

More Human than Non/Human: Posthumanism, Embodied Cognition, and Video Games as Affective Experience

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On the Incomplete

Just as it would be impossible for an individual to play every single game, no scholar could ever hope to read all the things. At some point, they have to switch gears from researching to writing, or else they'd never finish anything. In the interest of full disclosure, we would like to inform you, dear reader, that this particular paper and the project it represents are, at this moment in time, incomplete. Given that the paper is being written in preparation for the 10th Annual Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, that's not necessarily a bad thing; after all, academic and professional conferences are powerful sites of knowledge production that enable individuals to come together and share their work with a broader collective before they revisit, revise, and ultimately strengthen an argument.

Much as we might wish to claim this as our rationale, that is not, in fact, the case. Rather, ours is a story of contingency, precarity, and refusal. Couched in no uncertain terms, our research has taken us in several divergent yet promising directions and we have been unable to read as much as we would like. The institution at which we are both employed (one of us as a part-time adjunct) does not offer tenure, and our program is a nascent one—as such, contract renewals for the present academic year were by no means guaranteed. We both also recently relocated along with our families, which is a considerable undertaking on itself. One of us has a toddler in daycare, which means both she and we are more or less perpetually ill. Finally, one of us spent roughly six months emailing, interviewing, and circling back, all in order to secure a six-month contract—the renewal or conversion of which to a regular salaried position remain dependent upon budget negotiations. Add on top of all this a political climate eerily reminiscent of a particular Reich and the most important presidential election of our lifetimes taking place a week from now, and you can imagine that we've found it a little difficult to concentrate. Consequently, we were unable to distill our thoughts and compiled material a single, unified argument in time for POCG 16. Put another way, we refuse to foreclose upon the potentialities opened up during the course of our research thus far, and as such, this paper is a performative exercise in which we share our project, such as it currently exists, without imposing artificial limits upon it.

That being said, for a panel entitled “Beyond the Human” where multiple papers address such sites of inquiry as posthumanism, animal studies, and becoming in its various guises, this approach actually feels somewhat apropos. In an argument¹ for “aesthetics as first and last philosophy” (89), Ian Bogost asserts:

I want to write well rather than write to completion. [...] And as I think about being a philosopher—the kind who writes, anyway, at least some of the time—I realize that I can’t currently imagine writing philosophical arguments or treatises or positions. Fault me for it if you’d like, but I just don’t want to interpret Whitehead or Rancière. What if we took a break from it, from philosophical history for a while? *What if we stopped making arguments?* (99, emphasis mine)

These ideas may remain controversial, particularly in an academic culture in which the paradigm of “publish or perish” largely remains the norm. And yet, there’s nothing inherently new about them. Artists—visual, musical, literary, architectural, ludic—typically employ heuristics rather than taking a hermeneutic approach to their work, while the collaborative practices of knowledge production favored in feminist circles similarly privilege creativity and multiplicity over a more rigid process of analysis and synthesis. As such, we do not read the fact that our project currently fails to make an argument as a failure. Rather, we see it as an opportunity to continue the work we’ve started, as well as an invitation for others to draw upon the material presented here in the name of collaboration.

More Abstract than Argument

As Bernard Perron and Felix Schröter state, “talking about video games, affect, and emotion is nothing new” (2)—and yet, their decision to release an edited collection on just that topic in 2016 says volumes about the amount of scholarly work and critical heavy lifting that remains to be accomplished in the field. While much has been written about the ways in which games both move us (emotionally) and cause us to move (physically), the reciprocal relationship between video games, affect theory, and embodied cognition has yet to be fully articulated. As just one, particularly salient example, Katherine Isbister’s recently released *How Games Move Us: Emotion By Design* manages to elide affect theory in its entirety, despite the fact that the title alone practically cries out for the connection. Conversely, while projects such as Perron and Schröter’s succeed in placing video games in direct conversation with embodied cognition, the readiness with which they appeal to “naturalism” and science in the name of universality (8) belies the fact that scientific knowledge is always historically situated and contingent.² As such,

¹ Given the hypothetical future of philosophical discourse advocated for by Bogost, perhaps “manifesto” would be more fitting than “argument.”

² See, for example, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (1979).

this project seeks to render the implicit explicit in the hopes of elucidating the powerful implications of video games for pedagogy and knowledge production.

In a similar vein, this project attempts to disentangle the radical possibilities of posthumansim from its conservative offshoot, transhumanism, while forwarding an argument for the adoption of what Katarina Saltzman terms “composthumanism”—characterized by a cyclic as opposed to linear understanding of time and an emphasis on decomposition and transformation (68). The term “posthumanism” arrives as early as 1977 as Ihab Hassan states, “five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something one must helplessly call posthumanism” (qtd. in Badmington 5). Yet even today, posthumanism remains contested and far too often conflated with the rise of transhumanism, which looks toward a near-future moment in which humanity is able to transcend disease, illness, and the body itself—the supposed limits of our materiality and embodiment (cf. Gualeni 11 [“a cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of altering the way human beings are in the world through the development of technologies capable of overcoming human cognitive, biological, and operative limitations”]). As Cary Wolfe astutely points out, transhumanism is in actuality “an *intensification* of humanism” in its reification of Cartesian dualism, with its emphasis on mind over body, human over nature (xv). Any truly posthuman theory, then, should challenge binary thinking, decenter the human from the privileged position it has enjoyed since the Enlightenment, and consider the nonhuman in ethically responsible ways. Or, as Karen Barad argues, “A posthumanist performative account worth its salt must also avoid cementing the nature-culture dichotomy into its foundations, thereby enabling a genealogical analysis of how these crucial distinctions are materially and discursively produced” (32). As such, while the nanotech-augmentations featured in *Deus Ex* enable game designers and players alike to grapple with the issues raised by transhumanism, it’s games such as *Fallout 4* and their narrative-driven incorporation of nonhuman companions such as Dogmeat and second-generation synth Nick Valentine that succeed in bringing the moral and ethical considerations of a truly posthuman philosophy to the fore.

Positing the Posthuman

While posthumanism as a philosophical project remains nebulous at best, it nevertheless stands as a useful counterpoint to anthropocentric thought both within and beyond the academy. Though often conflated with transhumanism, which continues to privilege the human as evidenced by its desire to transcend the limitations of material, embodied existence, posthumanism—by its simplest definition—postulates an alternative to humanism and the hegemonic consequences of binary thinking. Most recently, the misunderstanding of posthumanism has been encapsulated within the academy by “the nonhuman turn,” which—like posthumanism—shares a direct lineage with affect theory, actor-network theory (ANT), animal studies, the new materialism, and cognitive science (Grusin viii). Unlike posthumanism, however, the nonhuman turn effectively reinforces the very same (false, culturally-constructed) binary of human/nonhuman that

posthumanism—in a Derridean embrace of *différance*—rails against.³ Rather than misreading “posthumanism” as the the desire to transcend/go beyond the human (i.e. transhumanism), we would be better served to read the “post-” here as *after* or even *in opposition to* as we do with postmodernism and post-structuralism/deconstruction. While posthumanism and the nonhuman turn both arise from the recognition that Western culture’s privileging of the human over the nonhuman (which includes nonhuman animals, plants, and inorganic/inanimate material) is dangerous and ultimately destructive, posthumanism allows us to deconstruct and move beyond the very dichotomy on which the term nonhuman is predicated, thus opening up the door for alternative futures that would almost certainly be foreclosed upon within either a humanist or nonhumanist framework.

Both the *Deus Ex* and *Fallout* franchises are set within dystopian futures. However, the former focuses on a narrative arc of salvation, which readily lends itself to transhumanist themes, whereas the latter eschews continuity and narrative progression across the series in favor of multiple, disjointed plots with no clearly identifiable throughline. This fundamental difference in philosophical bent is easily revealed by a cursory examination of the naming conventions deployed for the two franchises’ protagonists. *Deus Ex* begins with JC Denton—it’s virtually impossible not to read this particular player character (PC) as an allegorical stand-in for Jesus Christ, firmly situating the transhumanist narrative within a Judeochristian framework in which nanotechnological augmentation proffers the key to salvation from and transcendence over mere mortal existence. In the sequel, *Deus Ex: Invisible War*, we take on the role of Denton’s clone, Alex D, the etymology of which takes us back to the Greek Alexandros, defender or protector of the people—i.e. another savior—while the introduction of ApostleCorp continues to insist upon a biblical interpretation. The theme continues in the prequels, as the PC for both *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* and *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* is Adam Jensen, whose edenic connection should be painfully obvious, particularly in connection with the chosen subtitle of the sole mobile title in the series, *Deus Ex: The Fall*.

The *Fallout* series, by contrast, features a series of unnamed protagonists, and while *Fallout 2*’s the Chosen One bears echoes of the Christ myth, *Fallout*’s Vault Dweller, *Fallout 3*’s Lone Wanderer, *Fallout: New Vegas*’ Courier, and *Fallout 4*’s Lone Survivor are all simultaneously anonymous and specific. While it may be tempting to see this as simply a means by which to more readily facilitate the player’s identification with the PC (cf. Swink 59 [“My identity intermingles with Link’s as I take over and make my own his skills and abilities, his bodily space”]), it may prove more productive to read the singular yet generic nature of these characters as emblematic of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s disavowal of the self in favor of collective assemblages (*Plateaus* 266). This interpretation is supported by the inclusion of Dogmeat—a nonhuman companion animal who is also a singularity (at once universal and particular) in that the NPC Dogmeat appears in various incarnations throughout the series, thus

³ Speaking of the desire to render the implicit explicit, special thanks to Stefano Gualeni for his insightful suggestion to invoke Jacques Derrida here rather than merely evoke his work.

rejecting Western subjectivity in favor of a collective assemblage that remains fluid and exchangeable.

This is by no means unique to *Fallout*. The *Legend of Zelda* universe operates in similar fashion, as does *Super Mario Bros.*—patterns, characters, and the overarching mythic structure repeat across multiple iterations of a seemingly cohesive universe with no progression of a unifying narrative from one title to the next. The same can be said of any number of metafictional texts, including *Cloud Atlas* and *American Horror Story*.⁴ On the one hand, the use of metafiction—whether in games, novels, film, or television—enables the artist to make a statement about the essence and practice of their craft that may ultimately be more important or lasting than the work itself. On the other, though, it opens the door for Derridean play, as exemplified by the very darkly comic use of the name “Dogmeat.” It also further undermines Western society’s traditional understanding of identity and subjectivity. Is the princess of Mushroom Kingdom named Peach or Toadstool? Both.⁵ Is Dogmeat a Blue Heeler or a German Sheperd? Yes.

Yet while companion animals in and of themselves don’t necessarily open up a text to a productive posthuman reading (see, for example, the *Super Mario Bros.* universe, in which Yoshi is always expendable in the name of preserving the PC), *Fallout 4*’s inclusion of synths and the (Underground) Railroad speaks directly to posthumanism’s deconstructionist bent, the direct link between humanism and slavery, and the ways in which binary thinking and logocentrism have historically been used to legitimate systemic racism and oppression. Even as the game calls into question the exclusionary and hate-filled rhetoric that would devalue Nick Valentine and Dogmeat’s existence compared to the PC, both its narrative and mechanics fuel the same paranoia and fear that result from nimbyism and bigotry. By virtue of the game’s branched narrative, the player functions as co-author and is thus actively involved in determining which of the game’s themes are explored, and to what extent. Of more immediate interest to this project, however, is the role affect plays in determining the player’s choices and experience—both within and outside of the game.

Approaching Affect

According to Kenneth Veale, “a perception of responsibility on the part of the person playing a game is a natural consequence of dynamics within the ‘messy, hybrid assemblage’ that Brendan Keogh uses to describe the experience of game play” (131). Affect theory is often mobilized within the field of game studies to examine the ways in which the player comes to identify with and/or feel responsible for their avatar, as seen in Veale’s work, as well as the ability of the game to wield an impact upon the player. Recently, researchers have taken an increased interest in

⁴ Again, our thanks to Stefano Gualeni for pointing out the useful parallel that could be drawn between *Fallout* and *Legend of Zelda* as well as *Cloud Atlas*, which led us to think through other instances of such repetition with a difference.

⁵ While the name by which you were introduced to her depended upon country of origin and localization practices, ultimately Princess Peach and Princess Toadstool blurred into one and the same persona.

empathy as one such area where games can be truly effective and affective. A title of particular relevance in this regard is *Gone Home*, originally developed and published by The Fullbright Company for Windows in 2013 and later ported to consoles in 2016 by Midnight City.

Set in the 1990s, *Gone Home* is a narrative-driven exploration game and a core member of the genre commonly referred to as walking simulators. Arriving on the porch of a seemingly abandoned house during the middle of a storm, the game employs a variety of atmospheric elements that signal the horror genre, prompting a very vocal section of the gaming community to write-off the title for promising one type of experience and failing to deliver.⁶ From an affect theory standpoint, however, the game is compelling and successful. Rather than developing empathy through the player's identification with an avatar or even encouraging the player to empathize with various NPCs, *Gone Home* asks you to slowly develop empathy as you uncover guarded bits of information regarding a number of NPCs who are never physical present during gameplay. Despite the lack of interaction with these characters, the nuance and breadth with which their stories are revealed rather than told goes a long way toward the development of empathy. At the same time, the game raises the ethical question of trauma tourism:⁷ Are we motivated to dig deeper and learn more in order to develop a better understanding of and empathic connection to these NPCs, or are we actually satisfying our curiosity rather than some altruistic impulse? The game specifically challenges the player on this score when, upon discovering a discarded piece of paper containing sexually explicit content, the player character (independent of the player's actions) stops reading. Players have complained about this incident, which "annoyed" them as it pulled them "out of the 'game'" (Tiradyn), or, to borrow from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, it disrupted the game's flow. And yet this is precisely the point. The player is purposefully wrenched out of the gameplay with which they've grown familiar in order to force them to recognize the voyeuristic nature of the game.⁸

While *Gone Home* deserves recognition for helping to revitalize the space for narrative-driven games, and while it does raise important questions related to the lived experiences of homosexuality, sexual awakening, childhood trauma and abuse, and conspiracies of silence as they operate within familial spaces, it's also worth questioning whether or not the embodied experience of the player qualifies as a truly empathic one. In either case, a recent turn toward virtual reality (VR) as a space within which to explore and develop empathy may prove more effective. VR has a greater impact in terms of pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors than other types of media, according to Stanford Virtual Human Interaction Lab (VHIL) Project Manager Elise Olge, which opens the door for increased empathy without the need to expend additional cognitive resources to fuel our imaginative capacity. Moreover, Olge asserts, immersive experience (and thought-provoking content) connects empathy with calls to

⁶ Rather than run the risk of spoilers, suffice it to say that the game does include a supernatural "haunted house" subplot—but that's not where the true horror element of the game actually lies.

⁷ Also commonly referred to as disaster tourism.

⁸ Similarly, one might argue that the father's subplot acts more as an instance of *schadenfreude* than a driver of empathy.

action, which in turn leads to tangible results such as increased spending (donations) or labor (volunteer efforts). Of relevance to game scholars and designers alike, United Nations Creative Director Gabo Arora points to the necessity of tying VR to an artistic endeavor rather than viewing it in a purely utilitarian way. While the UN's own immersive VR experience *Clouds Over Sidra* yields considerable results in terms of face-to-face fundraising, according to Arora,⁹ less narrative-driven, more overtly propagandistic VR experiences are likely to see minimal impact.

Applications for Games

How, then, can we reconcile affect theory and posthumanism as two seemingly divergent approaches to game studies and design? The key appears to lie in haptic feedback, player movement, and the skillful use of non-player character (NPC) interaction—or, conversely, the deliberate lack thereof. The rise of embodied cognition as an area of critical inquiry supports a posthuman project in that it subverts the traditional privileging of human rationality vis-à-vis Cartesian dualism, as does contemporary gaming's increasing emphasis on bodily movement as exemplified by a trend in hardware that extends from the Nintendo Wii to room-scale VR systems such as HTC Vive, Oculus Rift, and PlayStation VR. Contemporary gaming has shifted the focus from hand-eye coordination to a full-body immersive experience, just as Deleuze and Guattari understand affects as the “*nonhuman becomings of man*” and percepts as the “*nonhuman landscapes of nature*” (*Philosophy* 169). By turning away from the transhumanist project of “overcoming” and towards a posthuman and Deleuzian objective of “becoming other,” gaming stands to reinforce its empathic capabilities by foregrounding the affective experience of others rather than focusing solely on the construction of the self.

Olge notes that movement is directly correlated to learning, with improved retention as you move through and explore a space—this emphasis on “learning by doing” also highlights the value of haptic feedback in that realistic input and a sensory feedback loop that behaves in accordance with the understood/expected physics of an environment (e.g. motion-tracked controllers that vibrate when damage is sustained¹⁰) improve immersion, which can make the difference between what feels like a simulation and an authentic embodied experience. To that end, Stanford's VHIL runs “Empathy at Scale,” a series of experimental studies designed to measure the impact of immersive VR experiences on the development of empathy. In one experiment designed with the goal of reducing non-recycled paper usage, VHIL compared the behavioral impact of reading about deforestation, watching a video of someone cutting down a tree, and a VR experience in which the study participant cut down a tree themselves. According to Olge, results show that people who engaged in the immersive experience of cutting down a tree

⁹ To date, *Clouds Over Sidra* is available in 40 countries and more than 15 languages. Gabo Arora estimates that the film effectively doubles donations.

¹⁰ Ideally, technology will continue to improve so that motion-tracked controllers will be able to provide resistance that adjusts accordingly based on the physics of the game world (i.e. heavy objects will feel heavy, gravity or lack thereof will be taken into account, and so on).

in VR used 20 percent less non-recycled paper compared to the other two experimental groups. While the initial results are promising, VHIL's next research question will address the long-term sustainability of VR-induced empathy and the resulting behavioral effects.

We can see similar investigations of distributed affective networks in mainstream game titles, albeit with less-than-radical results. Drawing upon Donna Haraway's work on both companion species and the cyborg as well as Ursula Heise's extension of such work beyond the realm of embodiment and into digital spaces, Stina Attebery situates the eponymous digital nonhuman lifeforms of the *Pokémon* and *Pikmin* franchises alongside non-digital species to properly consider "the bioethics of human-animal relationships under technoculture." Of particular interest to Michelle Westerlaken and Stefano Gualeni's work on game design with/for animals, including ants, is Attebery's deployment of Jussi Parikka's assertion that media are inherently necessary to animals' (and, in particular, insects') being in the world in that it is navigated through "constant interactional sensing, movement, and memory of their surroundings." In Deleuzian fashion, Parikka focuses on the process of becoming-animal and an understanding of our own mediated environment as "constituted [by] our ethological bodies interacting with bodies technological, political, and economic" as necessary to enable "a new approach to and appreciation of the distributed affect worlds of social insects" (qtd. in Attebery). Yet rather than paving the way toward becoming-animal, Attebery argues, *Pikmin* and *Pokémon* emphasize and reinforce the biopolitics of interspecies relationships. Nevertheless, just as Westerlaken and Gualeni focus on the self-transformative process of game design, Attebery highlights the ways in which players are coshaped through their interactions with both Pokémon and Pikmin, particularly in light of *Pikmin*'s negotiation between caretaking and control.¹¹

While the frame narrative of the *Pokémon* series justifies the capture and containment of animals under the guise of "research," nowhere is this rationale supported through the game's mechanics. The disconnect between frame narrative and game play highlights the importance of remaining cognizant of the metagame throughout the design and development process, as well as the need for copious amounts of playtesting—particularly if the goal is to explore affective relationships. As Robin Hunicke notes:

There are ways to unlock behavior towards each other that really come from the way that we think of embodiment. [...] In *Journey*, you're just a wisp of cloth and the other person is just a wisp of cloth, and you don't know who they are—you don't know where they came from. And in a way, I feel that by puppeteering your

¹¹ A potentially promising area for further research would be an investigation into the ways in which augmented reality affects the nature of human-animal interaction (HAI) in *Pokémon GO*. Based on our limited experience with the game to date, we would expect to see a measurable shift in players' empathy felt toward other humans; however, we hypothesize that any effect on HAI would be negative, given the way that the game reinforces a power dynamic characterized by dominance, containment, and abuse rather than cultivating a relationship built on care, mutual benefit, and at least an attempt at understanding.

little character with that other person, [...] your mirror neurons and all these other things, they make you think things about that other person that may or may not be true, but they're generally positive. But it took a lot of design to make that positive. At the beginning of the game, we had resource structures in the game that made people want to compete with each other. They would be racing through the game to get resources, and we were like, 'What are we doing? We're supposed to be making people want to spend time together.' And they're just like, 'His scarf is longer than mine—how'd that happen?' You know? Whoops! And so you just really have to work very hard to remove these drives that we have when we're out here and get people into a place where they can really empathize with one another.

Hunicke points to VR as a powerful technology “in terms of being able to connect with another person,” though it requires some effort to retrain players. Playtesting for Hunicke's latest project, *Luna*, shows that most people default to using a single hand—which makes sense, given computer gaming's reliance on the mouse hand. With VR, it's a full body experience, which is something Hunicke urges designers to stress moving forward (Schell et al).

Marshmallow Laser Feast is currently working on a VR experience that merges affect and posthumanism to explore tree time. Explains Creative Director Barnaby Steele, “We're so locked into [human time], we're not really aware that we're in the midst of this mass extinction.” To address this issue, the studio accelerates time, which enables participants to watch a redwood grow over the span of more than 3,000 years. They've been experimenting with lidar scans and CT scans to defamiliarize the way we normally view the world. “It's super interesting to think about image-making techniques that sample the real world in a way that you couldn't see and then allowing that to be experienced in VR,” adds Steele. “It sort of unleashes a whole load of wonder and doesn't require any modeling” (Colinart et al). Bearing in mind the work done by Stanford's VHIL, the potential of this project to bring the full weight of the anthropocene to bear at a scale far beyond what might be accomplished through print material or traditional documentary film. While Thomas Nagel famously argues the impossibility of a human to ever understand what it's like for a bat to be a bat (qtd. in Westerlaken and Gualeni), VR appears to at least offer the potential for us to have an embodied experience that radically estranges us from our daily lived experience. Experiencing a stylized approximation of tree time may not help us to understand the ontological experience of tree-ness as such, but it could be a step in decentering the human experience, which may prove critical in navigating the affective networks with which we are entangled.

Alternative Futures

This project, as originally conceived, was not intended to be particularly feminist or queer in scope. However, given the continued and pervasive influence of #GamerGate felt both within and

beyond the academy as well as the larger political climate within the United States and the precarity surrounding the lived experiences of many in the face of a potential Trump presidency, we would be remiss to ignore the implicitly gendered and overtly heteronormative nature of such binaries discussed above as human/nonhuman, mind/body, nature/culture, as well as those germane to the field of game studies: “hardcore/casual, mechanics/narrative, and computation/representation” (Anable). This also extends to arguments over what is and isn’t a game. Yet, as the existence and persistence of identity politics underscores, the mere fact that such binaries are culturally constructed does not negate the very real and lasting effects they wield from an intersectional perspective. Where, then, do we go from here?

Recognizing the failure to-date of the feminist project writ large to accomplish either the goal of a total and ubiquitous equality, thus negating sexual difference in order to reaffirm the essential sameness at the core of humanity, or the goal of fully realized autonomy for women beyond the constraints of patriarchy, thus reasserting sexual difference, Elizabeth Grosz resists the temptation to extrapolate from past history and the present state of affairs a precarious projection of feminism’s future direction in favor of a “much less depressing” project of re/imagining what feminism itself might be—a questioning of what *could*, or perhaps even *ought*, feminist theory do, rather than attempting to predict what it *will* do. Far from merely seeking to redefine feminism in the wake of third-wave movements, Grosz pushes toward a feminist worldview that espouses alternative conceptions of subjectivity and relations to the material world and “an embrace of an unknown and open-ended future” (75). The echoes of alternative futurism as it relates to sf and speculative fiction seem relevant when thinking through the conservative backlash to games journalism and feminist approaches to game studies as well as design. Rather than asking how games will do the work of challenging binaries and exploring new and existing affective networks, we may be better served imagining what a posthuman game might look like. Experiments in animal-computer interaction (ACI) have already creating this imaginary in earnest, as detailed in Westerlaken and Gualeni’s work, but what of other organic lifeforms as well as nonorganic material?

As both Gualeni and Bogost have argued elsewhere, this is a project that hinges upon the question of *doing*. Rather than theorize about games, we ought to design and produce games as theory.¹² Drawing upon Michel Foucault’s critique of truth as a production of power, Grosz questions “the hijacking of philosophy by the most narrow and conservative of intellectual forces” and points to the move by Deleuze and Guattari to return radical social theory to its proper investigation of thought itself¹³ in order to posit an understanding of an ideal feminism in which thoughts, or Deleuzian concepts, are produced rather than simply critiqued. To that end, Grosz employs Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of the “concept” as a means with which to engage the surrounding chaos and/or impact of an event—not solutions to problems but rather

¹² While we are not game designers ourselves, we do attempt put our money where our proverbial mouths are by working closely with the next generation of game designers and artists.

¹³ Interestingly, it’s that same “hijacking of philosophy” by conservatism that prompted a rebranding of the field as “critical theory,” at least within the American university.

ways to address the problems with which they coexist, enabling us to formulate “possibilities of being otherwise” that might have appeared foreclosed upon by the immediate impact of the event. Concepts, then, come into being and are situated in time and place, in history, and take part in a process of re/generation “insofar as each concept has borders and edges that link it up and evolve it with other concepts” (78-79). All of this dovetails nicely with game design as an iterative process, as well as the citationist style endemic to postmodern art.

Because concepts open up ways of being otherwise, “are themselves the making of the new” (80), they are crucial to the formation of what feminism *could* be—a radical politics that grants to the incorporeal possible the material weight of the real. Pushing back against “identity politics, which affirms what we are and what we know,” Deleuzian theory “is opened up to the virtual, to the future which does not yet exist” and feminism, as imagined by Grosz, provides “a ballast” that allows “the horrifying materiality, the weighty reality, of the present as patriarchal, as racist, as ethnocentric ... to be transformed” (81). In this formulation, feminism is not the antithesis of patriarchy but is rather “the very excess and site of [its] transformation” (82). Ultimately, Grosz dreams of a feminism that looks outward rather than inward “in order to expand, not confirm, what we know, what we are, what we feel” so that we might “become other than ourselves” as a vehicle for truly radical change (87). This idea of “becoming other” appears to align with Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of “becoming animal” as well as “the community to come,” which finds itself picked up and slightly reformulated by Giorgio Agamben as “the coming community” and “whatever being,” or existence as singularity which is at once universal and particular. This shared emphasis on becoming as well as the possible (as opposed to the virtual or the real) opens the door to a radical politics:

For if it is true that whatever being always has a potential character, it is equally certain that it is not capable of only this or that specific act, nor is it therefore simply incapable, lacking in power, nor even less is it indifferently capable of everything, all-powerful: The being that is properly whatever is able to not-be; it is capable of its own impotence. (Agamben 35)

In both Agamben’s as well as Deleuze and Guattari’s work, the focus remains on flux rather than stasis, multiplicity as opposed to fixed identity. Games that involve themselves with questions of affect are similarly invested in such multiplicity, as they encourage players to inter/act with and be acted upon by any number of elements. In this way, we might read play itself as a continual process of becoming.

This emphasis on transformation returns us to Saltzman and the notion of composthumanism as an alternative formulation of the posthumanist project in stark opposition to transhumanism. Coinciding with Walter Benjamin’s understanding of the radical political force of art in the age of mass production as well as science and technology studies’ assertion of knowledge production as both situated and contingent, Deleuze and Guattari define art as “the only thing in the world that is preserved”—which thus might be understood as universal—and yet “lasts no longer than its support and materials”—or, couched in other terms, its own particularity

(*Philosophy* 163). Preservation is possible only insofar as the work of art achieves a singularity that encompasses yet surpasses both the universal and particular. Materiality, through art (the minor in literature¹⁴ as well as music, the nonrepresentational in painting, perhaps), is expressed, which in turn gives rise to percepts and affects—that is, sensation, not perceptions and affections which are simply experienced or felt by individuals, but unique entities themselves: “Even if the material lasts for only a few seconds it will give sensation the power to exist and be preserved in itself *in the eternity that coexists with this short duration*” (*Philosophy* 166). If games are to be understood as art, it stands to reason that some games will function within the minor. These are the games that challenge our definition of what games are and what they can or should do. They come from marginalized voices but are produced in the dominant discourse of the game industry. As such, they will produce affects as well as percepts.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, “The percept is the landscape before man, in the absence of man.” We can read “before” in this context as both “prior to” and “in front of”—in other words, the percept is itself external to and independent of the human. Affects, on the other hand, come into being as one passes out of conventional subjectivity and becomes otherwise. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “*Affects are precisely these nonhuman becomings of man*, just as percepts ... are *nonhuman landscapes of nature*.” In other words, both affects and percepts are themselves produced as the barriers between subject and object, internal and external dissolve. The “[b]ecoming animal, plant, molecular, becoming zero” of the human constitutes affect, while percepts are landscapes in which the human, through this same process of becoming, is rendered imperceptible (*Philosophy* 169). For the sake of convenience, we might attribute affects to an interior lived experience while equating percepts to the “there” out there, yet this is insufficient in that it is precisely the breakdown of the subjectivity/objectivity binary via nonhuman becomings that produces such sensation in the first place. It is a passing from rather than a transformation into, “a zone of indetermination, of indiscernibility” through which affects and percepts come into being and art is able to achieve its immaterial preservation (*Philosophy* 173).

That being said, Deleuze and Guattari are careful to distinguish between “sensory becoming,” “the action by which something or someone is ceaselessly becoming-other (while continuing to be what they are)” and “conceptual becoming,” or “the action by which the common event itself eludes what is.” Percepts and affects, then, are “otherness caught in a matter of expression” while concepts are constituted by absolute heterogeneity (that is, difference). Put more succinctly, concepts are virtual (though realized through the event) while sensations (percepts and affects) are neither virtual or actual, but are, instead, the possible (*Philosophy* 177). While bodies and events bring concepts into being, flesh serves merely as “the thermometer of

¹⁴ Minor literature, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari and exemplified by the work of Franz Kafka, is not literature written in the language of a minority but is rather literature constructed by members of a minority population within the language of the oppressor. Within minor literature, language itself “is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization” vis-à-vis its impossibility—in the case of a Prague Jew, “the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise” (*Kafka* 16).

becoming,” requiring an oikos (“not so much bone or skeletal structure as house of framework”) to serve as “the sides of the bloc of sensation” (*Philosophy* 179). The house, or oikos, vis-à-vis its construction through adjoining planes, encompasses “the ‘nonorganic life of things’” (*Philosophy* 180). Those adjoining planes are connected through melodic counterpoints rather than teleological relations, thus enabling an irreducibility of singular relationships to either particular or universal ideation.

Rhizomes and Rhyme

In keeping with Deleuze and Guattari, this paper is meant to function as a rhizome. There are numerous points of entry as well as lines of flight. While everything may not appeal to every reader, we hope that there are an adequate number of bits that resonate and spark useful, productive connections. The connections and conclusions drawn here are far from exhaustive, nor do they necessarily follow a rhetorical logic. They do, however, trace an affective network of authors, ideas, and games that acted upon us and shaped our thinking.

Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith rightly argue for the centrality of the cinema as a physical space “where societies gather to express and experience feelings” (qtd. in Perron and Schröter 1). Given that we now have the ability to watch films socially in VR, as well as continued advances in social gaming, it’s easy to see games occupying a similar place in culture. Although Perron and Schröter appear to lament “shortcuts from theory to practice” (5), we celebrate the notion of creative practice as a valid and vital form of theoretical praxis. Looking forward, it may prove useful to juxtapose the role of the house in Deleuze and Guattari’s work with the function of oikos in certain strains of ecocritical thought, particularly with respect to social justice, as the deployment of melodic rather than teleological connections become politicized. Deleuze’s call for the dissolution of the self is particularly relevant in this context, as a potential means to move beyond a humanist worldview that inevitably locates power opposite a marginalized other. Remix culture and an investigation of art collectives/art as social practice would help to clarify a critical position here, as it aligns the singularity of art à la Deleuze and Guattari with a posthumanist re/imagining of authorship as quintessentially collaborative. With respect to video games, we can easily see narrative-driven and experimental games—particularly those that run the risk of being labeled “non-games” by conservative voices—functioning as a native form of minor literature, while modding practices in the gaming community as well as an increasing emphasis on branching narratives, open worlds, and player agency play out the relationship between remix culture and collective authorship.

Who knows? Maybe we’ll even make our own “non-game” game.

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