Games Without Play*

David Golumbia

BECAUSE WE HAVE FROM THEIR INCEPTION called them games, and because some of them bear physical and formal resemblances to what we knew as games, we have simply and in some cases uncritically accepted the views that all video and computer games *are* games and that what we do when we use them is to *play*. On examination, such assumptions turn out to be problematic, at least on the terms in which concepts, like games and play, are usually understood. While the first widely distributed video game, *Pong*, strongly resembled an analog game (table tennis), many contemporary video games do not resemble analog games and also do not resemble other ludic or playfully imaginative activities that we have seen before in culture. On careful examination, many of the programs we call video games today much more nearly resemble something like *work*, embodying what literary theorists and philosophers recognize as a means of enacting a Nietzschean *lust for power* and, in Derridean terms, a desire to constrain play—much the opposite of what their construal as games might be understood to indicate. The commonplace view that either narratology or ludology will be the right method for analyzing computer games turns out to be based on the unexamined assumption that the phenomena in question are stories or games to begin with.[1] Instead, computer games, despite their formal novelty, conform to recognizable cultural patterns that demand the kind of close analysis of which cultural critics are already eminently capable, without the odd presumption that only new critical methods can decode them effectively.

Jeu Without *Jeu*

To understand whether one can play video games, we need to consider what might be meant by the word "play" in the first place. Here, it is both

ironic and symptomatic that play is one of the most famous, even notori-
ous, of concepts in contemporary literary theory, and that its reception
in literary theory as well as in culture at large rests on a misunderstand-
ing, one that hinges on both mistranslation and, in at least some cases,
something like interpretive bad faith. The misunderstanding cannot be
said to be completely without foundation, especially since it is associated
with Derridean deconstruction, a canon of thought especially open to
multiplicity of meaning. At the same time, it has remained too easy to
associate with Jacques Derrida and deconstruction a conceptualization
of play that does not actually occur in Derrida's writings and which, in
many ways, those writings seek to expose as inadequate.

    The misunderstanding centers, of course, on the way the French word
jeu is translated in one of the earliest of Derrida's texts to be read and
heard in the English-speaking world, namely "Structure, Sign, and Play in
the Discourses of the Human Sciences." When the essay was first translated
into English, the word *jeu*, the standard French term for game or play,
was translated by Richard Macksey at key places in the text as "freeplay."[2]
(The word *jeu* is also used in the French title of the essay, "Le structure,
le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines," and is there, as
in other places in Macksey's version, translated simply as "play.") "Free-
play" is itself an interesting term deserving of further examination, but
by the time Alan Bass provided what is now considered the authoritative
translation of the essay, in 1978 *Writing and Difference*, *jeu* had reverted
to its more usual English translations of "play" or "game."[3]

    Derrida's detractors often point at what they take to be the obvious
meaning of play and especially "freeplay" to dismiss deconstruction as
a frivolous, nihilistic, and skeptical quasi philosophy that enacts what is
often called a "postmodernist" denial of the possibility of meaning. The
use of the word "freeplay" no doubt contributed to this understanding,
and it would be disingenuous to claim that Derrida, his translators, and
his supporters did not mean to suggest at least the possibility of an un-
bounded and undecidable variability in meaning. But the term *jeu* points
much more obviously in at least two much more troubling directions with
which Derrida's critics rarely engage, no doubt because they are much
harder to dismiss. The first of these may be the most obvious, though
it is not one that has been largely taken up by poststructuralists: the
fact that *jeu* is the correct translation of "game" in the way that Ludwig
Wittgenstein uses the term in the *Philosophical Investigations*, where the
notion that language itself is like a game (a game that nevertheless has
rules) has historically been taken quite seriously by even those philoso-
phers and traditions who dismiss Derrida out of hand. The second is
that *jeu* is not at all the "normative" French term for "freeplay" (despite
Macksey's overt statement to this effect in the translator's footnote to

the first edition of "Structure, Sign, and Play"); as in English, "freeplay" would be indicated by a compound term, *jeu sans combinaisons* (something like "game without rules"), while *jeu* itself is the term for a concept rarely invoked in print by either critics or supporters of deconstruction: "looseness," in the sense that a string not pulled taut is said in English to have "play" (indeed, sophisticated readers already may understand *freeplay* itself to have just this meaning).

The phrase *jeu sans combinaisons* does not appear in Derrida's writings, but the term *jeu* in the relevant senses of (1) play as game; (2) looseness; and (3) to be "in play," all occur repeatedly in Derrida's writing, especially in its earlier phases. Derrida specifically uses *jeu* to point at these conceptualizations because he sees them as related, and this relationship is evident from the text of "Structure, Sign, and Play" itself: "The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play [*jeu*] based on a fundamental ground, a play [*jeu*] constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of play [*jeu*]. And on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game [*jeu*], of being caught by the game [*jeu*], of being as it were at stake in the game [*jeu*] from the outset" (279). This passage plays on *jeu*, but nowhere does it suggest that Derrida wants to invoke a sense of *jeu* as wild, fully unbounded, or wholly without reference to the other terms that make up the linguistic matrix. Rather, Derrida offers an alternative to the structuralist view of meaning, one we can today align with a whole host of positivist and "classical" (in George Lakoff's terminology) theories of meaning that might be most easily labeled as depending on a correspondence theory of truth.[4]

Both senses of *jeu* are critical to a Derridean understanding of language, but they are even more critical to understanding the two English words that now stand for *jeu*, namely play and game. Here, the theorist who seems best to anticipate Derrida's approach is the French sociologist Roger Caillois, whose 1958 *Les jeux et les hommes*, translated as *Man, Play, and Games*, builds significantly on the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga's 1938 *Homo Ludens*, while accessing much of the same theoretical material about which Derrida was thinking ("Le structure, le signe et le jeu" was composed fewer than ten years after *Les jeux et les hommes* was published in France). Caillois considers not merely the formal nature of play and games, as do many of today's self-described "ludologists," but also and perhaps even more so the social, conceptual, and psychological functions of play itself. Despite his interest in every type of game, Caillois is interested in a particular kind of play that he considers intrinsic to the idea of *jeu*, namely one that is "(1) free, (2) separate, (3) uncertain, (4) unproductive, (5) regulated, and (6) fictive."[5] While not

every form of play can, of course, fulfill each of these criteria, Caillois ascribes something critical to those that do. Because "the game remains separate, closed off, and, in principle, without important repercussions upon the stability and continuity of collective and institutional existence," it can be understood as free from some direct repercussions for existing social reality; again, with the notable exceptions of professional players, it is easy to see how even highly structured games, like chess and bridge, fulfill these basic criteria. The homology between Caillois' conception of *jeu* and Derrida's could not be stronger: an activity entirely without rules cannot be a game, in much the same way that fully unbounded semantic operations could not be recognizably linguistic.

Play in general, including the simulative and vertiginous play noted in great detail by Caillois, performs critical social and psychological functions while being formally divorced from social reality. As cultural critics like Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, following on work by Mikhail Bakhtin, have shown, simulative play, like carnival, allows the glimpse of rearranged social systems while not directly impacting the systems themselves; the ritualized and apparently largely inconsequential regular carnivals practiced by many societies thus serve vital social functions, troping on existing social forms, while standing outside of those institutions to which they correspond and by stipulation having no direct effect on them.[6] We do not need to be able to draw a hard-and-fast distinction between games and things which are not games (which Caillois in non-Derridean fashion calls "the corruption of games") to be able to maintain the distinction between the social as such and its iteration in any number of representational or simulative arenas. In much the same way, Derrida does not need to eliminate the concept of literal meaning per se in language to notice both the slipperiness of this concept and the linguistic potential to iterate meaning beyond literality.

In other traditions, the profound reliance of the social as such on play that is nevertheless radically divorced from something like political life itself enforces the powers of language and representation. We are familiar enough with the idea that children are not merely practicing adult roles when they play at every kind of game, even games that appear directly to simulate adult functions like the workplace. We are confident that these games are separate in an important way from adult responsibility and adult consequence, and indeed when the polis begins to intrude too directly on childhood play is when philosophical (not to mention, in some quarters, political) worry begins. For the condition of what we now understand to be childhood requires a kind of unbounded, free play, a play that can break its own rules and make up new rules as easily as it often conforms to them. Out of this process comes not merely adult creativity but perhaps both what we call adult language and representation

themselves.[7] Activities that take the name "play" but that fit too neatly
into the adult worlds of social responsibility begin to lose the quality that
made them valuable in the first place: namely that looseness or "give"
that allows creation and also responsibility to develop.

There can be no doubt that Derrida's own account both predicts and
licenses the "misinterpretation" of *jeu* according to which it means "free-
play." Language, on Derrida's account, and contrary, for example, to the
structural account associated with Ferdinand de Saussure no less than
Claude Lévi-Strauss (to whose work "Structure, Sign, and Play" responds),
is always in a state of play. Language is always (indeed, always-already)
subject to reinterpretation and reuse according to rules that are neither
absolute nor rigid. The limits of play cannot be determined in advance;
like the most archetypal forms of play according to Caillois—for example,
a game of hide-and-seek played by children—neither the full parameters
nor the teleological end of the game exists outside instances of their
use. Children playing hide-and-seek may not care if their elaborations
on the game's rules makes it, in some metaphysical sense, an instance
of hide-and-seek "proper" or not; such a question likely has no answer
(which is not to deny that children often fight precisely over whether rules
have been properly maintained). Games and language games alike exist
in a world where they are inherently subject to reinterpretation along
many axes, and some reinterpretations may be "wild," far away from the
limits intended by their source. Derrida and Caillois alike worry about
activities that prescribe play to begin with—that determine all or most
of the rules in a way rigid enough to prevent reinterpretation—but that
stand for us in the same place in which we are accustomed to having
play. Children playing games with rules too fully determined ahead of
time may not be playing in the critical way understood as necessary by
child development experts; language and language-like activities that
lack flexible interpretation may not fulfill a primary function of cultural
communication.[8] This does not mean, however, that they serve no func-
tion whatsoever—and by peeling away the grounding assumption that
what we do with (at least some) computer games is playing, we can see
more clearly what functions such activities do serve.

Leveling Up and *Machtgelust*

Two very popular styles of game in which the idea of play is especially
problematic also appear representative in their lack of resemblance to
earlier game genres and, for this reason, form an especially apposite site
for probing the question of play. One, the Role-Playing Game (RPG),
builds on some precomputer models of both gaming and storytelling,

including paper-based games like Dungeons and Dragons and also text-based games like Zork and Adventure. RPGs take their name from the basic premise that the player identifies with a central character or group of characters, such as a wizard, fighter, or priest, and attempts to guide the character through adventures or battles. The other major game category relevant to this argument is the so-called First-Person Shooter (FPS), which derives both from the RPG model of a unitary adventurer (or small group of adventurers) and also from the screen perspective of mechanical devices and their practice simulators, including the screens used by airplane pilots and the dashboards of automobiles. In FPS games, even more than RPGs, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the suturing of the player's identity and activity with the apparent "main character" in the game. In an RPG, this character is typically displayed among others on the screen, such that a third-party observer might not even be able to determine which animated figure represents the player without significant observation and analysis. In an FPS, the identification is even more circumscribed, in that the player identifies not with a character on screen (at least not for much of the time) but rather with the point of view of a character who is generally unseen during gameplay. Thus the "first person" of the genre name refers primarily to a perspective, one that is not unlike Albertian perspective itself, an elongated, usually three-dimensional view into a world. Typically, the only element of the first person that is directly represented on screen is the character's weapon.

Despite being called games, these programs allow players limited choice. In many FPS games, including the especially popular *Half-Life* and *Halo* series, the player can do almost nothing but kill living human beings and creatures. While the player has a limited number of choices as to which entity to kill at any given time, the extermination plan is itself rigidly determined. The player may have the choice to kill any one of five aliens in a given room first but, nevertheless, must kill all five aliens before progressing to the next step in a given task. Furthermore, all actions in such a game are completely or almost completely scripted for the player. The player must kill one group of five aliens and then another group of six, and so on, in order to retrieve, say, a key behind them and then use that key to unlock a door or a chest that will reveal either more aliens or a better weapon with which to fight the next group of aliens.

Described in the baldest terms—and perhaps just as curiously, described in accurate detail or in the terms that emerge in watching a player use the programs—it is not easy to understand how FPS games conform to usual expectations for words like pleasure or fun. The path of use of an FPS has virtually no play in Derrida's sense; rather, the player submits to

Fig. 1. Several players assembling a party in *World of Warcraft*, the most popular contemporary RPG. The player is represented by the bearded figure without a name above his head, something one must be fairly familiar with the game to see.[9]

Fig. 2. A scene from the popular FPS *Half-Life*, in which the player's character is represented only by the crowbar emerging from the right side of the screen.[10]

the issuance of orders and then follows them as precisely and efficiently as possible. The player only controls variables like the rate at which he or she fires a weapon or the choice of weapon itself. Unlike in games of intellectual skill that do have rigid rules (such as chess), the FPS player has almost no complex strategic choices to make in real time that demand concentration. What demands concentration are the physical acts that make up the bulk of the gameplay; the player's mind is either left to wander in the hypnotic state created by absorption into the game's visual (and its sounds), or is intently absorbed in the sensations of playing themselves, whether visualized on screen or imagined.

The rewards for playing, too, are unlike those in many games. With some exceptions, there is no real "winning" a game like *Halo* or *Half-Life*; indeed, to "win" the game in the sense of finishing the entire set of prescribed scripts is, paradoxically, to lose, since for many players it strips the game of future utility. The player pursues something like what a consumer of genre fiction pursues, namely knowledge of the complete future extent of the narrative and its details, and as in a generic mystery novel, the reusability of such a generic narrative is circumscribed (which is not to deny that many players, like mystery novel readers, enjoy replaying sequences whose details are well-known to them). This resemblance of FPSs and other games to genre fiction accounts in part for the attraction of narratological methods for game analysis. But what is missing in most FPS games is the rest of the material one finds in the typical narratives read by those who value literature, which is to say, the complex individual and relationship identifications that make literature not simply a sequence of events but a version of human engagement. Few people play computer games for their narrative richness or for their resemblance to the complex human events at the representation of which novels, films, and even television have always been adept; perhaps this reflects the relative newness of the computer game as a medium, but at present, and given the huge amount of creative and financial work that has already gone into game development, it seems plausible that these are, in fact, inherent aspects of the medium itself.

It might be thought that RPGs offer something closer to literary complexity than do the almost exclusively killing-oriented FPS games, and, to some extent, this is certainly the case. Yet most RPGs stray far away from anything like novelistic action. Neither complex characterization nor plot is easy to provide in an RPG, since many aspects of these must be left up to relatively meaningless player actions (first turning right or left at a fork in the road, when eventually both sides must be traveled to complete a quest). The kinds of characterological arcs commonly found in traditional narrative seem beyond the grasp of RPGs, perhaps because the time investment itself in narrative character is incompatible with

the fast-paced actions of RPGs. The user does not have time to watch characters develop the quirks and foibles, or experience the personal triumphs and tragedies, that are hallmarks of the interiorized novel. Plot elements emerge as overt and discrete: a character may interact with others for any number of reasons, but these are generally constrained within the economy of gameplay and no less within the several economies of accomplishment around which RPGs are structured. This is one reason why players of RPGs often evince little or no awareness of the game's putative plot.

The success of RPGs can hardly be underestimated; like FPS games, they are played by hundreds of thousands of people worldwide, perhaps encountering more users of single games than ever watch particular television programs or read particular novels. The flagship RPG during the early 2000s has been an example of a subgenre that now seems poised to subsume the genre itself, namely the Massively Multiplayer Online RPG (MMORPG), *World of Warcraft*. Like many traditional RPGs before it, *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) is based in a fantasy setting that derives heavily from *The Lord of the Rings* and its sequels; the world is populated by dwarves, elves, orcs, wizards, warlocks, fighters, rogues, and so forth. The MMO prefix attached to RPGs like *WoW* is typically taken to point at the social nature of the game: thousands of players are found in the game at any one time. But just as important are the terms massive and online: for unlike earlier RPGs, which were played by one or more individuals using their own personal computers, MMORPGs are played "in" virtual realms created and hosted by the game company (in this case, Blizzard Entertainment). One can play *WoW* only when its servers are "up"; and one is always playing the "same" game that others around the world are playing at the same time.

The descriptive word "multiplayer" can be radically misleading. Despite the term, most *WoW* gaming is performed by and most especially for the individual, and many parts of the game are played on one's own. Much of the game is playable without sustained interaction with other players at all. In this respect, *WoW* is more like traditional RPGs than its reputation may suggest; players can simply choose to kill monsters, fulfill quests, buy and sell treasure, and so on, with the resources provided by the game, and it is not at all clear how much gameplay truly involves the sort of social interaction that many presume to be the game's raison d'être. Further, the basic gameplay actions are the same regardless of one's level of social interaction. *WoW* is comprised of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of "quests," which are simply tasks given out by standing ingame characters (referred to as Non-Player Characters, NPCs), which vary only slightly depending on some choices players can make at various points in the game.

The basic actions of *WoW* are surprisingly rigid, uncompromising, and even authoritarian, given the apparent addictive pleasure so many users take from the game. A typical quest involves simply killing some number of monsters, six or twelve or more, and then returning to the quest-giver to receive a small handful of coins. Some more difficult quests appear in the player's quest log with the suggestion that two, three, or more players participate in them, and this is where *WoW*'s multiplayer aspects emerge. Players begin with simple treasures and weapons and, as in the traditional RPG model, receive experience points as well as treasure for the completion of quests. A main goal of questing is to "level up"—to advance in experience so that one's character moves to the next power plateau, where more advanced skills and weapons become available and the character has more power (more strength, ability to cast more powerful spells, et cetera). Currently, *WoW* is "capped" at level seventy, and estimates vary from several weeks to several months of dedicated play before the ultimate level can be achieved. Many players never reach the top level, and it is of course possible to create multiple characters of different races, professions, and types within the game, so that the basic leveling-up activity can continue virtually ad infinitum.

Even advocates for social transformation and "games as teaching tools" would acknowledge that leveling up is one of the main pleasurable parts of gameplay and that the pursuit of higher levels is a main "addictive" quality of all RPGs.[11] To nonplayers, this phenomenon can seem strange: what is so attractive about learning that the wizard I am playing has moved from level fourteen to level fifteen? Levels are just levels, a spells is just a spell, and achieving a higher level simply means that one fights equivalently leveled-up enemies. The fact is that users receive a visceral pleasure from the experience of leveling up, one that is today represented by flashes of light and sound and other indications of power. Leveling up comes from gaining experience points, and we are told at least roughly that it therefore parallels the real-world experience of gaining additional expertise in one's chosen profession. But, on reflection, this analogy holds only a little bit; much more accomplishment in the world is due to applying existing expertise to new areas of competence than to increasing expertise per se: we don't imagine that Jane Austen became an appreciably "better" novelist through each of her six books, even if we do see something like skill-level changes at various points in her career.

I propose that we look elsewhere for an explanatory parallel between the RPG world and ours. The experience of leveling up matches what Nietzsche was getting at when he discussed the lust for power (*Machtgelust*).[12] The term occurs most often in Nietzsche's *Daybreak* (1879) in the context of a co-occurrence between the pursuit of religious truth and of capital:

Not actual need, for they are not so badly off, perhaps they even eat and drink without a care—but they are afflicted day and night by a fearful impatience at the slow way with which their money is accumulating and by an equally fearful pleasure in and love of accumulated money. In this impatience and this love, however, there turns up again that fanaticism of the *lust for power* which was in former times inflamed by the belief one was in possession of the truth and which bore such beautiful names that one could thenceforth venture to be inhuman *with a good conscience* (to burn Jews, heretics and good books and exterminate entire higher cultures such as those of Peru and Mexico). The means employed by the lust for power have changed, but the same volcano continues to glow, the impatience and the immoderate love demand their sacrifice: and what one formerly did "for the sake of God" one now does for the sake of money, that is to say, for the sake of that which *now* gives the highest feeling of power and good conscience.[13]

Little in contemporary culture better bears out Nietzsche's insights about the generality and attractiveness of the operative lust for power than do video games of all sorts and FPSs and RPGs in particular. These games turn on an almost pure lust for power: they repetitively enact the accrual of more and more power to a central, perceiving subject, with the rest of the world reduced to objects to be killed or consumed.[14] Even in the social world of MMORPGs, other people exist largely as adjuncts to the pursuit of one's own power. The enemies and monsters one must kill in order to achieve mastery, unlike the human players in the game, are eternally-returning participants, who exist for no reason other than to be exploited for resources by the powerful central subject. Unlike the player, enemies are generally following no quest and experiencing no gain of power themselves. They do not consume diminishing resources, get more powerful treasures and weapons, or auction wares for gold—they are simply software subroutines that continually appear and reappear as the object of player quests. There can be little doubt that this objectifying view of the world connects directly with the lust for power enacted by the main game player—that not only must I be leveling-up as a demonstration of my mastery over the world, but at the same time, the "bulk" or cyber-biomass of the world must *not* be realizing the same goal. There must be haves and have-nots. There must be colonizers and colonized, predators and prey, rulers and ruled; the thought of a world without hierarchy is, in computer game terms, the ultimate nightmare.

The lust for power experienced by players of games like *WoW* is not merely abstract: it is directly and deliberately embedded in what looks much like our own Western view of modernity. Less known outside the gaming world than the basic experience point/leveling-up model are the subsidiary actions that can consume much of the *WoW* players activities called, within the game, professions. Professions come in two flavors: three professions available to all players (cooking, fishing, and

first aid), and then a group of higher-level professions from which each character can choose only two (these include skills like blacksmithing, mining, jewelry-crafting, enchanting, herb-picking, potion-brewing, and so forth). The high degree of parallelism between these activities and their real-world equivalents has started to attract puzzled notice among some commentators.[15] Among other things, they ask, what precisely is "fun" or "pleasurable" about doing an activity—cooking, for example, or mining with a pickaxe for raw metals—that is often not pursued with real pleasure in the real world?

More striking, these activities are hooked directly into the complex economic systems featured in *WoW*. Characters can mine for copper, silver, iron, gold, and other valuable metals, and then smelt these metals and otherwise combine them so as to sell them directly to other players, trade them for other valuable treasures, craft them into valuable jewelry, auction them for gold coins, and even sell them outside the game for real-world money. Unlike gambling games that have determined real-world monetary payoffs, *WoW* offers an economy that closely resembles the actual world of capitalist employment, in which players can spend substantial amounts of time in the pursuit not of quests and experience points but ultimately of gold and jewels that can be exchanged for money. In other words, perhaps just as much as one can "play the game" in *WoW*, one can *work*.

Gaming as Work

Working in *WoW* is as repetitive as the most mechanized sorts of employment in the "real world." Professions are subject to a similar experience point/leveling model as is the rest of *WoW* so that extensive work in a given profession allows one to work on, search for, or craft ever more valuable items. A player who spends hours mining copper, for example, will eventually gain the skill necessary to mine tin, and after that, silver, and after that, iron, and so on; each of these metals can either be sold for its "raw value" or smelted and otherwise combined into valuable jewelry and other items. Playing *WoW*, one often sees numerous players engaged in these solitary work activities, and clearly, for many players, such work becomes the main point of engagement with the game. Players frequently receive messages from highly skilled "professionals" who can craft high-level weapons, add powerful enchantments to other weapons, create valuable jewelry with the right materials, and so forth, often in exchange for gold or other valuables.

While killing-monsters-for-experience-points has become a familiar, if underanalyzed, aspect of what we too easily today call games, the relation-

ship of *WoW* professions to play and to pleasure has hardly been examined at all. Despite their simulative nature, little about these professions is play, unless one also wants to count the writing of documents on "simulated" paper in a word processor or the calculation of "simulated" mathematical tables, to be play. The fact that one is not in fact mining real-world copper or tin, or cooking "basted boar ribs" or "baked clams" that can be consumed in physical reality, seems only peripheral to the question of just what sort of activity these professions are. Surely there is little to separate standing in front of a copper vein with a simulated axe picking up pieces of metal ore, or standing in front of a cooking fire with "raw clams," and then "cooking" them, from any number of other computer-based activities such as data entry, that we would readily recognize not as play but as work. The fact that users have the impression of pleasure from either the tasks themselves or their results does also not provide prima facie evidence that the activity is play; pleasure is not evident as a critical defining feature of play by Caillois or Huizinga, and it is arguable that many other computer-based activities, such as programming itself, Web design, graphic design, and others, provide extremely similar sorts of pleasure for users, even if these are rarely called games.

If we cast aside for a moment the generic distinction according to which programs like *WoW, Halo,* and *Half-Life* are games while Microsoft Excel, Microsoft Word, and Adobe Photoshop are "productivity tools," it becomes clear that the applications have nearly as much in common as makes them distinct. Each involves a wide range of simulations of activities that can or cannot be directly carried out in physical reality; each demands absorptive, repetitive, hierarchical tasks as well as providing means for automating and systematizing them. Each provides distinct and palpable feelings of pleasure for users in any number of different ways; this pleasure is often of a type relating to some kind of algorithmic completeness, a "snapping" sense that one has completed, with digital certainty, a task whose form may or may not have been made clear from the outset (finishing a particular spreadsheet or document, completing a design, or finishing a quest or mission). In every context in which these activities are completed, whether that context is established by the computer or by people in the physical world, there is indeed some sense of "experience" having been gained, listed, compiled by the completion of a given task. Arguably, this is a distinctive feature of the computing infrastructure: not that tasks were not completed before computers (far from it) but rather that the digitally-certain sense of having completed a task in a closed way has become heightened and magnified by the binary nature of computers.

What emerges as a hidden truth of computer gaming—and no less, although it may be even better hidden, of other computer program

use—is the human pleasure taken in the completing of activities with closure and with hierarchical means of task measurement. Again, this kind of pleasure certainly existed before computers, but it has become an overriding emotional experience for many in society only with the widespread use of computers. A great deal of the pleasure users get from *WoW* or *Half-Life*, as from Excel or Photoshop, is a digital sense of task completion and measurable accomplishment, even if that accomplishment only roughly translates into what we may otherwise consider intellectual, physical, or social goal-attainment. What separates *WoW* or *Half-Life* from the worker's business world is thus not variability or "give" but rational certainty, the discreteness of goals, the general sense that such goals are well-bounded, easily attainable, and satisfying to achieve, even if the only true outcome of such attainment is the deferred pursuit of additional goals of a similar kind.

It seems hard on any account to call this sort of activity "play" and even less to understand why it is proper to see it as a "game." The fourfold typology established by Caillois in *Man, Play, and Games* bears this out: for there is almost no legible sense in which *WoW* or *Half-Life* can be understood as a game of competition (*agon*), of chance (*alea*), of simulation (mimicry), or of vertigo (*ilinx*).[16] Competitive games are defined by having winners and losers, yet only in specialized circumstances can *WoW* or *Half-Life* be said to have winners or losers. There are winners and losers, for example in team-vs-team competitions to achieve particular objectives, but such competitions are relatively peripheral to the main gameplay. They are certainly not games of chance because there is little left to chance about games like *WoW*—indeed, the lack of chance is one of the most remarkable features of the games and part of what has misled some critics into viewing them as narratives, since they almost always indicate what comes next in as much detail as does a movie or film (but different kinds of detail and for different reasons). They are not simulations in the sense employed by Caillois, since one is not really imitating acts in the real world that one cannot do; rather, one is engaged in the real pursuit of simulated activities, just as "real," as we have been seeing, as the digital production of written documents or of spreadsheets. And they are nothing like the games of vertigo described by Caillois, in which "vertigo is commonly sought for its own sake," citing as one example the whirling dervishes who "seek ecstasy by whirling about with movements accelerating as the drumbeats become ever more precipitate. Panic and hypnosis are attained by the paroxysm of frenetic, contagious, and shared rotation."[17] While vertigo and hypnosis are indeed produced by games like *WoW*, their high degree of structure and focus differentiate them from the free detachment of perception that concerns Caillois.

At the very least, *WoW* and *Half-Life*, and their cohort are therefore not games in the sense to which we have become accustomed. It seems clear that we call these programs "games" because of the intense feelings of pleasure experienced by players when we engage with them and because they appear on the surface not to be involved in the manipulation of objects with physical-world consequences. On reflection, neither of these facts proves very much. As we have seen, many objects in computer games do have real-world consequences and sequels so that, at most, they may be games in the sense that gambling for money is in the real world—precisely the example used by Caillois to illustrate the fuzzy area where play stops seeming so playful. And the fact that computer games are pleasurable cannot, by itself, furnish grounds for calling them games: after all, games constitute only a part of those activities in the world that give us pleasure.

It is plausible that physical games simulate forms of pleasure that we also receive from other activities—and, following a psychoanalytic line of thinking, we can suggest that most pleasure comes either from sex or aggression and that both of these tie rather directly to the lust for power. Such pleasure in aggression of this sort is on display everywhere in the analog world, and some of the finest arguments in critical theory about the nature of capital look unsparingly at the somatic pleasure those in power derive precisely from the manipulation of capital, the manipulation of people in place of or as capital, the manipulation of a person as an object for its own sake, and the sheer exercise of power as a kind of aggressive pleasure in itself. It is no fantasy to imagine that corporate presidents, contrary to many workers' hopes, actually take pleasure in firing or laying off large numbers of employees, in making unreasonable demands, in selling off and then demolishing property owned for hundreds of years for the sake of short-term profits. Despite the claims of freedom associated with contemporary free-market discourse, we are often aware of a somatic pleasure at the heart of capitalism that gives the lie to Hobbesian claims about the state of human beings in civilization as somehow different from its antecedent social forms. It is our own society with its displaced bloodletting that is "nasty, brutish, and short," at least as much as are our fantasies of what prestatist, precapitalist societies might have been like.

More is involved here than a series of rough analogies between corporate and political power and the activity of "playing" computer games. As we have been suggesting all along, many prominent business activities today are themselves computerized all the way to the bottom and rely on processes that look remarkably similar to the ones performed in computer games. While the player who spends a great deal of time working at cooking or mining in *WoW* no doubt experiences at least

some identification with the hypothetical "worker," the main gameplay in *WoW* is much more like that of the corporate middle manager, given instructions from on high that typically include the bloody extraction of resources from what appear on the surface to be other living beings, but which are also plainly not understood to exist at the same metaphysical "level" as does the subject. Killing in computer games, as in much of human history, is justified not for some sense of the "greater good" but because those one kills are understood to be "less than" oneself. And in this respect, the fact that so few games find ways of creating human pleasure that are not directly represented by the killing of living (or even "unloving") beings must be seen as highly disturbing. If not for sex—which for a variety of reasons has not been a large-scale success in computer games—the only pleasure we seem to be able to create in computer games is bloody murder. To the degree that computer games as a genre reflect us as we are, we as a social group are far more murderous and bloodthirsty than our polite, everyday selves suggest.

This, one suspects, is a reason few truly powerful capitalists play games like *WoW* or *Half-Life* in their leisure time, for they must often receive exactly the pleasure it provides at its height from their actual work activity. For the same reason, it is not merely abstract or metaphorically apposite to suggest that programs like *WoW* or *Half-Life* are like work. They are like work not merely in their persistent representation of what we know to be physical world employment: they are also definitely like our own capitalist system of work and worker exploitation. If they simulate anything directly, that is, games simulate our own relation to capital and to the people who must be exploited and used up for capital to do its work. But it is overly simple to call this activity simulation: a better term might be something like *training*.

Outsourcing Play

I am suggesting that programs like *WoW* and *Half-Life* do not merely resemble the capitalist structures of domination, but that they directly instantiate them and, in important ways, train human beings to become part of those systems. As such, it is remarkable to see how much of the in-game and also out-of-game structure surrounding these games conforms to the insights of cultural theorists about the way capital, work, and exploitation function in the world outside of the so-called games. It is well-known that many games developed hand-in-hand with training simulators, especially for military activities like airplane flying, submarine piloting, marksmanship, and so forth. Indeed, the "subjective" screen viewpoint of FPS games like *Half-Life* emerge directly from the console

modeling of flight simulators, and here again emerges an interesting conflation between simple operation of a mechanical device (airplanes, cars) and exploitation/murder of other living things. Among the most popular games have been those like *Grand Theft Auto* that combine aspects of FPS and driving simulation, and it is widely reported that teenagers and others who spend a great deal of time in driving simulations have difficulty containing their aggression in real-world driving, precisely because these simulations encourage aggression for pleasure.

Even in the popular press, we have been told over and over again that the "virtual economies" of games like *WoW* and *EverQuest* (a series of MMORPGs manufactured by Sony) are "bleeding into" the real-world economy through the exchange of "virtual gold" for real money via eBay auctions and other direct online sales.[18] This pitches the real/virtual distinction, on one reading at least, at the wrong level. There is nothing virtual about the money spent on such games, and the goods earned and traded inside the games are virtual only in the sense that other computer documents are virtual—a sense that in many ways bypasses the fundamental connotation of the virtual as taking place only in the imagination, as (in terms vital for Caillois) taking place only outside of our reality to begin with. Nothing about the economic exchanges in games like *WoW* or *EverQuest* seems virtual in this sense; to the contrary, they seem every bit as "real" as are the actual monetary transactions on which our world relies and which are almost exclusively today executed via electronic interaction.

Rather than exist as a virtual alternative to physical cash economies, then, the worlds of *WoW* and *EverQuest* both mimic and instance those economies, in more ways than their putative existence as games may suggest. To begin with, the correlation between real, clock time and in-game money resembles closely the employer/employee relationship; players are encouraged by a variety of means to spend as much time as possible in the game, as if they were "salaried" employees who need be worked as much as possible during each time period. This counterintuitive fact is paralleled by many of the features of time and space in games. One might imagine that, having secured the player's dollars for that month, gamemakers would find it profitable to limit the amount of time each player spends in the game, thus maximizing their resource output for each unit of income; instead, they find a variety of means to extend the player's interaction, no doubt largely because of the danger of a player's finishing the game, which can't be allowed.

MMORPGs thus become curious combinations of intense combat scenes, often lasting just a few moments; extended periods of "farming" or "mining" (both of these meant in both literal and metaphorical senses); and a great number of scenes of traveling, waiting, resting, flying, run-

ning, and standing—getting to the next quest phase, the next mission, or back to the home base to exchange treasure or report the completion of quests. Obviously, all of these mechanisms could be foregone, at least in theory, and the plainest reasons they must exist are to spread out gameplay for players and to limit the number of software interactions experienced at any given moment by the server hosting the game. This means that a surprisingly small percentage of "in-game" time is spent doing what most would recognize as nominally playing the game; instead, as in physical reality, one waits, walks, and flies for the few opportunities to actually gain experience and treasure.

This communicative economy where time and space are exchanged for cash and experience also mimics physical economies, the ones communication theorists like Harold Innis and Armand Mattelart have pointed to in the emergence of large-scale communication systems over nations and continents.[19] In the view of both of these writers, the conveyance of ideas over space becomes a kind of surface that obscures the real exchange of commodities and human labor out of which human empire is formed. To both authors, the restriction of the word *communication* to information, ideas, and images obscures much of what can be said to be really happening as communication takes place. Communication in the restricted (informatic) sense must always be seen in the social and physical matrices of which it is a part; the temptation to see communicative acts as whole in and of themselves, while powerful, is often productively resisted.

Rather than an imaginary economy "bleeding over" into physical reality, then, it seems perhaps more productive to understand phenomena like *WoW* and *EverQuest* as extensions of physical economies into our own ideological imaginaries, much like movies and television before them. Unlike most movies and television, however, MMORPGs demand intimate and profound engagement from individual users. The popular name for this phenomenon is addiction, and psychologists and parents the world over are concerned, in what strikes me as in part a displacement, about the absorptive addiction of young people into virtual worlds like *WoW*. The counterargument to such accusations is that the games are "social" and people are "learning to be social," but however true these sentiments may be, they seem themselves to miss the point. The question here is not what games provide, but what they replace; for what they replace, especially in the experience of young people, is often play itself: play not aimed at goals, and play that is in many ways (but not every way) much less hierarchical than the use of MMORPGs.

More salient and much less considered, though, is the way in which MMORPGs are a real world of engagement, one that parallels the kind of world a programmer or securities analyst might experience within the

capitalist working day. Parents and even students seem obsessed with this kind of experience today, and it seems no accident that one main form of what seems to be "entertainment" in many ways simply replicates and simulates the precise world of employment and movements of capital that do, in fact, define much of the world in which we engage as Western adults and engage moreover to accustom our children. The problem with games in this sense is not at all that young people are spending too much time playing: it is instead that they are not playing at all, at least not in the simulative and imaginative sense that writers like Caillois and Derrida understand play itself.

Who Plays? Where?

There is little more striking testimony to the ways in which *WoW* and *EverQuest* are not really play than the widespread selling of high-level characters for real money that has emerged as a significant part of the world of these games. From the beginning of *WoW* in particular, and today with even more urgency, we have heard that players with means choose not to engage in the grinding, repetitive, and often extremely boring process of leveling up a player from level one to level ten to level twenty. Instead, many players want to use their real economic power to purchase characters at the game's highest level, currently level seventy. Here the word and concept "mining" take on a new meaning, metaphorically extended from the process of mining precious metals inside the world of *WoW*. Today, there are literally hundreds of Web sites selling "WoW Gold" and providing "Gold Farming" and "Gold Mining." The sixtieth and seventieth level characters players purchased have been played by others, who spend hundreds if not thousands of hours in the most dedicated engagement with the game, "power-leveling" characters as quickly as possible so as to sell off the results for real money.

The prices that can be obtained for such a process may seem absurd—absurdly expensive, in that one is supposedly paying for a "game," but also absurdly cheap when one considers the amount of time that must be put into power-leveling a character all the way to the game's cap. Currently, it is possible to buy a level seventy character, along with accompanying treasures, weapons, flying mounts (which offset the tiresome process of traveling from place to place inside *WoW*), and in-world gold, for about $250. Parallel characters can be purchased for other MMORPGs at similar prices. Estimates vary, but it takes at least five full twenty-four-hour days (120 hours) to take a character from level zero to level seventy, and probably more than this. In the U.S., that translates to at least three full weeks of work, for which the sum of $250 is well below minimum wage.

While some U.S. players do choose to sell the results of their character leveling, the bulk of such work is reportedly done by commercial entities operating at a grey-market level in "developing" nations, especially China. Such reports are hard to verify, in no small part because Blizzard Entertainment and other game companies cannot be seen to be endorsing such work as a formal part of the world of their games, although rumors abound of Blizzard's overt endorsement and even covert ownership of gold-farming operations. Julian Dibbell himself, whose *Play Money* (2006) evinces a certain childlike wonder at "making money from playing games," in a 2007 article in the *New York Times Magazine*, "The Life of the Chinese Gold Farmer," goes some distance toward recognizing the similarity between *WoW* and the actual world of enterprise capital which it instances and no less the overt colonialist resonances the game itself represents.[20] To the well-off U.S. gameplayer, $250 to play a top-level character may seem like the ultimate in fun, but the "gold-farm wageworkers" Dibbell documents, earning something like thirty cents per hour, working twelve hours per day, seven days each week, do not seem to be engaged with *WoW* for fun. These digital laborers do not seem to derive significantly more pleasure from their work than other manual laborers do from theirs. From the gold farmer's perspective, *WoW* simply is work of the most bluntly capitalist sort.

Are "Chinese Gold Farmers" better off for having this work than not having any work at all? This hoary chestnut of proglobalization theory misses the point, much as do arguments that *WoW* and other MMORPGs are simply games or virtual worlds and must be understood within those frames. The other name used in the popular press for gold farming or mining is virtual sweatshop, and like other sweatshops, those based in MMORPGs betray the drastic inequality on which our contemporary social structure is based, one that does not merely reflect but reifies the colonial structures we tell ourselves exist only as a part of a rejected past. The surd facts of an activity being understood as pleasurable play by the middle class and above, while being practiced under an economic whip in the globe's developing regions, raises the most profound questions about the shape of our society and not merely how it plays but what circumstances are required to engage in play in the first place.

The Simulation of Globalization

While there are external cues about what is happening in the situation of MMORPGs in the larger world, we have yet to examine how the game content itself might relate to processes of globalization. It is not that games directly simulate the world of capitalist work: indeed, a few

games do directly simulate work of this sort and are found enjoyable only by a small minority of players. Some simulation programs, the labeling of which as games is problematic even within the digital community, on the other hand—such as *Second Life* and *The Sims Online*—have become duly famous for their market in so-called virtual real estate, where entrepreneurs remarkably like physical real estate agents buy and sell virtual property for significant real-money profits. Here, the mapping of programmatic content onto social wish fulfillment is relatively direct. There is little mystery about why it is pleasurable or satisfying to own a mansion with expansive property inside of Second Life; the pleasure there is exactly homologous with the pleasure of significant property ownership in the physical world.

Perhaps because of its displacement, the homologies between *WoW* activity and real-world work are less easy to see, and this makes them perhaps that much more powerful, as we have been arguing. Yet on one significant level, the homologies are quite visible and yet rarely remarked upon by players. This is, of course, the way that the virtual world of Azeroth itself (the world in which *WoW* takes place) does not merely resemble but duplicates analog reality. We know that J. R. R. Tolkien modeled much of *The Lord of the Rings* on contemporary and ancient Europe so that significant aspects of that world are easily recognizable as transmuted places from England, France, and so on. There is little doubt that Tolkien's elves, dwarves, and hobbits represent various fantasies of the prehistoric European past, or that the orcs and goblins associated by Tolkien with heat and darkness reflect any number of racial and ethnic prejudices that never quite come to the surface, although the inherent racial Manichaeism in the narrative becomes much more evident when, once the material is translated to film, actors of color can be recruited only for villainous roles.[21]

Like other MMORPGs, though perhaps in more detail, *WoW* builds off the Tolkien world. While having no explicit locations corresponding to those of Tolkien's Middle Earth, *WoW* solicits a variety of other places and creature types into the world of Azeroth, and it is clear that a whole series of racial and racialist assumptions inform much of this world-creation. The locations in Azeroth typically are comprised of parts of Earth before they have been "civilized" or have been brought into modernity: jungle, tundra, forest, island, cave, savanna are just some of the most common types of terrain one encounters. The game takes place in a Tolkienesque mythical past where quasi-modern cities are few and far between. Although there certainly are a few large cities that play critical roles in the game, these are largely exempt from the questing and mining that make up the bulk of gameplay.

The creatures with whom one fights in these environments are also subject to a distinctly racialized conception of human progress—they

instance an "old" vision of progressive evolution that largely predates Darwin. Here, in the mythic past, humans were part animal: satyrs, "pig-men," "lizard-men," and so forth are commonly found. Players can opt to have characters come from one of these nonhuman races, but, as in most games of this type, the human race, nearly always represented with white or light skin, displays a balance among emotional, intellectual, and physical capabilities, and an ability to play a multiplicity of roles that is denied to the other races that are more closely tied to racialized char-acteristics.[22] Player characters, in general, are attractive to look at, and a whole subgenre of gaming exists in which the appearance of character avatars plays an important role. In RPGs, as in some genre narratives, the characters are generally young, strong, at the height of physical and sexual prowess, and often displaying visual features that cue such heightened prowess even when it may be entirely irrelevant to the RPG in question. Extremely ugly, even frightening, monsters are most often the target of aggression, and ugly, physically brutish humanoids often speak in apparently barbaric tongues full of guttural sounds and grunts or in the sort of proto-English associated with the "cavemen" and "sav-ages" of outdated visual representations. It is not uncommon to attack a tattooed, gleaming-eyed "savage" who responds immediately with a mock-pidgin phrase like, "me kill you bad!"

Not only are protohumans in *WoW* depicted as half-animal, but they are embedded in a range of animals and creatures that reinforce the view of the world as the mythic, desirable ancestors of our own, in which evolutionary and social patterns work out much more neatly than they do in now for us. Each bit of terrain is well-stocked with the animals one might typically find in its real equivalent, although these are some-times combined and extended in fantastic ways, and, of course, there are creatures not found in any version of the earthly past. One version of what appears to be African savanna, for example, includes snakes, zebras, giraffes, gazelles, and then rhino-like but also stegosaurus-like giant lizards and pterodactyl-like flying lizards, both of which cast light-ning on unsuspecting passersby. Characters of higher level, as they do in other regions, can simply walk by these animals without consequence, as they will not attack characters who are too powerful. The open savanna thus appears a kind of pristine, prehuman-occupation version of Africa, something that no doubt never existed on our Earth. More disturbingly, these animals never attack each other and also never appear to eat; they simply wander, fairly slowly, fodder for the killing instinct of players. Even the lowest levels of the game feature small animals (rabbits, mice, snakes, deer) that do not fight and provide no experience points or usable meat (meat from animals being a principal source for the cooking skill) but can still be killed by players simply for the "pleasure" of killing.

Thus one cannot interact with the beautiful world of Azeroth in any way but aggressively, and one cannot treat the apparently precivilized animal-human races with any attitude but imperious cruelty. These races and animals are confined to their (admittedly large) localities within the game, as are players at first, but as the game progresses and the player gets access to higher-level modes of transportation, the player soon assumes a god's-eye perspective on the locally bound flora and fauna. Here, too, is a kind of covert pleasure that the game provides, for the player is aligned here precisely with nothing so much as the globalist subject of capital, surveying his holdings from a demesne unavailable to his laboring subjects. Only the player engages in trade, professions, and murder for profit's sake; the static and bound animals and enemies attack in response or out of defense of their own territories, sure to give way to the more powerful player either now or later. The world presented by *WoW* is not precisely our world, but, in significant ways, it mimics exactly the wish that capital and globalization encode for us.

It is not clear, on almost any score, why it might be legitimate to call the activity that one undertakes inside of *WoW* and other MMORPGs "play." It is not loose or unstructured; it is not without consequence; it does not admit of significant breaking of the rules or their suspension for social purposes; and an extensive part of the actual activity one undertakes there is extremely goal-directed and prescribed, in many ways the opposite of what we have heretofore called play. Indeed, if *WoW* is play, it is so somewhat as the game of Monopoly is play: it provides practice for, and just as much a simulation of, the insertion of the imperial subject into the world of capital, of ownership, and of racial and ethnic superiority. And much like those worlds, it offers no scene of victory or emergence from its own terms: as in the exchange of "real" capital, the result of using programs like *WoW* is even more of the same.

At a more conceptual and philosophical level, it seems reasonable to be concerned about the pleasure games like *WoW* inspire in their players. While no doubt a certain amount of such play is no more cause for concern than any other form of entertainment, the difficulty players experience in tearing themselves away from such games dovetails with questions about the nature of computer game pleasure. This is an area few players wish to see interrogated; gameplayers among undergraduates are quick to dismiss such concerns with tautological explanations like "they are just fun." Outside the explicit world of capital and colony one sees in *WoW* in particular, there is reason to wonder about the effects of spending many hours in a world where one can pursue, in a linear manner, hierarchical power over a world of inferiors and also apparent peers whose level of attainment is easily measured in numbers. One can just as easily wonder about the lack of play in the Derridean sense that

one sees in such games. Can there be any doubt about the potential attractiveness of an apparently human world in which we understand clearly how to attain power, what to do with it, and that the rules by which we operate do not change or change only by explicit order? The deep question such games raise is what happens when people bring expectations formed by them into the world outside.

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

NOTES

1   For "ludology"—a new field purportedly devoted to games in general but in practice exclusively attuned to video games—see especially Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997), and more recently, Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). Ian Bogost, in *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), despite his use of an alternate terminology and attention to predigital games, seems as determined as the ludologists to focus on the new aspects of video games at the expense of their more familiar features. The view that video games are closest to narrative literature is espoused most famously in Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997); also see Pat Harrington and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, eds., *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007). Alexander Galloway, in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2006); McKenzie Wark, in *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007); and T. L. Taylor, in *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) best avoid the inherent problems in both ludology and narratology as methods of game criticism.
2   Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, eds., *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1970), 247–72.
3   Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1978), 278–93 (hereafter cited in text).
4   George Lakoff's discussion is found in his *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1987).
5   Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2001), 43.
6   Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Methuan, 1986).
7   An interesting analytic argument to this effect, not at all directly informed by deconstruction, is found in Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990).
8   This research is discussed at some length in the epilogue, "Computers Without Computationalism," of my *The Cultural Logic of Computation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009).
9   Screen capture from official Blizzard Entertainment Web site for *World of Warcraft*, http://www.blizzard.com/. Image and likenesses are copyright © Blizzard Entertainment Corp.
10   Screen capture from *Half-Life 2* from Gamer's Hell gaming fan site, http://www.gamershell.com/. Images and likenesses are copyright © Valve Software.

11 Along with writers like Juul, Bogost, and Aarseth, all of whom advocate the educational potential of video games while also acknowledging some of their troubling aspects, scholarly and public discourse today is saturated with the view that games are beneficial, promote learning, and provide a potentially transformational path toward new educational possibilities—that is, not simply that games might be part of a suite of learning tools, but that they eclipse what is possible in a physical classroom. This is the sort of view I associate with the discourse of computationalism in *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, and that I suspect emerges not from thought about education but rather from a post hoc desire to justify the pleasure users get from playing computer games. Notable works that cast video games as educational experiences include James Paul Gee, *Good Video Games and Good Learning: Collected Essays on Video Games, Learning, and Literacy* (New York: Peter Long, 2007) and *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); David Williamson Shaffer, *How Computer Games Help Children Learn* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); John C. Beck and Mitchell Wade, *Got Game: How the Gamer Generation Is Reshaping Business Forever* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2004); Marc Prensky, *Digital Game-Based Learning* (Hightstown, NJ: Paragon House, 2000), and Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good For You: How Popular Culture Is Making Us Smarter* (New York: Penguin, 2005). Of these, Shaffer is the most thoroughly grounded in educational theory, and Johnson the most ideologically revealing.

12 See Linda L. Williams, *Nietzsche's Mirror: The World as Will to Power* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), on the relationship between "will to power" and "lust for power" in Nietzsche's works. *Der Wille zur Macht* occurs in Nietzsche's later works (e.g., *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1885, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1886) and takes on metaphysical overtones that are not at issue in this discussion, and was used by Nietzsche's sister as the title of a posthumous collection of aphorisms and other fragments; *Machtgelust* occurs in some of Nietzsche's midcareer works (especially *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, 1879, and *Daybreak*, 1881) and has psychological overtones that mesh well with what I am arguing is experienced during video game play.

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), Book 3, §204, 126.

14 See Herbert Tucker, "Southey the Epic-Headed," *Romanticism on the Net* 32 (November 2004), for a discussion of Robert Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) that parallels the kind of characterological pattern found in video games and notes the resemblance.

15 See the recent collection edited by Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: "A World of Warcraft Reader"* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), and in particular Scott Rettberg, "Corporate Ideology in *World of Warcraft*," 19–38.

16 For the full typology see Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 10–36.

17 Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 23.

18 See, for example, Julian Dibbell, *Play Money: Or, How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), and Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), both of whom endorse the view that monetary exchange in computer games is a demonstration of their cultural value; whether or not they are correct, here we are asking whether such exchange constitutes *play*.

19 See Harold A. Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Toronto: Punduvn Press, 1964) and *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1999) and Armand Mattelart, *The Invention of Communication* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996), *Networking the World, 1794–2000* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000), and *The Information Society: An Introduction* (London: Sage, 2003).

20 Dibbell, "The Life of the Chinese Gold Farmer," *New York Times Magazine*, June 17, 2007, 36–40.

21   See Jessica Langer, "The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post)Colonialism in *World of Warcraft*," in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity*, 87–108, for an excellent extended discussion of *WoW*'s colonial settings.
22   Esther MacCallum-Stewart, "'Never Such Innocence Again': War and Histories in *World of Warcraft*," in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity*, 39–62, smartly analyzes both the real-world and fantasy settings of *WoW* and relates them to real-world conflicts whose displacement seems to be at least part of the cultural memory out of which *WoW* is built (a fact to which the proliferation of games that replicate historical conflicts testifies).