Little Jesuses and *@#?-off Robots: On Cybernetics, Aesthetics and Not Being Very Good at *Lego Star Wars*

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> S: Who's leading?
>
> H: We're leaderless…. Rudderless!
>
> H: Ooh. Something says that there's something here…. that we need to do.

The two Lego Jedi knights wander aimlessly for a while, barely distinguishable from the crowd of more purposeful computer-controlled Lego Star Wars characters. The 'something' appears to be a grate in the floor. It glows with a throbbing blue light that indicates some kind of significance, the precise nature of which soon becomes apparent: glowing objects can be acted on by 'using the Force' (standing near the object and holding down the circle button on the PlayStation 2 controller).

Later in the game Helen tries to see if her avatar (now a Lego Chewbacca) can kill Seth's (Lego Yoda). Chewbacca leaps around the screen repeatedly until it becomes clear that Helen should be pressing the square button (fire weapon) rather than the x button (jump) to use Chewbacca's laser crossbow. In scenes with many NPCs on screen it is often hard to work out which avatar one is actually in control of. Moreover it is quite possible for one's avatar to be killed and to reappear without the player noticing for some time that control has been taken from them by the game.

Our case study – a session of videogame play in which both the players (ourselves) and the screen action are video-recorded – is littered with moments of confusion over the game's expectations both at the level of the controls and at the level of overall progression through the game. The notion that videogames are 'learning machines' is a familiar one (Provenzo, Gee) and our case study offers many examples of the ways in which we as players learn how to play this particular game. Our hypothesis though is that conventional assumptions that players learn the game system to achieve mastery over it – and that this mastery is the source of the prime pleasure of gameplay – is in fact an inversion of the dynamics and pleasures of videogame play. Games configure their players, allowing progression through the game only if the players recognize what they are being prompted to do, and comply with these coded instructions. The analysis of the pleasures of gameplay must take the respective agencies of the players and the game technologies as central, as well as those between players and the game.

> H (after a few minutes of aimless wandering and jumping): I think this is the bit where we're supposed to work things out…

The term 'gameplay' is ubiquitous in the discussions of game players and game designers, and is commonly identified as central to the particular pleasures and

fascinations of games. John Banks notes however the elusiveness of the term. It is often missing in academic accounts of video games and videogame culture and yet is simultaneously the quality around which claims about video games as a distinct medium necessarily revolve. Banks suggests that this is a weakness in theoretical vocabulary. Recent discussions within game studies have suggested that the problem is one of methodology rather than vocabulary. Analyzing gameplay is notoriously difficult; players are usually too engrossed to reflect on their experience and researchers studying other players find it hard to get any analytical purchase on their activities (as gameplay is so often characterized by little movement or comment on the part of the players). In this essay we offer one approach, using video and participant observation, to gain some purchase on the intangibilities of gameplay, and suggest some salient concepts. Though no doubt new vocabularies and methods are needed, we would go further – the intractability of gameplay as a phenomenon is the product of a critical aporia due to the inherent humanist assumptions of the humanities and social sciences informing the development of game studies and new media studies in general. Gameplay cannot be understood without an understanding of the agency of games as technologies.

It is important to note that we are using two senses of the term 'gameplay'. Firstly we mean it in the sense it has in the language of game design and criticism, that is, gameplay as ludological form, the ways in which the game engine or assets are coded by their designers in anticipation of the game player's expectations, skill and attention levels. Secondly we are using it to refer to the 'event' of gameplay, the synchronic moment of specific players and game in a particular time and space. In coding gameplay in this first sense, game designers are anticipating a range of instantiations of gameplay events, in this second sense.

Starting points

This study is fuelled by our interest in theories of technology and culture, theories that question widespread assumptions that human agency is the primary object of research and that human agency is the only significant force or determinant in the social world (e.g. Haraway 1991, 1997, 2003, Latour 1992, 1993 ,1999). In analyzing this event of the playing of *Lego Star Wars* we found the concept and terms of *cybernetics* to be particularly useful in tracing the flow of control, regulation and feedback between the human and nonhuman elements in the gameplay event. We suggest that the distinct nature of video game play is generated in the intimate and cybernetic circuit between the human and the nonhuman. Here we mean cybernetics not in its loose discursive sense of 'something to do with computers' but literally as the material feedback of information and control between machines and organisms (Wiener). We want to resist firm conceptual differences between technology and culture in general, and interrogate assumptions of the conceptual separation of bodies and subjects from machines and images at the level of everyday lived experience.

Most studies of videogame playing itself to date follow the tendency to concentrate on the social or communicative contexts and practices of new media, studying the contexts and practices that frame and inflect playing (e.g. Alloway and Gilbert, McNamee, Wright, Boria and Breidenbach, Ito). Other studies that begin to address the human-technological circuits of gameplay of central concern to this thesis tend to echo cyber cultural studies (or film theory) in that they work with theories about the nature of interaction and immersion, rather than any observation of actual, lived interaction (e.g. Friedman, Morris, Lahti). Whilst game studies has developed a rich seam of enquiry into the formal structure of videogames and their images and scenarios (Juul 2001, Järvinen, and Aarseth, Smedstad & Sunnana) these cybertextual analyses are concerned with the videogame as a (dynamic) text or object. Each of these approaches is vital, and they overlap productively. However this overlap is not absolute – there are gaps between them, between ethnographies that say little about the detailed nature of human / media technological intimacy and theories of subjectivity that do, but without the ethnographic concern with the observable, lived experience. These approaches tend to say little about the aesthetic or formal nature of videogames as media objects. Cybertextual analyses do this latter, but posit only abstract or notional playing subjects, contexts and /or events. The study presented here suggests some ways to begin to operate in these interstices.

Videogames as screen media texts offer visual pleasures; the attractions of *Halo*, *Half-Life II*, or *The Legend of Zelda: the Wind Waker* are inseparable from the beauty of their graphics. The event of videogame play—videogames *in* play—however instantiates an intimate relationship between players, images and technologies that is both material and aesthetic: an instance of the consumption of popular screen media and of the 'interactive' use of computer hardware and software.

So, whilst we were concerned to identify the operations and agencies of the game and the game-software, we wished to resist studying the game as an abstract form or structure. The pleasures of *Lego Star Wars* cannot be reduced to its status as a ludological form: it is a media object and aspects of the gameplay require knowledge of the Star Wars universe, and of Lego as a toy. Thus our model does not dismiss established notions and analysis of visual / screen aesthetics, but it does cast them as descriptive of only part of gameplay. Any consideration of videogame play aesthetics must consider questions of agency. We wanted in this small study to suggest a method for analyzing the aesthetics and agencies (both human and nonhuman) at play.

We set up a simple exercise: choosing a multiplayer game that one of us (Helen) had not played before and the other of us (Seth) had played briefly, we recorded the onscreen game events via the television screen and our own gameplay and speech with a video camera mounted on top of the television pointing at ourselves. After an hour or so of play the two tapes were captured in a digital editing program and synchronized. The speech and key game events were transcribed and short sections selected for in-depth analysis. The findings of any such study will of course be inflected by the particular game under scrutiny. Our game, *Lego Star Wars*, suited our purposes as it allows co-operative two-player play, thus facilitating—indeed necessitating—conversation between the players. It is a very forgiving game for inexpert players, as there is little in the way of punishment for avatar death. It is also a very funny game, making numerous jokes about both the Star Wars characters and films and about the game world's construction from virtual Lego. Our method is small-scale ethnography, using video – a micro ethnography. In studying the event of gameplay we are assuming that the videogame 'text', the videogame technologies and

the players are all in play, all objects of study, as are the circuits within and between them.

We quickly realized, in attempting to analyze this gameplay, that the circuits of agency and affect were much more complex than expected, and that we did not have the conceptual vocabulary to describe the interactions and agencies we were identifying.

Control aesthetics

We have for some time been suspicious of widespread assumptions that 'interactivity' – particularly in videogame play -- is premised on the exercising or extension of human agency. This assumption gives rise to two further problematic positions: firstly, Sid Meier's much-repeated aphorism that gameplay is 'a series of interesting choices' (cited in Juul 2005); and secondly – but closely connected – the notion that the experience and pleasures of gameplay are bound up with the attainment and exercise of mastery by players, mastery of the game system, perhaps even mastery of the player's own body. We will interrogate both of these assumptions through our analysis of playing *Lego Star Wars*. We are accustomed to think of interactive engagement with a game as one of (human) choice and intervention, yet our study of learning to play a game indicates an inversion of this logic might be more accurate. The learning player does not so much make choices as attempt to work out what the game is expecting them to do; the game trains the player.

Critique of mastery

Discussions of virtuoso gameplay performance often resonate with the claims made for a putative technological sublime. Images of cybernetic or cyborgian

transcendence abound. Banks quotes an Australian game designer in what is a fairly typical account:

> …It got to the point where I could finish the game […] in 27 minutes – about 40 minutes if I held the controller upside down. I could literally play the first level with my eyes closed, using only muscle memory! Anyway *Mario Kart*: sometimes, playing it, I lost all sense of everything except the game. My hands moved without conscious intervention on my part… I believe the MK 'trance state' short circuits this delay not requiring the brain to be aware of something before the hands have responded.

Kushner bestows on game designer John Romero the same transcendent machine-like characteristics: "Romero was so good at Pac-Man that he could maneuver the round yellow character through a maze of fruit and dots with his eyes shut." (Kushner 5). Whilst these accounts are frequently offered in order to make a particular point about the 'skill' of an individual in 'mastering the interface' we would want to read these accounts slightly differently. From a theoretical perspective concerned with the operations and effects of technological as well as human actors it is possible to turn this gameplay upside down. That is, Romero could play Pac-Man with his eyes closed because the game had thoroughly and completely mastered *him*, it had taught his fingers the precise micro-movements needed to fulfill its intentions (continued play), and had imprinted on his brain cognitive analogues of its virtually mapped game world. The player is mastered by the machine.

We would argue that this machinic language should not only be read metaphorically. Gameplay is an intense event, a set of intimate circuits between human bodies and minds, computer hardware and the algorithms and affordances of the virtual worlds of videogames. Early accounts of videogame play were particularly concerned with describing and accounting for these intense experiences (Turkle, Sudnow). On reflection it is telling that tales of mastery are spun from these moments

of the technological capture and entrainment of human players' time, attention and peace of mind.

Nonhuman agency

Our analysis of our playing of *Lego Star Wars* identified a complex and overlapping set of circuits between the game, its elements and ourselves. It is difficult to analyze and account for nonhuman agency in the virtual worlds of videogames, as this agency is exercised as much through the setting of limits or the offering of activities as it is through establishing rules as such. Even the moments at which the game entities most clearly impose themselves on the player / avatar – for instance when the latter is killed by an NPC – are so thoroughly legitimized by the game world and its diegetic dynamics that they are invisible in these terms.

We can look to *Lego Star Wars* for a clearer example of such agency, but it is one that requires a little explanation. The game has an innovative two-player mode, in that it does not use a split screen presentation. Rather, both players explore a section of the game world together. The levels of the game usually extend beyond the screen, and the virtual camera (controlled by the game, not the players) tracks the players' avatars as they move across or into the space. However if the avatars move in opposite directions, or if one avatar stays still, but the other moves in the general direction encouraged by the progression of the game, the edge of the screen becomes a dragnet, as if the moving player were pulling the screen with them and the recalcitrant player is caught on the opposite edge of the frame, an edge which now becomes a physical barrier. If this goes on for more than a few seconds the reluctant avatar is left behind, that is, they disappear off-screen, and the virtual camera moves freely again. Control of this avatar is taken from the player, and though it will appear again shortly, the player has to actively retake control by pressing the relevant button.

H (Chewie, screen left, standing still)
S (Yoda, screen right, floating on his tray, using the Force to switch on lights around a platform)

> S (moves right towards more lights): Let's see if we can switch all these on.

H (legs not moving, but dragged right by virtual camera)

> S: Come on!
>
> H: (drops off screen right – laughs): sorry!

Chewie appears screen right – now controlled by the computer, not Helen, follows Yoda around the platform for a few seconds

> H (presses 'start' button, retaking control of Chewie): I'm back in the room!

Helen/Chewie then leaps around the platform for some time, as if celebrating and exercising this regained control

> H: I love his action! It's so fantastically…..
>
> H: …absurd.

Helen/Chewie moves off to the right of the screen

> H: Come on Yoda.

It is perhaps an indication of the difficulties of analyzing gameplay in detail that a little process such as this has been explained by us in two hundred words, and yet can take place in little more than two seconds. Moreover players learn this feature of the game through their kinaesthetic experience of it – it is the nuances of positioning, virtual friction and the removal and re-adoption of avatar control that is felt and learnt.

Cybernetic aesthetics: effects and affect

Videogame play comes into being through a set of feedback loops between players, software and hardware. Each of these is an agent or actor in the videogame event. What if, rather than privileging the player and the player's agency, our starting position were that these actors are symmetrical – each acting on the other? Both humans and nonhumans are the playful objects here.

In their invaluable guide to computer game analysis and design, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman draw extensively on cybernetics as a key term in the analysis of the operations of videogames. Their adoption of the terminology of feedback loops and regulators, of negative and positive feedback, is precise and pragmatic—they are explaining the mechanisms of the game, not articulating a cybernetic technological imaginary.

> As a cybernetic system, the rules of a game define the sensors, comparators and activators of the game's feedback loops. Within a game, there are many sub-systems that regulate the flow of play, dynamically changing and transforming game elements (218).

Cybernetic media

Wiener's cybernetics is a broad model that applies to tremendously diverse relationships and phenomena. In game studies we are of course concerned with a popular media object, and this raises the question of how cybernetics is put to aesthetic effect. Salen and Zimmerman's concern is to explain the construction of a pleasurable game play experience, not the technical workings of software *per se*. They are explaining cybernetic systems designed to facilitate play. In *WipEout*, they point out, negative feedback loops are mobilized to adjust the performance of NPC hover cars: if the player is in first place, the NPC car will accelerate; if he or she is lagging behind the NPCs will drop back to allow the player to catch up with them. The aim of the *WipEout* system is pleasurable gameplay, in particular 'jockeying for position among a dense cluster of hover vehicles, battling for first place with another racer who is hot on your tail, or dead ahead in your sights' (220). Feedback systems 'support meaningful play by making the game responsive to the ongoing state of the game' (221).

This analysis of the operations of *WipEout* in play is a useful example of what Salen and Zimmerman refer to as 'second order cybernetics', i.e. the feedback system

under study is recognized to include human agents (researchers) among its elements.

This second order cybernetics must be extended and developed to fully account for

the imbrications of agencies and their attendant pleasures. By understanding

gameplay as cybernetic, issues of interactivity and player agency are recast in terms of

networks and flows of energy which are entirely interdependent:

> we do not see here two complete and sealed-off entities: the player on the one
> hand and the game on the other. Rather there is an interchange of information
> and energy, forming a new circuit [...] Through the tactile and visual interface
> with the machine, the entire body is determined to move by being part of the
> circuit of the game, being, as it were, *in the loop* (Lister et al 370).

Avatars, identification & affordances

> H: I'm Chewie!
> H: You're Yoda! You get to be… Mr. Wise.
>
> H: Shall I see if you can get killed?

rather than shooting at Seth/Yoda as Helen intends, Helen/Chewie jumps up
and down on the spot

> S (laughing): death by leapfrog!
> H (laughing): you may have the wise words, but I have the fancy
> moves!

until this point Seth/Yoda had been walking slowly around – S. finds that
using the jump button (X) and the left analogue stick triggers a more energetic
movement

> S: I'm just moving the stick a little bit…. And he's flipping out….
> H: Woohoo! He's fantastic!
> H: Yoda! Calm down!

Much has been made of comparison between theories of the film viewer's

identification with key protagonists within a film narrative and the game player's

identification with the avatar. The argument is thus that the player may identify more

strongly with the avatar because the player controls the character's movements,

decisions and (depending on skill and experience) that character's ultimate fate

(always within the strict limitations and possibilities structured by the game as

software). Whilst this has proved a productive theoretical approach it may not fully account for the complex and shifting positions and identifications taken by the game player. James Newman, for example, argues that the player's relationship with the avatar is constituted less by subjective identification, and more by a material engagement with the avatar as a software element, 'a set of potentials, available techniques, opportunities and capabilities which can be embodied, expanding the abilities of the player and equipping them for the task at hand' (Newman 418). The avatar-player loop is one of the game-in-play's cybernetic sub-systems.

Discussing Lara Croft and the *Tomb Raider* games, Diane Carr talks of the avatar as a 'vehicle':

> Watching a film may of course involve shifts in processes of looking and identification, but *driving an avatar involves utilising a console, identification is occupation: literal and mechanised*. This flux in agency is the price we pay to play. When Lara dies her temporary mortality returns the role of subject to her operator. She exerts violence with us, and then she dies for us, over and over (175, our italics).

This is not to argue that players may choose a character out of a sense of identification (and Carr does not dispute the particular appeal of Lara Croft or her role in the successes of *Tomb Raider* as gameplay):

> H: I'm Chewie!
> H: You're Yoda! You get to be… Mr. Wise.

The player is delighted to be able to play as a wookie and responds to the other player's avatar in terms drawn from her knowledge of the Star Wars entertainment supersystem. However, whilst this awareness of, and pleasure in, recognizable characters persists (albeit intermittently) throughout the gameplay event, both players'

attention is quickly shifted to the affordances of the chosen characters, that is what can be done with that character within the demands of the game world:

H: Shall I see if you can get killed?

We might argue that whilst the aesthetic or subjective operations of choosing an avatar (or choosing a game based on its main character) on the one hand, and the use or driving of that avatar as a set of capabilities on the other may seem autonomous, they are articulated—and the nature of this articulation depends on the particular game being played and the specific moment of gameplay within any particular event. For instance the gameplay design in *Lego Star Wars* demands the transference of agency between avatars and from the player to game and vice versa as essential to progression through the game. R2-D2, for example, has the capability of unlocking doors and so must, at least briefly, be occupied to enter new game spaces. The game forces 'identification' on the player. In this instance we are very close to Newman's idea of avatar as capability – our choice of R2-D2 is a pragmatic one based on the specific task/puzzle posed by the game.

In the current example however, the breakdown of one circuit of control (Helen's pressing of the 'jump' button instead of the 'fire' button) instantly instantiates another, and becomes the basis of a circuit of kinaesthetic and spectacular affect: Chewbacca repeatedly leaps over Yoda's head to the hilarity of the players:

> S (laughing): death by leapfrog!
> H (laughing): you may have the wise words, but I have the fancy moves!

Soon after this Seth worked out how the Yoda avatar needs to be controlled. Yoda initially walks very slowly, but once jumping (pressing the X button) and changing direction (moving the left analogue stick) he leaps and pirouettes manically around the screen. Again this is very amusing for the players:

> S: I'm just moving the stick a little bit…. And he's flipping out….
> H: Woohoo! He's fantastic!
> H: Yoda! Calm down!

This little event is the product of a set of interfering aesthetic and cybernetic circuits. The 'ideal' cybernetic circuit of effect that would successfully result in Chewie shooting Yoda is replaced by a cybernetic circuit of both effect—simple manipulations of the controller triggering jumping avatars -- and affect—the pleasure of unexpectedly, and ludicrously, agile characters lead to both hilarity and a brief, improvised 'mini-game'. Significantly both effect and affect are generated by and through the cybernetic operations of *amplification*, i.e. the tiny (and in this case inadvertent) effort of pushing the x button results in maximal movement of the avatar, and new visual pleasures and play possibilities.

> The dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently… When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it (Aarseth 48).

Whilst we would acknowledge Espen Aarseth's frustration with textual analyses of videogames that are insensitive to distinct forms and practices of the videogame, we would argue that the ludic and vehicular nature of avatars is *articulated* with their status as symbolic objects. Again the dynamics of effect and affect are inseparable. As we saw above much of our pleasure in the affordances of Yoda and Chewbacca in this game lies in the articulation of the possibilities for movement and action they afford on the one hand and in the visual appeal and expectations that come with their status as both familiar media characters and Lego toys on the other. This articulation of course shifts through the rhythms of the gameplay. In the heat of a battle or the tangles of a puzzle the player may be less concerned with the appearance or intertextual connections of his or her avatar, but at other moments these factors may be primary, and at times the two will be inseparable.

Kinaesthetics

If the aesthetic, symbolic pleasures of avatars are articulated with their vehicular capabilities and their mediation of agency between player and game world, then that point of articulation is often, perhaps usually, their kinaesthetic effects and affects. The motive of the vehicular avatar is of course movement through the game world. Avatars are movement, cursors that scroll the game world past the virtual camera and lead the player's attention into and through the game world – they drive through the game. Some, such as Lara Croft and Chewie and Yoda, are constituted by kinaesthetic sub-systems: Lara with her spectacular jumps and rolls, Chewie and Yoda with their similar, though funnier, gymnastics. Videogames as cinematic media are much more closely related to animation than live action film. Speaking generally, the aesthetics of

animation are much more thoroughly concerned with movement than the narratives, characters and verisimilitude of live action (Wells, Manovich).

In the following example, at a later stage in the gameplay event, a kind of spontaneous and improvised animation is performed by the player/avatars. Seth worked out how to change characters whilst the game is in progress:

> S (initially a clone trooper): [changes into a rolling robot]: Oo! There we go.
> H: (a Jedi): what did you do then?
> S: er… use the shoulder buttons.
> S: you can turn into one of those….

Both players press shoulder buttons and their avatars transform rapidly, cycling through the available alternatives.

> S: … fuck-off robots with a force-field.
> H: Oo! (laughs) Look at that! Hey hey!

Both players select rolling robots and there follows a minute or so in which the robots roll around the available space, occasionally unrolling to fire off a few laser blasts.

> H: have they got anything for us to shoot?

Here progression through the game was suspended while the kinaesthetic *and* visual pleasures of the robot avatars were played with. Readers who have played this game will, we hope, recognize something of these (largely non-instrumental in terms of game progression) pleasures. The distinct responsiveness of the robot avatars, the fluidity of their animation as they roll into balls, the synchronization of sound and action as they unfurl and the rhythms of their laser blasts are satisfying to the player in a way that is hard to describe or explain.

Little death

This robot dance marks an interlude (literally, a break in play) in our progression through the game. It represents a brief, yet deeply pleasurable, exploration of the avatar's animation and virtual physics: a moment of semiotic and kinaesthetic play in the more work-like demands of the game's dynamic. There are pleasures too then in the abdication of agency: a lack of control or ability to move unrestricted in the world is not entirely unpleasurable. As Salen and Zimmerman demonstrate, an effective ('meaningful') gameplay event is one in which the player and the computer are evenly matched, the game carefully engineering its expectations of the player. Even for players well-trained by the game the loss of agency and interpassivity, Carr's 'flux of agency', are part of the 'loop' of pleasure. Our game event was characterized by a rippling of control, affordance and being-acted-on across the human and nonhuman agents. We will return to this point with a longer example, but just to make the point clearly, we will look at this in relation to game 'death'. The pleasure-in-mastery assumptions of conventional game criticism cannot account for the humor and pleasure attendant on the well-managed death in videogames. We do not have the space here to explore (nor the psychic explanations for) the degree to which

temporary, but frequent and repetitive, failure within games might be argued to be a key, perverse, element of videogames – though given the degree to which this constitutes a central element of nearly all games we must assume this significance and salience.

Lego Star Wars is an uncharacteristic game in that there are generally few game implications for avatar death. There is no limit on 'lives' and avatars respawn immediately. Repeated death or failure in some tasks and puzzles remains as frustrating as in other games, the difference here is one of degree, not kind. This said, the peculiarities of this game do foster a notable exploratory approach to game-death:

> Helen/Chewie follows Seth/Yoda onto a circular platform. S/he fires a couple of laser blasts at Yoda.
>
> > S & H (laughter)
>
> There follows a (largely ineffectual) attempt by each player / avatar to destroy the other, attended by laughter and imitations of the noise of Yoda's light saber.
> > S: We can't figure out why we're not hitting each other
>
> Finally Yoda's light saber hits home and Chewie explodes in a shower of Lego bricks.
>
> > H (laughing): Ohhh! You broke me into tiny pieces!
>
> Chewie respawns and exploration of the platform continues
>
> > S (attempting to jump Yoda over the barriers at the edge of the platform): can you actually jump off the edge?
>
> After a few fruitless seconds of this attempted suicide…
>
> > H (Chewie shooting at Yoda): If it's death you're after!
> > H: stand still!

In this example, as with some of the others already discussed, it is evident that gameplay is constituted by the playful negotiation or exploration of the borders between player and nonplayer agency as well as any impulse towards mastery.

'Death/Life' is not a structural opposition in all games' mobilization of agency. Rather, 'death' in *Lego Star Wars* is one end of a spectrum of agency negotiation. At the other end might be the tactic of a player in a two-player *Lego Star Wars* game of temporarily 'dropping out' in a particularly tricky situation until the obstacle is overcome by the other player. Here the game suggests the player temporarily hand back his or her (limited) agency to the game itself. But it is a spectrum and players' relationship to the avatar and the world is responsive / possessive, containing complex elements of both a passive responsive 'being acted upon' and a sense of possession of that action – a performative possession: 'I am doing', 'I am being', as well as 'I am being made to do.'

Little jesuses

In our final example we will attempt to demonstrate something of the complexity of all these factors – the multiple agents and their pleasures – and to show that they operate not as discrete phenomena but as imbricated and overdetermined micro events within, and constituting, the macro event of the gameplay itself.

The players/avatars are faced by a wall. It is clear that the avatars are being asked to find a way to scale this wall. One player, it isn't clear who, plays as the young Anakin Skywalker, the other as the multi-armed cyborg General Grievous. Each wanders round the vertical half-cylindrical structure in the centre of the wall. The players are by now familiar enough with the game's conventions to recognize that this is where ascent will be facilitated once the puzzle is solved. The avatars jump against the wall in an exploratory manner. The avatars are changed – the novelty of cycling through the possible avatars has not yet faded. Seth's avatar settles down as a Jedi. It wanders over to a glowing panel to the right. The game suggests that this might be a step towards progression:

> S: I have to do something with the Force

Helen changes her avatar to a Jedi and moves over to a similar panel on the left. Both press the circle button to apply the Force. Lego blocks emerge from the panels and swing round into the half-cylinder

> S: Aha! We've got some steps.

> The steps swing back into their original position.
> This event is repeated a few times.

> S: why do they keep coming back?
> H: Oh! What?

Eventually the game's demand that the circle button is held down longer - until the steps are firmly in place - is realized. The half-cylinder now has a low step on its left side and a higher one opposite on the right.

> H (Jedi): After you sir.
> S: (Jedi): Oh, thank you.
> S: (jumps up onto first step)
> H: We are now the same person. (jumps up to second step)
> S: Are we? (jumps up to second step and up to platform above)
> H: Oops (mistimes jump and falls down to ground level).

The virtual camera follows the lead character up to the upper platform making it impossible for Helen to see her avatar.

> S: Tell you what, if I drop out, then er…
> (brings up a menu and selects Drop Out)

… you can see what you're doing.

The onscreen character that was Seth's avatar but which is now temporarily controlled by the game jumps down the steps

> S: Oh – don't jump… (realizes that rather than getting in the way this temporary NPC is being driven by the game to lead Helen's avatar up the steps)

> S: Oh I see, I've got to show you where to go now… (although Seth no longer has any agency in the game, the affective link with the onscreen character that is intermittently his avatar persists).

However the NPC is not as helpful as the game would seem to like:

> S: … or I could just get in your way!

Helen gets confused over which controls to use and activates her light saber rather than jumping.

> S: You don't need your light saber!
> H: I know, but how do I put it away. (she inadvertently changes into a droid soldier)

Laughter. The droid soldier falls off the step…

> H: This guy can't jump! Great. (Helen reselects a Jedi, an avatar with the ability to jump).
> H: why won't my light saber go away? (presses square) Ah!
> S: Jar Jar Binks is good at jumping.
> H: Is he?

There follows thirty seconds or so of ineffectual jumping.

> H: (laughing) do you want to just jump me up there? (hands controller to Seth)
> S: I won't be able to do it now…

The NPC once controlled by Seth now jumps alongside Helen's avatar now controlled by Seth, getting in the way.

> S: Oh piss off!
> (laughter)
> S: they're like little Jesuses jumping around.

Conclusion

The videogame engineers a constant imbrication of different operations of human and non – human agency. At the very least we can argue that 'mastery' is only one pleasure among many, that activity and passivity are not opposites in videogame play but fluctuations in the circuit, and thus that a new conceptual language is needed to attend to both the operations of nonhuman agency and the human pleasures of lack of agency, of being controlled, of being *acted upon*.

What are the implications then of a cybernetic – or cyborgian – aesthetic event in which the player is acted on as well as an actor? How can we conceptualize this heterogeneous engineering of bodies, minds, algorithms, avatars and actions? We would suggest that concepts of gameplay might be situated between the feedback loops of cybernetic systems, on the one hand, and the earliest version of the modern concept of the aesthetic, on the other. This notion of aesthetics is more closely linked to its early eighteenth century etymology: *aisthesis* – sense experience, experiences that are both cognitive and evaluative *and* bodily, sensual, somatic.

> That territory is nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together – the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensate surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world (agleton 13).

Gameplay, we suggest, is characterized by a recombinatory *aesthesis*. The cybernetic processes allow moments for amplification of affect and effect within the game – generating extraordinary moments of visual and kinaesthetic pleasure. We have not attempted to fully theorize either embodiment or pleasure here. However our small study suggests that ripples of pleasure run through gameplay events, triggered by and interfering with the imbricated agencies we begin to identify above. Perhaps the most evident characteristic of the video records of this gameplay event is the players'

persistent laughter. Persistent laugher is the audio track to the game event: it is a

corporeal yet automatic index of, and witness to, this *aesthesis*.

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