THE IDEOLOGY OF INTERACTIVITY (OR, VIDEO GAMES AND THE TAYLORIZATION OF LEISURE)

Matt Garite
English Department
401 Hall of Languages
Syracuse University
Syracuse, NY 13244
+1 (315) 426-8105
magarite@syr.edu

ABSTRACT
Interactivity is one of the key conceptual apparatuses through which video games have been theorized thus far. As many writers have noted, video games are distinct from other forms of media because player actions seem to have direct, immediate consequences in the world depicted onscreen. But in many ways, this "interactive" feature of video games tends to manifest itself as a relentless series of demands, or a way of disciplining player behavior. In this sense, it seems more accurate to describe the human-machine interface made possible by gaming as an aggressive form of "interpellation" or hailing. Drawing primarily upon the work of Louis Althusser, I argue that traditional theories of interactivity fail to acknowledge the *work* of video games—in other words, the extent to which video games define and reconstitute players as subjects of ideology.

KEYWORDS
Ideology, interactivity, video games, Marxism.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a story on October 10, 2002 about a jobless 24-year-old South Korean man who was found dead after playing computer games non-stop for 86 hours at an Internet cafe in Kwangju, 260 kilometers southwest of Seoul [15]. Nine days later, a 27-year-old Taiwanese man named Lien Wen-cheng died moments after police found him foaming at the mouth and bleeding from the nose on the floor of a cyber cafe restroom in central Taiwan. The man is suspected to have died from exhaustion after playing video games for 32 hours straight [16]. All of which is to say that the age of the video game is upon us. After surviving decades of criticism from all sides of the political spectrum, the video game industry is now seemingly on the verge of securing a position of dominance within the realm of popular visual culture. According to the Interactive Digital Software Association's *2002 Consumer Survey*, approximately "sixty percent of all Americans, or about 145 million people, play interactive games on a regular basis" [12]. Business analysts repeatedly forecast that "growth in the game software market is likely to outpace that of the Internet, television, radio, motion pictures, music, and

newspapers" [12]. Despite this considerable popularity in recent years, video games nevertheless remain notoriously under-analyzed within the academy.

Most of the work on video games published within the past two-and-a-half decades has been limited to either popular, journalistic accounts of the history of the game industry, or so-called 'empirical' studies of the effects of video game violence on children. As a number of recent writers have argued, these approaches consistently fail to produce systematic accounts of the formal features of video games, and instead result in either untempered praise or 'Lieberman-style' invective.[1] More importantly, the few works that *have* attempted to produce rigorous formal analyses (usually by importing terms from established fields like film studies, literary theory, and art history) tend to view video games as part of a general history of media technologies, without situating or grounding these technologies in relation to broader social, economic, and political conditions. As a means of addressing these limitations, my paper will present a series of theses concerning the ideological effects of those structural features that distinguish video games from traditional (particularly literary and cinematic) forms of cultural production.

In this sense, my approach corresponds with Fredric Jameson's definition of textual interpretation as an analysis of the political unconscious of cultural forms. Jameson claims that by viewing an object of study in relation to its historical moment of emergence, the object undergoes a "dialectical reversal" by which it then becomes possible to grasp "formal processes as sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content" of individual works [14]. Thus, rather than focusing on the political content of particular games, I will instead perform an analysis of the generalized structure of video games themselves. By critically engaging with recent characterizations of video games as "interactive narratives," I hope to demonstrate that gaming technologies offer players a seemingly unprecedented degree of freedom and control, while simultaneously drowning them in the icy waters of routine calculation. More than anything else, I am concerned with the *work* of gaming—not merely the work of the player, but also the work that the video game performs in order to 'play' the player.[2] By repeatedly demanding user input, video games lock players in a self-replicating, integrated circuit of instructions and commands. I will therefore argue that video games embody one of the primary contradictions of consumer ideology whereby, under the guise of freedom, discipline encodes its other.

Interactivity is one of the key conceptual apparatuses through which new media forms have been theorized thus far, appearing in both popular and academic descriptions of gaming. Some of the industry's most successful game developers have names like "IO Interactive (IOI)," and "Eidos Interactive." This second company is described on its web site as "home to some of the interactive industry's best known brands including *Commandos*, *Soul Reaver*, *Championship Manager* and *Tomb Raider* featuring the world's most famous cyber-babe Lara Croft." As art historian Julian Stallabrass notes, "The distinctiveness of computer games lies in interaction: the passivity of cinema and television is replaced by an environment in

which the player's actions have a direct, immediate consequence on the world depicted" [21]. This emphasis on the "active" role of game players is a common trope that appears repeatedly in discourses on interactivity. For instance, Janet H. Murray insists upon the distinctive capacity of computer-based media to respond to player input. In her influential book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, she writes, "the primary representational property of the computer is the codified rendering of responsive behaviors. This is what is most often meant when we say that computers are *interactive*. We mean they create an environment that is both procedural and participatory" [19]. Game players are thus seemingly granted a degree of agency and choice. By manipulating a control pad, they play an active role in determining the flow of narrative. This ability to "choose-your-own-adventure" is one of the most commonly rehearsed means by which games are advertised. The bold caption of a magazine advertisement for *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) urges potential players to "CHOOSE YOUR PATH. You can side with the light or succumb to the darkness—but in the end you must choose and let the galaxy suffer the consequences," while ads for the first-person shooter game *Postal 2* (2003) invite players to "Freely explore full 3-D open-ended environments. Interact with over 100 unique NPC's [non-player characters] including Gary Coleman, marching bands, dogs, cats and elephants, protesters, policemen and civilians, with or without weapons. POSTAL 2 is all about choice; experiment with everyone and everything. And remember...*it's only as violent as you are!*" *Postal 2* and *Knights of the Old Republic* are not the only games that claim to be "all about choice"—similar evocations of player freedom litter the pages of gaming magazines each month.

And yet, despite these persistent references to the "interactive" character of video games, the meaning of the term often remains unclear. Murray's definition of interaction as "the codified rendering of responsive behaviors" finds its double in Canadian installation artist David Rokeby's essay "Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media." Rokeby writes, "a technology is interactive to the degree that it reflects the consequences of our actions or decisions back to us" [20]. However, as Patrick Crogan notes, the mirror in Rokeby's definition of interactive media is not purely reflective—it also "*refracts* what is given; what is returned is ourselves, transformed and processed" [9]. For Rokeby, the video game is primarily a refracting mirror that "transforms the interactor's gestures largely by amplification" [20]. Nevertheless, this process of amplification must ultimately go unnoticed. Games seek to naturalize the relationship between player gestures and on-screen effects by demanding the repetition of these gestures ad infinitum. For a player to respond effectively (i.e. in a manner that the game rewards), the arbitrary correspondence between, say, pressing the "A" button and kicking an on-screen enemy must become fully internalized and made to seem transparent, until response is a matter of habit.

Rokeby's metaphorical description of the video game as a refracting mirror is useful in the sense that it allows us to identify what Lev Manovich calls the "synthetic realism" of new media objects. In his groundbreaking study *The Language of New Media*, Manovich argues that one of the primary attractions of current games is their ability to simulate both "the codes of traditional cinematography" as well as "the

perceptual properties of real life objects and environments" [18]. Indeed, if a traditional realist aesthetic is defined by its effort to "mirror" a reality beyond the text, then the distinctive feature of the synthetic realism of video games is their contradictory effort to establish a transparent rendering of the real, while simultaneously announcing (indeed, parading) themselves as graphic simulations. As Manovich notes, the synthetic realism of video games "has a surprising affinity to twentieth-century leftist avant-garde aesthetics" [18], in the sense that Brecht's alienation effect and the Russian Formalist concept of *ostranenie* are now unconsciously embedded in the hardware and software of games themselves. Because video games are typically divided into segments of action and spectacle, players are essentially "forced to oscillate between the roles of viewer and user, shifting between perceiving and acting, between following the story and actively participating in it" [18]. Initially, this incorporation of a disruptive Brechtian aesthetic might seem to present players with opportunities for critical engagement with the medium. But as Manovich claims, "The effect of these shifts on the subject is hardly one of liberation and enlightenment" [18]. Indeed, rather than distracting players from identifying with on-screen events, these abrupt transitions between action and spectacle function as suturing mechanisms that only seem to further engage players in the game's synthetic unfolding.

Manovich's scattered discussion of video games in *The Language of New Media* amounts to one of the more productive analyses of the medium to date. Nevertheless, the bulk of his claims are mentioned only in passing, and therefore require additional development and critique. For instance, Manovich presents a compelling reversal of existing definitions of interactivity by arguing that game narratives are actually *not* "all about choice," but rather place a relentless series of both cognitive and physical demands on players. He writes:

> When we use the concept of "interactive media" exclusively in relation to computer-based media, there is the danger that we will interpret "interaction" literally, equating it with physical interaction between a user and a media object (pressing a button, choosing a link, moving the body), at the expense of psychological interaction. The psychological processes of filling-in, hypothesis formation, recall, and identification, which are required for us to comprehend any text or image at all, are mistakenly identified with an objectively existing structure of interactive links. [18]

Older forms of media are themselves "always-already" interactive in the sense that consumers read or interpret texts, but video games extend this process further by combining traditional "psychological" modes of interaction with physical or external modes. Manovich implicitly links this externalization and objectification of cognitive processes with an ongoing Taylorization of the workplace, as well as late capitalist efforts to standardize and commodify knowledge. In other words, he argues that when we play video games or work at a computer,

> we are asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations. Put differently, in what can be read as an updated

> version of French philosopher Louis Althusser's concept of "interpellation," we are asked to mistake the structure of somebody else's mind for our own. This is a new kind of identification appropriate for the information age of cognitive labor. The cultural technologies of an industrial society—cinema and fashion—asked us to identify with someone else's bodily image. Interactive media ask us to identify with someone else's mental structure. [18]

Manovich arrives at a similar conclusion in an early essay called "On Totalitarian Interactivity" (which was originally posted as a message to the Rhizome listserv and later reworked as a section of *The Language of New Media*), although this earlier essay is distinct in that Manovich situates his critique of interactivity in relation to his experience as a post-communist subject. He writes, "The experiences of East and West structure how new media is seen in both places. For the West, interactivity is a perfect vehicle for the ideas of democracy and equality. For the East, it is another form of manipulation, in which the artist uses advanced technology to impose his/her totalitarian will on the people" [17]. Although I disagree with Manovich's claim that such observations are bound up with ideological divisions between East and West, there is nevertheless much to be gained from an analysis that conceives of video game interactivity in terms of manipulation and control. Manovich's observations here and in *The Language of New Media* provide starting points for such an analysis, but there is still a great deal of work that remains to be done. For instance, the link Manovich establishes between interactive media and Althusser's theory of "interpellation" remains uncertain or hypothetical at best, and yet I believe such a link has much to yield. By relating Althusser's work on ideology to existing definitions of interactivity, I intend to demonstrate that video games operate on players through an updated, aggressively interactive and immersive form of interpellation.

In his 1970 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser develops an elaborate theory for understanding the network of mechanisms through which contemporary capitalist social formations reproduce their various relations of production. While outlining the features of this theory, Althusser situates cultural forms like art and literature alongside a number of other distinct and specialized "private" institutions (like schools, religious organizations, political parties, and the media), all of which are referred to as Ideological State Apparatuses (or ISAs). For Althusser, the main function of cultural texts (and of the ISAs as a whole) is to construct people as "subjects" by "representing the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" [1]. The subject functions in Althusser's model as the material site in which ideology is grounded and inscribed, while at the same time being that which is constructed *through* and *within* ideology. Althusser claims that the primary effect of this process is that the condition of subjectivity becomes immediately obvious and apparent to the subject, while the constructed or imposed nature of this condition remains unacknowledged. Within ideology, it appears 'obvious' that people are unique, distinguishable, irreplaceable identities—and that, as autonomous individuals, they possess a certain kind of subjectivity or consciousness which is the ultimate source of their beliefs and actions, independent of the world around them.

Althusser describes this apparent obviousness of subjectivity as "the elementary ideological effect" [1]. British literary critic Catherine Belsey further explains this point by writing:

> Ideology suppresses the role of language in the construction of the subject. As a result, people 'recognize' (misrecognize) themselves in the ways in which ideology 'interpellates' them, or in other words, addresses them as subjects, calls them by their names and in turn 'recognizes' their autonomy. As a result, they 'work by themselves', they 'willingly' adopt the subject-positions necessary to their participation in the social formation. [3]

This is where the tripartite meaning of the word 'subject' becomes apparent, implying simultaneously both the free-thinking subject of consciousness, the grammatical subject of a sentence, and finally, a position of dependence and submission in relation to the power or authority of another. According to Althusser, the subject of ideology is constructed as both "a free subjectivity, a center of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions," as well as "a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission" [1]. He writes, "the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection 'all by himself'" [1]. He later describes the process by which individuals 'willingly' submit themselves to ideology by writing, "ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing" [1]. Althusser uses the term "interpellate" to refer to a process whereby ideology hails or addresses subjects. We must note however that this discussion of interpellation *as a process* or a succession of events through time is misleading since, as Althusser points out, "the existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing" [1]. In other words, there is never a time when an individual can exist outside of ideology. Humans are social creatures (necessarily born and raised within an historically specific social formation), and ideology in the general sense is a precondition for (while being inseparable from) all modes of social interaction.

Thus one of the primary functions of an ISA is to produce willing subjects on a mass scale. The individual who "willingly" subjects herself to ideology in Althusser's model is not unlike the video game player who submits "freely" to the commandments of the game. Indeed, we might say that the interactive structure of video games produces that primary ideological effect whereby subjects are interpellated or called upon to (mis)recognize themselves as distinct, autonomous, freely acting individuals. The branching structure of game narratives presents players with a series of options regarding where to go and what to do. Players are made to feel like these decisions matter or have consequence, since the imprisoning code that determines such options always remains hidden from sight.

Walter Benjamin's famous passage from "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" regarding the so-called "liberating" features of cinematic perception seems particularly relevant here. He writes, "Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling" [4]. However, as Manovich notes, "the cost of this virtual mobility was a new institutionalized immobility of the spectator. All around the world large prisons were constructed that could hold hundreds of prisoners" [18]. These prisons are what we call theaters. Video games break with this tradition of immobility and detainment only to the extent that players must twitch their hands. Like cinema, the video game seemingly permits us to wander while it chains us to our seats.

Charles Bernstein has drawn similar conclusions regarding the relationship between video games and cinema. In his humorous essay "Play it Again, Pac-Man," Bernstein writes:

> If films offer voyeuristic pleasures, video games provide vicarious thrills. You're not peeking into a world in which you can't be seen, you're acting in a world by means of tokens, designated hitters, color-coded dummies, polymorphous stand-ins. The much-admired interactiveness of video games amounts to less than it might appear given the circumscribed control players have over their men. Joy sticks and buttons (like keyboards or mice) allow for a series of binary operations; even the most complex games allow for only a highly limited amount of player control. [5]

Bernstein later states, "the computer only simulates a small window of operator control. The real controller of the game is hidden from us, the inaccessible system core that goes under the name of Read Only Memory (ROM), which is neither hardware that you can touch or software that you can change but 'firmware.' Like ideology, ROM is out of sight only to control more efficiently" [5]. This connection between the power of both ROM and ideology to determine player actions is extremely compelling. But what is perhaps the most fascinating feature of video games is their effort to simulate an illusion of player control while simultaneously reflecting on-screen the player's subjection to the game. In most interactive narratives, the on-screen character (or "avatar") functions as the player's uncanny (and unconscious) double, manipulated by the player in much the same way the player is manipulated by the game itself. The avatar's actions are determined by the player to the same extent that the player's actions are themselves determined by the program. Players are thus unconsciously confronted with a rehearsal or re-enactment of the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment subject. Althusser's dialectic of freedom and subjection is useful in this context in that it foregrounds the key contradictions of interactive gaming: at one and the same time, video games grant players an unprecedented degree of freedom and control, while simultaneously bombarding them with a relentless series of limits and demands. To borrow from Althusser, we might say that what existing theories of interactivity

often fail to acknowledge is the extent to which video games define and reconstitute players as subjects of ideology.

One of the more radical features of Althusser's theory of ideology is his tendency to blur what he calls the "bourgeois" distinction between the public and private spheres. A similarly inhibiting distinction between work and leisure, or utility and play, has been materially inscribed in the gaming process. In recent years, games have fled from the cave-like, dangerous world of the local arcade in order to settle in homes across the globe. Living rooms and bedrooms are now occupied territories. This transmission into domestic space has only managed to strengthen the leisurely connotations of gaming. It is crucial that we dispel this myth that video games are playful, apolitical technologies of leisure and entertainment. Indeed, if we agree that video games function as technologies of interpellation, then it no longer makes sense to describe such games as "libidinal extravaganzas devoid of any socially productive component" [5]. Instead, my argument revolves around the notion that video games are tools, machines, complex devices that perform an overdetermined set of functions. More than anything else, I am concerned with the *work* of gaming—not merely the cognitive and physical labors of players, but also the ideological work performed by games themselves.

To borrow a military term popularized in the wake of 9-11, we might say that video games are "weaponized" texts, or disrupters of psychic stability. By introducing military metaphors, I mean to say that games perform what Pierre Bourdieu calls "symbolic violence"—in other words, that "gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such" [7]. Forms of symbolic violence (like unspoken rules of value and discrimination, or silent systems of punishment and reward) permeate all those ISAs that perform educational or pedagogic functions. Indeed, as Bourdieu notes, "All pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power" [8]. While video games are undoubtedly an extension of what Althusser refers to as "the cultural ISA," they nevertheless also tend to reinforce the work of educational or pedagogical institutions, since—like all ISAs—their primary function is the reproduction of the dominant ideology. Like educational institutions, video games are instances of symbolic violence in the sense that they inflict themselves on players. The world of the video game is nothing more than the on-screen rendering of programmed instructions and decrees. Players are "schooled" by an aggressive bombardment of pixellated images and sounds. Every moment is a direct imperative, an attack that demands a response. As the game unfolds, the player's body is silently inscribed with and encoded by the command lines of the program.

This aggressive, imperative mode of culture finds its earliest precedent in the more radical works of the historical avant-garde—and particularly, with the work of the Dadaists. As Benjamin observes, "From an alluring appearance or persuasive structure of sound the work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality" [4]. Clearly, the video game departs from this ballistic model only to the extent that it fires with precision and never stops to reload. Early games like *Asteroids* (1979) and *Space Invaders* (1978) signify an ideal projection of this logic.

The player's bombardment by the medium is doubled on-screen at the level of content as her spacecraft is subjected to an unrelenting, exponentially accelerating field of falling asteroids and alien invasions. In *Space Invaders*, players valiantly attempt to prolong game-play by firing ineffectual photon torpedoes from a fixed position at the base of the screen as the enemy horde descends; whereas *Asteroids* modifies this plot structure by situating the player's humble spacecraft at the center of the screen in the midst of a multilateral asteroid assault. But most importantly, in both games there is no possibility of survival. It is only a matter of time before players are overwhelmed. As the original *Asteroids* instruction booklet clearly states, "The longer you survive, the more space hazards you'll encounter." Thus in all possible outcomes of these games, players must inevitably submit to the alien logic of the code.

The frequent use of doubly charged terms like "monitor" and "screen" to describe video game hardware should remind us that games are not merely interpellating mechanisms, but also technologies of surveillance. Indeed, these two ideological functions often work together. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin comment upon the role of surveillance as a key structuring mechanism of action-oriented video games in their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, where they state:

> players of action-style games are called on to conduct an ongoing surveillance. They are assigned explicitly or implicitly the role of security guards, whose simple task is to shoot anything that appears threatening. Because the ultimate threat is that the enemy will destroy the equilibrium of the system and eventually halt the game by destroying the player himself, the player must constantly scan the visual field and direct his fire appropriately. Ideologically, the player is asked to defend or reestablish the status quo, so that even though the violence of the games appears to be antisocial, the ultimate message is not. It is a message that has prevailed from the early games such as *Space Invaders* (1978) in the 1970s to such games as *Doom* (1993) and *Quake* (1998) in the 1990s. [6]

Bolter and Grusin are right to claim that most generic action games position players as defenders of the status quo; but this is not in fact always the case. For instance, this convention is strategically negated in the recent, wildly popular *Grand Theft Auto* series, where players are cast as disruptive car thieves, and the object of the game is to flee from the confines of the law. Indeed, rather than focusing on the narrative content of action games, it may be more productive to think about surveillance as a structural feature of gaming itself. Like detectives at the scene of a crime, players are regularly called upon to process screen images and scan displays in order to visually monitor the playing field for signs of enemy movement. Regardless of narrative content, game screens always function as fields of data waiting to be mined. Thus, like the modern workplace, video games present users with an extensive series of information processing tasks. Following Manovich, we might say that the experience of gaming is in many ways like parsing data: "Gathering clues and treasures; constantly updating a mental map of the universe of the game, including the positions of pathways, doors, places to avoid, and so

on; keeping track of one's ammunition, health, and other levels—all this aligns playing a computer game with other 'information processing' tasks typical of computer culture, like searching the Internet, scanning news groups, pulling records from a database, [and] using a spreadsheet" [18]. In other words, when we strip away the particulars of content, gaming is essentially an aestheticized mode of information processing, and therefore the digital economy's ideal form of leisure.

But players are not simply called upon to police their game screens—they must also police themselves. In this sense, it may be helpful for us to think about video games in terms of what Jameson calls "autosurveillance" or self-monitoring. In his "Foreword" to Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jameson writes, "autosurveillance marks the penetration of information technology within the body and psyche of the individual subject: it implies a diffusion of computers on a generalized scale and a kind of passive replication of their programs by the individual [...]. Under autosurveillance, capital and the state no longer have to do anything to you, because you have learned to do it to yourself" [13]. The advantage of this concept is that it allows us to theorize that internalizing process whereby the video game penetrates and regulates the body of its player. Indeed, as we've already noted, video games are ultimately little more than programmed sets of procedures and rules. When the player "willingly" subjects herself to the rules of the game, these rules become internalized or embodied by the player, to the effect that the player learns to behave in accordance with the commandments of the game. As Bernstein notes, "Playing video games, like working with computers, we learn to adapt to fixed systems of control. *All the adapting is ours*" [5]. Players are disciplined by the game in order to work in accordance with the game. The game is therefore like a virus—it uses players to replicate its code.

In this sense then, autosurveillance is not unlike Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault draws upon eighteenth-century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham's model of the panopticon prison in order to theorize the disciplinary mechanisms of modern society. For Foucault, these disciplinary mechanisms operate by means of omnipresent methods of surveillance. He describes Bentham's prison as an architectural diagram of "the mechanisms of power which, even [and especially] today, are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and to alter him" [11]—and most importantly, to make him productive. The implications of this diagram extend far beyond the local workings of the prison system, and ultimately can be seen to characterize the network of power relations which make up capitalist society as a whole. Foucault states:

> [The Panopticon] is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of disposition of centers and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons. Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behavior must be imposed, the panoptic scheme may be used. [11]

Spy satellites, surveillance devices in shopping malls, and online web cams are all therefore approximate expressions of this more abstract and pervasive disciplinary mechanism. In all of these instances, relations of visibility are disproportionately arranged so as to neutralize dangers, reduce aberrations or abnormalities, fix 'useless' or 'disturbed' populations—and ultimately, to produce homogeneous, regulated (and self-regulating), acclimatized subjectivities. As Foucault puts it, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" [11]. Disciplinary mechanisms of this kind therefore bear a striking resemblance to many of the concepts we've previously discussed. What all of these theories constantly re-emphasize is the power exerted by environments upon individuals, or rather, the ability of environments *to get inside* individuals. Like Althusser's theory of interpellation, and Jameson's concept of autosurveillance, panopticism is yet another means by which subjects are "programmed" by ideology. The distinctive feature of these systems is their ability to silently coerce individuals, to make them "willingly" subject themselves to relations of inequality. Such systems are utterly conducive to the needs of capitalism in the sense that, under each of these regimes, there is often no need for capital to use direct force to constrain its workers. Observation, oversight, and supervision of workers becomes individualized and internalized, so that workers are now *made to work by themselves*.

Video games extend this logic by subjecting players to a relentless series of tests. Players "freely" subject themselves to electronic processes of measurement and evaluation in much the same way a patient lies prostrate before the examining eyes of the surgeon. Foucault's conception of discipline by means of surveillance is here implemented as discipline by means of the test. Games are dividing practices, sorting machines: not "eyes that watch," so much as "devices that examine." Actions are processed by means of a binary logic: right or wrong, success or failure, punishment or reward. Jean Baudrillard sees this binary logic as the distinguishing trait of all forms of digital culture. In *Simulations*, he writes:

> Digitality is with us. It is that which haunts all the messages, all the signs of our societies. The most concrete form you see it in is that of the test, of the question/answer, of the stimulus/response. All content is neutralized by a continual procedure of directed interrogation, of verdicts and ultimatums to decode,...the cycle of sense being infinitely shortened into that of question/answer, of bit or minute quantity of energy/information coming back to its beginning, the cycle only describing the perpetual reactualization of the same models. [2]

Baudrillard re-emphasizes the centrality of this notion of testing a few lines later, when he writes, "Everywhere the test functions as a fundamental form of control" [2]. Based upon such remarks (and drawing upon our earlier discussion of

Foucault), we might say that testing is the primary means by which contemporary disciplinary mechanisms construct standardized, routine modes of behavior suitable to the working conditions of late capitalism.

Baudrillard later pursues this notion of testing by way of Walter Benjamin, whose remarks are once again both prescient and instructive. In his discussion of the cinema, Benjamin observes that the photographically recorded screen actor no longer performs directly before an audience, but rather is "subjected to a series of optical tests" [4]. For Benjamin, the consequence of this process of testing is that cinema audiences, in adopting the position of the camera, themselves adopt the stance of the test. Baudrillard reverses this claim by stating that it is *only* the camera that may adopt the stance of the test. Like the screen actor, the audience too is subject to a kind of visual interrogation. As Baudrillard notes:

> No contemplation is possible. The images fragment perception into successive sequences, into stimuli toward which there can be only instantaneous response, yes or no—the limit of an abbreviated reaction. Film no longer allows you to question. It questions you, and directly. It is in this sense that the modern media call for...a greater degree of immediate participation, an incessant response [...]. The role of the message is no longer information, but testing and polling, and finally control. [2]

Film was perhaps the initial embodiment of this logic of the test, but the video game marks the apotheosis or ideal instantiation of this logic. With video games, the test becomes standardized. Indeed, the resemblance between gaming and standardized testing is actually rather striking. Buttons on recent platform controllers are often labeled alphabetically, so that every stage of game-play, with all of its various on-screen prompts, is ultimately translatable as an extended sequence of multiple-choice questions. Player actions are equated with letters (or "up," "down," "left" and "right" arrows in the case of directional controls), so that, like the standardized classroom, the interactivity of video games often amounts to little more than choosing between "A" and "B." The popular assertion that video games are "interactive" and "all about choice" thus seems profoundly misguided in the face of this absolute circumscription of options. Choice is granted only at that moment when decisions have all been made.

By interrogating the concept of interactivity, I have attempted to demonstrate a number of means by which video games interpellate players as subjects of ideology. As I hope to have shown, the command structure of video games tends to reinforce the disciplinary regimes of late capitalism. At the level of structure, video games function as Taylorized forms of leisure, virtually indistinguishable from the information processing tasks characteristic of labor in the digital (or postmodern) workplace. Games aggressively determine standardized player responses by means of a relentless series of instructions and demands. The violence of gaming is therefore of the "re-corrective" kind, surgically merging player with code. And yet, although this essay attempts to provide an extensive analysis of the interactive features of gaming, there is still much that remains unexplored.

For instance, a similar essay could have been written focusing on that other structural feature of the game-text that marks video games as distinct from traditional forms of culture—in other words, the ability of games to simulate movement through navigable virtual worlds. An essay of this sort is likely to offer opportunities for perceiving and analyzing the plurality of means by which players challenge the imprisoning rationality of the code. Indeed, we might say that gaming technologies are only interactive to the extent that the player may resist.

REFERENCES

1. Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review, 1971.
2. Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.
3. Belsey, Catherine. *Critical Practice*. London: Routledge, 1980.
4. Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. New York: Schoken Books, 1968.
5. Bernstein, Charles. "Play it Again, Pac-Man." *A Poetics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
6. Bolter, Jay David and Richard Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999.
7. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
8. Bourdieu, Pierre and Jean-Claude Passeron. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage Publications, 1990.
9. Crogan, Patrick. "*Blade Runners*: Speculations on Narrative and Interactivity." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.3 (Summer 2002): 639-657.
10. Curley, Anne. "Senator Decries Violent Video Games." *CNN Online*, 25 November 1997: <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1997/11/25/email/videos/>
11. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1995.
12. Interactive Digital Software Association. "Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry." (2002): <http://www.idsa.com/pressroom.html>
13. Jameson, Fredric. "Foreword" to Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
14. Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.
15. "Man Dies After Playing Computer Games Non-Stop." *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 Oct. 2002: <http://smh.com.au/articles/2002/10/10/1034061260831.html>
16. "Man Dies After Playing Video Game for 32 Hours." *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 Oct. 2002: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/10/19/1034561356377.html>
17. Manovich, Lev. "On Totalitarian Interactivity." (1996): <http://www.manovich.net/>
18. Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.
19. Murray, Janet H. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York: Free Press, 1997.
20. Rokeby, David. "Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media." (1996): <http://www.interlog.com/~drokeby/mirrors.html>

21. Stallabrass, Julian. “Just Gaming: Allegory and Economy in Computer Games.” *New Left Review* 198 (1993): 83-106.
22. Wright, Brad. “Sounding the Alarm on Video Game Ratings.” *CNN Online*, 20 December 2002: <http://www.cnn.com/2002/TECH/fun.games/12/19/games.ratings/>

---

[1] Senator (and former vice-presidential candidate) Joe Lieberman (D-Connecticut) is one of the more outspoken opponents of the game industry, repeatedly calling for congressional hearings regarding violent or sexually explicit content in video games. Besides describing video games as “digital poison” and “a threat to public health,” Lieberman is also reported to have said, “The content of many cutting edge games is becoming more and more vivid, violent, and offensive to our most basic values. [...] This relatively small but highly popular minority [of violent games] is not just pushing the envelope—they are shooting, torturing and napalming it beyond all recognition, and beyond all decency.” For more information, see [10] and [22].

[2] Or, as an advertisement for the recent film *Spy Game* (2001) announced, “IT'S NOT HOW YOU PLAY THE GAME, BUT HOW THE GAME PLAYS YOU.”