Mark Butler

On Reality and Simulation in an Extra-Moral Sense

The Playful Logic of Life and Death in Liberty City

This paper is a critical examination of the relationship between reality and simulation. After a brief theoretical introduction, it unfolds its argument on an empirical level, using a thick game playing description of GRAND THEFT AUTO IV. This in-game experience serves as material for the subsequent analysis, in the course of which defining characteristics of computer game playing are formulated. Finally, on the basis of this analysis, the paper postulates the hypothesis that playing computer games like GTA IV promotes competency in deconstructing simulations and implements a cyclic logic of recreation.

In his text *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* from 1873 Friedrich Nietzsche characterizes our relationship to the world as an illusion or, as one might also say, as a simulation, with reference to the etymological root of the term in the Latin word *simulare* and its medieval usage to signify an illusion, pretension, or imitation. Following Nietzsche's line of thought, we are always in an illusion (i.e., a simulation), because of the metaphorical leaps that occur between the spheres of sensation, perception and conception. He argues that words are produced by a twofold process of metaphorization, which doesn't follow a necessary causal relationship: "A neural stimulus is first transmitted into a picture! First metaphor. The picture is again contoured into a sound! Second metaphor" (Nietzsche 1988:879, all trans. by author). And the word is finally transformed into a term by its generalization. Such is the case, for example, when the word 'game' is used to refer to the whole set of rule-based sys-

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tems of play, as opposed to a specific artifact, thereby suppressing the concrete uniqueness of each single game. Our relationship to reality is never direct, but always two steps removed, mediated by images and structured by symbolic cultural conventions. This contingent formatting of reality is obscured by the fact that in western thought we tend to forget the genesis of the symbolic terms we use to reflect on reality in real sensations as well as imaginary perceptions, and to think of them as eternal truths.

Nietzsche sums up his position: "What is thus the truth? [...] [T]ruths are illusions, of which we have forgotten that they are illusory, metaphors that have been worn out and have become sensually powerless" (1988:880-881). He stresses that on the one hand, the truths (which are condensed in terms) have lost their power of sensory presence, while they offer, on the other hand, a mathematical precision that allows us to create wondrous conceptual architectures – and machines, as one can add with a view to our current simulation culture. The abstraction process that he describes, the increasing distance from the sensory relationship to the world in the course individual development as well as cultural history, comes to a head in Alan Turing's (1936) "universal machine" – a simulation engine made of symbols, a meta-game that can implement any conceivable recursive rule-structure.

In addition to being the epitome of the abstraction process that Nietzsche describes, this abstract machine also marks a qualitative turning point in our illusory relationship to the world and opens up an expansive unforeseen field of play. The affinity between computers and games was present from the beginning, but it only began to blossom in the 1960s, after the digital medium's immense potential for play was awoken by the first generation of computer hackers at MIT and their development of SPACEWAR (1962) (Levy 1994:50-69). Since this ludic reappropriation of mainframe computing, the use of the highly abstract and senseless binary code to generate multi-

sensory and highly meaningful worlds has grown exponentially, fully exploiting each new generation of processor- and memory chips. In the course of this development, the constitutive role of symbolic structures and their logic in the production of our illusory reality has been highlighted. The diffusion of digital simulation technology into everyday culture over the last four decades marks a qualitative shift in our relationship to symbolic systems and the world they mediate. Just as Nietzsche postulates that illusion is primary for our relationship to the world, one can view digital simulations as primary for the cultural reality of the 21st century. Simulation, in the current situation, "is not derivative and inferior but primary and constitutive" (Haraway 1997:134).

Life in a Simulated City

The central example that I have chosen for this paper is one of the most successful products of the cultural industry: GRAND THEFT AUTO IV from Rockstar Games. In the latest installment of this series, the developer team returns to its original *topos*, Liberty City, and creates a completely new version of it. While in previous episodes this virtual city was a generic *bricolage* of multiple American cities and their popular representation (Bogost/Klainbaum 2006), the Liberty City of GTA IV is modeled on New York at the beginning of the 21st Century. To achieve this, the developer team did extensive field research to map the diverse characteristics of the city – traffic and weather patterns, the demographic distribution and diverse habits of the inhabitants, police presence in the wake of 9-11, etc. The result is a *gesamtkunstwerk* – the most complex commercial simulation of a city that has ever been produced.

Liberty City is the first of the two protagonists of the game. It has its own *ethos*, which is condensed on the web site of the game in diverse slogans such as, "Welcome to Liberty City. Proving there is no such thing as society" – an ironic play on the "neoliberal govern-

mentality" that has successfully established itself in New York and around the globe since the beginning of the 1980s (Bröckling et al. 2000). The second protagonist of the game is Niko Bellić, into whose virtual skin the player slips. In the following I will present the process of *becoming Niko* and the "procedural rhetoric" of this "persuasive game" (Bogost 2007), using two thick descriptions of game play from my field diary to highlight its performativity and as material for the subsequent analysis.

The narrative frame of the game world is set up in the animated introduction. The role the game offers me is that of a Serbian immigrant, who is just arriving in Liberty City by ship. Niko/I has/have left behind his/my war-torn country, which is plagued by unemployment, and followed the e-mails of his/my cousin Roman to the so-called country of limitless possibilities that he continuously praises in our correspondences. This pipe dream begins to burst the moment Niko/I step off the ship and his/my drunken cousin greets him/me in a rundown taxi, acting like a complete fool. It's obviously better that Niko/I drives/drive, whereupon the interactive game play begins and the program teaches me the controls. (The left analogue stick is for steering the car, the right analogue trigger for accelerating, etc.) I quickly dive into the game, because the control scheme is familiar from prior episodes, and let myself drift through the virtual world in order to familiarize myself with it.

The main difference between GTA IV and its predecessors lies in the richness of detail with which all dimensions have been designed – the driving physics, the streetscape, the architectural facades, the luminous and acoustic atmospheres, the host of virtual commodities and marketing campaigns, the gestures, behavior and facial expressions of the characters, etc. The procedural animation of the figures is especially worth mentioning. The game engine uses

the Euphoria-middleware from Natural Motion, which generates movement and behavioral patterns in real-time. This dynamic animation approach results in the emergence of unforeseen situations that even surprise the game's designers, and precludes an exact repetition of scenes.

I enjoy the ride through the city and finally arrive at Roman's apartment, where the illusions he sold me via e-mail finally disintegrate. His so-called 'mansion' is a vermin-infested dump. After a scripted fight, which is shown as a cut-scene, he departs for work, leaving me alone in the hole he calls home.

Fig. 1: Roman's apartment

At least he has a TV. I turn it on, recline on the sofa and acquaint myself with the new world: "Welcome back to *I'm rich!* The show that puts avarice firmly on the national agenda as we zealously

and emphatically discuss things rich people have, you'll never afford, and anyone with good taste would never want. In this week's show we've got *très* rich people who inherited truckloads of money and spent it ostentatiously. We've got flashy criminals, who've bribed congressmen to be allowed to live as they want and get plump business contracts. And we'll get down and dirty with fab politicians, who've siphoned off 50 per cent of the gross domestic product of poor countries to buy speed boats, servants, snakeskin sofas, and incredible surround sound sanitariums!" The beginning of my life in Liberty City stands in stark contrast to the glamorous world presented to me on TV, where a grotesque representation of the American way of life is paraded before my eyes, as I sit in the dilapidated apartment with only $25 to my name.

At this point, I would like to cut to a later entry in my field diary:

I have been in the game for 22 hours 14 minutes and 47 seconds, which equals 27 days 19 hours and 30 minutes in the simulated world. Much has happened since I arrived. I saved my cousin from Albanian credit sharks, dealt with his debts to the Russian mafia, and earned over $85,000 through diverse odd jobs. According to the game's statistics I have killed 322 people in the course of these activities – 4 of them in close combat, 67 by driving over them (usually by accident, during a car chase) and 272 with the 6792 bullets that I have fired off. Since being in Liberty City I have been arrested twice and have died 16 times. But these small setbacks have not stopped me from achieving the highest level of enthusiasm, according to the feedback of the program. I want to know how my destiny will unfold and decide to step out of my penthouse. I throw a quick look in the mirror before I leave to examine my outfit and make sure that it fits my mood.

As I step out into the street, I decide to call Carmen, whom I met through an online-dating-service. She's in the mood for a date and tells me to pick her up in the next hour. A limousine drives by, and I think, "A perfect ride to impress her!", whereupon I rip the door open and pull the driver out. As I slide in behind the steering wheel and drive off, the radio plays a jingle: "From Africa to America – when your country begins to feel like it's been overthrown by a bunch of war-crazed lunatics, it's time to tune into the funk on IF99." On the Northwood Heights Bridge, as I'm snaking my way past traffic, my hood flies off after I graze another car one time too often. I decide to change my ride, fearing the disapproval of my date. I slam on the brakes, jump out, and sprint to a stylish sports car. Since it's locked, I smash in the window with my elbow and hotwire the vehicle. The radio starts up with the motor: "Weazel News: Today the president suspended *habeas corpus* and saved freedom!" I switch to the rock channel, because I can't stand the constant terror paranoia, and put myself back on course for my romantic rendezvous. Disappointingly, Carmen calls off our date because she is tired of waiting – she feels jilted and I sink in her favor.

Trying to ignore my feeling of frustration, I concentrate my attention on the sleek new sports car, which is the exact opposite of the oversized and sluggish limousine. The driving experience is fantastic: rapid acceleration, hair trigger brakes, and unbelievable maneuverability.

Fig. 2: On the bridge to Algonquin

I immerse myself completely in the new automobile feeling and sail across the bridge back to Algonquin, slipping though traffic effortlessly, as Iggy Pop's *I wanna be your dog* pipes out of the stereo, until this automobile idyll is rudely interrupted by the vibrating of my mobile phone. As I fiddle to suppress the incoming call, highly annoyed by the permanent social pressure of modern telecommunication, I accidentally graze a police car, whose driver immediately fires up his siren and alerts his colleagues. I slam on the gas, but he follows me in a high-velocity chase. In the heat of the moment, as other patrol cars approach from all sides, I decide to drop a hand grenade out of the window. This lets me lose my immediate pursuer, but I'm still not out of the danger zone…

The Phenomenal Logic of Computer Game Playing

One of the central attractions of playing a game like GTA IV lies in the possibility of slipping into a virtual identity, of taking part in a digital role playing game and entering the ludic sphere of *as if*. Play-

ers use the computer as a medium of inebriation and daydreaming. During play, the visual, sonic, and vibratory patterns of the game produce an "altered state of consciousness" (Ludwig 1972), and the players imaginatively step through the looking glass into the simulated reality. They shift their psychological presence into the fictive world, the phenomenon of immersion that also occurs while reading a novel or watching a movie. Of course, computer games are interactive, in contrast to novels or movies. The different identities that the player assumes don't result solely from the appearance and characterization of their game figure, but also, and for the most part, from the set of interactive possibilities that their digital persona offers. The simulated identity is programmed into the *virtual embodiment* that the player takes on (Beck 1997:248-252, Ihde 1990:72-80, Butler 2007:102-106), the spectrum of possible actions that the game offers, as in the case of my becoming Niko, where my role is defined by the ability to steal cars, go on dates, tune the radio, and toss grenades out the window, among other things.

The immersion in a computer game requires a learning process that must be repeated with every new program. Players must practice the possibilities of their virtual embodiment – this is the disciplinary dimension of digital play; they must internalize the structural logic of the program in order to participate in the game successfully (Pias 2002:110-117). This is the prerequisite that must be fulfilled before player and computer can be part of the same information circuit, exchange symbolic messages along multimodal feedback channels, and form a cybernetic unit. Only then is it possible to dance with the code. Players who have mastered the controls of a game expand their body scheme to encompass the digital incarnation and its symbolic logic so that they can control it telekinetically. In the most intensive phases of play, self-reflexivity is dissolved as thinking and doing meld with each other in a state of flow. This experience is accompanied by an affective coupling between players and their simulated selves. The interface – which encompasses the monitor, speakers, controller,

as well as the underlying calculations – disappears with its use. In the term of Martin Heidegger, it becomes *zuhanden* (ready-to-hand) and connects the sensitive body in front of the screen with the data body in the virtual world.

Computer game playing is not only telekinetic but also telepathic, in the sense that players are connected to their digital incarnations and feel from a distance. The affective logic of game playing encompasses a fundamental dimension of uncertainty and fear. This is the source of its "thrill" (Balint 1959) – the anxious pleasure that the player experiences as heightened vitality. All games live from their novelty and unpredictability, which mobilize the player's dopaminergic system, their brain's pleasure, reward, motivation, meaning and learning circuits (Arias-Carrión/Pöppel 2007, Blakeslee 2002). In the most intense phases of play, an existential threat in the virtual world can evoke further physical reactions. The simulated thrill can increase the player's pulse and release adrenaline, for example, evoking a 'fight or flight' reaction. Next to the different nuances of anxiety, from nervous anticipation through claustrophobia to panic, current computer games stimulate a wide array of further emotional spaces. Virtual reality – defined as sensory experience of and interaction with data structures (Krämer 1998:32-33) – is a downright laboratory of the sensible and imaginable. A tentative list of game playing's affective spectrum encompasses: joviality, curiosity, covetousness, aggression, zealousness, stress, melancholy, courage, care, and calmness, as well as the joy of perception, experimentation, and creation.

The process of computer game playing can be analytically divided into three dimensions, using a formula that I have derived from the methodological distinction between the "real", the "symbolic", and the "imaginary" that Jacques Lacan makes in his cybernetic psychoanalysis (Lacan 1997: 7-15, 63). In the *real rush* of digital play *symbolic messages* are exchanged between program and player that produce an *imaginary illusion* (Butler 2007:170-177).

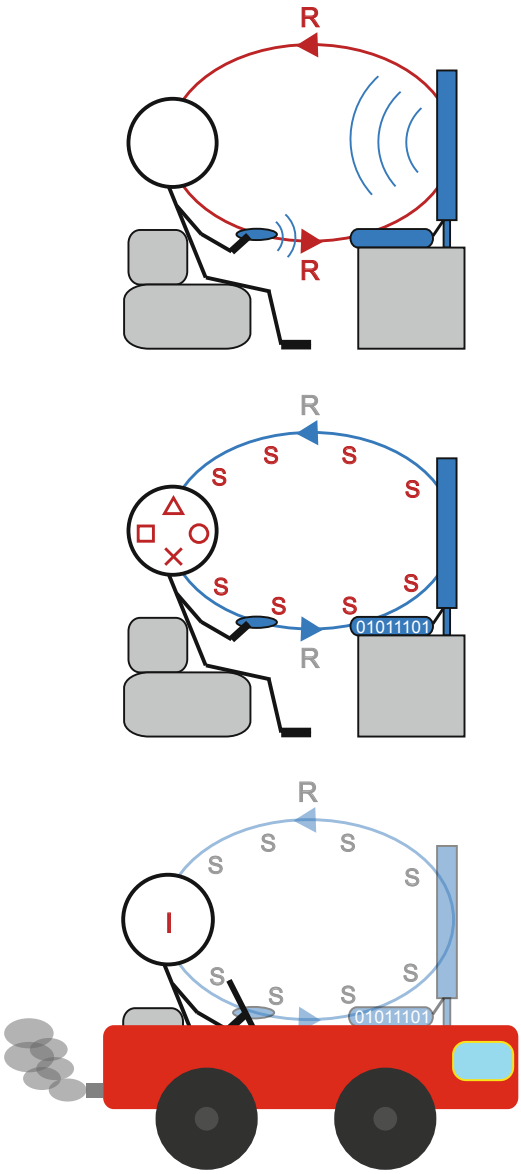

Fig. 3: The real, symbolic, and imaginary dimensions of computer game playing

The term real refers to the temporal dimension, the stimulating progression of the digital simulation. The symbolic is the register of the signifier, the structural logic of the binary code that defines the ontology of the virtual world and must be internalized by the player to play successfully. And the imaginary is the dimension of the signified – it encompasses the player's phenomenal experience of the program's performance at the perceptible contact surface of the interface.

Computer game playing is, like every form of play, a schismatic experience that oscillates between the poles of inebriated flow and reflexive awareness, between self-loss and self-reference (Adamowsky 2000:51). The player dives into the virtual-imaginary illusion and is embodied on the other side of the screen, which leads to affective participation. The complementary experience is the moment when the symbolic underpinnings of the simulation are blatantly obvious. This occurs, for example, when a player hasn't mastered the controls, tries to do something that hasn't been programmed, or is killed in the virtual world. During the course of play, the particularity of the game repeatedly calls attention to the fact that a given simulation is always a selective world model. Even with GTA IV's high degree of freedom, which has set a new benchmark in this regard, there are numerous activities that have not been programmed into the game and therefore do not exist. It is not possible, for example, to have a sex change or to organize a protest against police brutality – at least not until someone modifies the code. The symbolic structures that generate and delimit the simulated possibility space as well as the logic of their interrelatedness are more than apparent for the player.

In the process of play, the player's experience of the game oscillates between the two poles of intensive inebriation and reflexive awareness. The simulation is perceived alternately as an "imaginary illusion" and as a "symbolic fiction", to use a distinction made by Slavoj Žižek (1997:127-141). With these two terms it is possible to analyze a fundamental characteristic of computer game playing, al-

though this paper prefers to call the latter a 'symbolic construct' for reasons of clarity. My field report of GTA IV is double-voiced, because it encompasses these two different relational modalities. The passages that bear witness to my deep immersion and intense involvement in the game encompass a trace of the simulation as immersive illusion, in which I act as if the virtual world were reality, while those that attest to my distanced reflection on the game refer to the simulation as a contingent digital construct that could have been designed in a myriad of other ways. This difference corresponds to a distinction between experienced players and novices that I have found when questioning them about their game playing biographies (Butler 2007). The more experience a player has, the more they speak about the symbolic structure and logic of a game. While neophytes fervently report on the imaginary illusion, experienced players tend to speak more about a game's symbolic architecture and mechanics – for example, the fact that standing Carmen up lowers the parametric value of Niko's relationship to her, which dictates whether he can use her services as a nurse. This finding points to a fundamental learning process of computer game playing: the more someone plays, the better they become at deconstructing digital simulations.

The Recreative Logic of the Digital Doppelgänger

The question posed by media effects studies concerning the impact of computer game playing on the player isn't wrong, even though the answers given often are. This is especially true with regards to the postulated power of games to produce violence, which is condensed in the discursive figure of the 'killer game'. This position fears that players will mistake everyday reality with the imaginary illusion of a game like GTA IV. The approach of this discourse is correct in the assumption that virtuality – defined as the modal logical space of the possible, but not necessary (Deuber-Mankowsky 2001:46-47) – is not an illusion without consequence. But, as this paper argues, the experience of playing a game like GTA IV is markedly different from

the increase in aggression that media effects studies often postulate. Whereas milestone empirical studies only show a minute correlation between such games and aggressive ideation or behavior (Kutner/Olson 2008), there is a much more common effect: players learn how a game is put together while playing it. Dedicated players deconstruct the program until every algorithmic interrelationship has been uncovered. Through this process, they not only gain competency in seeing the symbolic underpinnings of the digital simulation but also become able to clearly delineate the virtual world from their everyday life. Furthermore, this deconstructive digital experience can also affect the relationship to the non-virtual world, the imaginary reality that is also formatted by symbolic constructs, as Nietzsche and others have pointed out. This potential efficacy of digital simulations on non-virtual reality is paradigmatically shown in the experience of playing GTA IV, where the entire game world is a biting satire of New York City and contemporary American culture.

The game unfolds its critique through ubiquitous gestures of parody that expose cultural fault lines through imitations with an ironic undertone. It doubles the non-virtual world in a grotesque reflection and foregrounds its illusory nature. This mimetic principle of the deconstructive double condenses itself exemplarily in the virtual "mediascape" (Appadurai 1996:104) of Liberty City, as in the episode of *I'm rich!* or the different radio jingles that were presented in my field report. The parody that these virtual media convey is aimed at their non-virtual counterparts. But the denuding mockery doesn't stop there. These channels are also used to address myriad topics of the non-virtual world ranging from computer games and their critics, through growing social inequality and the dysfunctional privatized health care system, to the dangerously deregulated financial industry. GTA IV spares nothing and no one from its acidic humor – it even ridicules its own ironic stance in this jingle for Radio Broker: "OD on irony. OD on insecurity. Do you think we actually care about you? We're wrapped up in our own little microculture."

The satirical simulation directs the player's attention to the object of its ridicule, contemporary capitalist culture, and brings it into focus. While the parody and the laughter it produces are generated in the virtual world, their targets are on this side of the screen. The game simulates an *ethos* in dire need of renewal. GTA IV is a digital implementation of "carnivalesque" strategies that David Annandale (2006:89-102) found in the precursor game, GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS (2004), building on Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the medieval carnival and its transposition to literature. These strategies throw a critical light on existing power relations and cultural conventions, calling them into question with universal laughter – in the case of GTA IV the symbolic structure of everyday life and the social Darwinist struggle within the logic of the neoliberal dispositive. The carnivalesque laughter opens up a festive space of freedom, in which fears can be overcome (the despair of poverty, the disciplinary threat of authority, or the horror of death) and an "unofficial truth" can be experienced (Bakhtin 1984:90) – a foolish truth, a popular truth. This other truth embodies a playful relationship to self and world, in which power is dethroned and inner as well as outer censure is suspended.

Like the carnival, GTA IV speaks in "concrete sensual" symbolic forms, as Bakhtin puts it (ibid.:57), or, in Nietzsche's words, in the language of myth (1988:887). As Niko, the player takes on the role of the carnival king and experiences the alternation between the regal fool's rise to power and his inevitable fall. The fundamental game playing dynamic oscillates between phases of empowerment and disempowerment, which structurally correspond with the aggrandizement and debasement of the festive figurehead. The vital feeling of freedom that the player experiences while performing transgressive acts during intense phases of game play has its counterpoint in the moment of simulated death. Then all colors disappear from the screen and the player must watch Niko's demise in slow motion.

Fig. 4: Niko's simulated death, after holding on to a grenade for too long

These scenes mock the player, who inevitably emerges from the imaginary illusion and has the option to defy virtual death, reload the symbolic construct, and initiate a further iteration of the simulation. The quintessence of the carnivalesque truth – "the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal" (Bakhtin 2003:124) – condenses in this cyclic rise and fall of the foolish sovereign.

The virtual embodiment is a digital *doppelgänger*. A simulated persona such as Niko, with its potentially endless reincarnations, has no original and embodies the same carnivalesque structure that Bakhtin found in the literary double: he is a parody of the protagonist. "In each of them (that is, in each of the doubles) the hero dies (that is, is negated) in order to be renewed (that is, in order to be purified and to rise above himself)" (ibid.:128). This cyclic logic of regeneration is fundamental for play, whether it takes place during a festivity or computer game playing, and is the foundation of the modern characterization of these activities as recreative. Play is the sphere for the recreation of self and world *per se* (Winnicott 2005:67-76). The term 'recreative' contains a lingual trace that marks a genealogical continuity, linking GTA IV not only with the medieval carnival but also with archaic board games like the Egyptian MEHEN (4th millennium BC) – an analogue simulation of the soul's journey through the

netherworld and its subsequent rebirth (Rothöhler 1999). Similarly, the player who dives into Liberty City uses the symbolic construct of the game as a vehicle for a virtual-imaginary journey to the other side of the looking glass, in a recursive process of symbolic death and recreation. Simulated arenas of experience, like the one offered by GTA IV, are necessary cultural institutions, in which the symbolic order of society can be broken, everyday illusions suspended, and affective intensities that will never be fully civilized safely enacted. Or to paraphrase Nietzsche: we're riding on the back of a tiger, caught up in dreams, and the tiger needs room to play.

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GRAND THEFT AUTO IV (2008), Rockstar Games, PlayStation 3.
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Response

There is always an attraction for us, as academics, in the tales we tell of our game experiences, and there is something particularly compelling in the account we are offered here. Butler is both an engaging storyteller and a scholar obviously engaged in analysis of some sophistication, and this is a fascinating account of his time 'in' Grand Theft Auto IV (2008). His positioning of that experience in relation to the thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche is also illuminating, and he certainly conveys the sheer exuberance of GTA IV, and captures its essential joie de (virtual) vie. This essay, therefore, has much to recommend it to the student of games or even the player of GTA IV able to revisit his or her own played experience. As a more formal response to an essay such as this, however, it is perhaps most useful to focus on the use of both methodologies and terms in Butler's approach of the game artifact.

I would argue (with full recognition that I need to recognize my own specific location as a reflective individual playing subject) that there is a crucial difference between Butler's assumption that he is spending time 'in' Liberty City and GTA IV, and my own that I spent time 'with' GTA IV and Liberty City. To a degree this is a question of how we as individuals both see questions of immersion, and the language we use to describe that experience. It certainly has implications, socially and politically, where games (and Rockstar games more than most) receive interrogation as potential 'murder simulators'. As one of Butler's subtitles tells us, he has been engaged in 'life in a simulated city', where I would claim only to have been engaged with a simulation. Nor is this mere academic logic-chopping – at its heart is a crucial argument regarding the nature of computer game play that echoed (along with discussion of game narrative and ludology) throughout the conference where this paper was presented. On

the one hand a simulation remains a simulation, judged on that basis by a player who in no sense sees a transition through the screen into 'being in the game-world', and on the other an effective simulation offers a sense of immersion that is described (if not, I would argue, thought) as a movement through the intervening screen towards what Butler boldly describes as embodiment in the game world.

Of course, Butler is already aware of the issues of being in the game-world, and sensibly engages in established academic practice to maintain the position of the unbiased but engaged observer. His autoethnography, with its field notes and its declared oscillation between activity in the game and his reflection on those actions, is clear and effective. We can trace and follow a practice which many would do well to emulate – for once the experience of play is not reduced to the operation of rules or reduced to a description of the content of the visual field. Instead the focus is, as it should be, on experience. And if there is one element of games that has not to date had sufficient or adequately subtle analysis in the literature, then it is the experience of play. At the same time Butler also establishes the authority from which he can claim to speak from experience as both player and researcher. A potential problem lies not so much in the declared subjectivity of the self-aware researcher, but his punctuating claim that what had preceded was a truly 'empirical report' rather than a form of accounting for one's engagement with a game that continues to need qualification before simply claiming the legitimacy ascribed in our culture dominated by the discourses of science towards empiricism.

Of course, this always leaves the individual academic researcher something of a hostage to fortune. A more traditional academic position might well leave the first person singular well alone, and retreat from any obvious reflection in claiming the supposedly neutral high ground of the detached and impartial observer. But Butler is right in rejecting such a stance for his own clear engagement. Where things become a matter of contestation, however, is in their expression of

that 'I'. It is taken for a given, for example, that we see ourselves as players as the I who engages in the cut-scene narratives of the game – that 'I' am Nico, that 'I' do not just engage in the activity of play, but that I fully inhabit the role offered to me. I would suggest that this is not a universal, or even a necessary, experience of play. To be forced to perform a close up execution of one NPC, for example, certainly drives a wedge between some players and their fictional vehicle in the game world.

When Butler rightly looks to the attraction of computer games he says that 'one of the central attractions […] lies in the possibility of slipping into a virtual identity and taking part in a digital role playing game, of stepping into the sphere of 'as if' he might even be conflating two separate pleasures. Certainly computer games offer an opportunity for role play (although the disappointment of MMO role players with the scarcity of general players who role play has led to the establishment of specialized, and far fewer, specific role playing servers and may speak to how marginal this pleasure is), but this is not to imply that the playing of role is essential to the defining 'as if' of games. We need not adopt a role, or surrender ourselves to an immersive imperative, to behave 'as if'. It may by more useful to think of the defining pleasure of games as resting in their continual posing of the questions 'what happens next if I' where the I is the player, not the protagonist, and exposure to in-game danger or threat is the enabling possibility for the imagination (and performance) of action. When Butler invokes Csikszentmihalyi and 'flow' it is possible he may be mistaking unrelated phenomena. Flow is not about the adoption of role, but of absorption in action, and it is arguable that should we become absorbed in being in the world then we would not be able to act effectively in the game.

Highly competitive players of online games such as HALF-LIFE: COUNTER-STRIKE (2000), for example, do not play 'as if' they were in role, but as if they were playing a highly competitive game/simulation where some rules have real-world analogues (an approximation

of physical properties for example) and some do not (respawns, game modes, scores). Similarly, whether I choose to run over pedestrians or shoot pigeons or even to just go swimming for hours in GTA IV does not depend on my adoption of the role of Nico, or even of the role of some unnamed shadow alongside Nico, but of my knowledge and understanding of the spaces GTA IV offers me for possible action in the game world. Some of this may also be necessary: to act in the world of the game I must know it is a game. Were I to act 'as if' the game were anything but a game I would be engaging in truly psychopathic behavior well before I reached Butler's declared body count. And because of the way in which the popular press can leap upon any apparent confusion for game world (and by extension game action) and real world action we might want to be cautious of the care with which we describe and imagine this distinction beyond acknowledgement of mere oscillation.

To some extent it is all too easy to see why we might treat game spaces such as Liberty City as if they were effective simulations in which the oscillation between immersion and non-immersion described by Butler is possible. Butler is right to point to GTA IV as 'the most complex commercial simulation of a city that has ever been produced', but we should also take care to point out how limited a statement this actually is. There may be much to do in Liberty City, particularly compared to other game city spaces, but it remains farcically restricted in its possibility were we to imagine a simulation of a city that modeled and allowed access to even a fraction of its spaces and activities. We are firmly in a game here – if Liberty City is a bricolage, it is a bricolage of games as well as of cities where we stumble over minigame after minigame that constantly alert us to the crucial distinction that we are not living but playing.

To engage in autoethnography, to keep field diaries and to reflect effectively on our play, and to concentrate on our game experience when we write about games is all laudable and, here, accomplished well, and Butler's is one of the most seductive accounts of the plea-

sures of games that has been published recently in the field. Perhaps the only note of caution is that we need to ensure that we do not become too involved in the practice of playing, and that we are always alert to the fact that we are playing a game and not just a role, and that even if we consider ourselves immersed, we are immersed in an activity of play, and not in another world.

References

HALF-LIFE: COUNTER-STRIKE (2000): Vivendi, PC.
GRAND THEFT AUTO IV (2008): Rockstar Games, Xbox 360.