as social irrealism to demonstrate that reality can be understood through the impossible and the imagined.*

**Key words:** Video games, aesthetics, politics, social irrealism, popular geopolitics, lived abstraction

### **Introduction**

In the past decade video games have become deeply wired within everyday life. From playing *Angry Birds* on a smartphone to playing the latest *Call of Duty* franchise online, these virtual worlds are now destinations that millions of people explore, consume, and experiment with. And yet, despite these heterogeneous geographies and assemblages (Shaw 2011), video games are continually represented by the mainstream media in simplistic and reductive ways. While the tide is undoubtedly changing (albeit unevenly), their presence in tabloids is frequently marked by their association with violence. Consider

these recent newspaper headlines: 'Violent video games DO make people more aggressive' (Darrall 2011), 'How video games blur real life boundaries and prompt thoughts of 'violent solutions' to players' problems' (Hope 2011). The release of *Modern Warfare 3*—which generated \$1 billion in sales just over two weeks after its release—is a recent example of a game that fomented much controversy. The military shooter prompted a UK MP to table an 'early day motion' (2427) 'That this House is deeply concerned about the recently released video game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, in which players engage in gratuitous acts of violence against members of the public...'. While no doubt instrumental to legitimizing the 'military entertainment complex' (Shaw 2010), video games are much more than this violent caricature.

Likewise, 'intellectual' critics continue to deride the literary, intellectual and aesthetic value of games, infantilising them as silly rather than sublime, as puerile rather than political, as entertainment rather than education. Veteran film critic Roger Ebert generated impassioned debate over claims that video games do not qualify as art, stating 'To my knowledge, no one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers' (Ebert 2005). While hardly representative as a gatekeeper for 'art', Ebert's view is not uncommon: video games are not, and can never be, art. Journalist Charlie Brooker (2009 np) laments that, 'for all the talk of just how many trillion units *Modern Warfare 2* has shifted, games strike around half the population as utterly inaccessible: a peculiar situation for a mass-market industry'. The purpose of this paper, however, is not to defend video games as artistic, despite that being a position that many now rally to, citing games such as *Flower* and *Journey* or the 2012 art exhibition on video games at the Smithsonian. Instead, we wish

to recover the inherent ambiguities and political possibilities of video games. As Mary Flanagan writes in her book *Critical Play*:

For many game players, games exist for entertainment, for passing the time, for fun. They are a diversionary activity, meant for relaxation or distraction – a ‘not-work’ space where players are free to engage in fantasy narratives, amazing feats, and rewarding tasks. But what if certain games have become something *more*? What if some games, and the more general concept of ‘play,’ not only provide outlets for entertainment but also function as means for creative expression, as instruments for conceptual thinking, or as tools to help examine or work through social issues (Flanagan 2009: 1)

Even a cursory observation reveals that video games are inscribed by a myriad of narratives (see Hones 2011 for more on ‘narrative space’), produce a range of dystopian and utopian landscapes, and create characters and monsters that blur all kinds of boundaries—transgressing as well as reinforcing identity norms. While Flanagan (2009) focuses on artistic experiments and performances in her understanding of ‘critical play’, we suggest that video games can also be seen as politico-aesthetic technologies because they animate fantastical futures that require the player to make, and reflect upon, profound ethical decisions. Numerous scholars have gone before us in taking seriously the place of popular culture in the remaking of our geographies (e.g. Aitken and Zonn 1994; Kneale and Kitchin 2002; Sharp 1993; Dodds 1996; Dittmer 2010; Dittmer and Gray 2010), but video games still lag behind (c.f. Shaw and Warf, 2009). For us, this tendency reflects a more general response to them as imaginary play spaces that are separate from everyday life and ‘real’

politics. It is this disconnect between *abstraction* and *lived experience* that we wish to complicate by defining play as an event of what Brian Massumi (2011) calls *lived abstraction* - an 'occurrent practice' that undoes entrenched dualities between representation and experience. In short, we wish to short-circuit the barriers that prevent the aesthetic resonating with the political. Our particular focus in this paper are the ways in which video games create and experiment with future geographies, with the political located precisely in 'the indeterminate but relationally potentialized fringes of existing situations, beyond the limits of current framings or regulatory principles' (Massumi 2011: 53). And it is here we agree with Andy Merrifield's (2009: 386) reflection that 'Politics more than anything else needs the magical touch of dream and desire, needs the shock of the poetic; left to professional career politicians, the political is always destined to feel stifled and lifeless and apolitical; it's always destined to induce a jetlagged, deadening insomnia...'

In order to illuminate the political, future-oriented aesthetics of video games, we develop and extend the concept of 'social irrealism'. Social irrealism is a form of storytelling where questions over the future of humanity and its existential place in the world are told through imaginary landscapes and alien tropes that refract and reshape the real. While it is true that video games usually produce fictional spaces, they do not produce entirely *unreal* spaces. Instead, they are much more like virtual laboratories for probing, playing, and experimenting with reality. In order to demonstrate how video games mobilize this 'shock of the poetic' and create socially irreal spaces, we engage with some of the most successful games series in recent memory: *Deus Ex*, *Mass Effect* and *Bioshock*. The use of allegory is by no means new of course, but what is unique to video games is the level of interactivity they afford the player—by their very nature they are designed to create 'complex, implicit, contingent conditions wherein the texture of engaged human experience can happen'

(Malaby 2007: 107). That is to say, video games are fictional worlds that nonetheless embody very real forms of social commentary, and as a result of the play that they stimulate, immerse the player in socially unreal spaces that can either be aligned with or antagonistic to prevailing political imaginations.

### **Playing games**

Play is a slippery concept, understood in multiple and oftentimes contradictory ways. Play is frequently opposed to work as its unproductive other, even if though the gaming industry generated \$25.1 billion of revenue in 2010 (ESRB 2011). Yet on further examination play reveals itself to be *more* than the opposite of work (Yee, 2006); *more* than an activity isolated in its own 'magic circle' (Malaby 2007); and *more* than 'a mere series of images and sounds that function as signifiers of a fictional world' (Cain 2008: 57). Play is a verb that suggests a thoroughly active engagement, a 'co-mingling between self and world' (Shaw 2010: 791) that involves all kinds of cyborgian elements (Haraway 1991). The upshot of this is an understanding of play that is *performative* and not easily separable from everyday experience: 'The essential point, then, is that games are grounded in (and constituted by) human practice and are therefore always in the process of becoming' (Malaby 2007: 103). Against a 'separate sphere' approach then, we see video gaming as a process threaded within the warp and weft of social life.

This understanding of gaming as a type of becoming connects with recent calls in popular geopolitics to understand the performative nature of consuming media (Dittmer and Dodds 2008; Dittmer and Gray 2010). Even viewing a movie—a seemingly 'passive' activity—involves all kinds of emotional feedbacks and reinscriptions of meaning; little and

not-so-little embodied and cognitive participations. Consequently, not only is the boundary between performance and consumption blurred; so too is the boundary between the discursive and the concrete, such that 'The representational and affective qualities of video game worlds are not opposites but complementary forces always doing work on the player' (Shaw and Warf 2009: 1341, see also Ash 2009). It is the *ludic* quality of video games, where narratives are *shown* to the player through spatial exploration, rather than being simply *told*, which separates video games from other types of media, and is therefore of inherent interest to geographers. Indeed, Cubitt distinguishes 'the role of narrative in digital media by noting that the medium of the computer favours spatial metaphors over temporal ones, and that artists working with the medium face a privileging of eschatological metaphors over teleological ones' (in Thomas 2006: 101). What's more, in an attempt to produce a type of 'contrived contingency', many games include 'sandbox' features that allow for all kinds of spatial exploration and play. So while video games are limited by an underlying software code, these rules need to be seen as 'both artificially constraining on participants yet at the same time productive of the pleasure of play' (Lastowka 2009: 388).

These descriptions of play point towards a fundamental creativity. Play is an event, an occurrent practice, that while emerging from a set of pre-existing empirical conditions, cannot be reduced to them. Play is therefore differentially composed by its 'oneness' and 'manyness'. Its oneness or singularity results from the fact that in its very existence it produces change in the world that is unique to its own inherent 'here and now', which, no matter how similar to other occurrences of play, is ontologically *different* and cannot be replicated. Play's manyness results from its participation and emergence within a pre-existing world that is structured by technologies, software codes, bodies, and emotions. As a preliminary remark then, and one that we return to in the discussion section of the paper,

we want to suggest the politicality of play arises not simply through its 'politicized content' (the domain we turn to immediately below) but through its production of empirical novelty in the world, a novelty that *can* be re-inscribed and taken up in subsequent experiences, such that 'When an occasion of experience perishes in the world of bare-active potential from which it arose, it contributes its self-formative activity to the world, for potential uptake into a next occasion's unfolding' (Massumi 2011: 22). The critical-political moment of play then, is not simply its semiotic or heuristic exploration of political themes and narratives, but its composing and 'passing on' of the experiences it invents. As Woodyer (2012: 322) puts it:

By refracting aspects of society, play is a vehicle for becoming conscious of those things and relationships that we would otherwise enact or engage without thinking...Through its playing with limits, experimentation with rules, roles and meanings, and mimetic behaviour, playing contains transformative potential. It is an area ripe for rupture, sparks of insight and moments of invention, which present us with ways to be 'otherwise'. In Benjamin's terms, it is through playing that a revolutionary consciousness and possibilities for more wilful social transformations may emerge.

### **Social irrealism**

Developments in technology have increased the sophistication and possibilities of play. David Cage, the director of the critically acclaimed murder-mystery game *Heavy Rain* put it bluntly when he said 'This is not a game about saving the princess or the world' (quoted in

Lomberg 2011). Of course, for every experimental game developed, there are others that stick to rigidly formulaic structures, but that is equally true of other types of media. Drawing on Brian Sutton-Smith's classic, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Flanagan (2009) highlights the potential of 'critical play' to help define social norms and identities. She explains that although generally set in fantasy spaces, players often experience *real* issues within them and 'create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life' (Flanagan 2009: 6). It is this experience of real issues in fantastical settings we wish to expand upon in our use of *social irrealism*. John Steinbeck's novels *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* are considered masterpieces of *social realism*. They depict the plight and struggle of working women and men during the Great Depression of 1930s-era America. Steinbeck's tales of human misery were scathing reports on the prevailing injustices he witnessed. Other forms of realism – whether magical realism or forms of science fiction similarly combine aspects of the real, the observable and familiar, with aspects of social critique, imagination and mythology. The point for all of these forms of realism is not simply to escape reality, but rather to intensify particular aspects of it. By using the term *social irrealism* then, we do not want to turn realism on its head, but instead, demonstrate that reality can be understood through the impossible and the imagined.

Our analysis thus proceeds in a way that emphasizes the combination of the real and imagined to highlight the impossibilities of both poles of mimesis and fiction (Sharp 2000). We use the term *social irrealism* to argue that the human confrontation with the unfamiliar and the hybrid, which are hallmarks of 'irreal' literature, coincide with a political framework for understanding social existence beyond its actualities towards its possible futures. In short, we use *social irrealism* to designate the perennial uncertainties of life exposed to the strange and wondrous manifestations of infinity. This type of *social irrealism* is common in

science fiction writing, so much so that Kneale and Kitchin (2002: 3-4) argue that sci-fi can be seen as a 'privileged site for critical thought'. This is because at the heart of science fiction is 'a gap: between science and fiction, between the reader's reality and the world of fiction, between the possible and the impossible' (Kneale and Kitchin 2002: 4). This gap offers profound political possibility. For example, China Miéville has stated that 'There was never a moment I was interested in writing the kind of stuff we can grandly called mimetic, that was "socially realist." I was always interested in the surreal, the imaginary' (quoted in Brown et al. 2012). The politics of social irrealism are therefore 'suspended between a here and now and an elsewhen or else-where' (Anderson 2010a: 783). The (im)possibility of some futures and not others emerges directly from what is experienced and accepted in the present—and socially irreal media tugs us towards this unknown. The term 'science fiction' covers a vast range of literature and other cultural forms, from high concept, high culture to summer blockbusters, which means that it lacks precision. Thus we use the term social irrealism to highlight those aspects of science fiction central to our argument.

The socially irreal qualities of video games can thus offer spaces in which possible futures are played with and experienced. While popular geopolitics, for instance, is traditionally rooted in understanding the role of media and culture in shaping discourses and practices that reflect *present* political conditions, we want to argue that the creativity inherent within video games allow players to experiment with and reflect upon futures that *may* come to pass. The future is often viewed as a dangerous realm of surprises, contingency, and shocks that must be managed and secured, enlisting a range of anticipatory actions that essentially discipline processes of change and becoming (Anderson 2010b; Dillon 2007; Foucault 2003). Despite this overdetermination, popular culture is constantly producing its own future geographies and impossible spaces: 'In everyday life,

“present futures” and “future presents” are constantly embodied, experienced, told, narrated, imagined, performed, wished, planned, (day)dreamed, symbolized and sensed’ (Anderson 2010a: 783). It is this battle of imagination over the status of the future—both as a future present and present future—that we find embodied and enlivened in the socially unreal spaces of video games.

Not all video games are socially unreal of course; more-than-often they repeat well-rehearsed scripts from everyday life, unproblematically reflecting identity norms. The choice of game series we analyze in this paper—*Deus Ex*, *Mass Effect* and *BioShock*—must therefore be seen as necessarily selective. But these are not incidental selections – all have been both critically and financially successful. The third instalment of Bioware’s *Mass Effect* trilogy, for instance, was the biggest entertainment launch of the year at the time of writing, as well as receiving an exceptional 75 perfect scores in critical reviews ([masseffect.bioware.com](http://masseffect.bioware.com)). These series are thus indicative of a range of games that allow players to engage with issues of contemporary importance, whether the impacts of multinational corporations, the privatisation of DNA, or the manipulation of biological life and its intersection with technology. These issues are not usually expressed mimetically, with game developers choosing to use unreal spaces and characters to unravel political motifs and possible futures. They reveal what *might* come to exist in the near and far future, and therefore the politics located within these games are more of a possibility than a probability; more of an ambiguity than an actuality—that nonetheless speaks to our present condition without being reducible to it. By discussing the socially unreal spaces of video games we wish to show how they raise profound ethical and moral questions for the player to answer and experiment with. In what follows we explore the social unrealism of these games as a form of political and immersive science fiction: starting with the challenges of

‘playing with science’—a motif which runs as a device through all of the series—and finishing with a closer reading of the critique of utopia in the first of the *BioShock* series.

### **Playing with the future**

We begin our analysis with *Deus Ex* and *Mass Effect*—both of which share a common concern with the future uses and abuses of science and technology. Our purpose is to highlight the complex socio-political issues these games grapple with and the ‘future geographies’ that they construct for the player to explore. *Deus Ex* and *Mass Effect* involve complex, textured, and inter-woven narratives where the decisions the player makes can have far-reaching consequences.

Both games are set in the distant future. *Deus Ex* (released in 2000) is a dark, brooding, conspiracy-driven ‘cyber-punk’ role-playing game set in 2052. The protagonist is JC Denton, a human augmented with super-human nanotechnology, and an agent for the United Nations Anti-Terrorist Coalition (UNATCO). He is charged with eliminating members of the ‘terrorist’ National Secessionist Forces (NSF), which is believed to have stolen shipments of the ‘Ambrosia’ vaccine, a cure for the ‘Gray Death’ virus that plagues the planet's abject population. JC tracks down the shipment, where he finds his brother, a UNATCO agent that has defected to the NSF after learning that the Gray Death is a fabricated virus and that UNATCO is only disbursing supplies to powerful elites. JC allies with his brother in a scene which appears to present the player with a genuine moral dilemma<sup>i</sup>, and becomes a wanted man. Denton is eventually captured and held prisoner in UNATCO headquarters, where he is freed by an AI program known as 'Deadalus' and both Dentons escape to Hong Kong, where they discover the Gray Death virus was originally created by

the Illuminati. As the game progresses, JC becomes caught up in a network of shadowy organizations and conspiracies, and learns that the real 'puppet master' is an Illuminati splinter group called Majestic 12, headed by businessman Bob Page, who now controls UNATCO, the Gray Death, and Ambrosia supplies. As the game reaches its climax, the player must make a further moral judgement in deciding how to defeat Page: plunge the world into a Dark Age by destroying global communications, bring the Illuminati back to power by killing Page, or merge with the modified Deadalus AI to rule the world as a benevolent dictator.

*Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (released in 2011) is a prequel set in 2027, at the dawn of human augmentation. The game is centred on Adam Jensen, a security consultant employed by Sarif Industries, a North American biotechnology company. Sarif Industries is attacked at the start of the game, and Jensen is mortally wounded, brought back to life by military-grade augmentations. Under directions from CEO David Sarif, Jensen's first task is to intervene in a hostage crisis at one of Sarif's manufacturing plants that is under siege by the radical anti-augmentation 'terrorist' group Purity First. After bringing the crisis to a successful conclusion, Jensen investigates who is behind both attacks, and comes to discover a massive government cover-up and collusion with Sarif's main competitor which turns out to be a pawn of the Illuminati, who are developing a 'killswitch' for all augmented people worldwide, forcing them to submit to their rule. Before this can happen, the Nobel Prize-winning father of human augmentation, Hugh Darrow, activates a signal that causes everyone who received a psychological upgrade to turn violently insane—an act he justified as a last resort to get biotechnology banned forever. The game ends at a massive geothermal plant run by Darrow, and like the original *Deus Ex*, has multiple conclusions. Jensen can broadcast Darrow's confession about the Illuminati's intentions, thus ensuring

augmentation is permanently banned. He can blame the pro-human group Humanity Front for the attack on people's minds, thus furthering augmentation; he can blame the insanity on faulty augmentations to ensure tighter regulation; or he can destroy the entire geothermal station (thus killing everyone that knew the truth) and let humanity decide its fate.

The *Deus Ex* game series is a complicated, inter-textual, socially unreal space, full of choices (big and small) for the player to make. At its core, *Deus Ex* pivots on the anxieties surrounding government control. The original game is driven by conspiracy theories covering everything from black helicopters, vaccinations, and FEMA, to the Illuminati, Area 51, the ECHELON network, and even extraterrestrials. The production and distribution of 'Grey Death' to control and manipulate the masses connects to a general critique of the ways in which shadowy elites use bio-technology to garner and cement their power. Not dissimilarly, *Human Revolution* grapples with the morality of transhumanism—of pushing humanity beyond its own biological frontiers, and an industry which promises to cure human disability and enhance a range of human abilities through augmentation. The game's protagonist wouldn't be alive without augmentation, but the very same technology is responsible for holding millions of people hostage to political control. The universe is split between pro-augmentation corporations such as Sarif Industries and anti-augmentation humanity groups ('Purity First', 'Humanity Front'). Indeed, the role of bio-tech corporations as unelected power-brokers that can single-handedly decide the fate of humanity is *the* central moral problematic in *Human Revolution*, and one that invites the player to not only reflect on the ethics of human augmentation—but actively decide its future. Recalling the Icarus myth, the game's director, Jean-Francois Dugas, states that today 'mankind is using mechanical augmentations but there is still much to be determined in terms of their effect

on society and the ultimate direction it will lead us in' (in Bramwell 2010). Taken together, both games are animated by the complex interactions and uncertain futures of corporate and government control, technology, and (bare) life.

The trilogy of *Mass Effect* games, released over a period of seven years from 2005 to 2012, has a more consciously historical vision of the future. The first game sees Earth seeking membership of the Galactic Council, but placed very much at the margin of things. The protagonist, Shepard, is a human military officer who is the first human to be admitted into the prestigious intergalactic paramilitary organisation, Spectre. In the initial instalment, Shepard must stop the renegade Spectre officer, Saren, from leading an army of synthetic life-forms (the Geth) to conquer the galaxy. However, Shepard soon realises that there is a far greater threat when s/he<sup>ii</sup> receives a message from a mysterious ancient race, the Protheans, via a beacon which warns that the galaxy is threatened by the Reapers, a non-organic race of creatures which destroys all organic life from the Galaxy every 50000 years. The Protheans were wiped out in the last cycle and the beacon warns that the cycle is about to be repeated. The game ends with Shepard's defeat of Saren but a growing fear that something much more dangerous is still out there. The second game starts with a scene of Shepard's death as her/his ship is destroyed by a Reaper ship that has entered the galaxy. Using advanced cybernetics, Shepard is brought back to life by the pro-human organisation, Cerberus, and is sent on a mission to find and destroy the reaper base threatening the galaxy. It is an uneasy alliance because Cerberus was presented as a violent and xenophobic human-interest group in the first game, and many characters (including Shepard) are wary of its intentions. En route, Shepard has to amass a team, bringing together races from around the galaxy. At the end of the game, Shepard has to choose whether to destroy the Reaper base or to hand it over to the Illusive Man, the shadowy leader of Cerberus. In the

final game, the Reaper invasion of the galaxy has started and is centred on Earth. With a backdrop throughout of massive planetary destruction, Shepard must unite all the races in the galaxy to stand a chance of stopping the Reaper attack. At the same time, Cerberus is now clearly identified as an enemy as the organisation attempts to subvert Shepard's mission and the Illusive Man is shown to be working with the Reapers.

At the game's conclusion, Shepard makes it to the control room of the Reaper ship only to discover that the Reaper invasion has been orchestrated by a being which exists outside of organic understandings of time and space. The being explains that the Reapers are needed to destroy advanced organic life every 50000 years because of the inevitability of synthetic life turning on its creators when it achieves a certain level of sophistication. Without this selective destruction, all organic life would die out. Shepard hears that 50000 years before, humans (and the other races involved in the defence of the galaxy this time around) were not considered sufficiently developed to require destruction and so were left alone. This time, their technological developments posed a threat to their continued survival and so they were targeted for destruction. Shepard has the option to destroy the Reapers, to control them or, if s/he has been sufficiently successful in uniting the galaxy, also has a third option of synthesis: to end the historical pattern of building opposition and destruction by uniting organic and synthetic life. Throughout the three games, Shepard must make decisions about who to save, who to support, and how to act (through choices marked as 'paragon' or 'renegade') and these actions come back to shape the nature of gameplay in the third instalment. Game designer Casey Hudson claimed in an interview that *Mass Effect 3* would complete the story arc of Commander Shepard, and would pull in over 1,000 variables from *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* to shape how players experience the final chapter (Elroy 2010).

One particular aspect of the future that is explored in these game series is the nature of life as synthetic intelligence and medical science become ever more advanced. In addition to the corporate politics of control of the 'augmentation' industry in *Deus Ex*, there is also a politics of 'pure' humanity (the Humanity Front, a group celebrating natural evolution and opposing any human interference) against the population of 'aug's'. Interestingly, in both *Deus Ex* and *Mass Effect*, the player's character has been critically injured at the start of the story and other agents have chosen to augment them without their consent, leaving them as ambivalent characters in this politics between science and nature, but benefitting from many of the game-winning advantages. The storylines of both *Deus Ex* and *Mass Effect* are set within futuristic geographies where technology has overcome the obstacles that once held humanity back: in the case of *Deus Ex* this is directly linked to overcoming the fleshy limitations of the human body, whereas in *Mass Effect*, alien technologies have allowed humans to make contact with other species in far flung corners of the galaxy. In its sweeping story-arc *Mass Effect* raises the politics to a galactic scale and the game's ambition sees it drawing on the themes of control over alien scientific advancement in the context of intergalactic power-struggles, biowarfare, and a threat that goes beyond human perception of space and time.

As noted above, *Deus Ex* and *Mass Effect* are highly interactive and demand that the player makes moral and ethical choices that will affect the outcome of their relationship with other characters and events in the gaming world. This is written through the narratives of the games, but is also embedded within their ludic qualities. In *Deus Ex* there is a choice in *how* the game is played. Either the player can decide to load up with heavy weapons and go in all guns blazing, or s/he can decide on a stealthy mode of play in which the aims of each level can be achieved without killing a single character (and indeed in the Xbox version

of the game, an “achievement” is awarded if the whole game is played without killing a single additional character this way). The *experience* of playing the game in the two modes is quite different. Moreover, since these games pivot around the personalities and decisions of characters, there is an emotional investment demanded of the player. While the big existential choices are still in operation—which in *Deus Ex* literally change the course of the planet, and in *Mass Effect* all of biological life —there are variety of intimate and often humorous moments that are part of the gaming experience.

There are also intimate moments when other characters appear to react to the player’s conversation choices or actions with happiness or sorrow, anger, pride or humiliation. The apparent choice to switch sides and support Denton’s brother in the first *Deus Ex* game, seemed like a very significant, and very individual, choice made by both authors at the time of playing. The recurring nature of many of the characters in the *Mass Effect* story-arc does lead to a sense of familiarity, if not friendship, and so the death or injury of these characters is of more than trivial meaning to the unfolding of the story. Immediate conversation options, character response and atmospheric filmic cut scenes all provide affective signs in the playing out of the characters and game. In an attempt to convey this process, we offer two flash points in the play of the final game (both of which a dependent upon decisions made in earlier instalments).

One of the most significant moral choices running through the *Mass Effect* trilogy is how to deal with the Genophage, a disease manufactured by one race, the Turian, to restrict the fertility of another, the Krogan, a race that the Turian considered warlike and potentially threatening in greater numbers. In *Mass Effect 2*, the effects of this biowarfare start to become clear as it seems that Krogan society has become more warlike precisely because of the limited number of fertile females (and there are suggestions that gender relations have

also changed as a result of this). In this and the final game, there are choices to be made that can lead to a cure for the Genophage but this will lead to diplomatic pressures from those who fear the consequences of unrestrained Krogan population growth and threaten to withdraw support for the battle against the Reapers. On the other hand, if the player chooses not to pursue a cure, s/he loses a friend and a different ally in the final battle. Thus, there are at least two 'scales' of decision-making to be undertaken here: the first in terms of the personal relationship built up with a particular character (and, given the investment of time required, this might be in the order of 30 or 40 hours spent 'together' working through the trials of the two previous games). At the same time, the decision influences the numbers who will join the player in the final battle of the trilogy and thus the possibility of success. A decision made with the intention of forging alliances for the coming battle can lead to the end of a friendship.

The second example emerged quite powerfully in the differences in playing styles between the authors. In the final game, Shepard must try to unite different races to beat the final Reaper invasion. At one point, s/he must make a decision between the biological Quarians and the Geth, a race of synthetic life forms built as servants by the Quarians. Some time ago, the Geth had revolted against the Quarian, driving them from their home world, and leaving them as intergalactic migrants. In the final game, the Quarians are trying to retake their home world but Shepard meets with the Geth who explain that their past actions had been in self-defence and that they now wished to work with the Quarians in the bigger fight against the Reapers. Shepard has to decide whether to support this by freeing the Geth to fight alongside the other races. Shepard's Quarian friend Tali, insists the Geth cannot be trusted.

In our play-through of the third installment, both authors decided that the Geth should not be kept enslaved and so freed them, against Tali's recommendation. For Jo, who had built up considerable trust between her Shepard and Tali over the previous instalments, this led to a new co-operation between the Geth and Quarian, who worked together to recolonize the home world and fought together in the final battle. What was apparently the same decision for Ian had very different results. Because he had made different decisions in the run up to this moment, the Quarians did not trust him and continued to fight the Geth. Freeing the synthetic life forms gave them greater strength and they fought back, destroying the Quarian. In the cut scene that followed, Tali, devastated by the annihilation of her race dramatically threw herself off a cliff. Although he had the strength of the synthetic Geth forces for the final battle, Ian's Shepard had lost a friend in the most dramatic manner. As the producers of the game have repeatedly noted, the decisions made in *Mass Effect* are designed to shape the unfolding experience, elevating the game above games where success is dependent upon manual dexterity and kill scores; like a good book or film, the characters and story exist beyond the moment of consumption.

While not offering quite as many opportunities for the player's direct enactment of moral choice as the other series, *BioShock* offers the most overtly and consistently moral and political future landscape for gameplay.

### ***BioShock's* utopia undone**

Welcome to the world of Rapture, the underwater city that is the setting for *BioShock*. The submerged metropolis was built in the mid-1940s by Andrew Ryan, a business tycoon who

dreamed of a utopia where the world's greatest minds could mingle in an environment free from government oppression. An in-game recording of Ryan's manifesto is revealing:

I am Andrew Ryan and I am here to ask you a question: Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? No, says the man in Washington; it belongs to the poor. No, says the man in the Vatican; it belongs to God. No, says the man in Moscow; it belongs to everyone. I rejected those answers. Instead, I chose something different. I chose the impossible. I chose Rapture.

Rapture's maze of regal skyscrapers, art deco, neon lights, and glass tunnels did not last long, as political dreams soon turned into social nightmares. Ryan's vision of a city 'Where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality', led to extreme experiments with genetic engineering. One such fruit of Rapture's scientific labour was ADAM, a mutagen harvested from the stem cells of a previously unknown species of sea slug (and later re-harvested from corpses by girls called 'Little Sisters'). The scientists discovered that ADAM could overwrite the human genome and so began to 'splice' modifications called 'Plasmids' into the user's DNA. But over-exposure to ADAM eventually made the user completely insane. Rapture was fast becoming an underwater hell.

*BioShock* was released in 2007 to widespread critical acclaim. The reviewer for the *Chicago Sun-Times* stated 'I never once thought anyone would be able to create an engaging and entertaining video game around the fiction and philosophy of Ayn Rand, but that is essentially what 2K Games has done', with *The Los Angeles Times* adding, 'Sure, it's fun to play, looks spectacular and is easy to control. But it also does something no other game has done to date: It really makes you feel'. Summing up, *The New York Times* wrote, 'Anchored

by its provocative, morality-based story line, sumptuous art direction and superb voice acting, *BioShock* can also hold its head high among the best games ever made'. The creative director of the game, Ken Levine, cites Ayn Rand, George Orwell, and Aldous Huxley as influences on *BioShock* (IGN, 2006). In an interview for *The Washington Post*, he explained '[W]e wanted to draw people in who never thought they'd be interested in the game as a meditation on governmental regulation. It's hardly something you can pitch as a video game: "Come play our game about a pseudo-objectivist style Utopia!"' (quoted in Musgrove, 2007).

The politics of *BioShock* are unmistakable. The name of the game's antagonist, Andrew Ryan, is, of course, close to an anagram of Ayn Rand, the Russian-American philosopher, novelist, playwright, and screenwriter. Rand was educated in Russia and moved to the U.S. in the mid 1920s, working as a screenwriter in Hollywood during the 1930s, before establishing herself as a famous novelist-philosopher with *The Fountainhead* in 1943 and *Atlas Shrugged* in 1957. Rand established a libertarian movement called 'objectivism', a system of belief centred on 'ethical egoism', reason, individual rights, and laissez-faire capitalism. This is opposed to 'ethical altruism' and all forms of collectivism, which Rand viewed as immoral and bound up in state totalitarianism. Her magnum opus, *Atlas Shrugged* still commands a popular following among self-styled libertarians and slogans derived from the book have appeared on banners at U.S. Tea Party events. The novel explores a dystopian United States where society's most industrious and creative citizens refuse to pay heed to government regulations and taxations and so 'disappear' in a strike led by John Galt. The book warns that the erasure of individualism and profiteering leads directly to social decay and destruction. With an almost Nietzschean sense of what it means to be a super-human, Rand's characters are constantly fighting off society's

'moochers' and government 'parasites' that steal the fruits of their individual labour, eventually causing them to 'shrug' their social obligations—as if the Greek legend Titan were to shrug the world that bore upon his shoulders. Despite its enduring popularity as a political parable, it remains a controversial novel that many see as apologia for greed.

*BioShock's* Andrew Ryan mirrors the character of John Galt by 'shrugging' society and building an underwater city at the bottom of the Atlantic (see Steinberg et al. (2011) for a discussion of the association of utopianism and the sea). Like Galt, who stated that 'The political system we will build is contained in a single moral premise: no man may obtain any values from others by resorting to physical force'; Ryan promises that Rapture will be 'A city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality, where the great would not be constrained by the small'. Private ownership is at centre of this undersea venture, and Ryan is extremely hostile to government nationalization and 'New Dealers'. Yet despite such lofty visions, instability soon emerges along the faultline of Rapture's growing social divide. Ryan's hand-picked 'geniuses', artists, and scientists refused to do simple jobs such as cleaning and food processing, culminating in widespread neglect and economic collapse. Frank Fontaine capitalized upon this unrest and established a 'Home for the Poor' to challenge Ryan's leadership. Fontaine aggrandized his position by smuggling goods in from the surface, violating Rapture's only 'law'. Ryan responded in turn with tyranny, putting smugglers to death, nationalizing Fontaine's business, and taking over the city's security infrastructure. This decisively tipped the balance of the civil war in his favour by betraying, in merciless fashion, his own objectivist philosophy: he dispersed mind-altering pheromones to control the hapless 'splicers' running amok in Rapture. By the end of the civil war nearly everyone was either dead or psychotic, and Ryan's underwater paradise was no more than a flooded hell. This is the dystopia the

protagonist of the game discovers when his plane crashes on the surface of the Atlantic Ocean in 1960.

*BioShock* is a brave game, unflinching in its motifs, and masterful in its creation of a submerged landscape that delights and horrifies. Yet its narrative is rarely 'heavy-handed', relying on far more *showing* than telling, despite being punctuated by scripted events. *BioShock* tells its story through the living and breathing intricacies of Rapture. The player comes to understand the game's narrative through spatial exploration (c.f. Hones 2011): key plotlines within the game, both major and minor, are unravelled as the player reads through newspaper clippings, listens to audio recordings, rummages through creepy science laboratories, or interacts with Rapture's colourful survivors. As Levine explains:

One thing I think we learned making *BioShock* is that you have a storytelling device that doesn't exist in any other [medium] and that's your environment... There's something awesome about the discovery process that the player goes through when they play the game and they can sort of discover little stories -- sometimes they're out of the way and sometimes you get a story that a lot of people may not have even seen or sometimes you're able to put together some narrative clues just by looking around the world and exploring the world. I love that. There's no other media can do that... (quoted in Musgrove 2007).

The narrative of *BioShock* is thus driven by its spatiality: the player not only bears witness to Ryanist philosophy as it is embodied in the landscape: its ideology, its design, its failures—but also slowly understands what happened to Rapture and how they are a pivotal part of its future. And despite its construction during the Second World War, the world of

Rapture is nonetheless a strange blend of historical and futuristic artefacts, with themes like genetic engineering run amok resonating with contemporary concerns over DNA manipulation. *BioShock's* social irrealism thus emerges from its intricately realized 'future present' in the city of Rapture. It explores the absurd consequences of experimentations with DNA and the failures of implementing a laissez-faire form of government. In short, the game hails the player with social, moral, and political issues that are alive rather than abstract. From the player's first entrance into Rapture, where they are greeted with a statue of Ryan proudly proclaiming '*No Gods or Kings. Only Man*' to the slow descent into horror as the mutilated splicers attack from their watery tombs, the game viscerally explores Ayn Rand's political philosophy with a narrative complexity that exceeds even the novels it takes inspiration from. At its heart, *BioShock's* social irrealism is driven by an analysis into the conceit of political perfection, and the very human costs of playing with science.

### **The politics of virtual aesthetics**

Video games are politico-aesthetic technologies that connect the player to socially unreal landscapes that invite all kinds of moral reflection and ethical experimentation: from choosing to save or harvest 'Little Sisters' in *BioShock*, to siding with David Sarif in *Human Revolution*, to ending the Genophage in *Mass Effect*. In this discussion we want to push this idea even further, and go beyond the explicitly politicized *content* of video games, to understand how playing video games is also a potentially political *process*. That is to say, video games are not simply political because they have political content: they are political because they are *played*. The guiding question is therefore: 'If one exercise of experience bequeaths its activity in residual form to a successor's taking up, might not that taking up be

anticipated, in a fostering way, by how the experience is determined to occur itself?' (Massumi 2011: 13). In other words, how does playing with the future reverberate *into* the future?

As we discussed at the start of the paper, playing is a creative event, and one that undoes strict divides between subject (i.e. the player) and video game (i.e. the object). Instead, and following Massumi (2011), we are much more inclined to see video game play as part of the creative flow of the world; part of the chaotic 'background' through which events of experience constantly become. Under such an understanding, the subjective is not something which pre-exists the event, it emerges alongside it; it is the *experience* of the event. To call video game play an event is therefore to discern its processual and experiential nature, through which the qualia of the world are sensed and experienced—mobilized into a moment, captured within a happening. At the start of the paper we also pointed towards the debate surrounding whether or not video games count as 'art'. We think a better, more important question, is the transcendental question: under what (phenomenological, moral, ethical) conditions is the artistic possible? A painting on a wall, a statue, an installation, are usually referents of art because they mobilize—often through beauty, shock, surprise —life itself: its trauma and toil. Not only can video games replicate such serious and sensuous experiences (as we outlined in the sections above), but they can be far more *interactive*. The player is not a viewer of a piece of art; they are a participant in a virtual world, a co-constituent of the aesthetic experience, of the event.

Video games are therefore politico-aesthetic technologies in two related senses. They are socially unreal and embody political content through fantastical and futuristic worlds. But they also mobilize, beyond the obviously thinking-political, a *feeling-political*. They mobilize the affective, the potentialities of experience, the 'more than' of life beyond

its actualities. Brian Massumi (2011) argues that occurrent art is not just defined by its actuality, its brute matter-of-factness, but also includes a 'semblance'. Semblances are the lived experiences of art, the virtual as it is actually sensed, felt, and embodied beyond a cognitive register. Everyday experience is suffused with semblances: experiences of the more-than-actual. But occurrent art takes the semblance as its very object. We want to argue, therefore, that video games operationalize semblances like other occurrent arts, towards a space of feeling-political: 'This is precisely what makes art political, in its own way. It can push further to the indeterminate but relationally potentialized fringes of existing situations, beyond the limits of current framings or regulatory principles. Aesthetic politics is an exploratory politics of invention, unbound, unsubordinated to external finalities' (Massumi 2011: 53). In sum, aesthetic politics is essentially a politics of *invention*; a process of stimulating thinking about the multiple ways the future *could be*.

All video games produce difference in the world, but not all are creative of feelings-political, because not all video games mobilize and *invent* socially unreal futures. Video games are like 'frames' or 'diagrams' that are able to abstract the sensuous and lived quality of the world towards different kind of ends, towards other ways of being-in-the-world. Recalling Deleuze's 'power of the false', not as the opposite of the true, but as the hidden 'not yet' of life's potentialities, Massumi (2011: 173) writes that politicality is essentially an imaginative and invocative power: 'its ability to marshal powers of the false, not in order to designate the ways things are but to catalyze what's to come, emergently, inventively, unpreprogrammed and reflective of no past model'. The socially unreal aesthetics of video games are diagrammed to invoke different futures that are experienced by the player, which hint towards ways of becoming-other. This experience is an inherently political act, and not necessarily because it lines up with 'leftist' or 'rightist' tropes, but because of its

ability to leave a 'trace' in future experiences, to pass on a potential, to set in motion a feeling-political that may be recalibrated and deposited elsewhere and elsewhen in the world.

### **Conclusions: social irrealism, ludic morality, and semblance**

The future is a space of imagination, where the possible and the impossible resonate together, emerging from—and looping back into—the present. We find the politico-aesthetic importance of video games located in their ability to imagine possible geographies and intervene in the anticipation and practice of futures, whether this is the battle over the role of genetic engineering, the failure of utopian visions, or critiques aimed at corporations, imperialism, and genocide. Without wanting to overstate their importance, video games can critique the present by extending and stretching the consequences of already-existing political and scientific practices into a socially irreal future, and they can likewise imagine a completely different future where the impossible *could* one day be possible; where new social arrangements, identities, and spaces proliferate. In their own way, all of the game series we've discussed—*Mass Effect*, *Deus Ex*, and *BioShock*—create a socially irreal landscape for creative engagement.

Growing computing power is facilitating the possibilities of more complex decision trees and thus more complex story outcomes. While early games could be critiqued for emphasising the means over the ends, with no sense of the consequences of a player's actions, the game series in this paper all develop a sense of morality that emerges from the consequences of players' actions, which, in the case of *Mass Effect*, stretches across the story-arc of an entire trilogy. This development of a sense of the consequence of a player's

actions occurs through emphasising a morality through the ludic, the playing out of the character's role in particular contexts and exchanges. Rude and arrogant behaviour in *Mass Effect* leads to people refusing to talk or co-operate, the loss of valuable information and can even influence whether characters live or die. Yet these games do remain tightly scripted, offering the player only the *semblance* of choice. When playing *Mass Effect*, for instance, whether the 'paragon' (supportive and negotiating) or 'renegade' (aggressive and manipulative) paths are followed, it is not possible to choose not to fight to save the galaxy from an alien invasion; it's the style in which this is done that is decided. And yet this can offer a genuine *sense* of choice during the initial play. For example, Atkin's (2003: 73-5) analysis of the game *Half Life*:

The artificial intelligence [...] responds *both* to the already written script, *and* to the actions of the reader. In effect, the player or reader of *Half-Life* is telling himself or herself the story in a fashion that is inevitably unique to that individual, and to that moment, and the lack of predictability guarantees an individual and unique experience. It is noted often enough that life does not have the organisation of art, and yet the game-fiction offers up apparent disorganisation (it is closer to lived experiences, is more 'realistic', or at least more mimetic) while nevertheless remaining readable in a satisfying way.

The semblance of choice connects to our other use of semblance: as the *experience of play* that exceeds its purely semiotic parameters. A semblance is the affective force of life that is included within the video game as a kind of 'diagram', as a 'lived abstraction' that points to a creative and novel outside, where experience becomes-other and experiments

with the 'power of the false'. As Brian Massumi writes in his work on occurrent arts, the force of the semblance can be put to use, potentials can be 'captured and reframed, and even given functions, political, social, personal, or economic', adding 'Art isn't about "illusion". That's not what "semblance" means. Art is about constructing *artifacts*—crafted *facts of experience*' (Massumi 2011: 57). For us, the force of the semblance coincides with, and is co-constitutive of, the socially unreal. Playing video games can be political in two interrelated senses: both as a heuristic engagement with a politicized future, but also, as an *experience* of that future, which leaves a sensuous trace—a potential for reigniting itself in future moments. So often the potential of the future is shut down, anticipated, or rendered inevitable by hegemonic discourse that shout and cry 'there is no alternative'! The creativity involved in video game play is an inherently political practice, infused with the ambiguities of becoming-other. If video games can be described as socially unreal, it is not always because they are exhaustible to critiquing what 'is', but because they simultaneously point to what might be.

Critical geographies continue to successfully analyze the *present* and prevailing conditions that sculpt and script power relations across the planet. Such critiques have sought to understand the role of magazines (Sharp 1993) and comic books (Dittmer 2010) in constructing and maintaining national identities, or the role of cinema and television in legitimizing militarism. The discursive production of the 'world' is central to naturalizing the uneven political forces that legitimize state violence, war, occupation, but perhaps most importantly of all, the practices of everyday life (Grondin 2011). But so too is there a great deal of investment in defining what the future will be. Whether anticipating future acts of 'terrorism' (Anderson 2010b), defining what counts as human 'security', predicting future virus outbreaks, or even predicting the impacts of global climate change, there is a constant

geopolitical struggle over what futures are imagined, legitimized, and practiced in the present. We want to emphasize that such a struggle is intensely *uneven*. As Anderson (2010a: 788) asserts of the future, '...critical engagement must turn on questions of what life is to be protected or saved, by whom, and with what effects. And, conversely, what life has been abandoned or destroyed, by whom, and with what effects'. We find that video games imagine the future in a variety of utopian, dystopian, and fundamentally ambiguous ways, and are thereby directly invested in the struggle over anticipating and realizing certain futures and not others.

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<sup>i</sup> However, it becomes clear on replaying that there is no choice and the game is quite linear. On first playing, the narration of the game is sufficiently convincing that the player does feel that s/he is making a life changing decision for her/his character.

<sup>ii</sup> The player can decide what gender, and what appearance (within a certain athletic aesthetic) to give Shepard.