WE USED TO WIN, WE USED TO LOSE, WE USED TO PLAY: SIMULACRA, HYPO-LUDICITY AND THE LOST ART OF LOSING

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This article is concerned with the modern design of digital games, in particular their formulation as experiences for consumers rather than players. Utilizing Baudrillard's concept of the simulacra as an analytical probe, this article discusses the simulations of winning, losing and playing evident in today's digital game products. Building upon the author's previous work, which introduced the twin concepts of hyper- and contra-ludicity to game studies, this article argues that the recent invasion of hypo-ludicity into game design sets a dangerous precedent for digital games as games as opposed to entertainment media. While hyper-ludicity empowers and contra-ludicity challenges, hypo-ludicity is characterized by its emptiness; of empowerment, of challenge, of agency. Anchoring the discussion in analyses of popular game systems, design features and mechanics, the article ultimately illustrates the prevalence of simulacra within today's digital game products, and how this undermines the very notion of winning, losing and even playing.

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Playing *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), I am busy at work. I am crafting as many iron daggers as possible at a village blacksmith's; a monotonous task that seems in retrospect a satirical commentary upon the material non-productivity often inherent in playing digital games (Fiske and Watts, 1985). Yet I persevere for three purposes. First, I am intent upon reaching a skill level of 100 in blacksmithing so that I may craft better quality armours and weapons; second, I aim to unlock the Steam achievement[1] 'Skill Master'; lastly, I wish to sell on the daggers to move a step closer to unlocking yet another Steam achievement, 'Golden Touch' (acquire 100,000 gold). Exhausting the materials required to craft the daggers, I am obliged to find more iron ore outside of the village.

As I explore, the anxiety borne from the possibility of losing my digital labour compels me to quicksave[2] as often as possible. I encounter a group of extraordinarily well-equipped bandits, and besides wondering why such lavishly endowed people would need to resort to brigandry, I am also irritated by the sight of my avatar's messy death; I reload. I next encounter a gargantuan, bellicose dragon that decides I am to be its next meal; I reload.

I tire of this and soon move to my iPad for a quick game of *Angry Birds* (Rovio Mobile, 2009). A new feature is advertised, the 'Mighty Eagle', allowing me to bypass a level through unleashing said eagle upon my enemies, obliterating them and nullifying any challenge presented; but only if I pay for it of course.

Three things occur to me as, deflated by the experience, I turn off my PC and put aside my iPad. First, in crafting the daggers I am not having fun; indeed, I wonder if I can distinguish in my own mind between play and labour in such instances. Second, I am distraught by the fact that, as long as I remember to quicksave, being defeated means nothing to me, to the game, or to my affluent assailants. I simply reload, try again, and carry on in the same pattern until I inevitably succeed. Third, in paying for and summoning the 'Mighty Eagle' to dismiss my opposition, I wonder if I am even *playing* the game, or simply paying to watch the game win itself.

Tension, discomfort and dissatisfaction are all largely negated through such game design, and though at first glance this seems a positive evolution, it is in many ways the death knell of the classic player experience. As Ruggill and McAllister gracefully articulate (2011, 34), discomfort is a vital yet oft-overlooked attribute of playing games. Players *need* suffering, they *need* tension if they are to build towards the sheer cathartic *jouissance* (Barthes, 1975) of winning; who has not savoured the joy of a last-minute comeback, a win against the odds, a moment of unexpected brilliance that steals victory from the jaws of utter and, crucially, *irretrievable* defeat?

Though, as we will see, such moments still exist in particular digital games and genres, the lack of risk, danger and discomfort in mainstream digital game experiences can only lead to a diminished sense of accomplishment, a diminished

joy in winning; as psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (2002) would no doubt conclude, omnipotence is boring.

The Consummate Winner

'If you learn from a loss you have not lost.' So wrote Austin O'Malley in his book of aphoristic probes, *Keystones of Thought* (1914). Yet what is lost if one is never provided with the option to lose? Do we still learn if all that is provided is a constant, inevitable win-state? Can one still define winning if the ability to lose is excised from the game? Or is it a simulacral win, a superficial resemblance to the symbolic value of a definitive win-state?

An in-depth epistemological discussion of what it is to win, lose or play is beyond the scope of this article; indeed an epistemological discussion of play alone already fills hundreds of books and articles, while an agreed-upon definition within game studies remains elusive. For the purposes of the following discussion, let us define them through the lens of Caillois' discussion of play and games, and in particular the *agon ludus*[3] form of play (2001): to win is to reach the endpoint of a ludus (ibid.) structure (the endpoint may be articulated spatially, temporally, agonistically, or all of the above), whereby the game system's rules clearly dictate that one entity has, through his, her or their efforts, accumulated a superior amount of goal-related resources to his, her or their peers; such wins are final and definitive. To lose is to be actively and conclusively denied access to such goal-related resources by opposition, whether this take the form of other players or the game environment.

Finally, to play in the context of winning and losing (separate therefore from *paidia*; Caillois, 2001) is to consciously engage in a game-scenario where rules, whether formal or informal, are both agreed upon and *performed* by agents within the gamespace. The pleasure of such agonistic play rests at least partly upon entrance into what Csikszentmihalyi (2002) has described in terms of psychology as the 'flow state', requiring a suitable matching of the player's skill with the challenge offered; challenge of course implying the possibility of loss.

Following from the above definition, there appears an inherent tension between inhabiting the subjectivities of both player and consumer. On the one hand, you are placed in the role of submission: to the game's rules (perhaps embodied in an authority figure such as the referee or dungeon master), objects, boundaries and other players. Such an environment carries with it an implicit risk, of failure, of loss, of dissatisfaction; all formal game systems (i.e. those within the ludus category; Caillois, 2001) are necessarily limiting and oppressive. On the other hand, as consumer, you are placed in a position of power, as owner and, to a degree, dictator of the experience, able to demand compensation if the content does not supply the expected gratification: 'the customer is always right' – a consumer axiom

is self-evidently at odds with the notion of losing.

To play a game is to risk, while to pay for something is motivated at least partly by the need for security, to remove certain risks. Thus, while the motivation of the consumer thrives partially upon the removal of danger and the concordant supply of safety (whether physical or symbolic) in exchange for market capital, the player is conversely a subject who must acknowledge his or her exposure to danger as an intrinsic quality of the gamespace. Simply put, the subjectivity of consumer, if translated directly into a game system, would most comfortably fit the role of the games master (GM) or 'spoil-sport' (Huizinga, 1949 [1938], 11), but not egalitarian participant. The power the consumer has over the always fragile, socially negotiable magic circle (ibid.) is considerable; the etymology of the term consumer (to destroy, to squander) is especially apt within such a context.

Yet, in the case of commercial digital games, the subjectivities of consumer and player will often clash. Though much of game studies valorizes the special and unique nature of play, games and the player, we must remember that engagement with games is never as clean, clear and hermetically sealed as metaphors such as Huizinga's 'magic circle' suggest. This is ruminated upon by Crawford in an excellent discussion of sociologist Erving Goffman's work and its application by Fine (1983) to role-playing games (RPGs):

[F]or Fine, though the game world may, to some degree, be bracketed from wider social frameworks, it is not separate but rather *embedded* within them. For example, Fine highlights that it is impossible to escape the fact that the fantasy world of role-playing games is one structured and understood through the gamers' contemporary Western knowledge, understanding, morals, language and so forth. It is a bracket world, but one constructed from the building blocks of the social and natural world in which it is located. (Crawford, 2011, 29)

The multifarious ways whereby a subject is interpellated by a digital game, as we shall see, is never a simple, separate hailing of some idealized player-subject divorced from his or her socio-cultural context, but to a broad and complex identity informed by the historical moment they are located within. For the purpose of this article, I focus upon two of the primary ways in which a subject is spoken to by the contemporary digital game: as simultaneously, paradoxically player and consumer.

To explain briefly, the objectives of this article are three-fold. First, the meta-narrative that threads this article together is a discussion of the rising prominence of simulacra in digital games and their impact upon the production, reception and associated culture of digital games; I will draw quite substantially from Baudrillard throughout and therefore have included a brief synopsis of his critical trajectory. Second, I will discuss and analyse the absence of losing (and the abundance of winning) within modern digital games, and what this means for both the producer and user. Third, drawing

on this discussion I look towards the related importance of automation in such games, identified here as hypo-ludic features, and how their misapplication can instantiate an absence of play itself, illustrating how this affects the future of the digital game industry as a *game* and not an entertainment or media industry.

Simulation and Simulacra
One cannot invoke the terms 'simulation' and 'simulacra' without addressing Baudrillard's (2004) articulation of it. Both winning and losing within the modern digital game are excellent anchors for discussing the concept because, as is true of all successful simulacra, they retain certain similarities with their authentic counterparts, yet in doing so also take on a style and life of their own. They are interpretations bursting with verisimilitude, as Baudrillard would say, copies without any definitive original.

Yet in applying Baudrillard, perhaps especially so, one must pay attention to both the heritage of his concepts and the subtleties of his critical project. Baudrillard should be viewed as an inheritor of the Durkheimian tradition steeped in the analysis of human relations and communication, as Merrin's (2005) superb overview elucidates, Baudrillard is best viewed as a radical exponent of this perspective. In his study of tribal societies, Durkheim perceived a clear separation between what he termed the 'profane' world and the 'sacred'. Succinctly put, we can separate the profane as the everyday routine of production, and the sacred as that most often created through mass social engagement, typically congregations for festivals and religious rituals where the possibility exists that the group will undergo a psychological transformation, where the individual will comprehend a 'new life flowing within him whose intensity surprises him' (Durkheim, 1915, 225).

This communal lifestyle exists in tandem with the concept of symbolic exchange, which materializes itself most evidently in the gift economy of these societies, where gifts are given regularly between members of the community, obeying three cardinal rules: one must give, one must receive, and then return a gift of greater value. Such practices act to increase social rank, strengthen social bonds and create a resource of social power, due to a sense of obligation and the danger of losing face. Such custom extends to other forms of transaction within tribal life, e.g. speech, which again must be given, received and, crucially, returned on an equal or greater level; this stands in direct contrast to what Baudrillard calls the modern practice of 'non-communication' within society, evident in for example the unilateral nature of the television broadcast or the phatic nature of the tweet.

It should be noted that in this matter, though cited as an inheritor of McLuhan, Baudrillard is staunchly anti-McLuhanist in his view of the media (Merrin, 2005). While McLuhan saw electronic media as the potential re-tribalization of modern

man, bringing us back to a communal mode of experience, Baudrillard saw it as the exact opposite, as the final destruction of this experience through the assimilation of the symbolic and sacred into the simulacral, for example, millions of individual television owners being referred to as the 'television community' even as they consume alone and often without knowledge of one another.

Baudrillard noted what he considered the dying out of symbolic relations in contemporary western society, as such things are seen as a dangerous and disruptive to capitalism, with their constant threat of irruption, violence and change. This transformation manifested itself most obviously through the emergence of the global media and the prevailing trend towards consumerism, where the symbolic was becoming replaced by what he called the semioticization of the object. Briefly, in *The System of Objects* (1996) Baudrillard noted how the object had become detached from its original symbolic role, that is to say the object being inherently tied to and realized through human activity, to instead being utilized as a signifier. Consumption in late capitalism is thus concerned not with functional value but the idea and social meaning of the object, thus explaining the market value of an artefact far exceeding its utility, as its sign value becomes the prime determiner in such an economy.

This detachment from grounded symbolic exchange was coterminous with the desacralization of society (again seen as a threat to the ethos of rationality and capitalist production), to create a more individualized populace whose safe, profane productivity became mirrored in social relations and media technologies, such as the mobile phone as Merrin illuminates:

The mobile phone … does, however, provide an excellent Baudrillardian example of a form that only appears to increase communication, the streets full of oblivious, down-turned individuals thumbing their abbreviated and almost meaningless messages back and forth representing a dystopic relation of that world of non-communication…. For him the man in the street 'talking away to no one' represents 'a new urban figure', one imposing on everyone else 'the virtual presence of the network'. Emphasizing the priority of symbolic relations against such a sociality and public imposition, Baudrillard describes him as 'a living insult to the passers by'. (2005, 23)

Baudrillard contended that mobile phones simulate communication, much as television phone-ins simulate debate, and online polls simulate political involvement; they strip it of its symbolic potential, that is to say its ability to cause confrontation, revolution and associated violence, instead creating a safe, profane and infinitely expurgated environment. Baudrillard believed that the removal of the symbolic, through the implementation and use of media and technology, creates the simulacrum; the sanitized, verisimilitudinous copy of something that never wholly existed in the first instance. Baudrillard traces the historical and philosophical

heritage of the simulacrum, from Plato's warnings of the deceptive power of the image, to the 8th-century iconoclasm of Byzantium, to the present day where we are now so immersed in a world filled with 'the evil demon of images' (Baudrillard, 1987, 28) that their powers of 'diabolical seduction' (ibid.) wholly consume us, so that we cannot now distinguish between the simulacrum and whatever may exist outside of it. Simply put, we, as a culture, have so perfected the creation and exchange of signs that we possess the means to create a fantasy world 'more real than real' (Baudrillard, 1990, 11), due to the seductive veracity of the replication, as Merrin ruminates:

The simulacrum, therefore, is marked not by an unreality but instead by its excess of reality and truth, by a 'diabolical' conformity … that makes it 'more real than real' … a transparent hypervisible image, a 'pure and simple exhibition' in which everything is immediately realized for us in advance in a single hyperreal dimension. (Merrin, 2005, 39)

This fantastical 'semio-realization', a transparent hypervisibility, is increasingly evident within the various systems that support winning and losing in digital games; a secure, sterile interpretation emptied of discomfort, risk and danger, full of excess in the sheer plethora of simulacral wins these products afford the user.

We Used to Win …
As mentioned at the beginning of the article, the tension between consumer and player is most obvious within the modern digital game, where a common panacea to remedy the irreconcilable strain of the player/consumer dichotomy has increasingly been to turn towards various and, as game designers such as *Braid*'s (2008) Jonathan Blow claim (Nutt, 2011), intrusive systems of simulacral wins.

The most omnipresent of these systems of meta-wins, residing above the individual game and reassuringly full of *nepenthes*[4] for the consumer-player, are the Xbox LIVE achievement, Steam achievement and Playstation trophy systems. Providing for the user a constant stream of notifications indicating the accomplishment of various intra or extra-mechanical objectives[5] that can then be compared with those of other players, they also utilize Pavlovian response mechanisms to induce the sensation of winning whenever the distinctive electronic blip of award occurs.

What is present in such moments is the artifice of the win-state, the superficial sheen of winning contrasted with the profound finality of a true win-state, whereupon the game must end and the winner's triumph has a 'precise and incontestable value' as Caillois (2001, 14) phrases it. Instead these 'illusionary rewards' (Björk and Holopainen, 2005) often provide no gameplay advantage, finalize nothing and are always of contestable value within the digital game subculture where their relative merits, to both one another and the culture itself, are hotly debated (Jakobsson, 2011).

Such achievements not only rarely provide any kind of impact upon the game's fictional world, but can in fact be at bizarre odds with the game's intra-mechanical win-state, sometimes even requiring that the player *lose* the game a number of times to *win* the achievement/trophy. Such disparity was crystallized in Michael Jakobsson's (ibid.) ethnographical analysis of Xbox LIVE achievements, rightly conceptualizing such reward systems as independent games in and of themselves, coining the abbreviation *XLMMOG* (Xbox LIVE Massively Multiplayer Online Game) to describe their socially motivated and ontologically separate nature from the individual game they are linked to. In reporting his interaction with a movie trivia game, Jakobsson admits to cheating to unlock achievements in an effort to compete with his girlfriend's achievement list, reaching a moment of clarity:

In contrast to the optional characteristic of achievements as scaffolding, this experience showed a glimpse into the force of the system leading gamers to engage with games in ways that they never thought they would. I did not realize it at the time, but I had ceased playing the trivia game and was at this point only playing the *XLMMOG*. (ibid.)

One could argue that Jakobsson had actually ceased *playing* altogether, and in fact had begun *labouring*.

We Used to Lose …
The removal of a final, symbolic lose-state in commercial digital games, where the player actually *loses* something irretrievably, is intertwined with the process of automation discussed earlier. Though the foundations of the digital game industry can be argued about *ad nauseam*, if we focus upon the growth of the business throughout the 1970s until the larger adoption of home consoles through the early 1980s (up until the market crash), there is a strong market presence of games that not only offer a lose-state but emphatically enforce it. This is evidenced by a plethora of highly successful arcade games we can broadly label as extreme examples of contra-ludicity; those that not only exhibit a staunch defiance of the user's play, which can be said of later games such as *Mega Man* (Capcom, 1987), but actively seek to overwhelm the player and close down play as quickly as possible, from *Space Invaders* (Taito Corporation, 1978) to *Pac-Man* (Midway, 1980) and of course Pajitnov's *Tetris* (1984).

In such games loss was not simply a possibility, it was an inevitability due to the machine's overriding requirement to generate profits for the arcade owner. The only way to 'win' such games was to place first on the scoreboard: the best of the losers. To earn such a title meant hours of engagement, memorization of control schemes, of artificial intelligence (AI) behaviours, movement sequences and optimal pathways. Play in such scenarios was an often brutal but effective teacher, both ludically and financially, and to master the gamespace was to concurrently master your financial

investment. As Fiske and Watts noted, in learning to play one also learned the pleasure in momentarily subverting the capitalist ideology such contra-ludic designs were born from:

This active waste of that most precious commodity, moneytime, is only non-productive in the material sense. For these are machines-for-leisure, and the phrase is only superficially paradoxical. In the same way that machines-for-work produce material commodities, so do machines-for-leisure produce semiotic commodities. Leisure is essentially a time for self-generated semiosis, a time to produce meanings of self and for the self that the world of work denies. The main productivity of work is obviously that which produces the commodity – the semiotic work of producing the subject is necessarily secondary to, and driven by, the economic. And the economic relations of work always position the machinist subordinately—the subjectivity produced is the subjectivity of a subordinate class, determined by the interests of the dominant. (1985, 93)

Fiero (Lazzaro, 2004), an Italian word encapsulating the emotional thrill of personal triumph, was unquestionably the dominant player experience in such designs; the more adversity faced, the greater the sense of triumph in overcoming the odds.

The gradual shift within the digital game market from public to private, from arcade machines to home consoles, had an inescapable affect upon the design of such products. Rapidly such schematics, previously attuned to the abovementioned contra-ludic pleasures, were deemed undesirable and unsustainable in the face of the punter-turned-consumer, and the semiotic commodites produced by the machines-for-leisure paradigm became increasingly embellished and overwritten with features borrowed from the dominant machines-for-work schematic, which, instead of revelling in the aimlessness and recreational status of the computer game, began more and more to implement numerous suasive techniques and specific forms of interpellation (Althusser 2001) in an effort to convince the user that their time is being productively spent, as Ruggill and McAllister write:

[T]he computer game medium is essentially aimless and boring. Games are frequently wearisome in their unyielding policing of players' actions (e.g., status reports, progress updates, performance statistics); they are typically tightly closed systems that permit little significant alteration by players … The medium also requires players to train in and then successfully implement an overwhelming range of skills: artistic, technical, organizational, financial, legal, and motivational. For these and countless other reasons, computer games depend on insistent mechanisms to force gamers to lose sight of the fact that the medium with which they are engaged is really not worth their time or trouble. (2011, 39)

Games were designed this way to provide the user with a sense of appreciable advancement via the introduction of many features that evaluated, quantified and segmented the user's play. Of these, none were more important than the save file, allowing the safe storing of one's progress through a game, much as one saves one's digital labour; this is no coincidence, as Galloway has noted (2006).

Subscribing to the capitalist proverb 'time is money' (or as Fiske and Watts paraphrase above, 'moneytime' [1985, 93]), the machines-for-work paradigm naturally assumes one must have something to show for hours of work-play; time could no longer be 'wasted' in digital games. Success could no longer be measured by an individual's sense of enjoyment, anxieties around the industrial capitalist notion of time being squandered (Thompson, 1967), that is to say, materially unproductive, would be calmed only by the conspicuous collection of copious wins, a simulacral productivity to soothe the user's sense of sedentary guilt.

Perhaps first formalized in digital games with the introduction of the high-score board, this is most aggressively illustrated in today's highly successful Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), the most commercially visible currently being *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2005). Character levels, money, weapons and apparel, vehicles, housing, vast character-centred records and statistics, all are ways for the player-worker to monitor and evaluate their progress through the capitalist (not to mention fascist) logic of the system, and all of which of course ties in to *World of Warcraft*'s overarching achievement system; quite simply, the more one has accumulated the more one is generally deemed successful at the game.

Such features are worker time-sheets masquerading under a ludic visage, the answer not to the question 'What have you done today?' but, much more pointedly, 'How much have you done today?'; this articulation of play nowhere more apparent than in the monolithic 'gold farming' industry spawned by such design paradigms (worth an estimated $500 million as of 2008; see Cavalli, 2008), as players outsource their 'play' to China, wearied by its inescapably gruelling nature. The notion of digital games as recreation in its etymological sense, to refresh, is surely challenged by such phenomena.

We Used to Play …

One of the primary counterpoints to the existence of danger in all kinds of digital spaces is the current trend towards automation evidenced through the implementation of a host of features within these products. As Manovich (2002) discusses, automation is an increasingly prevalent characteristic of digital media, specifically the ability of code to be created or modified automatically by the machine if it is provided with a set of guiding rules. This is of course fundamental to the operation of the majority of digital games, where a user's input (e.g. pushing a

button) is automated and translated by the machine into a suitable output (e.g. 100 kicks for every button press). Automation is in itself not anathema to digital games, quite the opposite, yet its unthinking implementation often is.

For example, a side effect of automation's increasing prevalence in digital media is the related abundance of hypo-ludic[6] features within digital games that market themselves under the aegis of convenience and accessibility; much of the danger inherent in losing and winning has been subsumed beneath the protocol's totalitarian heuristics. As we will see, such design paradigms maintain the potential for innumerable instances of boredom and frustration on the part of the player, as the game removes the very essence of control and agency so necessary to the experience of not only winning and losing, but *playing* a game.

If hyper-ludicity[7] (Conway, 2010) offers empowerment, through momentary 'power-ups' (Mario's mushrooms, Pac-Man's power pill, character skills, weapon upgrades, etc.), rare in-game items and progression systems, and contra-ludicity[8] (ibid.) offers resistance, through 'power-downs' (a diseased avatar, broken weapons, etc.), increasing enemies or a hostile environment, then hypo-ludicity offers nothing but absence: of empowerment, of resistance, of agency.

The earlier mentioned save file was one of the first casualties of automation in digital products, becoming the 'auto-save' or 'checkpoint', whereby the program records progress without user input. Translated into the digital game medium without consideration for its specific requirements, automatic saves are notorious within the gamer subculture for causing a plethora of unwelcome issues: the game save may grossly disadvantage the player (saving when the user has very low health/ammunition), disrupt play (the frame rate dropping as the program accesses the hard drive is common), or render the game obsolete when the save is initiated just as a glitch or bug is encountered. Again, this is not to say that the save file is in and of itself a disagreeable feature in the digital game product, but its thoughtless execution is; I have referred to this elsewhere (Conway, 2011) as the problem of Procrustes.

Procrustes was a serial killer in ancient Greek mythology whose modus operandi was to murder his victims by either stretching their limbs or chopping them off to fit an iron bed of his design. This is, I contend, precisely what we do when we take an idea meant for one medium, form or schema, and unthinkingly apply it to another. We chop, we stretch and we contort the idea to fit something it was not meant for. An intelligent application of the concept could resolve such issues; a few basic rules governing the automatic save, such as consideration of gamestate, avatar status, frame rate stability, et cetera, would quickly remedy such complaints.

Yet the principle of automation continues to disrupt, block or negate the play experience entirely through its various incarnations and unremittingly tactless employment. Team Bondi's *L.A. Noire* (2011) is particularly guilty of utilizing automation to create hypo-ludic features that masquerade quite convincingly as

hyper-ludic, as empowering the player, until one realizes that they are not being empowered to overcome an obstacle so much as bypassing it entirely without effort; the very notion of ergodicity (Aarseth, 1997), a fundamental component of traversable, *playable* media, is obliterated in such instances.

To move to more concrete examples, the current trend towards 'matchmaking' as a value-added feature in multiplayer digital games illustrates the pitfalls of automation very well. Briefly, before matchmaking an online player would be required to browse a list of servers that hosted the game of their choice, finding one that provides (ideally) a stable connection and players of a particular skill level who also spoke the same language. Matchmaking, alternatively, is an automated process whereby online players are placed in the same match according to the programmer's rules, which can be geographical, technological (latency, bandwidth, processor speed, RAM, etc.), agonistic (one's knowledge of and proficiency with the game, normally a quantification of the player's game records formulated as a player ranking system for the computer's convenience) and so on. Abiding by these instructions, the software then 'matches' a group of gamers together because they fulfil similar criteria, and therefore are of a comparable skill level, thus theoretically creating a balanced competitive environment. Throughout, the user has no control over the process and must simply sit and wait while the system tries to find a suitable match; sometimes no match can be found and the user is given no option except to persevere by clicking 'search again' or to simply give up.

Such automation is of course formulated in typical consumer-player rhetoric as a 'fair and more enjoyable ranked multiplayer experience … more accessible for a wider audience' (Battle.net, 2012) by the developer (in this instance Blizzard Entertainment), yet for the user it often leads to bemusement, dissatisfaction and outright anger as they can no longer play the game they purchased. Take for example the enormously popular *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (Activision, 2011), whose matchmaking rules are configured to highlight local players; those who live near to one another will be placed by the matchmaking system in the same match. Such prioritization seems logical enough, until the game is purchased by someone living in a country with a small gamer population. In this case, users in countries like Croatia, Malaysia, Norway, Portugal, Greece, Cyprus and Finland faced enormous problems in finding a match (Purchese, 2011) due to the limitations imposed by the matchmaking system, and even when these users were eventually placed within a match, they found their enjoyment nullified by overwhelming lag,[9] ghosting[10] and an inability to communicate as they were placed in matches with users from another country whose language they could not speak (ibid.).

To move from the macro to the micro, there are many instances of the game mechanics themselves becoming automated. For example *Assassin's Creed*

(Ubisoft Montreal, 2007) presents an extraordinarily detailed world, allowing the user the ability to explore through the avatar's utilization of *parkour* techniques; climbing, leaping and diving across medieval Jerusalem with particular panache. Yet the control scheme makes gameplay largely redundant, being based upon an automation of context. The player presses the button they feel appropriate to the situation, yet the machine changes the button's meaning dependent upon its own understanding of the context (being a set of rules implemented by the developer). Therefore a player can press a button intending, for example, to attack an enemy, and the avatar may instead climb up a wall as the machine deems this appropriate within the scenario.

This not only diminishes the user's sense of autonomy but also nurtures and amplifies the player's frustration as an oppressive, insubordinate control system wrestles agency from the user under the guise of knowing better; a similar frustration, no doubt, to that often felt by users of mobile phones with auto-corrective text. Such a control scheme also breaks psychological immersion as the spasmic connection between player and avatar repeatedly reveals the fragile technological construction of the fictional world; it is the digital game equivalent of the boom microphone entering the shot.

The Joy of Losing
Though such simulacra and automata seem more and more prevalent, there still exist digital games that resist unproductive applications of automation, while also offering perilous loss and conclusive wins. For the latter, it would be easy to solely locate such games within the multiplayer branches of the ludic tree, such as the *Call of Duty* franchise (Activision, 2003–present), *Starcraft 2: Wings of Liberty* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010) and the *Pro Evolution Soccer* series (Konami, 1996–present), yet there are certain single-player digital games that grasp both the ontological and etymological meaning of Caillois' (2001) *agon* as, respectively, definitive and often painful.

From Software's *Demon's Souls* (2009) and *Dark Souls* (2011) are perhaps the most recent commercial examples of this, the latter's official website address being the most concise summary of the intended play experience: www.PrepareToDie.com. Agonistic to its core, the *Souls* series is predicated upon representational and ludic destruction; of the unskilled, the unprepared and the unaccompanied. The fictional world is a ravaged, corrosive environment, owing its devastation to the greed of one speciously heroic knight, an allegorical character illustrating the developer's cynical view of the archetypal digital game protagonist; even the family-friendly Mario left genocidal destruction in the wake of his pursuit of Princess Peach.

Various independent digital games-makers, operating from a substantially different business model than their mainstream counterparts, can afford to take risks both representationally and ludically that are denied to the commercial sector; indeed a whole sub-genre of digital games, titled *roguelikes*, base their whole appeal upon the idea of 'permadeath' (permanent death). Independent games such as *I Wanna Be The Guy: The Movie: The Game* (O'Reilly, 2007) can be viewed as sardonic critiques of the consumer-player paradigm, offering no safety, no game save and no meta-wins, overbearing automation or hypo-ludic designs. The user is instead thrust into an intertextual, intra-textual landscape that provides a commentary not only upon the history of the digital game and the two-dimensional 'platfomer' genre, but also upon the evolving interpellation of the player-subject. The game is gleefully sadistic and provokes the modern consumer-player into assuming an unfamiliar masochistic mindset, being at the absolute mercy of the game's unforgiving and often spiteful mechanical apparatus that relentlessly punishes the player for the slightest error.

Broadening our horizons towards the aesthetics of the medium, we should be cognizant that by excising meaningful loss from the digital game we are limiting the range of emotions we can invoke in the gamer, and the modes of storytelling we can explore. Tragedy, for example, is a format that demands suffering and loss. Russian developer Ice-Pick Lodge's *Pathologic* (2005), an exception which proves the rule, is an extraordinarily powerful experience whereby the player must accept the meaningless and relentless dying out of an entire village as an unstoppable plague ravages the townsfolk. Contemporary mainstream design, through its obsession with the persistent satisfaction of the consumer-player, rigidly rejects such a mode of gloomy existentialist reflection, and therefore may prematurely stunt the artistic growth of the medium.

Conclusion
Marshall McLuhan said of games in *Understanding Media*:

> Games are popular art, collective, social reactions to the main drive or action of any culture. Games, like institutions, are extensions of social man and of the body politic, as technologies are extensions of the animal organism. Both games and technologies are counter-irritants or ways of adjusting to the stress of the specialised actions that occur in any social group. As extensions of the popular response to the workaday stress, games become faithful models of a culture. (1964, 316)

One is tempted to ask what role digital games, as simultaneously technology and game, play in this formulation as counter-irritant, and as model of our culture. The typical mainstream single-player digital game is indeed filled with simulations of losing, winning and even playing, and this is reflective of the proliferation of simulacra within western culture (Baudrillard, 1983), yet I believe this has further implications.

The removal of failure, the psychological drugging of the player through the

awarding of constant *nepenthes*, the increasing separation of the player from the risks inherent in play, all reflect a psycho-social neurosis around failure, a fear born from multiple sources: the discursive strategies adopted by mainstream media (including digital games), constantly interpellating the audience as winner, as achiever, as hero; the increasing prevalence of political correctness as a hegemonic ideological force that perpetually defers failure, dislocating it from the realm of individual responsibility to an abstract entity (the school system, the workplace, the banking system, the government, the nation-state); the narcissistic design of communication technologies and platforms, from the phatic text of the mobile phone to the obvious onanism inherent in 'social' websites such as Myspace, Facebook and Twitter.

We as a culture are haunted by the phantasm of failure, constantly surrounded by its signs, its aftermath, its residue, yet committed to denying its existence; this is a scepticism bordering on nihilism. In removing loss, tension and dissatisfaction from the digital game product, we are concordantly refusing to win and ultimately refusing to play. When engaging with digital games, if we are not allowed to risk, to experience danger (albeit symbolic), stress and discontent, then we are allowing ourselves as a society and culture to grow more ignorant of the purpose games historically serve: to promote learning, experimenting and critical thinking. In doing so we are concurrently indulging ourselves more than ever in our narcissistic tendencies (Lasch, 1991); we would do well to remember Narcissus' eventual fate.

1.
The Steam achievement, like the Xbox LIVE achievement and Playstation 3 Trophy, are meta-goals defined by the game's developer that may or may not align with the game's intrinsic objectives. The achievement system is located outside of the individual game and is attached to the gamer's profile, accessible to other players, and therefore trans-game achievements can be viewed and compared between all users of a platform.

2.
A 'quicksave' is a standard macro in digital games that allows the user to save the current gamestate through the press of a key.

3.
Agon ludus being Caillois' (2001) term for a competitive formal game structure.

4.
A medicine from Greek mythology with the power to remove sorrow, here used to describe systems that guard the player against negative emotion that could arise from losing by providing a bombardment of simulacral wins.

5.
To name but a few common achievement/trophy tropes: collect a certain amount of items, begin the game, kill a set number of enemies, use a particular item.

6.
Absence/lack of play.

7.
Above/beyond play, expanding a player's agency within the gamespace.

8.
Resisting play, contracting a player's agency within the gamespace.

9.
An abnormal delay in the feedback loop between the user's input and subsequent outputs.

10.
When lag becomes so great that other players continually disappear and reappear throughout the gamespace, in effect 'ghosting' across the environment.

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