SHALL WE PLAY A GAME?: THE PERFORMATIVE INTERACTIVITY OF VIDEO GAMES

Michael J. Beck

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

August 2014

APPROVED:

John M. Allison, Jr., Major Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication Studies
Justin T. Trudeau, Committee Member
Shaun Treat, Committee Member
Holley Vaughn, Committee Member
Mark Wardell, Dean of the Toulouse Graduate School
Beck, Michael J. *Shall We Play a Game? The Performative Interactivity of Video Games.*

Master of Science (Communication Studies), August 2014, 113 pp., bibliography, 61 titles.

This study examines the ways that videogames and live performance are informed by play theory. Utilizing performance studies methodologies, specifically personal narrative and autoperformance, the project explores the embodied ways that gamers know and understand videogames. A staged performance, “Shall We Play a Game?,” was crafted using Brechtian theatre techniques and Conquergood’s three A’s of performance, and served as the basis for the examination. This project seeks to dispel popular misconceptions about videogames and performance and to expand understanding about videogaming as an embodied performative practice and a way of knowing that has practical implications for everyday life.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapters</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. DISCUSSION</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBILOGRAPHY</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As I grew up in my hometown of Rock Falls, Illinois, listening to the radio, I often heard advertisements for a videogame retail store called Video Games ETC! The commercials were quite typical. They frequently detailed how they had “the latest and greatest video games and consoles!” And like any good business they had a tagline at the end of every commercial. Amidst a flurry of distorted rock guitar chords I heard, “Video games ETC! Just a game? I DON’T THINK SO!” As a child I agreed with this statement, but as an adult I feel compelled to defend it. This simple commercial tagline effectively responds to the prevailing negative attitudes toward playing videogames as a meaningful endeavor. This tagline conveys the attitudes of gamers in U.S. culture by claiming implicitly that videogames are more than just games, and the extent to which we are willing to take videogames “seriously.”

In this chapter, I provide an overview of my thesis performance project and the ideas that caused me to link videogames and performance together. Second, I examine a literal and performative understanding of videogames. Third, I discuss the ways videogames function as a method of performing self through my own narratives. Then, I emphasize how videogames are connected with and through culture by means of technological performance. Finally, I preview and discuss the specific research questions I answer in later chapters.

I play videogames as a serious activity. I do not define the term “serious” as humorless and somber, but as something crucial or significant. Johan Huizinga (1955) defined play as “the direct opposite of seriousness” (p. 5). However, Huizinga envisioned the playing of games as something meaningful and important to those who are engaged in them. For this project, I use
my own personal experience to develop an understanding of how videogames function as an embodied performative activity. My experiences informed the construction of my stage performance, “Shall We Play a Game?,” which utilized my experiences refracted by theories of play, performance studies theorist Dwight Conquergood, and theatre scholar Bertolt Brecht as a way to investigate, understand, and critique the cultural significance of videogames.

This project stems from a lifetime of playing videogames and the desire to understand the complex relationship between videogames and performance. Every videogame I have ever played has asked something different of my body. While Galaga required only my hands and eyes to play, videogames like Just Dance required my entire body in order to play. Older text-based adventure videogames, to take another example, required a different type of engagement as well as a significantly higher level of engagement from the gamer.

Text-based adventure videogames featured no visual graphical representation of the game world, and required a gamer to type in-game instructions to move and interact within the digital world. Videogames like Zork! and Materia Magica are noteworthy examples. These in-game typed instructions were limited due to computer memory space. For example, a gamer would have to type, “go south” rather than, “so down” to move through the game. These games required the gamer to learn the language of the game, altering the way the game becomes constructed in the gamer’s mind. They also required a heavy performative undertaking from gamers just to imagine the world. Videogames, even in their earliest incarnations, had performative potential. The defining factor of text-based videogames is the use of textual language that is so present that it becomes hidden in plain sight.
Realizing that videogames are no less textual than other more conventional sources of performance material made the idea of creating a staged performance based on videogames manageable. “Shall We Play a Game?” investigated the physical ways that videogames affect our bodies when we play. Each scene in the performance focused on a specific theory, story, or question related to my personal experience with playing and theorizing about videogames. This performance was my method for allowing the audience members, many of whom had far less experience than I did, the accessibility to theorize videogames as embodied performances.

What are Videogames?

Videogames have been defined and interpreted in a variety of ways depending upon the context in which the videogames are being discussed. For the purposes of this chapter, I provide a working definition for videogames as I am using the term throughout my project. The simplest definition of “videogame” is a game played by electronically manipulating images produced by a computer program on a television screen or other display screen (Oxford Dictionary). This definition is technically correct, but incomplete. For the purposes of this project I begin with Ian Bogost’s (2012) explanation of videogames from his book How to Do Things with Videogames:

We take on a role in a videogame, putting ourselves in the shoes of someone else: the urban planner, the ninja, the auto racer. Videogames are a medium that lets us play the role within the constraints of a model world. And unlike playground games or board games, videogames are computational, so the model worlds and sets of rules they produce can be far more complex. (p. 4)
In this observation, Bogost posited an interdependent relationship between human gamer and digital game as the most essential and defining aspect of videogames. Specifically, Bogost placed the roleplaying in which the gamer engages at the center of his definition of videogaming.

Certain videogame genres, role playing games (RPG) and first-person shooters (FPS) are geared more towards creating and performing a specific character. Other genres such as puzzle, simulation, and arcade videogames are more focused on gameplay than on “character” and “narrative.” Within these genres the role of “gamer” becomes the predominant role a person performs rather than a specific in-game character. Whether a person is creating a character in Mass Effect or destroying candy in Candy Crush, the role of “gamer” is fluid and ever changing. This fluidity to take on whatever role is required by the game to complete various tasks changes from game to game.

By emphasizing the performative role of the gamer in his definition, Bogost implicitly argues the performative role of the gamer as something understandable and inseparable from the videogame. In this project, my performative understanding of videogames is heavily informed by the videogames genres of RPG and FPS. These videogame genres prioritize character development within a game’s narrative and gameplay allowing a more amendable application of performative discourse. Following Bogost, I will adopt the following operational definition of videogaming: Videogames are an electronic media in which gamers perform multiple and varied roles within a carefully constructed and ordered game world.
Videogames as a performance of Self

I continued to play videogames throughout my childhood. I would get a new console ever so often for Christmas or my birthday. Even through my parents would give me videogames as gifts, they constantly reminded me not to spend all my time alone in my room playing them. They were frequently concerned by the way different videogames completely enthralled me, occupying all of my attention. My parents would call my name three or four times before I came out of this trance-like focus on the television screen. This behavior would naturally concern any parent. They were afraid that the videogames were “eating my brain” and “making me stupid.” My father was often more concerned than my mother about this and would actively question me about it but, no matter how hard I tried, I found it impossible to explain my experience when playing videogames in a way that he could understand.

One day, I finally encouraged my father to really play a videogame for more than five minutes. I was ten years old and had a Sega Genesis, and had my father play Sonic the Hedgehog 2. Like Super Mario Bros., the game is easy to learn to play, but takes some time to master. I handed my father the controller and he began to play. The first five minutes he was dismissive and his character died several times. However, after ten-minute mark, as he became familiar with the game controls, my father’s demeanor turned from aloof to one of engagement. He began to lean closer to the screen. He moved the controller in the direction he wanted Sonic to go. He was completely fascinated by the videogame. After thirty minutes my father finally lost his last life in the game. When he was greeted with the “GAME OVER” screen he snapped out of his position, turned to me and said, “Now I know how you can get so involved with these videogames.” He handed me the controller to me and left my room.
Initially my father was unable to comprehend how videogames could command such control of a person’s attention. However, when he held the controller in his hand and embodied the act of playing a videogame, something finally clicked. Convincing my father about how I could become so engaged with videogames was no small task. He was a child of the 1950s and 1960s, who grew up working on and riding motorcycles, which he still rides today in his 60s. I asked my father this past summer why he loved motorcycles and riding them so much. The only definitive answer he was able to give me was, “I could explain how I feel riding them (motorcycles), but you wouldn’t be able to understand unless you’ve actually rode them.” It is through somatic engagement, the actual practice of performing a specific activity, that one is able to understand the experience of that activity.

My father has not played a videogame since that day when I was 10 years old, but the singular embodied experience gave him the ability to understand how I experienced videogames. This experience was completely dependent on playing the game. The experiential understanding of videogames belongs within the realm of performative practice. The embodied practice of the specific communicative process in all of its unexplainable messiness allows people to have a deepened understanding of that communicative event.

Understanding the way a gamer plays videogames is a highly subjective embodied experience. This experience, as I’ve described before, is greatly dependent on a personal history with that activity. My father’s experience with riding motorcycle is one I will never understand. My own body’s limitations, lack of coordination, and poor vision prevent me from ever being the one in control of the motorcycle. I can understand the experience from a
passenger point of view, but the amount of control I can exert over the driver is limited. This passenger/driver metaphor can be extended to the playing of videogames.

Videogames like Final Fantasy XIII or Half-Life 2 do not incorporate character creation, moral choice systems, and game narratives that change based on the gamer’s choices. In playing, the gamer—like a passenger—has little effect on the outcome of the narrative. Other contemporary videogames, like Fallout 3 and The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, allow gamers to create and develop their own character based upon values, ideals, and aesthetics of beauty central to each gamer. These systems have become complex enough to allow almost limitless possibilities of digitally envisioning and constructing each gamer’s self. The gamer, in such scenarios, is like the driver in the previous metaphor.

In Mass Effect 3, a “Paragon” (Good) or a “Renegade” (Evil) button prompt can occur during the game’s interactive narrative sequences. For example, in one sequence, a female reporter hassles your character for information. Once, when I was playing, a “Renegade” prompt appeared on the screen, and I pressed the corresponding button, and my character punched the reporter in the face. After I performed this action, I felt so terrible I reloaded a previous save in order to re-play this sequence over again and make the opposite choice. The “Paragon,” or morally good, choice involved my character placing a hand on the reporter’s shoulder, comforting her, and reassuring her that she is doing all she can. This sequence leads to an additional conversation where your character and the reporter both apologize for being so hostile. This “Paragon” action more accurately reflected my ideals and play style within the context of Mass Effect 3. Even though I was aware that my in-game avatar and the reporter in Mass Effect 3 were nothing more than a large collection of pixels, I still felt personally
implicated by making decisions within that game. When I play a videogame my avatar is so connected to my sense of self that I experience a sense of cognitive dissonance when I perform a choice that is considered “morally bad.” This connection to my avatar is so strong that I will spend the extra time needed to replay sections of a game in order to more closely align my avatar’s actions with what my own would be in a similar situation.

For this project understanding the ways that videogames can cause visceral and instantaneous reactions is an important step in understanding how we envision and perform our own self with and through videogames. I will go into greater depth about the conceptions of performance of self within the analysis chapter.

Videogames as/is a Culture

The significance of videogames as culture is overlooked and undervalued by non-gamers. The videogame community has created a culture that is uniquely its own. Bogost (2012) stated,

I’ll take for granted that videogames are already becoming a pervasive medium, one as interwoven with culture as writing and images. Videogames are not a subcultural form meant for adolescents but just another medium woven into everyday life. (p. 7)

It is precisely the everyday ubiquity of videogames in U.S. culture that enhances their immersive quality. One only needs to do a quick YouTube search to finds thousands of channels consisting of millions of videos specifically devoted to videogames. Two Best Friends Play (2014) and Nerd Cubed (2014) are two popular YouTube channels specifically focused on videogame play. In both channels, gamers focus on playing through various popular and obscure
videogames while simultaneously providing humorous critiques of the games. Their use of humor while the playing games functions as a creative form of participation and co-creation within videogaming culture.

The subject of participation within a videogaming culture stems from the participatory nature of new media literary. Henry Jenkins (2013) addressed the growing need to close the participatory gap between users of technology and technology itself. In the May 6, 2013, issue of his blog, “Confessions of an Aca-Fan,” Jenkins discussed the need for people to become more engaged with new media technologies. This discussion focused on how users of technology are not just consumers, but coders and programmers who constantly change the way new media technologies, like social media and videogames, can constantly expand the ways we use those technologies (“What do we know about participatory culture,” 2013). As a culture, videogaming has become more participatory over the past 30 years, not only in terms of how users to play videogames, but also in the potential for users to modify and create new games.

The Two Best Friends Play and Nerdist Cubed YouTube channels and Jenkins’ theorizing on technological participation demonstrate gamers’ active participation not just in playing videogames, but also in a performative creation, participation, and reinvention of videogames as a culture. For many gamers, the performative act of costume play (cosplay) of favored videogame characters is reminiscent of the embodiment of religious figures within religious or spiritual ceremonies (Turner, 1985, p. 26). Also, the rise and success of videogame conventions like the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), QuakeCon, and Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) have caused many gamers to take pilgrimages and attend with an almost religious fervor every year.
For many, the act of being around hundreds of thousands of gamers creates a sense of communitas, which helps reaffirm gamers through their sharing of past experiences.

These performative aspects of videogaming culture—the large gatherings, the cosplay, and the sense of communitas—are all important elements reflected in my own staged performance. The popular stereotype labels gamers as anti-social, sedentary creatures who play videogames in isolation. My performance works against this overused stereotype and situates videogames within a sphere of cultural engagement with many participating members.

Research conducted by the Entertainment Software Association found that in 2011, Americans spent over $24 billion on videogame hardware and software. They also determined that the average age of a gamer was 30 years old (ESA, 2012). Like most mainstream popular research available on videogaming, this study focused primarily on sales figures and demographics with little consideration of the cultural impact of videogames.

To understand the cultural effect of videogames, one needs to analyze the social and personal discourses that surround the performance of playing videogames critically. In my literature review, I document the work of academic scholars who are engaged in this type of critique and research. However, there are only a few examples of reviewers and critics who are doing significant cultural interrogations of videogames and videogaming culture. Often, reviewers only apply a critical lens when videogames are overtly offensive. For example, Extra Credits (2012), an Internet videogame review show, described Call of Juarez: The Cartel as “The most racist videogame from a major publisher.” It is all too typical for writers to examine only the negative cultural connotations of unpopular videogames after they have failed
commercially. Commercially successful videogames like GTA 5, on the other hand, receive little critical cultural critique from videogame reviewers.

Comments from game blogs, reviews, and even serious articles about gaming attest to the fact that many consumers and critics continue to view videogames as mere toys for adolescents. In a review of Spec Ops: The Line on Gameinformer.com, the reviewer describes the main protagonist’s narrative descent into madness as a thrilling experience, but goes on to say that the guns used in the game “lack the visceral pop of top-tier shooters” (Bertz, 2012). This type of surface level critique is typical of game review websites. By focusing on the lack of spectacle as a failure, rather than how the lack of spectacle addresses the specific ways the narrative descent into madness affects the main protagonist, the reviewer misses a vital opportunity to analyze the role of spectacle in videogames. This comment is akin to a review of Apocalypse Now that complains about Martin Sheen (Benjamin Willard) not storming Marlon Brando’s (Walter E. Kurtz) fort in a gung-ho, zealous manner. Reviews like this offer little in the way of critical engagement with the material. Many videogame reviews, like this one, focus heavily on the visual and auditory components of a game rather than analyzing the interactive, corporeal experience the game offers within the context of contemporary U.S. culture.

In performance studies, videogames are rarely the subject of research. Other academic disciplines such as mass communication use videogames as a subject of research because of their existence as mediated forms. Performance studies traditionally focused on literature as a site of research. As performance studies evolved as an academic discipline, the term literature was replaced by the more inclusive term “text.” This shift from literature to text has authorized non-traditional forms of “literature” as sites of research, including cultural texts, oral stories,
and electronic and digital cultural artifacts. However, performance studies scholars have only minimally explored videogames as texts. Mindy Fenske’s (2006) discussion of hypertextual performance comes closest to a performative interrogation of videogames. Performance studies scholars have a unique perspective from which to examine how videogames work and why they are important. One way performance studies scholars can close this gap is by examining the embodied experiences associated with playing videogames.

My own experience with videogames stretches back over 20 years. I cannot recall a moment in my life that videogames have not been present. Many might consider this circumstance a tragic failure of parenting by my mother and father. I was given a Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) when I was six years old. My father, who bought it for ten dollars at a local garage sale, gave me the NES along with my own television. Sometimes I wonder if my father regrets the gift knowing how much time and energy I spent playing videogames alone in my room. Even in my earliest days of being a gamer, I had some instinctual understanding of what power videogames had over my body. It was only after I talked about my experiences with other gamers that I realized that videogames are not merely an escapist activity.

My experience with videogames is not atypical of gamers of my generation. An entire culture of videogames has arisen in the past 40 years. Videogames, although digital, permeated our corporeal reality even after the game has been turned off. Clothing websites like Jinx.com create t-shirts with imagery from popular games. Genres of music like Chiptune are influenced by the music used in NES games of the 1980s and 1990s. Videogames have extended their reach outside the digital world into the corporeal world. This notion of carrying a videogame experience outside an online realm into an offline, or “real world,” frightens and worries many.
Videogames are Playful

Humans, as a species, are good at playing games. Johan Huizinga (1955) claimed that by early childhood, we either know how to play most types of games within a given context, or are capable of quickly learning the rules of participation. Play is a social construction that permeates many facets of human civilization particularly language, art, poetry, and aesthetics of law and order (*Homo Ludens*, p. 4). Huizinga’s argued that play is not a frivolous activity, but a significant one to the development and sustained reproduction of human civilization and culture. When play in understood as a core component to understanding culture we can begin to investigate how play becomes an embodied performative experience within a given culture. The embodied performative experience of playing videogames, like play itself, comes from the participation of that activity.

Julia Mason (2013) discussed the role of videogames, gamers, and communication, and concluded that for gamers to be successful in videogame play, they must behave and act like technical communicators (p. 220). Mason, whose professional background is technical communication, is referencing the documentation of and information about videogames. Items such as instruction booklets, FAQs, blogs, and guidebooks generated by the videogame community can help a gamer to become more proficient at playing videogames. She argues that in order for one to be successful at a videogame, one need only consult efficient and detailed instructions (p. 225). This line of thinking pigeonholes gamers’ experiences with videogames into a single interpretive frame. Mason’s argument is primarily centered on games that have a “win-state” or a knowable and obtainable ending. However, certain games like World of Warcraft, Guild Wars, EVE: Online, and many other massively multiplayer online role-
playing games (MMORPG) do not have a win-state or clear narrative ending. While I agree with Mason that thoughtful and expertly communicated instructions provide the gamer a greater technical understanding, I believe that relying only on a technical communication perspective downplays the individual and idiosyncratic interpretation a gamer can receive from the embodied experience of playing that game. The need for play, improvisation, and spontaneity helps set videogames apart from other digital mediums.

As much as I disagree with Mason, I feel that her approach is representative of a non-gamer view of gaming that centers on logical progression rather than playful interaction. For a dedicated gamer, understanding the rules of gameplay is easy, but the recognition of why we play videogames is more difficult to comprehend. I argue that it is through a playful, embodied performative practice that we begin to arrive at why people become so entranced by videogames.

Interactivity with Videogames

Videogames are an inherently playful media. The creation and existence of videogames relies on an interactive relationship between videogame and the gamer. Espen J. Aarseth (1997) traced a brief history of the few formal definitions of “interactivity” as they apply to different forms of media such as literature, film, and adventure games (pp. 41-50). Aarseth outlined the definition primarily through semiotics and then moved towards a contemporary social definition. Aarseth cited Peter Bogh Andersen’s (1990) semiotic definition of interactivity as a type of work “where the reader can physically change the discourse in a way that is interpretable and produces meaning within the discourse itself” (p. 49). While this definition
privileges the human element over the machine, it is grounded in a centrally located and closed
discursive system. Aarseth’s assumption that videogame interactivity happens only through a
human element is problematic because it ignores the machine elements interacting with the
gamer. A gamer has only as much agency as the videogame allows. Certain games like Heavy
Rain and BEYOND: Two Souls require the gamer to play performatively within heavily regulated
narrative stories, while games like Skyrim allow a greater leniency for the gamer to interact
with the narrative at their own pace. This difference in interactions with a videogame narrative
is most salient among the generation that has grown up with gaming as a daily component of
their existence.

One common misconception that non-gamers have about videogames is that
videogames exist only within an online realm while the gamer exists within the offline realm.
Non-gamers tend to believe that once a videogame is turned off it has no impact on gamers’
lives. The idea that a divide exists between online and offline is a common notion in our
massively mediated world. In “Social Relationships and Identity Online and Offline,” Don Slater
(2002) proposed the idea that there is actually no clear-cut distinction between being “online”
and being “offline, but rather a continuum of online/offline. Slater also noted that online
identity roles have strikingly similar offline roles, e.g., a person one meets in a chat room and a
pen pal, or shopping online vs. shopping in a physical store (p. 543). Another parallel that can
be drawn between the emotional response to information received through digital and analog
forms. For example, my emotional and physical response to the death of a character within the
videogame narrative of Final Fantasy VII was as equally as intense and visceral as my experience
at the death of a character within the Harry Potter series. However, the misconception that
videogames only negatively affect the corporeal world is common among non-gamers.

Videogames, like films and novels, have the potential to forge for deep emotional connections that carry outside of the game to positively impact the corporeal world. The true experiential power of videogames comes from actually performing with the game. The physical embodiment of playing holds more power than popular conceptions leads our culture to believe.

Aarseth (1997) argued, “[interactivity] operates textually rather than analytically” (p. 8). In order to be considered productive in this context, interactivity must operate within an open system of discursive practices. Interactivity that occurs between videogame and gamer, through Aarseth’s definition, includes a greater cultural awareness on the part of the participants involved in gaming. Aarseth argued, “Humans and machines are equal partners of communication, caused by nothing more than the machine’s simple ability to accept and respond to human input” (p. 48). The interactivity of videogames is not just dependent on humans, but on a reciprocal exchange between human elements and machine elements. However, Aarseth’s definition still privileges the human element above all others. Nevertheless, he addresses the interactive relationship between gamer and videogame as one of playful interdependence. The videogame may respond to our human input, but before we even began playing the game, we responded to the intertexuality produced by the culture surrounding that game. For example, GTA V’s box-art was released months in advance of the actual game, and before anyone played the actual game. However, this lack of experience with the game did not stop the videogaming community from creating countless parodies of that artwork. An article on Kotaku.com, “Impatient People Make GTA V Box Art,” reported that fans of the series
attempted to create the game’s box art design based on past GTA games, highlights how gamers’ vast intertextual past experience influences their everyday experiences outside of the digital world. The images used in the fan-generated box art were inspired by past videogaming experiences as much as by past official GTA box art, speaks to the tendency among gamers to engage in an active “co-creative” activity. Even in the absence of a game text, the fans are already “playing” with the idea of the game, and pretending that they are part of a creative team. This intertextual interactivity created by videogames has further closed the gap between online/offline to establish a new level of cyborgian aesthetics.

Cyborgian Aesthetics

As a mediated culture, we are moving more quickly than ever towards a cyborgian experience. Traditionally, a cyborg is defined as “a fictional or hypothetical person whose physical abilities are extended beyond normal human limitations by mechanical elements built into the body” (Oxford English Dictionary). However, cyborgian aesthetics is focused on the ways we as humans, give agency to mechanical elements that affect our lives. For some, the idea of giving over portions of our human agency to machines conjures up images of sci-fi dystopian worlds similar to The Matrix. As human agents we are fearful of having our agency forcefully removed from us. On the other hand, as users of technology, we willingly give some of our human agency over to machines all of the time. Even as I compose this thesis, I trust Microsoft Word to save my documents properly and securely. I trust Dropbox to be a personal backup in case something goes wrong on my computer. Even though I’ve set up these programs
to behave in this way, I am not constantly observing their actions. The relationship between gamer and videogame is one born from cyborgian desires.

Donna Haraway (1992) stated, “The cyborg is the figure born of the interface of automaton and autonomy” (p. 139). Similar to Slater, Haraway looked to erase the line between the human and technology. Aarseth (1997) further stated that Haraway’s work is essential in destabilizing the binary relations between person and machine and “challenges the old Western dualisms of self/other, soul/body, male/female, whole/part, reality/appearance, and so on” (Cybertext, p. 54). This erasure of dichotomous relationship between “organism and machine” is the most salient between videogame and gamer.

Martti Lahti (2003) claimed, “One of the characteristics of video games throughout their history has been an attempt, with help of various technologies, to erase the boundary separating the player from the game world and to play up tactile involvement” (“As We Become Machines,” p. 159). The videogame industry has been attempting constantly to close the gap between digital and corporeal. One of the oldest technologies used to close this gap has been the use of “rumble function.” This is a haptic feedback device contained within a game controller that responds to actions and events in the videogame. The Oculus Rift Virtual Reality Headset, one of the newest technologies, is a head mounted video display screen through which the gamer can see the game world in an attempt to feel more like the character she or he is playing. This device fills the gamer’s entire field of vision, placing her or him directly within the game world. The device tracks the gamer’s head movements and moves the videogame character’s head in conjunction with the player’s head.
The relationship of videogame and gamer is one that relies on a playful interdependence. Although the term “gamer” can be applied to anyone that plays any type of game, the contextual meaning has shifted towards videogamers because of the popularity of videogames. The person playing the game cannot take on the identity of a “gamer” without the videogame. Moreover, the videogame becomes nothing but a massive collection of ones and zeros without the gamer. The videogame requires more from the gamer than just pushing buttons and the videogame responding accordingly. The need for constant playful interaction is the characteristic that separates videogames from other computer programs. This understanding of interactivity within the context of this playful relationship is often filled with what I call “digital messiness.”

Research Questions and Conclusion

I began this project with three questions:

(1) What are the elements of congruence between videogames and stage performances and the ways they utilize theories of play?

(2) How do videogames function as a performance of self?

(3) How is the conventional meaning of fun complicated when videogames are examined through a performative lens?

My research has led me to believe that the congruence between performance and videogames occurs at the level where play becomes an enacted and embodied way of knowing. For this project, this embodied way of knowing comes from a personal experience in playing
videogames throughout my life. I relied on my personal experiences as the central source for my stage production.

In performance terms, embodied knowledge is when the actor takes the stage to “speak the speech” (Shakespeare, 3.2.1). Play becomes about the “doing,” which takes precedence over disembodied forms of “knowing.” I know of the control schemes for Street Fighter II, but that doesn’t mean I can make Ryu perform a Hadouken whenever I want. In a similar fashion, I might know of my lines and blocking when doing a performance of *Hamlet*, but it is only through the repeated act of practicing those words and actions repeatedly that I commit the text to memory and begin to create an interpretation of my role. In other words, knowing how to play videogames skillfully is achieved through a lens of performativity.

Those stylized repetitious acts, as Judith Butler (1990) pointed out, are central to how we can begin to understand the performance of gender (*Gender Trouble*, p. 140). Similarly, it is through a stylized repetition of acts that a gamer knows how to play videogames. Only through repeated performance can a gamer come to know how to perform a Hadouken perfectly. Likewise, an actor can learn to recite one of Hamlet’s soliloquies flawlessly only through repeated performances. Active participation is the method that a person utilizes to become more skilled or knowledgeable about a culture or identity—whether as a “gamer” or an “actor.”

The congruence between videogames and performance is multifaceted. My primary focus in this study is the elements of experiential play in the performance of videogames. Throughout this chapter I focused on the various way videogames and performance share connections with each while providing definitional and conceptual insight to highlight consistent themes and ideas. In chapter 2, I identify more specifically the connections between
videogame studies and performance studies. In chapter 3, I discuss how Bertolt Brecht’s aesthetic of theatre and Dwight Conquergood’s theories of activist performance influenced the creation of the script and stage production of “Shall We Play a Game?” Finally, in chapter 4, I address each research question to further expand the concept of videogaming as an embodied performative experience.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In chapter 1, I explained and defined videogames within a performative context. I ended the chapter by previewing possible links between performance studies research and videogame studies research. This chapter connects these disciplines in an effort to understand how videogame and performance studies scholars ask and theorize similar concepts. Within the literature review I explore critical research regarding the ways videogames are critiqued and understood narratively and ludically, as well as connections that exist between these two realms of research. From there, I draw parallels between videogame research and performance studies scholarship make connections between the two.

Narratology vs. Ludology

The function of narratives in videogames is a question that Ken Perlin (2004) addressed in his book chapter, “Can there be a form between a game and story?” In it, he asked the reader to consider the psychological implications of why a character in a book or movie seems more “real” than a character in a computer game (p. 12). Perlin attempted to move readers toward an understanding of why their emotional investment in videogames falls short because of the medium in which they are presented. Specifically, Perlin noted that the agency of a reader of a novel is taken away and supplanted with the agency of the novel’s protagonist or narrator. However, in videogames, the agency of the person playing the game is also the agency of the character within the game (pp. 13-14). For Perlin, this exchange of agency within the framework of a videogame must rest in a liminal space between the player of the videogame
and the character within the videogame (p. 16). Perlin’s interest in understanding a gamer’s psychological engagement with videogames as literature places videogames studies primarily in the domain of narratology. However, narratology is not the only possible method available to researchers interested in analyzing the impact of videogames.

In academic research, many videogame critiques are authored from a narrative perspective. By looking only at the narrative of videogames as an object of study, the elements of play within videogames are marginalized. Gonzalo Frasca (2003) argued for the use of more ludic methodologies in videogame critique because “the storytelling model is not only an inaccurate [methodology] but also limits our understanding of the medium” (p. 221). Frasca’s call for ludic engagement with videogames worked in direct opposition to Brenda Laurel’s (1993), Computers as Theater and Janet H. Murray’s (1997), Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace, two books that inspired the narrative methodology of videogame critique.

In chapter 1, I discussed how critics from popular videogame media outlets like IGN.com and Gameinformer.com do not approach their critiques using a critical lens. Instead, these media outlets focused on the playing, or ludology of videogames as the focus of critique. However, these ludological critiques offer nothing in the way of critical engagement and serve only to promote and sell the game being critiqued. It is this lack of critical engagement that has driven many theorists away from ludic methodologies. Markku Eskelinen (2004) compared and contrasted the narrative elements (narratology) to the ideas and study of play (ludology). Eskelinen stated, “it should be self-evident that we can’t apply print narratology, hypertext theory, film or theater and drama studies directly to computer games, but it isn’t” (p. 36).
Eskelinen explained that in narrative research we “configure in order to be able to interpret,” but in videogames, through a lens of ludology, we “interpret in order to be able to configure, and proceed from the beginning to the winning or some other situation” (p. 36). Both of these methods have their own histories, strengths, and weaknesses, and neither, on its own, can provide a comprehensive method for critiquing and theorizing videogames.

The study of the ludic or elements of play goes as far back as the research of Johan Huizinga (1955) and his anthropological understanding of play within culture. Huizinga claimed, “play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing” (Homo Ludens, p.1). Huizinga understood play as a central and indivisible component of culture. For Huizinga, play is a natural and necessary component to life, culture, and society. However, Huizinga loosely defined “play” and the ways it evolved into the more recognizable form of “game” throughout human civilization. For example, Huizinga saw the rules of a game as absolute and total, but he did not describe how those rules function or how they influence play.

Using Huizinga’s work as a springboard, Roger Caillios (1961) created a conceptual model for understanding the relationship of play and games within human culture. Caillios used Huizinga’s definition of play to locate specifically where play appears within cultural gaming events such as football, carnival rides, card games, etc. Whereas Huizinga only declared play to be part of culture, Caillios identified where play and culture intersect. “What is expressed in play is no different than what is expressed in culture . . . when a culture evolves, what had been an institution may be degraded” (p. 64). Caillios theorized the connections between culture and
play as being inseparable with the possibility of important religious and political ceremonious becoming obsolete.

The shift in the study of play towards the more specific category of “game” is an important step in understanding the ludic function of videogames. Videogames are more than just a narrative. Focusing on the serious or critical function of ludic elements within games and play allows for a richer form of critique. Each critical lens, narratology and ludology, illuminates videogames in some of their capacities, but limits them in the others.

New methods of videogame criticism through Performance

As I stated in chapter 1, the methods of criticism used today in mainstream videogame reviews and critiques often leave much to be desired. Many reviews focus on the game itself without any connection to a larger cultural context. In academic videogame research, scholars have attempted to provide a deeper cultural understanding of videogames. For example, in *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (2008), Ian Bogost attempted to create a massive new framework to find better ways to talk about videogames, the culture of videogames, and how they can be approached through various theories. Bogost began by defining “Unit Operations [as] modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems” (p. 3). By looking at individual units within a given system, in this case individual videogames over entire genres, Bogost sought to expand the ways that people approached videogames and videogame criticism. Bogost’s motive was to create a new approach to videogame criticism in order to “vault videogames toward a status higher than entertainment alone” (p. xiv).
This emphasis away from “pure entertainment” creates parallels with the idea of “performance as an essentially contested concept” (Strine, Long, & HopKins, 1990, p. 183). Strine et al. worked through several disparate examples of performance in order to create a rich tapestry of approaches directed at understanding different performance methodologies. Both Bogost and Strine et al. attempted to understand their respective fields and the ways that scholars of either, or both, can approach and begin to understand each from intertextual and interdisciplinary perspectives.

This type of scholarly discussion works within the framework of critical interrogation. In consistently working and reworking a concept like performance, one finds ways to expand and enrich performance beyond a static definition. Bogost (2008) was attempting the same critical engagement with videogames when he stated:

*Critical* in every inflection of the word: for one part, it embraces criticism like various forms of literary and philosophical inquiry. For another part, it underscores a kind of general analysis that relates to other fields. For another, it admits to certain danger of collapse and the need to keep that possibility in mind. And for yet another part, it telegraphs an exigency of action. (p. 176)

This interdisciplinary approach to videogame studies is part of Bogost’s concerted effort to make videogames viable as a respectable object of research in traditional academic institutions. This focus on interdisciplinary study requires “a structural change in our thinking [that] must take place for videogames to thrive, both commercially and culturally” (p. 179). This move to find a culturally viable place for the meaningful critique of videogames is similar to issues
performance studies theorists and practitioners encountered during the late 1970s and the 1980s.

A brief history of performance studies in the 1970s and 1980s

During the late 1970s many Interpretation Studies programs—as they were known at the time—experienced a paradigm shift. This change occurred as scholars began to bring theories, methods, and concepts from sociolinguistics, philosophy, anthropology, and other academic disciplines to bear on the study of performance. Eventually this change resulted in the renaming of the discipline and the formulation of performance studies programs as we know them today. Elizabeth Fine and Jean Haskell Speer (1977) advocated a paradigm shift that expanded the definition of both “text” and “performance,” opening new potential areas of research for performance studies scholars. “If performance is to become an integral part of interpretation study,” Fine and Speer argued, “we need to explore the qualitative, problematic nature of the phenomenon of performance” (p. 375). Fine and Speer identified the ways performance studies is already an integral part of the communication studies discipline, thereby demonstrating a much more rich and diverse understanding of human communication. Fine and Speer argued that starting with everyday performances like personal narratives, folklore, and jokes as texts, performance can become “a normal part of a social interaction” (p. 387). This identification of performance as an embodied form of human communication vaulted it to a more radical status. Fine and Speer’s ideas and their methods for transposing performance of literature practices for application to everyday performance contexts would “enrich our understanding of the social dimensions of performance” (p. 385). By exploring the social
dimensions of performance, they expanded the idea of what constituted performance and
provided the field with new directions for performance research and practice.

Working to expand what constitutes a performable “text” in performance studies began
with the shift from the term “literature” to the broader and more inclusive term “text.” Pelias
and VanOosting (1987) recognized this shift in performance studies and extended the
discussion of what constitutes a “text” beyond canonical literary works. Moving beyond a
literary canon “gives way to a broader catalogue of texts, newly available for examination and
richly rewarding critical attention” (p. 222). This expansion of what constitutes a performative
text allows for the inclusion of videogames as a type of “text” to be performed. However, over
the past few decades, the explosion of new technologies and the expanded uses of new media
in performances have further altered how performance studies scholars understand what
constitutes “text.”

Within performance studies, one significant method of understanding performance is
the use of performative writing. Della Pollock (1998) identified six different types of
“excursions” into performative writing: “Evocative,” “Metonymic,” “Subjective,” “Nervous,”
“Citational,” and “Consequential” (pp. 80-98). Each “excursion” is designed to allow a
performer a way to expand on their written work performatively. However, Pollock’s six
different methods are not meant to be binding, but should be seen as a jumping off points for
finding ways to write performatively about a given topic (pp. 80-81). These different methods
of writing help illuminate topics within performance studies that might otherwise be
inaccessible through conventional research methods. While Pollock identified modes through
which one enters into performative writing as a method of engagement, D. Soyini Madison
(1999) actively engaged with performance and performative writing as a way to understand the “uneasy possession of performance as a means of both subjectivity and freedom” (p. 107).

Madison works in a performative writing modality to help her understand her own subjective negotiations with performance, the way that theory informs performance, and how performance informs theory. In “Performing Theory/Embodied Writing,” Madison performed three written conversations within three different theoretical frameworks: Marxism, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism (pp. 110, 113, 117). Madison then explored the metaphor of swimming in a river to highlight how the embodiment of theory works through performance. While Pollock explained performative writing through six excursions, Madison demonstrated how performative writing could have a creative as well as a critical edge.

Understanding videogames through performance Methods

Looking at creative ways to approach new media forms of performance is something not entirely foreign to performance studies scholars and practitioners. With the increased use of technology and multimedia within performances the use of similar performance terminologies are beginning to surface in different areas of study. Mindy Fenske (2006) addressed this issue by examining “hypertext” and how it functions within multimediated performances. In its most structural and textual form, hypertext “take[s] a set of unconnected nodes (or pages, or lexia) and link[s] them together” (Bernstein & Greco, 2004, p. 169). However, hypertext can become more complex, including “interactive narratives, hypertext fiction, and videogames that offer scenarios, tools, plots and characters that demand input from their users” (Douglas & Hargadon, 2004, p.192). Instead of utilizing concepts from “textual and performance theories”
Fenske (2006) utilized “hypertext theory [to] generate ideas about multimediated relations” and how they intersect with performance (p. 140). The significance of this intersection allows performative writing to achieve a deeper response to a performance event.

Fenske stated hypertexts are “the literal representation of intertextuality” but with the added ability to include both audio and visual elements to a written text (p. 145). Her use of hypertext theory in conjunction with performance focused attention on the interactive relationship performers have with technology (p. 146). Fenske also argued that the use of hypertext theory can expand how performance scholars utilize intertextuality as a mode of criticism and a site of generating of performative texts. The concept of “hypertextual movement” is of particular importance to her argument, primarily because it helped explain the destabilizing nature of certain performance practices that favor chance (pp. 148-149).

Fenske exemplified two methods for understanding hypertextual criticism within performative writing. She illustrated the first method, Criticism as Infection, through Michael Bowman’s “Killing Dillinger: A Mystery,” claiming that “criticism becomes the process of infection, merging or passing through and into performance events in order to effect transformation” (p. 153). The second method, Criticism as Consumption, is illustrated through Lance Olsen’s “termite art” based on William Gibson’s Neuromancer, wherein “the critic through a consumption of the text . . . produces residues [that] can decompose and bring new life while simultaneously breaking things down” (p. 156). Fenske put the ideas of hypertextual performance and methods of performative writing in conversation with one another in order to approach multimediated performances with precise, but expansive languages.
Hypertext theory expands the necessary genres that videogames can fall under, but also how those genres can pigeonhole videogames. Espen Aarseth (2004) spoke to the idea that videogames “are not ‘textual’ or at least not primarily textual . . . a central ‘text’ does not exist—merely context” (p.47). The relationship between context and text follows in the philosophical tradition of Derrida (1967), who stated “there is nothing outside of the text” (*Of Grammatology*, p. 158). Aarseth challenged the idea of labeling videogames as solely “interactive narratives” by questioning what happens when “we try to translate a game into a story, what happens to the rules? What happens to the gameplay? And a story into a game: what happens to the plot?” (p. 50).

Textual translation from one form to another is fraught with issues of authenticity in interpreting the original text. The issue that Aarseth examined with regard to “interactive narrative” involves an issue similar to the one addressed by Wallace Bacon in “Dangerous Shores: From Elocution to Interpretation” (1960). Bacon was primarily concerned with how an interpreter of a text could safely navigate the implications of both elocution, with its emphasis on delivery, and interpretation, with its emphasis on textual meaning, without foundering on the excesses represented by these two shores. Bacon’s metaphor implicates and puts pressure on performer’s interpretation from the original text. However, Bacon understood how a text could function within both elocution and interpretation and create a positive artistic release.

The language of literature is a wonderfully complex and efficient thing—wonderfully because of its intricacy is a very exciting and compelling fact; indeed, it is almost incredible, sometimes how sharp a distillation of experience can be bound into words. (p. 150)
Bacon had a deep understanding of how words function within the world of literature, but these words are not solely bound to that world alone. Bacon knew that understanding literature in a deeply intellectual capacity not only expands those intellectual limits of a student, but the emotional limits of student as well (p. 152). Bacon would later revisit this concept of “dangerous shores” some thirty years later when performance studies has become more interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. However, Bacon still strongly emphasized the correlation between the text and the performer. Also, the studies of “interpretation have been concerned with both of the ‘shores,’ and it is as true now as ever that one may be grounded on either” (Bacon, 1996, p. 356). Within Bacon’s life, the scholarship of performance has shifted from understanding what performance is, to “talking about performance in the interests of uncovering truths about the cultural environments of the performers and the performances being discussed” (p. 358). This emphasis of understanding the cultural impact of performance in various contexts falls in line with a current trend in videogame studies. This trend to understand and demystify performance and to examine performance into everyday contexts mirrors a similar movement in videogame studies.

Working to understand and demystify videogames in an everyday cultural setting is part of the process Bogost (2011) attempted in How To Do Things with Videogames. Bogost did not try to understand what videogames can do culturally; rather, he sought to understand what they already do culturally. Very much in the vein of J. L. Austin’s How to Do Things with Words, which his title obviously mimicked, Bogost studied the multiple ways that videogames interact with culture, and argued the many uses of videogames. For example, Bogost discussed the ways videogames can be used for understanding empathy, Zen-like meditation, and on the job
training (pp. 18, 89, 151). Bogost’s argument for studying videogames is to demystify what it takes to engage, learn, and play videogames by comparing what is possible in the medium of videogames with what is possible in other mediums. “A book can carry us off to a fantasy world or help us decide where to eat dinner. A television program can shock us with an account of genocide or help us practice aerobics” (pp. 5-6). By illustrating the varied ways other mediums can function outside of a singular purpose, Bogost wants to provide videogames a similar air of mundanity so that in the future there would be no “gamer” or “non-gamer” identity labels.

Bogost’s approach to videogames seeks to understand videogames as process as well as product in order to demystify them. As he noted, “The more things games can do, the more the general public will become accepting of, and interested in, the medium in general” (p. 153). By providing an everyday perspective on videogames, Bogost worked to demystify videogames in much the same way J. L. Austin (1971) demystified “constative” and “performative” speech acts (pp. 13-22). Since videogames are an action-oriented environment, players’ actions operate as performative speech acts because “in every videogame, players’ actions make the game work” (Bogost, 2011, p.118). Given this parallel, scholars can examine these performative acts within videogames through traditional methods of performance research.

Bogost’s call for a cultural understanding of videogames is similar to that of Alexander R. Galloway (2006) in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Galloway wondered why so few critical studies on videogames have been conducted even through videogames are a central force within American culture (p. xi). This question was important for Galloway because, like Bogost, he wanted to demystify the discourse surrounding videogames to help people understand that videogames are products of the cultures in which they arise. Galloway
accomplished this task by tracking the evolution of the first person shooter (FPS) genre in videogames to the history of the use of the subjective point-of-view (P.O.V.) shot used in film. Galloway noted, “in film, the subjective perspective is marginalized and used primarily to effect a sense of alienation, detachment, fear, or violence, while in videogames the subjective perspective is quite common” (p. 40). Highlighting the use of similar techniques used in film and videogames, Galloway used the term “identification,” specifically in a Burkean modality, in order to express how both videogames and film using the subjective viewpoint can create vastly different outcomes in terms of viewer or gamer identification.

Galloway’s comparison of the FPS to the P.O.V. technique used in film is a nuanced comparison. However, Galloway points out that videogames, unlike film need constant participation in order for the videogame to be an enacted and engaged activity. “One takes a photograph, one acts in a film. But these actions transpire before or during the fabrication of the work . . . with video games, the work itself is material action” (p. 2). Videogames require constant input and action from the player in order to work. This relationship between game and human player is of technological interdependence.

Martti Lahti (2003) identified the interdependent connection, or symbiosis between videogame technologies and the player’s corporeal bodies and what affects those have on both game and player. Lahti specifically noted how “games commodify our cyborg desires, our will to merge with and become technology,” and how “games regularly [use] a variety of techniques to register the visceral element of playing” (pp. 161, 166). Lahti cited Gibson’s *Neuromancer* as a birthplace for the ideas of the modern cyborg experience with technology, specifically the Internet, or as Gibson called it cyberspace. However, Lahti argued “video games epitomize a
new cyborgian relationship with entertainment technologies, linking our everyday social spaces and computer technologies to virtual spaces” (p. 158). This linking of virtual spaces to the corporeal body’s subjective experience can come at the cost of exploiting, or exoticizing the Other. Lahti argued, however, “If something is left behind when we play [videogames], it is not the body. We may be toying with the body when we play, but we remain flesh as we become machine” (p.169). Lahti understood how the corporeal body affects the design and construction of videogames and other virtual realms and vise-versa.

Jane McGonigal (2011) engaged this idea further in her explorations of two primary ideas: the concepts of positive stress, or eustress (p. 32), and a flow state of mind (p. 41). These two experiential phenomena, McGonigal claimed, are essential to the well-being of all people. She argued, moreover, that both can be achieved more efficiently through videogames because “reality doesn’t motivate us as effectively [as videogames]. Reality isn’t engineered to maximize our potential. Reality wasn’t designed from the bottom up to make us happy” (p. 3). Videogames are effective at making us happy, according to McGonigal, “because they are hard work that we choose for ourselves” (p. 28). This freedom to choose which hard work to engage in creates a level of eustress that rewards us “within the limits of our own endurance” (p.33). Playing videogames are a voluntary activity and as gamers we choose what levels of engagement we want to have with that game world.

The level of eustress a gamer achieves, however, is dependent on his/her state of flow. Flow is a state of pure immersion within a given activity. McGonigal cites psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi and his work on flow to report that flow occurs in activities that are
challenging endeavors with a clear goal, well-established rules for action, and the potential for increased difficulty and improvement over time. More importantly, flow activities were done for pure enjoyment rather than for status, money, or obligation...flow was most reliably and most efficiently produced by the specific combination of self-chosen goals, personally optimized obstacles, and continuous feedback that make up the essential structure of gameplay. (pp. 35-36)

Flow is important for videogames, but also for athletic sports, running, working out, craft making, acting, etc. because a person focuses all her or his attention and energy into overcoming an obtainable and present obstacle. As a result of beating one more game level or running that extra mile, we are rewarded with an emotion of “fiero.” Fiero is an Italian word for pride that has been adopted by game designers to describe the emotional rush when triumphing over adversity (p. 33). The generation of flow and eustress from the playing of videogames relates back to Lahti’s concepts of virtual worlds affecting corporeal reality.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have summarized the literature relevant to the intersection of videogame studies and performance studies. Performance studies is unique among academic disciplines in its focus on understanding the relationship between texts of various types and physical bodies. In addition, performance studies scholars have utilized narratives of personal experience as a source of evidence. Combining these ideas from performance studies, I investigate how the links between narrative and ludic forms of play in videogames creates a nuanced way to understand the effects of playing videogames on gamers. While many
performance studies scholars have addressed the ways digital technologies affect our corporeal world (Chvasta; Fenske; LeVan), few have addressed videogames and videogaming specifically. Videogame studies scholars, on the other hand, have attempted to understand the cultural implications of videogames. However, they have done so with little regard to the experience of gamers in the performative playing of videogames. The ways that videogames influence our personal experience in and of and with the world is a site of research that bridges these seemingly disparate academic disciplines. In chapter 3, I discuss how performance scholarship served as a platform to expound on my personal experience playing videogames throughout my life. Also, I discussed the ways that performance and videogame scholarship worked in conjunction with each other when developing the script and staging “Shall We Play a Game?”
My goal for this project was to create a performance that highlighted the performative nature of videogames in a way that demonstrated how they function as an embodied way of knowing. Since the project is rooted in the performance of videogames, I created a stage performance to test this idea. I began with my own extensive knowledge, experience, and memory as catalyst for this project. Then, I used Dwight Conquergood’s three A’s of performance studies, accomplishment, analysis, and articulation, as the theoretical framework for constructing the performance. Conquergood (2002) argued, “We can think through performance along three crisscrossing lines of activity and analysis” (p. 152). The intersecting lines of Conquergood’s three A’s reveal performance as a creative process to understanding that phenomenon as both method and model, and using it as a means of intervening with difficult concepts and issues. Conquergood’s concepts expanded the discipline greatly to be multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and ultimately to find a balance between theory and practice. From this ground, I turned to a consideration of how to construct the performance. In doing so, I worked at the intersection of game theory and performance theory. In this chapter, then, I discuss the ways I utilized autoperformance and my personal experience as a site of performative discourse. I explore the ways I used Conquergood’s three A’s of performance for the theoretical construction of my staged performance. And, finally, I examine the ways Brechtian theatre techniques coupled with Caillois’s theories on game studies informed the ways that I physically constructed the performance.
Autoperformance and personal experience as Performative Inquiry

Autoperformance

According to Pensoneau-Conway and Toyosaki (2011), autoperformance is a catch-all label that can include many automethodological forms, like mystory and autoethnography. They also emphasized that one of the purposes of autoperformance is to call “attention to the constructed nature of the self within performance” (pp. 388-389). Autoperformance focuses on a performer’s autobiographical content in relation to self as a contested and constructed concept. Because my focus in the performance includes an emphasis on understanding and processing of self, I have chosen to label my method autoperformance rather than using other potential labels.

My choice for autoperformance as a performance methodology draws heavily on my own personal history and personal narratives. My performance is structured in terms of information gathering, organizing, and reporting, and is all based within my own subjective experience. I understand the implications of putting my experience on display as a specific site for critique. Carolyn Ellis (2004) defined autoethnography as, “Research, writing, story, and method that connects the autobiographical and the personal to the cultural, social, and political” (p. xix). Tami Spry (2001) described autoethnography as “a vehicle of emancipation from cultural and familial identity scripts that have structured my identity personally and professionally” p. 708). Autobiography is a significant part of autoethnography. However, as Ellis and Spry are careful to indicate, personal narratives serve as only one site of inquiry within autoethnography. Critique is equally significant.
Chang (2008) argued that one of the ways autoethnographers fail is in their exclusive reliance on personal memory as data, and an overemphasis on narration with an underemphasis on cultural critique is an “inappropriate application of the term autoethnography” (Chang, 54). Because my performance relies so heavily on narration created from my own personal memory rather than cultural critique I feel compelled to avoid labeling my performance autoethnography. My reliance on personal memory and experience for my performance is intended to function synecdochically rather than metonymically. My own performance stands in for others, but in no way is my performance a substitution for the audience’s own experience. Although Conquergood’s three A’s of performance studies were written to apply specifically to autoethnography, they are flexible enough for application to autoperformance. Pensoneau-Conway and Toyosaki’s definition of autoperformance highlights the constructed nature of self and performance. The nature of self, within autoperformance is constructed through a retroactive sense making process with a reliance on personal memory as a performative discourse. Throughout my performance, I attempted to draw attention to the constructedness of my conception of self as both gamer and performer.

One example of this constructedness occurred during the “Character Creation” scene where I drew the audience’s attention to the ways I built my videogame avatar ZaZen. For example, the audience saw me change into a ZaZen’s costume and take on a different form of self. Along with costume, I also changed my vocal intonation, gestures, and physical movement. Unlike Jake, the self presented in the rest of the show, ZaZen takes up more space, has more elaborate gestures, and speaks in a garish and ostentatious manner. The constructed nature of ZaZen’s self is highlighted through various gaming accomplishments across all games. The
“Character Creation” scene is juxtaposed with the proceeding scene, “The Pit(fall)” where I specifically highlight a singular videogaming experience that influenced the way I construct myself as gamer and performer.

Another example occurred during “The Pit(fall)” scene, in which I traced the ways videogames helped me process and understand past experiences in my life. This scene, more subtly than “Character Creation,” highlighted how my construction of self evolved as performer and as gamer through the playing of videogames. During “The Pit(fall),” I focus on the ways that playing and finishing the videogame Half-Life was used as a way to help make sense of my parent’s divorce. My parent’s divorce was a significant event early in my life that influenced my understanding of self as a person. This scene ties together the specific ways that videogames offered a performative and interactive way of exploring my conception of self.

Personal Experience as Performative Inquiry

For this project, the bulk of my data is drawn from my history and personal experiences with videogames. In using my personal experiences, I am careful to locate my own experience as “gamer” as one site within the larger cultural context of videogaming. During the scenes “What is a videogame?,” “Character Creation,” and “The Pit(fall),” for example, I constantly located myself historically within videogaming history, but I also referred to games and gaming consoles other audience members may have experienced. The use of my own experience within a culture as data for a production raises questions of authenticity because I rely only on my personal experience as a gamer. For this reason throughout the production I locate myself as only one voice among many. I accomplish this location of myself in relation to other gamers specifically in “This is Not a Game” when I, as gamer and performer, am confronted with
questions regarding misconceptions about videogames and gamers that I answer through my own experience.

I see my own experience within the performance functioning as an open link in a chain for my audience to connect to their own experiences. As grounding for this approach, I turned to Joan Scott (1991) and her work on experience within academic scholarship. She argued, “[experience] serves as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, of claiming knowledge that is ‘unassailable’” (p. 797). How can we argue against our own experience when experience feels so unshakable and ingrained in our lives? Scott further claimed, “Experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political” (p. 797). In this light, my experience becomes something to be argued, questioned, misunderstood, and contextualized against my audience’s experience. Using a performance lens, Judith Hamera (2006) extended Scott’s argument about experience:

Performance links experience, theory, and the work of close critique in ways that make precise analytical claims about cultural production and consumption, and exposes how both culture and our claims are themselves constructed things, products of hearts and souls, minds and hands. (p. 241)

In my opinion, the use of personal experience and performance for this project allows for a greater connection with the audience than quantitative methodologies. My experiences become something more than data for analysis. Presented through performance, those experiences allow discussion and negotiation alongside my audiences’ experiences.
Conquergood described how to use performance as a method of inquiry and understanding when he said, “Performance studies . . . in its capacity to bridge segregated and differently valued knowledges, draw[s] together legitimated as well as subjugated modes of inquiry” (pp. 151-152). This methodology is centered “both as model and method, as an optic and operator of research” (p.152). Using performance, as both object and method expands the way I analyzed and interpreted videogames as a text.

In a similar approach, Hamera (2006) outlined three reasons in Opening Acts why one would engage in performance-based scholarship over others:

- The challenges of engaging culture as an embodied process, not a thing, text, or a set of variables.
- The rigors of working across, betwixt and between conceptual categories likes space and place, here/now and there/when, archive and repertoire, production and consumption.
- The metatheoretical and methodological opportunities to reflect on and change how dimensions of difference, location, history, and daily practice are represented in academic discourse. (p. 240)

Much like Conquergood did with his formulation of the three A’s, Hamera has identified specific functions and processes that performance scholarship sanctions but that would be limited by other research methods. Inspired by Hamera, I sought to create a production that foregrounded the act of embodying and participating within a culture rather than attempting to observe and comment on it dispassionately. Also, as I discussed in chapter one, understanding the performance of videogames requires an embodied way of knowing. For these reasons, I have chosen autoperformance as a primary vehicle for understanding this embodied
performance. In the following section of this chapter I will specifically discuss the ways I utilized Conquergood’s three A’s of performance as a method from crafting my performance.

Conquergood: accomplishment, analysis, Articulation

Accomplishment

Conquergood (2002) defined “accomplishment” as, “the making of art and the remaking of culture . . . artistic process and form; knowledge that comes from doing . . . [and] performing as a way of knowing” (p. 152). Conquergood envisioned this practice as one of “artistry” and “imagination,” which serves the basic foundation for performance as a method of understanding: the creation of the performance. In terms of this project, the physical embodiment of videogames through a performative practice is incomplete without that stage performance. The staging of my experiences as a performance functions as the experimental testing of my project. The function of accomplishment is to create performance and to allow that performance to function as a way of knowing.

During my performance I explored the idea that videogames have their own culture, which gamers embody in the very act of playing. Gamers occupy a liminal space “betwixt and between” digital and corporeal realities. Gamers create videogames through a performative playful process of producing, consuming, and reproducing those games that they play. Gamers are often programmers of games as much as they are consumers of games, and performance functions in many of the same ways. While I create the performance prior to the actual event it is during my performance as I am producing it and my audience is consuming that performance, I am also recreating my experience during my performance.
My past written scholarship about performance and videogames were attempts to find a solid grounding in the idea of videogames as embodied performance. These earliest explorations began in Ronald J. Pelias’s Performance of Narrative class at Southern Illinois University in spring 2011. The first assignment in that class was to create a personal narrative performance. I performed a story relating some of my earliest experiences with videogames. I specifically concentrated on my experiences with videogames that were more kinesthetically engaging. My performance focused on my days in middle school while I was living in northern Illinois. During the winter, I would ride my bike to a friend’s house to play videogames before school started. The focus of this story and its performance was to understand how videogaming created and shaped opportunities for social interactions.

While the idea of videogames as an embodied performance failed to capture the attention and imagination of those who rarely played videogames, those who had played videogames relayed experiences similar to mine after each performance of “Shall We Play a Game?” Even in this earliest personal narrative performance related to gaming, my goal was to connect videogames with and through performance. Since that time, I have created performances and written papers for classes in which I have explored the intersections of videogaming and performance as a viable option for producing critical discourse.

Analysis

Conquergood (2002) identified “analysis” as “the interpretation of art and culture; critical reflection [and] thinking about, through, and with performance” (p.152). If the scholar uses “accomplishment” in the creation of art, then s/he uses “analysis” in the critical revision of art as a way of reflecting on the relationship between art and culture. Specifically, in this
project I am focused on the revolutionizing understanding and conveying meaning about the relationship between videogaming and the culture within which it exists. My concentration on the critical revision of my script and the construction of my performance were the most important aspects in helping my audience understand the relationship of videogames and gaming culture within my performance. Although, I save my discussion of the implications and effects that critical revision had on my performance for chapter 4, in this section I focus on the steps I took to develop the script and performance. The process was relatively easy because I knew I would be discussing a type of cultural artifact with which most of my audience members would be familiar. I had a wide range of source materials from which to choose on the topic of videogaming. However, relying on only technical and/or academic sources would only allow me to connect with an audience on a single, referential level.

For this project I had envisioned two goals, one immediate and the other longitudinal. I discuss the immediate goal in this section and I focus on the longitudinal goal more specifically in the “Articulation” section. My immediate goal was the scripting, rehearsal, and performance of the project. To state this goal another way, I asked the question “Is it possible to do an embodied performative project about videogames that significantly interrogates videogames culturally and personally?” While the longitudinal goal is, “Can this performance begin and sustain a dialogue about videogames and performance among individuals who are unfamiliar with one or both?” The first goal was eminently practical. The process of writing the script, selecting a co-director, making advertisement posters, memorizing lines, and staging were vital and essential components of this process. The creation of script took precedence over all other aspects of the performance.
I knew what ideas I wanted to portray for the audience, and I had to choose my words and craft them carefully. The script went through five revisions before it was finalized because I wanted to make my ideas as transparent as possible to the audience. In selecting Joanna Lugo as my co-director I was making a strategic choice in order to complement my strengths and address my weaknesses. Over the course of my graduate studies, I had the privilege of being in a number of performance classes with Lugo. Her background, and hence her style, is heavily rooted in body and movement based performance. My background and experiences, on the other hand, are in developing text-based performances, particularly narrative styles of performance. Hence, our skill sets complemented one another. Lugo and I were also complementary in that she is less familiar with the subject of videogames, but more familiar with performance as a method of academic study.

Having Lugo as a co-director decreased the stress levels associated with the amount of work required to mount the production in the Black Box Theatre. For example, her connections to people who work in photography and visual marketing helped ease the burden of designing and creating publicity for the performance. Having an additional dependable person as part of the creative team provided me with the independence I needed to memorize lines and work on blocking. Also, Lugo and I divided the workload for technical issues related to the performance. She worked on the lighting design and ran the lights and audio during the performance; and I worked on the audio design and edited the video used during the production. As this discussion indicates, utilizing Lugo as a co-director was a necessary and critical part for developing this performance.
Establishing a connection with the audience relies on the “critical reflection” that Conquergood identified as central to analysis. I anticipated that a majority of my audience would have experience in playing videogames. However, I knew that some of audience members would not have experience. Therefore, during the creation of the script I paid critical attention to the way I was explaining my experience with videogames for the audience. I wanted to provide audience members who had no videogame experiences a way into my performance. If I went on stage and muttered a plethora of videogame experiences without explaining, narrating, or relating to my audience the significance of those experiences, my audience would feel isolated, confused, and estranged from my performance.

I constructed the performance in a non-linear manner by constructing six scenes and juxtaposing them with one another, leaving the performance fragmented. To be more precise, the performance contained no narrative protagonist or antagonist to guide the audience’s sympathy. Some sections of the performance were humorous while others were more dramatic. The audience was not handed a narrative frame to guide or limit their critiques and interpretations. This deliberate open-endedness required critical interpretations from the audience in order to make sense of the performance. Providing the audience the material from which to construct their reading of the performance as well as the freedom to critique my experience was more important than the construction of a singular cohesive and coherent narrative. The use of narrative fragmentation as a structuring device leaves the interpretation of the performance largely in the hands of the audience. This structuring strategy provides them an opening to critique what was addressed, as well as what was not addressed. In other
words, they were free to draw on their own experiences—or lack thereof—to confirm and/or critique aspects of the performance.

In an attempt to create a larger and more accessible understanding of videogames and their culture in a 45-minute performance, some ideas inevitably get left out. Therefore, I had to find an autoperformance methodology that would invite the audience to understand the experiences presented and utilize their own experiences to flesh out the experience. Gregory Ulmer (1994) claimed, “[Mystory was] designed to simulate the experience of invention, the crossing of discourses that has been shown to occur in the invention process” (Heuretics, p. xii). For Ulmer, the use of mystory is most effective at the intersection of audiences’ and writers’ discourses and experiences. The same is true for my performance. The structure of “Shall We Play a Game?” fits within the personal, popular, and professional discourses of a mysteriography. The performance is divided into six scenes, two scenes were devoted to each category of discourse Ulmer recommends. Scenes one and two focused on the professional discourse of videogames and performance, scenes three and four dealt with the personal discourses surrounding my own experiences playing videogames, and scenes five and six investigated popular discourses specifically associated with misconceptions about videogames and stereotypes of gamers. My use of personal narrative is incomplete, but allows the audience the ability to fill in the gaps with their own experiences. Some audience members’ experiences with videogames were limited to Tetris or Pong, while other audience members’ with larger ranges of experience were able to pick up on many of the more esoteric references written into the script.
Anticipating and accounting for a potential audience’s level of competence and fluency in a subject such as videogames is complicated. Overloading the audience with too much contextual information (historical dates, technical jargon, academic sources, etc.) may disengage or bore the audience, but providing too little information may draw attention away from the subject at hand. During the first scene, “History of Videogames,” my goal was to provide as much contextual information as necessary for audience members unfamiliar with the history of videogames. This scene was essential for providing non-videogaming audience members the information they would need to help understand the performance.

Relaying videogame and performance history, terminology, and cultural context, as well as my own experiential understanding of videogames through performance, ensures that the audience can engage and understand the performance on both personal and cultural levels. These motives for creating the performance are aligned with Conquergood’s “analysis” in that I was concentrating on appropriately contextualizing the performance for an audience with diverse experience levels. Also, once I perform for an audience, my story becomes part of their story because during that performative event the audience interprets my experiences within a culture of gaming with the possibility of understanding my experiences in relation to their own. However, this sharing of experience and knowledge is only achieved, as Conquergood (2002) states, if it “comes from contemplation and compassion” (p. 152) and recognizing that my audiences’ experiences are different than mine.

Communicating these experiences effectively is the aspect of my performance that is most important to me as a performance pedagogue. Throughout the performance run, I had to engage the audience. Many audience members approached me afterwards to discuss how
enjoyable and intriguing my performance had been for them. In chapter 4 I will discuss the conversations I had and feedback I received in greater depth.

Understanding how my audience engages with my performance allows me to understand the critical impact of the performance. Inevitably, some audience members who come to the theatre will leave unaffected. Nonetheless, the performance event functions as collaboration, because without and audience to be present and responding the performer has no way of knowing whether the performance had any critical effect. If I have been successful in applying Conquergood’s idea of analysis in the construction of the performance, many more of the audience members will not only understand the performance, they will want to participate in a dialogue started by the performance. The focus on the theoretical questions of my performance as well as the aesthetic value leads me to Conquergood’s third and final A, “articulation.”

Articulation

The third and final component Conquergood (2002) addressed, “articulation,” focused on moving performance projects “outside the academy and [is] rooted in an ethic of reciprocity and exchange” (p. 152). As discussed in the previous section the longitudinal goal was more difficult to achieve. Conquergood described articulation in terms of a desire to move the performance beyond “the academy.” The fact that this performance was mounted in a Black Box theatre within the academy makes it more difficult to obtain Conquergood’s stated objective. Nevertheless, I argue that my use of performance talkbacks, which are rooted in my desire to create “an ethic of reciprocity and exchange,” was entirely in keeping with Conquergood’s goal for “articulation.”
The ways I addressed this “reciprocity and exchange” through Conquergood’s articulation was by (1) addressing the seemingly “non-academic” subject matter of videogames, which has been largely ignored within the academy, (2) attempting to attract an audience that, while it was composed largely of students, was interested in what they would perceive as a non-academic subject, and (3) using formal and informal talkback sessions for the purpose of helping audience members understand the larger political and cultural implications of gaming. The first two points were addressed within the construction and revision of the performance itself. However, the third point required a conscious effort on my part to extend the themes of the performance outside of the performance event. I had many discussions with students in the days after the performance event, and I made it a goal to ask those student questions that allowed them entry into the conversation started by the performance.

The goal of extending performance outside of the theatre is an objective for both Brecht and Conquergood. Brecht’s (1957) and Conquergood’s (1985) reject the notion of “man as a fixed point” and look to performance as a process and site of critical inquiry. I envisioned the performance as a site of discovery and critical inquiry, and I used aesthetic dimensions of the performance in ways that were congruent with Brechtian theatrical techniques. Although I used aesthetic qualities like lights and costumes, I used them in ways to demonstrate the artificiality of performance for the purpose of reminding the audience of the constructed nature of performance. In many ways these elements of theatre are highlighted more brightly than in representational theatre to show the artificiality of performance. In this way these aspects of the performance were intentionally “imperfect and provisional” and, thereby, left the audience “productively disposed even after the spectacle is over” (Brecht, 1957, p. 205).
I have depended upon interactions with other students, friends, and professors about this performance, and I look to them for specific insight as a catalyst of dialogue. While Conquergood’s “accomplishment” and “analysis” are typically associated with the development and revision of the performance, respectively, “articulation” occurs after the performance. This idea does not presuppose performance as a product, but rather as an ongoing process that continues engaging the audience after they leave the theatre. In my final chapter I focus in greater detail on “articulation” with regard to videogames as an embodied performance practice.

Brecht, Caillios, and Performance

To construct the performance, I turned to Brecht and his tenets of Epic theatre and performance as refracted through Caillios’ discussions of play. Brecht (1957) influenced the construction of my performance script in three ways: the use of montage, the idea of “the human being as subject to inquiry,” and the idea of the human being as process rather than a fixed point (p. 37).

Montage is a form of performance presentation with which most audiences are familiar and, thus, comfortable. Therefore, although I used narratives of personal experience as an important part of the production, I used montage as a way to disrupt any sense of a holistic, unitary experience, and to introduce play and game theories in the performance. Instead of forcibly drawing the audience into a critical discussion, using montage as a covert and recognizable form more smoothly prepared the audience to engage in critical dialogue.
I used montage scenes as a way to address different theoretical ideas associated with play specifically within each scene and, more importantly, to disrupt the illusionary elements of theatre. For example, in scene two, “Time to Play,” I expounded different aspects of play theory from Huizinga, Caillois, and Turner while engaging the audience with different types of simple games like rock, paper, and scissors. During this scene, more than any other, I spent time and energy preparing the theoretical framework that would allow the audience to interpret and understand videogames. Also, since I spoke directly with the audience and invited them to play games, I initiated the breaking of the fourth wall between the audience and me. This move on my part simultaneously disrupted the illusionary nature of theatrical events, it also invited the audience—symbolically at this point—into a dialogue about gaming and gaming culture.

Brecht (1957) argued, “The illusion created in the theatre must be a partial one, in order that it may always be recognized as an illusion” (p. 219). In no way do I attempt make the performance look “realistic.” For example, during the performance the stage was black and bare with the exception of a few black boxes that were moved about the stage as needed to create chairs, stepping stones to hop on to, a mountain to climb, etc. Furthermore, there was no illusion of a fourth wall. Consequently, I frequently turned to the audience and addressed their presence within the room by performing my experience and asking them to participate within the performance periodically by, for example, playing a game with me. Also, during scene three, “Character Creation,” when I changed out of the ZaZen costume and resumed the performance as “Jake” I wiped my brow with a handkerchief and offered a humorous comment regarding how hot the performance space was because of the theatrical lights. These moments
when I spoke to the audience, provided them with the opportunity to see me acknowledge myself as performer and not as a fixed persona within the performance.

Aside from one scene, I was costumed in a white t-shirt and black pants. Moreover, throughout the performance, I made every effort to draw attention to the seams within the performance. As the performance transitioned from scene to scene, I changed the set around myself in full view of the audience. I allowed the audience to witness the costume change in the “Character Creation” scene. I wiped sweat from my forehead with a towel and commented on the amount of physical moment I was engaging in during the performance. In all of these ways I attempted to break the illusion of a theatrical realism by showing the cracks and seams; however, in spite of these efforts on my part, the audience still had the ability to participate in illusion if that was their choice. Allowing the illusion to continue despite attempted disruptions to that illusion is what makes performance and videogames viable. Caillios (1958) discussed “simulations” as a “world without rules, in which the player constantly improvises, trusting in a guiding fantasy or a supreme inspiration, neither of which is subject to regulation” (p. 75). While I may attempt to break the illusion of a theatrical performance – that simulation – some audience members will want to cling to it.

Caillios (1958) clarified the relationship between play and performance. Specifically, he identified performance and theatre as falling within the play category “mimicry” (p. 21). This connection actively draws attention to the constructed nature of performance rather than allowing it to hide behind the illusion of realism, a fact that Brecht (1957) understood and commented on. “Reality . . . has to be altered by being turned into art, so that it can be seen to be alterable and be treated as such” (p. 219). Within the performance, I used my own personal
experience with videogames to create a sense of authority. This “authority” has the potential to become problematic because, as Scott (1991) explained, experience in its traditional sense is used to create origins of knowledge that offer little acknowledgment or consideration of their own constructedness (p. 777). As I work with and through my personal experience using a Brechtian lens, I need to be consciously aware of how my experience is not an unmoving or unalterable foundation but is, rather, a site of critical inquiry and critique.

Brecht (1957) claimed that “human beings are subject to inquiry” (p. 37). This is important to Brecht when theorizing what theatre and performance can convey to an audience. Brecht is working against realism and the notion that the performer on stage is “something to be taken for granted” (p. 37). In my performance I want the audience to be able to examine and question the construction of the performer on stage. This idea provides one possible connection with performance studies, whereby practitioners and pedagogues can understand and critique performances of the self. Brecht, and later Hamera, understood that performance is an embodied process of engaging culture and neither performance nor culture is a static or fixed idea. From a Brechtian perspective, my self and my experience are not born in the here and now within the performance. Instead, a vast array of past events are made visible by “the knotting-together of the events” (p. 194) in a performance designed to be projected and displayed for an audience. This “knotting-together” of past events and experiences as a point of inquiry was central to the construction of my performance script.

This intention to make my experiences a site of critical inquiry involves the recognition of “[hu]man as a process” rather than “[hu]man as a fixed point” (Brecht, 1957, p. 37). The emphasis on process rather than stasis relates back to “human as inquiry’ and the montage

56
scene construction. For example, at the end of “Character Creation” I brought Joanna Lugo onstage to take part in a creation of her own videogame avatar. She provided specific details about what she desired in a videogame avatar. However, at the end of the process I explained that the identity of her videogame avatar is a “white, heterosexual, muscular man.” She was disappointed by this outcome, and walked off stage disappointed and frustrated. From here, I proceeded to discuss the lack of diverse genders, sexual orientations, and racial representation within videogame. I concluded the scene with the question, “I have a complex story to talk about through multiple medias, do you?” In effect, I was calling out the privilege I have as a white, heterosexual man when playing as or creating a videogame avatar.

The “knotting-together” of events that Brecht (1957) described needs to be recognizable so that the audience is able to engage in the processes of analysis and critique (p. 201). My use of personal narratives is one way I went about “knotting-together” my history with videogames. By creating personal narratives where the focus was on the performance and not the performer, the audience had more agency to speak back to that performance. Allowing the audience the ability to unbraided these knotted events of my experience is an important step to moving performance from pure entertainment to critical interrogation. In segments of the show where no narrative is presented to the audience, the audience must supply their own narrative for the performance text presented to them. Also, because my show moved through different performance modes – personal narratives, movement based performance, performance art – the audience constantly had to change their interpretive frame. In the absence of an overarching narrative guiding the audience’s perceptions, the performance
functions more as a mosaic, with each distinct scene functioning as a complete performance event.

The staged performance associated with this project consisted of six scenes. Each scene was designed around a distinct theoretical question and, thus, each had a distinct aesthetic quality. Furthermore, each scene of the performance was self-contained. In other words, each scene could stand on its own as its own contained performance that nevertheless resonated within the larger performance context of “Shall We Play a Game?” The self-contained nature of the scenes created a type of mobility among the existing scenes. This structure allowed the possibility for new scenes to be written and included within the performance for future events.

One of my goals for the performance was to engage the audience with a wide and varied assortment of experiences associated with videogaming culture. By making each scene a contained but resonant performance, the audience members were provided greater freedom in terms of how to direct their attention during the performance (Brecht on Theatre, p. 201). The plot of the performance, to the extent that there was one, was not guided by a single overarching narrative progression. Instead an over-arching question or idea guided the audience as they engaged with the performance. The use of this over-arching question or idea to guide the audience through the performance, according to Brecht, allows the audience to engage the performance critically. “The [scenes] must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give [the audience] a chance to interpose our judgment” (p. 201). Also, focusing on a single narrative for this performance would create a vastly different experience. The audience and I would become more focused on the aesthetic qualities of the performance rather than the theoretical questions that undergirded each scene.
In the scene “Character Creation,” for example, I wanted to focus on exploring the element of self as embodied through digital avatars. More than that, though, I also wanted to examine the idea of what specific bodies get represented and why. In the scene “War Games,” on the other hand, I focused the audience’s attention on the prevalence of war as a subject in videogames through the use of video collage and movement-based performance. The video collage featured scenes from Spec Ops: The Line, Apocalypse Now, and Tom Waits’ music video for “Hell Broke Luce” intercut with various number of “kills” that I, as a gamer, had obtained in various videogames. I made this video collage to illustrate the thematic similarities of war across multiple media platforms, as well as show how “realistic” visual graphics in videogames can appear unrecognizable from film footage with corporeal human bodies. Dr. Holley Vaughn, during the formal talkback for the performance, made a comment about how she was unable to distinguish what were real bodies and what was digitally constructed within the video collage. Along with the video collage, I was positioned in front of the projection wrapped in a green extension cord, reacting and moving along with the video. I did this specifically to highlight the ways that the body is impacted by various digital media.

As these two scenes from my performance illustrate, vastly different ideas are being put forward for the audience’s understanding and critique. However, each scene needed to be vetted and edited in order to provide the audience with a method for processing the scene. This editing process was accomplished in part by sharing newly edited portions of the script with my co-director, Joanna Lugo. We discussed each scene in terms of content and affect. Based on our dialogue about the scenes, we made further edits to clarify ideas and language to help us accomplish the goals determined for the scene. Through this process, parts of each
scene were trimmed down to the point where a central idea remained with only supporting information to back it up.

Conclusion

As I mentioned in chapter 1, experiential knowledge arises through the embodied performance of specific actions. As a site of performance, videogames are dependent on a modality of “doing” rather than merely observing, watching, or witnessing. This idea of “doing” is compounded by both Brecht and Conquergood’s techniques for engaging with performance outside of the theatre. The primary component for my performance is the act of participation, whether during or after the performance. This act of participation is a central pillar of play according to Caillois. Although the audience for the performance was not forced to participate with the performance, they were certainly invited. This voluntary function of play, as regards to my performance, encouraged the audience to engage, and to practice their own sense of agency.

The purpose of illusion, or as Caillois calls it mimicry, is not to dupe or fool the audience into believing that what is happening onstage is “real.” Rather, it is to call attention to the culture surrounding videogames, the audiences’ place within it, and how dialogue can continue beyond the Black Box. In chapter 4, I analyze my process and answer the questions I posed in chapter one. In addition, I examine how my creative research fills gaps in existing research, and point to directions for future research related to understanding videogames as an embodied performative practice.

The participatory quality of play exists in videogames as well as in performance, and these two forms intersect in Caillois’ “mimicry.” The embodied performance of videogames is
wrapped up, as is performance, in an element of the willing suspension of disbelief. In both
videogames and in performance, the audience may be aware of the artifice, but it does not stop
them from participating. If the audience understands the rules of performance—and
videogames—more clearly, they are more willing to interact, engage, and critique the
performance—as well as videogaming culture. This willingness to suspend reality also serves my
performance by opening up dialogue about performance and about videogames.
CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

One of my primary goals for this performance was to create an opportunity and a space for audience members to respond to the performance in their own ways. Following each performance of “Shall We Play a Game?” I received a large amount of feedback from audience members. Invariably, each instance of feedback began with a personal narrative about a videogame for which they had deep feelings. I attempted to include as many different types of videogames within the production to allow gamers of all types some access to critique the show. Looking back at each response I received from audience members and what they expressed to me, I feel that the production was a success, both artistically and personally.

In chapter 1, I proposed the following research questions:

1. What are the elements of congruence between videogames and stage performances and the ways they utilize theories of play?
2. How do videogames function as a performance of self?
3. How is the conventional meaning of fun complicated when videogames are examined through a performative lens?

In this chapter, I provide a brief description of the structure of the performance and an explanation of the theories I used in the performance while addressing the congruencies between videogames and performance. Then, I elaborate on the ways videogames constitute a performance of self through an exploration of immediate audience feedback. Finally, I elaborate how my experience in creating this production complicated the concept of fun in videogames.
Congruence between videogames and Performance

Before the official start of the performance, the audience entered the theatre, passing me on the stage where I sat playing Super Mario Bros. Every night of the performance no audience member attempted to talk to me. Instead, they moved past me and took their place in the audience section. This audience entrance highlights how unspoken rules and conventions of play, regarding performance and videogames, were enacted by the audience without any instructions. In this section, I address the congruencies between videogame and performance through theories of play by (1) describing each scene in detail and providing the different performative discourses used within each scene and (2) emphasizing how Caillios’ (1961) quality of games appear and influenced each scene of the performance.

In scene 1, “What is a videogame?” I focused on the definitional, technological, and historical significance of videogames. Using Ian Bogost’s (2008) argument against videogames as “pure entertainment” as an instance of professional discourse, I posited for the audience a way to alter the definition of videogames to provide a more complete and performative interpretation. I began by giving the audience a dictionary definition of videogames, then questioned whether that definition was sufficient? I quickly explored the history of videogames from the earliest roots dating back to 1947, including a discussion of the prototype concept of all videogame consoles the cathode ray tube amusement device. Establishing this history helped problematize the definition as oversimplified and incomplete. After establishing this brief history of videogames, I took on a carnival barker-esque persona, and asked the audience to “step right up” to see the digital worlds created by/from videogames. This scene
emphasized the historical and technological advances of videogames juxtaposed against a cursory definitional understanding of videogames.

This scene embodied Caillios’ game quality, “governed by rules,” which during a performance or a game creates a specific set of rules for performer, audience, or gamer to follow (p. 9). As noted earlier, the audience was already unconsciously aware of rules regarding theatrical performance when they walked past me going into the theatre. The audience understood that talking to a performer onstage is often considered taboo unless the performer engages the audience first. Throughout “What is a videogame?” I challenged the set of rules governed by linguistic and technological constraints that inform a gamer of what is and is not videogame. Challenging the definition of videogame, like that of performance, does not destroy the concept, but expands the understanding of what that term means and contains. Strine et al. (1990) established that performance is an essentially contested concept (p. 183). Different types of performance call for different forms of definitional interpretation and criticism. An adaptation of a poem and a Futurist art piece are both performances, but the rules governing those performances are different. The same is true of videogames. Both Tetris and Halo are videogames, but the rules governing the way a gamer plays, interprets, and criticizes that videogames are vastly different.

In scene 2, which I entitled “Time to Play,” I introduced the audience to theories about how and why human beings play games. Working through both Huizinga’s (1957) and Caillois’ (1961) definition of play and game respectively, I explored where videogames might fit into their theoretical ideas. Unlike scene one, this scene was more heavily focused on the professional discourses surrounding performance and play. I began the scene by playing the
game of avoiding cracks on the Black Box floor, while repeating “step on a crack, you’ll break your mother’s back” highlighting the relationship of play and superstition. Then, I scattered black boxes throughout the performance space and jumped from one to another while attempting to avoid the floor. Next, I discussed how Turner’s (1982) concept of the liminal and the liminoid influenced how individuals in modern cultures understand work and leisure and how these two rarely mix in American culture (p. 20). Then, I played six games of “rock, paper, and scissors” with different audience members while explaining Caillois’s six qualities of games. Finally, I discussed the relationship between play and ritual by having the entire audience blow air into a game cartridge so that it will work within the gaming system. The scene ended with me discussing how the embodiment of play begins before the actual game does.

“Time to Play” was heavily focused on the Caillois’s game quality free, or how playing a game must be voluntary and not obligatory (p. 9). A person playing a videogame has chosen, rather than having been forced or coerced, to play a game. The same can be true for staged performance. Both audience and performer have consented, whether consciously or unconsciously, to participate in a performance event. Caillois’ notion of “free” makes no declaration about the level of engagement one has with that game, and the same is true for performance. The quality of “free” only addresses the level at which we consent to take part within that game or performance. During the “rock, paper, and scissors” game during scene two, I asked each audience member if they wanted to play, giving them a choice. Every person I asked consented and played “rock, paper, and scissors” with me. This willingness to participate further with the performance occurred through a voluntary process rather than a forced interaction. Every videogame must start with a similar voluntary consent or risk the game
becoming corrupted and a source of anxiety for the person playing (Man, Play and Games, p. 45). A corruption of my performance may have occurred if I had forced six random people without their consent to play “rock, paper, scissors.”

In scene 3, “Character Creation” I embodied my videogame avatar ZaZen to demonstrate how videogame personas can exist and evolve from the digital to the corporeal. The third scene was less rhetorical than the instructional tone of the first two scenes. In the scene, I used my experiences as personal discourse to inform the audience of the ways videogame characters are created. In this scene, I began to execute the ideas of play, performance, and videogames. Onstage I brought forth an idealized digital version of my self, my videogame avatar ZaZen. I accomplished this primarily through the use of different vocal intonation, body movement, and costuming, specifically a long black cloak, a toy shield, a wooden sword, a magic wand, and the Nintendo PowerGlove worn on my right hand. ZaZen’s physical and vocal embodiment was hyperbolic and reminiscent of an exaggerated royal procession complete with music and large throne made from two black boxes.

This scene illustrated the ways self becomes constructed and performed through videogames. For example, ZaZen specifically spoke about the difference between himself and my self as gamer. Most notably, he commented on the ways that videogame avatars are able to complete tasks that are impossible for corporeal bodies to accomplish. This scene worked transitionally between research questions one and two. While I did include some personal narrative details, the emphasis of this scene was to demonstrate performatively how videogames and performance intersect.
This scene used Caillois’s quality “make believe,” or a second reality created over and against “real life” (p. 10). The congruencies between videogames and performance are most apparent through this quality than any other. Both stage performances and videogames require a certain suspension of disbelief in order to believe that “second reality.” The audience watching me perform ZaZen knew that is not me, but also “not not me” (Schechner, 1985, p.121). The same occurs within videogames when I play as my avatar in Mass Effect or any other game, I recognize that avatar as not me, but also not not me. As a gamer, I suspend my disbelief and play along until the game is over. Also, during this scene of the performance I was already playing a heightened version of myself, creating and performing a character works as a meta-performance when Caillois’ “make believe” is incorporated.

In scene 4, “The Pit(fall),” I foregrounded my personal narratives with videogames more explicitly. While some personal narrative details exist in scenes one through three, in scene four personal narrative became more apparent to the audience. In this scene, I discussed how I became obsessed with the videogame Half-Life, in particular one part of the game where I was unable to jump across a large pit. The stage was set with two pairs of black boxes positioned to the left and right of center stage, creating a gap between the boxes. I performed my failed attempts at jumping this gap, my anger resulting from these failures, and my parents punishing me and restricting my use of the computer to play Half-Life.

As the performance moved on I discussed my parents finalizing their divorce, going to live with only my mother, and my inability to narratize my life. Eventually, I was able to play Half-Life again and figured out a way to cross the pit. I performed this solution onstage, by tying an extension cord around a black box on stage right and pulling the box stage left where I was
standing. I stepped over to the other box and remarked how accomplishing that digital task affected my corporeal reality allowing me to narrate my experiences from my parents’ divorce.

Of all the game qualities Caillios defined, “uncertain” fits most closely with this scene. “Uncertain” deals with the notion that the result of a game is not known from its inception, but appears through the spontaneous act playing (p. 9). During the playing of Half-Life, I was unaware that this game would have as profound of influence over my life. The playing of, and the circumstances in which I played that game, were not known from the beginning.

“Uncertain” occurs in videogames through a gamer’s exploration of a game’s rules, world, and/or narrative. In staged performance, “uncertain” would appear to have a greater impact on an audience than on a performer, but that is not the case. “Uncertain” occurs in performance in more nuanced ways than in games. For my performance, I knew all my lines, blocking, and understood exactly where the performance would end. However, I was still able to have “some latitude for innovation” as Caillios argued, to occur through the intonation of my speech, the movement of my body, the reception I received from the audience.

Scene five, “War Games,” featured a video montage compiled with clips from the film *Apocalypse Now*, the videogame Spec Ops: The Line and the music video “Hell Broke Luce” by Tom Waits. These three pieces of discourse filled in the popular discourse requirement of mystoryography. I chose the works because they all related to each other thematically. In their respective media, *Apocalypse Now*, Spec Ops: The Line, and “Hell Broke Luce” all addressed issues of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by war. Also, *Apocalypse Now* and Spec Ops: The Line are interpretations of Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness*, set in different times and places. Having both the film and videogame interpretation juxtaposed against each in
a compiled video was my attempt to created images that blurred the line between to two. Images of fire, military helicopters, explosions, and soldiers marching were prominent themes that appeared constantly in the video montage.

Throughout the video, intersession slides were added with the phrase “videogame kill count” listing various games I had played and the number of “enemies” I had killed within those games. While the video montage played, I stood in front of the projection, wrapped in an extension cord and holding a videogame controller. As the video progressed, I moved in relation to the video; looking out at the audience in the beginning before I was pulled in and directly faced and engaged with the projection on the wall. In this scene I allowed the video to speak for and through me, while I remained silent, communicating only through movement. My embodied emotions ranged from excitement, to rage, to panic, and eventually to exhaustion as the video progressed. I placed my body in relation to the contents of the video montage to critique my own participation of violence emphasized through the popular discourses of film, videogames, and music videos. This scene signaled a shift in tone for the performance because of my need to address the significant cultural role that war plays as a popular discourse within the medium of videogames.

Scene 5 was heavily tied to Caillois’s game quality, “separate.” With regard to this quality, he noted that a game happens at a specified time and place, and once that time is up the game is then over (p. 9). This quality directly correlates to stage performance, for example, “Shall We Play a Game?” occurred on the days of February 7, 8, and 9, 2013, at 7 p.m. in the UNT Communication Studies Black Box Theatre. These times and dates were agreed upon months in advance. This separation of time and space in performance is explained by the
Turner (1982), who commented on how modern industrialized cultures tend to separate “work” and “leisure” (p. 20). Staged performances, like videogames, occur in sanctioned spaces where one goes to participate in them, and at sanctioned times. However, performance art forms, such as flash mobs challenge this sanctioning off of space and time from an audience perspective, though not necessarily from a performers perspective. Flash mobs still rely on having a set place and time when and where they occur, even if those places and times are agreed upon minutes prior to the performance event. For videogames the line of “separation” for when and where they can be played in constantly expanding. The increased popularity of mobile phones led to the development of mobile games. Mobile games, like the device that operate them, are highly portable and be operated at any time. While mobile videogame platforms like the Nintendo 3DS, and The Playstation Vita allow gamers to play wherever and whenever they want, mobile phone games have been most efficient at expanding both the times and places where games can be played.

Finally, the sixth scene, “This is Not (not) a Game,” posed questions about what videogames are capable of other than entertainment. This scene interrogated the audience about the relationship between videogames and their role(s) within a larger cultural context and how videogames influenced the audience’s understanding of culture. Throughout this scene, I was still wrapped in the green extension cord from scene five having a debate with a disembodied, computerized voice that relentlessly questioned me about popular misconceptions about videogames and gamers.

This disembodied voice was inspired by GLaDOS from Portal and Portal 2, which, in turn, drew inspiration from HAL-9000 from 2001: A Space Odyssey. My body was placed alone
onstage within blue lights that flickered to the speech patterns of the disembodied voice as it interrogated me. This voice typified and communicated all of the negative stereotypes of videogames and gamers, forcing me to confront and critique its argument. Eventually, the debate came to a close, as a video projection of the game Loneliness, a videogame that uses only white squares to symbolize the feeling of urban loneliness. I moved my body in relation to the movements of the single white square and attempted to touch and grab this digital projection. This final scene addressed the issue of finding ways to make videogame known for more than escapist entertainment purposes.

The final quality of a game is “unproductive.” Caillois defined “unproductive” as “creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind . . . ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game” (p. 10). Caillois use of the term “unproductive” is problematic, and conjures up thoughts of the way games and performance are misconceived as being “wastes of time.” Brecht (1957) argued against theatre that was pure spectacle. He wanted a theatre that left audience members “productively disposed even after the spectacle was over” (p. 205). Brecht wanted theatrical performances to be a productive source of engagement with culture while still being entertaining.

I spoke at length in chapters one and two about the ways Bogost (2008, 2011) attempted to interpret a new way of creating and engaging with videogames beyond a “pure entertainment” perspective. In the final scene of the performance I addressed common and rampant misconceptions about videogames that make them appear unproductive. Caillios’ conception of “unproductive” fails to recognize that the events of a game, like the events of a performance can have a significant impact on gamer or performer.
“Shall We Play a Game?” utilized the three-part Mystory schema to allow the audience to engage the idea that videogames are a phenomenon to theorized, critiqued, and discussed. While every scene was grounded in a specific form of mystoryography discourse, overlap did occur and, therefore, I often found it necessary to provide contextual information about videogames and/or performance. This mystery methodology coupled with Caillois quality of games helped me to illustrate performatively the congruencies between videogames and staged performance.

Playing videogames as a performance of Self

After the Thursday showing of “Shall We Play a Game?,” an audience member approached me and told me that Silent Hill 2 was her favorite videogame. Then she began to narrate her experience of the first time she played the game. She described how the game was both terrifying and exciting for her, and elaborated on the parts of the game that have remained with her over the years. She talked about the number of times she replayed Silent Hill 2, and explained how she has carried the characters and the world of the game with her outside of the game world. Together we discussed the minutiae of the game recounting all of the parts that absolutely terrified us. As our conversation began winding down, she thanked me for validating her experience with the game. She closed with the observation, “My friends always thought I was kind of weird for enjoying this game so much, but then I’m the girl that watches horror movies all day long.”

This audience interaction addressed my second research questions, how do videogames function as a performance of self? This audience member’s emphases on being identified by
others as “weird” works on the idea of videogames have no impact on the development of self. Kenneth Burke (1941) argued that literature is equipment for living, and can be used to impart meaning in the ways we understand and live our lives (p. 296). Videogames, like any literature or text, can be used as a guidepost to understand our lives and our conception of self.

In *Man, Play and Games*, Caillois (1961) expanded his categorization of games by integrating explanations of the four classifications of games, “agon,” “alea,” “mimicry,” and “ilinx.” “Agon” involves games of contest, particularly athletic sports. “Alea” deals with games of chance, like poker or roulette. “Mimicry” focuses on games that involve illusions and spectacle such as theatrical performances. And ilinx is focused on games that alter perceptions and create a sense of vertigo like horseback riding, rollercoasters, and mountain climbing (pp. 14-23). Caillois created this classification system to provide a more detailed theoretical explanation of the categories games fall into and why. He then expanded his theory of games by combining categories in pairs to help account for the variety of games in existence.

In Caillois’ pairings of classifications, the ilinx and mimicry pairing created an expanded game classification called simulation. Simulation games rely on altering the perceptions of the world while constantly improvising within that world (p. 75). Videogame and staged performance are simulations in Caillois’ terms because mimicry makes a performer or gamer aware that simulation is not real, while ilinx attempts to eliminate that awareness (p. 75).

As I discussed in chapter 3, Brecht strove to expose the artifice of performance as a technique to both engage the audience and serve as a catalyst for critical dialogue. However, Brecht recognized that an audience would accept this construction of performance even if the audience was told it is artificial. This acceptance of a constructed illusionary world is directly
related to videogames. Gamers know that the world is constructed even as they become enthralled with that game. For videogames and Brechtian performance, “simulation” is an essential quality, even if the audience or gamer knows about or has its attention drawn to the artificiality.

Assuming the role of a videogame avatar is akin to performance on stage because when gamers becomes their avatars, they are engaging in actions similar to those of actors. Both recognize that the avatar/character they are portraying is simultaneously “not me, and not not me.” This “not not me” role relates back to “simulation” because the performer or gamer is aware of the construction through “mimicry,” but nevertheless buys into the illusion because of ilinx. These concepts are typified in the ways that self in constructed on stage and in videogames.

The idea of the tensive relationship of mimicry and ilinx was a constant theme through “Shall We Play a Game?” During my performance, the physical person of Jake Beck was always onstage. I made no attempts to disguise my identity to fool the audience that I was portraying someone other than myself. Specifically in scene three, I call attention to my identity as a heterosexual, white, man. However, as performance studies practitioners know, even when a performer appears onstage as him- or herself, s/he is still offering the audience a carefully crafted and edited version of the self—a persona instead of the real person. During the scene “Character Creation,” on the other hand, I performed my videogame avatar, ZaZen. While assuming the identity of ZaZen, I talked about “Jake.” In that moment, the audience experienced the pleasure of pretending another person was on stage, all the while knowing that “Jake” was simultaneously present. In contrast to Jake, ZaZen had hyper-exaggerated
bodily gestures and vocal inflections to make it evident he was a constructed character. Despite their awareness of the duality, the audience accepted the mimetic performance and illusion that both Jake, the performer, and ZaZen, the avatar, were present.

The prevalence of mimicry and ilinx is fundamental to how gamers construct and embody videogame avatars. As I stated in chapter one, many videogames feature a complex character creation system designed to help gamers immerse themselves in game worlds. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim videogame is one example of a videogame with a character creation system that is incredibly elaborate. Gamers can choose features for their avatars ranging from hairstyle and skin color to the width of the avatar’s nose bridge. This level of detail in creating a digital embodiment of one’s self, or idealized self will continue to expand as games become more complex and technically advanced. This idea of an idealized self is best defined as a self that is better than reality, meaning that certain traits and qualities a person has are amplified through/with videogames. This concept of the idealized self has become pervasive as videogame designers have embraced online multiplayer play.

Videogame online services like Xbox Live, PlayStation Network, and massive multiplayer online (MMO) videogames require all gamers to assign a name to that account or created character. This online “handle” is rarely a gamer’s real name. Rather, it is usually a symbolic presentation of their self as a gamer. For example, my personal gamer handle has always been ZaZen, written in that stylized manner. I selected this name from information on the Zen Mountain Monastery’s website (2013), which defines zazen as a practice of studying and understanding self by meditating in a seated position. Per the website, the exercise allows the practitioner to focus on new ideas and to open the mind in order to understand who one really
is (zmm.mro.org). This name was a natural choice for me because when I play videogames at home, I am always in a seated position, concentrating on the game, and immersing myself within the world the game presents.

During the “Character Creation” scene in “Shall We Play a Game,” I embodied ZaZen, through my corporeal form. In the physical embodiment of the avatar, I attempted to combine the many different videogame incarnations ZaZen has taken for me over the years. As the scene unfolded, I spoke about the game worlds of World of Warcraft, Skyrim, and Pokémon, among others, in an attempt to demonstrate the ability gamers have to use digital avatars to explore multifaceted possibilities for actualizing the self in digital worlds.

Because of the technological limitations of videogames, the performance of self in the process of gaming can make it more difficult for some players to create an idealized version of the self for deployment in digital worlds. While countless videogames offer the ability to name, design, and play as a character, gamers still face limitations with regard to avatar creation in the illusionary worlds of videogame playing. These limitations are primarily technological in nature; however they have larger cultural implications for gamers. In technological terms, these limitations on character creation force gamers to choose close approximations rather than exactly what they would like in their gaming avatar. Given current technological constraints, it is not feasible for game designers to account for every possible physical aspect of an avatar (e.g., eyes, mouths, noses, body types, musculature, etc.). While this detail may seem trivial, the choices that designers make with regard to what facial feature options to include, for example, can and often do reinforce cultural standards of beauty. These limitations are further reflected in marketing and advertising. When RPGs like Skyrim are advertised, marketers
choose which character they want to serve as the face of that game. Frequently, the choice is a white male character. While the choice of the character is a conscious one, the marketers probably fail to realize that such choices are a subtle but powerful way of normalizing the white male body as the “natural” body of a hero.

In designing “Shall We Play a Game?,” I felt that it was important for the audience to be exposed to these ideas and hopefully recognize how these technological limitations affect some players more than others. To accomplish this goal, I brought my co-director, Lugo, on stage during the “Character Creation” scene to design her own avatar. Together, we designed a videogame character onstage that turned out not to be what she wanted. In videogames, the creation of a representation of the embodied self can be complicated and difficult. Through playing games like these, I eventually learned to recognize my own privilege as a white male. By contrasting my experience as a white male in creating an avatar, with Lugo’s experience as a Latina female in creating an avatar, I attempted to demonstrate my privilege and Lugo’s lack of privilege for the audience. These issues are often compounded by videogames that offer character-creation mechanics, specifically mechanics relating to choices of “gender.” Although these games offer players a choice of a gender, they nevertheless offer little variation from male avatars in terms of dialogue, plot changes, and character interaction aside from occasional shifts in pronoun use. These limitations confine the mimetic or illusory character play style and often force the gamer into involuntary compromises. Thus, those who do not identify as white and male are at a greater disadvantage in terms of gamer-videogame co-creation of both avatar and adventure.
“Shall We Play a Game?” ran three nights. After the performance each night, several audience members approached me to thank me for sharing my gamer experiences with them. A few audience members hugged me afterwards and thanked me effusively. Although I can only speculate about the precise nature of these audience members’ conceptions of “self as gamer,” the performance offered them the opportunity to see how I conceived of myself in this role, to identify with me as a gamer, and to reflect on their own experiences and how they influenced their conceptions of self both within and outside of digital worlds.

In addition to general issues related to the creation and deployment of a digital self, the production included a scene, “The Pit(fall),” that provided the audience with an extended example of how my production and performance of self was mediated by videogame play. This scene, more than any other scene in the performance, illustrated the relationship of videogaming and the performance of self. This scene highlighted my own personal experience of playing Half-Life and examined the way that game affected my corporeal reality.

Half-Life was released for PC in 1998 and quickly became one of the most important and beloved videogames of all time. This status is affirmed by the fact that Half-Life received 51 “Game of the Year” award from all over the world (Award and Honors, 2013), and has sold “one million copies every year since it was released in 1998” (Martin, 2008). While these numbers are impressive, they cannot reveal the personal significance of the game for me. My personal history with the game began when a friend recommended it to me.

“The Pit(fall)” explores my own production of self through the playing of Half-Life. The scene uses my parents’ divorce as the backdrop for the personal narrative that occurs at this point in the production, however the divorce is not the focal point of the scene. This divorce
only serves to provide context to the important role Half-Life had on my life at that time in understanding my own identity as a gamer. The scene follows the common narrative trope of the mythic hero’s journey: The fall of the hero, the battle, and eventual ascension. For me, the fall occurred with my parent’s divorce; the battle was my parents’ efforts and my own to adjust to our disrupted lives and our evolving new reality; and, the ascension was eventually finding a way to talk about my experience with my parents’ divorce, which became associated with a key moment in Half-Life that involved crossing a pit. My goal for this scene was to convey how digitally constructed worlds, characters, and narratives have a significant effect on corporeal reality.

My experience of my parents’ divorce was certainly traumatic and caused me to question my identity, my “self.” The trauma associated with the divorce, however, was not the central focus of the story in my performance. The scene focused on my identification with the protagonist of Half-Life. In Half-Life the gamer performs the role of Gordon Freeman, a silent protagonist. Because of the increase in memory and storage space, game developers rarely use the silent protagonist anymore. Technological advances have made it easier for developers to include full voiced dialogue. Nevertheless, other notable silent videogame protagonists from this period exist, including Chell from the Portal series and Link from The Legend of Zelda series. Gamers learned about the identities of silent protagonists indirectly, but never directly from the character.

Throughout the game Gordon Freeman speaks no lines and utters no noises. The gamer playing Half-Life knows very little about this character going into the game and, since the game is of the first person genre in which the gamer sees through the eyes of the protagonist, the
gamer never sees what he looks like within the game itself. Half-Life’s box art and official character design show Gordon Freeman as a white male. However, the only physical description of Gordon Freeman in the game is provided metatextually through a text box that informs the gamer Gordon Freeman is male and 27 years old (Half-Life). Because of these design elements, Gordon Freeman becomes a blank slate upon which gamers can project their own selves, as long as they are comfortable playing as a white male. Even though Gordon Freeman is unalterable in terms of gender and appearance, the projection of self is more internally processed than externally observed. Although the gamer is told, “Pretend you are Gordon Freeman,” he or she is nevertheless able to project the self into the role of the protagonist because the first-person game design does not constantly remind him or her of differences between the gamer and the protagonist.

Since Freeman does not speak, all in-game narration is accomplished through action, or from other characters who speak to Freeman. Consequently, the gamer had to make sense of everything that happens as it occurred during game. In my case, this silent protagonist was a stand-in for a silenced real person, me. I was unable to speak about the traumatic event of my parents’ divorce. Like Freeman, I was forced to make sense of the event and my world through other people’s narration.

“The Pit(fall)” was the only scene that was not created specifically for “Shall We Play a Game?” I originally performed this piece during the UNT Communication Studies “New Voices, New Perspectives” conference in March 2012. For the conference, I had titled the piece “Extra Lives: Finding Agency through Videogames.” I have performed this scene several times, and it,
more than any of the other scenes in my performance, has become an impetus for discussions about how a performance of self can be digitally constructed.

During “The Pit(fall),” I created a gap on stage through the use of black boxes. I placed three boxes on stage left, three boxes on stage right, and nothing at center stage. One of the boxes on stage right has an electrical extension cord tied around it representing a rope. The physical gap on stage symbolizes the unavoidable pit that Gordon Freeman must cross in Half-Life. On stage, I made several attempts to jump the pit, with no success. Near the end of the scene, I picked up the extension cord, uttered the line, “And I began to play,” and drug the stage right box toward stage left using the extension cord, thereby closing the pit and allowing me to cross. In Half-Life, Freeman has no choice but to cross the pit by jumping at a very precise angle. This was impossible for my body to accomplish onstage, so the dragging of the box over with an extension cord was used to figuratively represent that crossing. I moved over to the other box, stepped down and finished the rest of the scene, discussing the ways that crossing the pit helped me comes to terms with my parents’ divorce. I used the line “I crossed the pit” as metaphor for finding a way to narratize my experiences during my parents divorce. This image of the pit closing stuck in the minds of several audience members.

Audience members who had played Half-Life approached me after the end of the Friday night show. One exclaimed he knew the exact pit in Half-Life I was attempting to cross during that scene. He also expressed his difficulty when playing the game with trying to cross that pit as well. He remarked on the frustration he experienced when his character died many times over. However, he confided that even though certain parts of the game were difficult, it was an enjoyable experience. Finally, he discussed a desire to replay Half-Life again after several years.
This scene, more than any other allowed audience members a place to discuss their personal experiences with videogames and the affect those games have had on their lives.

After the Saturday show another audience member sought me out to tell me the story of a similar experience. After her mother died, she became obsessed with winning the Final Fantasy VIII. She explained that she had often played the game for a few hours, but had never finished the entire game. Once her mother passed away, however, she was driven to finish this game. She claimed that one day “something just snapped,” and she was drawn to the game. She explained that her love of the game was associated with her desire to “have the type of love-like feelings that the characters Squall Lionheart and Rinoa Heartilly shared for each other.” I shared with her my belief that narrative can help us make sense of our lives when we feel like we’re trapped in a pit and unable to speak our stories.

In “Narrative and Time: A Phenomenological Reconsideration”, John Allison (1994) discussed the ways story structure is used performatively in everyday experiences. “A narratization is the lived narrative configuration of an extended temporal event that has not yet achieved closure, yet its end, sighted in advance, serves as the basis for selecting actions...to achieve that end” (p. 123). In playing Half-Life, I was trapped in a narratization that could not achieve closure until I found a way to cross the pit. That aspect of the game mirrored my personal experience of not knowing how to make sense of my parents’ divorce. Through playing the game, I was able to cross the digital pit, which helped me cross the metaphorical pit that I was experiencing at the time in my everyday life. By subsequently narrating those events in “The Pit(fall),” I was able to illustrate the narratization of that period in my life and to demonstrate how I arrived at a critical understanding of those experiences through/with
performance. The experiences that were narrated in “The Pit(fall)” were not separate from the world, but part of the world that used the body as a textual mode of expression (Peterson and Langellier, p. 146). My own narrative about how I achieved closure through the playing of videogames was (and remains) central to my performance of self and how I view past experiences and approach new experiences. Extending those experiences to an audience requires my personal narratives to be open enough to allow them to interweave their own experiences with mine. This requires a critical understanding of what I want my personal narratives to achieve and ties back to Conquergood’s (2002) “ethic of reciprocity and exchange” that I referenced in chapter 2 (p. 152).

My priority for “The Pit(fall)” was to reveal my experience with videogames as a mode of narrative sense making in a time of trauma and loss. Having my personal narrative “rooted in an ethic of reciprocity and exchange” (p. 152) allowed the audience’s experiences and narratives to become open sites of performative construction. In my experience with playing Half-Life and the audience member’s experience with playing Final Fantasy VIII, we were looking for ways to restore narrative structure to our everyday lives. However, because of traumatic events—divorce for me, and death of a parent for her—we found ourselves at a loss at how to understand our concepts of self. Both of us recognized the pit that had been opened in our lives and both of us found ways to reestablish that sense of self through the act of gameplay.

Before we parted ways, I asked her if she ever replayed Final Fantasy VIII again after she finished it. “No,” she said, “I felt like there was no need. The story was over and I felt a sense of closure.” She asked me the same question. I told her it took me until my sophomore year in
college before I could replay Half-Life. All of the personal memories and experience that I lived through when playing that game needed some time to settle before I could play it again. I told her, however, that replaying Half-Life helped me understand that part in my life more clearly, and suggested that replaying her game might help her understand what I meant. She nodded, smiled, and gave one last celebratory comment before she turned and walked out of the theatre.

Complicating Fun

Throughout the process of mounting the show and writing this documentation, I focused heavily on the first two research questions, the congruence between videogames and performance and the way they utilize play theories, and how videogames function as a performance of self. The third research question, how the conventional meaning of fun is complicated when videogames are viewed through a performative lens, was less central in my considerations. Nevertheless, this question was foundational for everything I was working to achieve. Whenever I worked on any aspect of the performance I always made an effort to make the performance enjoyable, but while doing work that was theoretically sound. Because of the seeming lightheartedness associated with videogames and their connection with entertainment, complicating the fun usually associated with them requires seeing them as cultural phenomenon rather than simply as a game for children and adolescents.

Looking at videogames through a performative lens reveals that videogames are more than “pure entertainment.” Many of the games I focused on during my performance, Skyrim, Half-Life, and Mass Effect were designed by large videogame companies with millions of dollars
and years to develop those games. Major videogames studios like EA and Bethesda are driven more by profit motive rather than more altruistic motives. While profits are essential for large companies to continue to exist, they frequently are sought at the cost of producing games that push the envelope in terms of the art of videogames. Renowned videogame critic Ben “Yahtzee” Croshaw (2013) condemned videogame series like Call of Duty, Battlefield, and other first person shooter (FPS) series that fail to do anything new or innovative. However, despite this problem, independent studios develop numerous games that attempt to evolve the medium beyond “pure entertainment.”

One of the biggest hurdles videogames face as an art form is that people fail to recognize them as art. Roger Ebert (2010) famously said, “video games can never be art” because by design a videogame is something you can win, and art is something you experience (p. 1). In making this claim about winning or losing, Ebert failed to recognize the cultural importance of this form of media. When I finished playing Spec Ops: The Line, I experienced no joyous emotion of victory. I received no victor’s fanfare upon completion. Instead, I was left with troubling questions about the effects of war and violence on the human mind. To speak of games only in terms of winning and losing, discounts the experience of the player and limits the multiple perspectives from which researchers and scholars might approach the study of this phenomenon. To reduce the effects of videogames to a simple binary is to shut off any possibility of considering whether and how videogames arise from and have the potential to influence human culture.

During the final scene of “Shall We Play a Game?,” I challenged the audience and myself with the question of whether videogames were more than a children’s toy. In the final
moments of that scene, a video of the art game Loneliness was projected across my body and on to the back wall of the theatre. The game features little in terms of graphical representation other than a black square moving on a white background. Jordan Maguson (2011) created Loneliness after spending a year in Korea teaching middle school students (p. 1). Maguson’s observations about life in an urban environment and the feeling of being alone in a crowded city speaks to a social disconnect many face in urban areas. Loneliness resonates with Huizinga’s (1957) framing of play as a serious activity with something at stake (p. 5). This game used the aesthetic design and gameplay mechanics familiar to videogames, but in minimalistic ways, to convey the concept of urban loneliness. While this game is not fun, in any traditional sense in which that word is used, Loneliness enables a gamer to experience a specific concept in an embodied, performative way.

Loneliness was the only “art game” I used during the staged performance to complicate fun overtly and to expand upon the idea that videogames are more than electronic signals controlled by a person. Many games like Loneliness start with a specific concept, theory, or idea at the inception as the basis for design and gameplay aesthetics. One game that begins with a specific theoretical concept and moves outward is the indie game Kentucky Route Zero.

Kentucky Route Zero, a game developed by videogame studio Cardboard Computer, is described on their website as “a magical realist adventure game about a secret highway in the caves beneath Kentucky, and the mysterious folks who travel it” (Kentuckyroutezero.com, 2013). The game relies on the concept of magical realism, which functions as a mode for exploring space and the ways that space performs, specifically hidden or unrecognized space.
The game’s protagonist, Conway, moves through the environment in a way similar to an actor moving on a stage. For example, at one point in the game Conway walks uphill on a road to a farmhouse. As Conway progresses up the road toward the farmhouse, the game’s stage expands to reveal more of the game level, like a stage curtain opening to show more of the stage. At the same time, Conway’s presence becomes smaller. This expanding of game level’s space to decrease the protagonist’s presence is a reoccurring theme throughout Kentucky Route Zero. When the gamer encounters a new level, the amount of space shown on the scene is very small, but as Conway moves through each level space expands through his subtle and nuanced interactions with lampposts, doors, and other characters. The use of these subtle details instills a sense of curiosity in gamers that makes them want to continue playing.

Space within the game constantly shifts in way that alter a gamer’s perceptions of the game world. The altering a gamer’s perceptions of space within the game world creates an emotional effect on the gamer. This perception shift occurs specifically in act two of the game.

Until act two, space only expanded as a character progressed through the game world. During act two, the gamer encounters a forest at night level and must traverse this forest starting at the left of the game world and moving to the right. As the gamer moves forward, trees in the background and the foreground move in relation to the character’s movement; some trees in the foreground appear and disappear more quickly than those in the background. Also, as the gamer passes certain trees some significant objects from previously in the game appear and disappear—often at the same time—creating a convoluted sense of perspective. This alteration of perspective, coupled with the somber tone of the night forest, affects the gamer emotionally.
Jesse Snider, a friend and fellow videogame enthusiast, introduced me to this game. He explained the ways that Kentucky Route Zero used expanding space as an aesthetic and gameplay mechanic that affect the emotional reactions of the gamer. When I played Kentucky Route Zero, the digital expansion and contraction of the game world affected the ways I emotionally engaged with the game. The level design of a game world is often only purely aesthetic and utilitarian. The game world is something that should be beautiful to look at and move through and something that does not take away from the actual playing of the game. Kentucky Route Zero’s game world attempts to convey a sense of emotion through its design. Levels like the mineshaft convey a sense of claustrophobia and fear through the contraction of space in the game world to take on the shape of a long, thin rectangle that occupies only a small portion of the game screen.

Kentucky Route Zero’s use of expanding space and magical realism complicates the idea of fun because the gamer experiences no instant gratification from finishing a level. There is no high score to obtain or in-game achievements to earn from playing. Each level of the game presents specific imagery and questions for the gamer to personally interpret as she or he progresses through the game. During one level of the game, for example, Conway travels on a mine cart through the darkness of a mine. The mine is pitch-black except for moments when electric sparks from the cart briefly illuminate the mineshaft. During these moments of light, shadows of dead miners quickly appear and disappear. As the gamer moves further through the mine, the shadows appear to come closer and be more numerous. The shadows come close to touching Conway but, as the entrance of the mine get closer, the shadows slowly retreat.
My initial reaction to the shadows was to be frightened because of my experiences with other games. Whenever I played horror games like Silent Hill 2, for example, the unknown was presented as something to be distrusted and feared. However, as I continued to play, I realized that these shadows were something I could place my trust in as a gamer. Because the game has no option for Conway to fight or defend himself, I was afraid Conway would be killed. However, as the number of miners that appeared and filled the space of the mineshaft increased to the point blacking out the entire screen, they began to subside back out of view. The game does not revisit or discuss these shadows in any way. Instead the shadows function as a method of understanding that the abandoned mine Conway traveled through was once alive with the sounds of people working.

This early level in Kentucky Route Zero set the stage for complicating how I would interpret and perform the game. Videogames, like Half-Life 2 and Skyrim traditionally use mines and underground caverns as place to be feared and purged of evil forces. Initially, I was reacting to this level of Kentucky Route Zero in a similar manner. However, when I realized that the mineshaft was something to explore with a sense of wonder and reverence this moved my performative investment away from one of fear to one of emotional exploration of my self in the game world.

Both, Loneliness and Kentucky Route Zero complicate how fun functions through a performative perspective. Traditional videogames emphasize individual game mechanics (narrative, moral choice systems, win-states, combat, etc.) that work in conjunction with one another to serve a purpose of entertainment. Videogames like, Loneliness and Kentucky Route Zero either eliminate or combine those mechanics to create a precise communicative message.
Loneliness eliminates almost all forms of traditional game mechanics until the game is only a
white square moving on a black background. Kentucky Route Zero combines many elements
listed above to alter a gamer’s interaction with those mechanics. Both of these games attempt
to move the meaning-making process outside of the digital realm and into the mind of gamers
to carry and discuss in the corporeal realm.

During this project I have come to consider Loneliness and Kentucky Route Zero as a
model for the performative power of videogames. I have played through these games several
times and each time I get a different sense of satisfaction from playing them. Both of these
games work against conventional videogames tropes by expanding the genre of videogames,
changing what games are capable of doing and changing the experiential possibilities for
gamer/performers. This is an important element for gamers to consider when playing
traditional and more popular games. Experiencing a sense of elation from a videogame does
not have to come at the cost of that game being viewed as “only a children’s toy.” Instead, with
critical performative reflexivity, gamers and performers can view videogames as texts that
influence the gamer and the game at the same time.

Conclusion

Peggy Phelan (1993) argued that all performance happens in the moment, making
performance ephemeral and ultimately unrecordable by any type of media documentation (p.
146). Phelan understood that performance happens within the moment, and attempting to
record changes the form of performance entirely. However, Phillip Auslander (1999) argued
against Phelan, that through mediatization, and the huge shift in viewership from theatre to
television, that contemporary live performance now “emulates mediatized cultural forms” (p. 158). These tensions between live and mediatized performance echo continuously throughout “Shall We Play a Game?” During the performance I constantly drew attention to the myriad ways that videogames effect conceptions of self, performance, and our ideas of entertainment. By focusing only on how videogames affect gamers during moments of play, critics and scholars lose critical insight into the ways gamers carry those gaming experience outside the digital world and into a corporeal one.

The argument between Phelan and Auslander becomes even more complex once concepts of hypertext theory are applied and come into play in the exploration of videogames and performance. As Fenske (2006) stated, “Hypertext arguably produces a reader as an active participant in the creation of the narrative experience” (p. 144). The inclusion of different forms of media in performance is not new. Music and video elements have been a part of performance for many years, but recently other mediated forms have appeared that have begun to disrupt how we participate with and though performance. Videogames are one such element. Much as Phelan and Auslander pointed out, Fenske’s explorations of hypertext have helped me explore how videogames—as another form of embodied performance—are yet another hybrid (live and mediatized) way of engaging the audience. Using hypertext theory as a bridge between the videogames and performance, has helped demonstrate how audience and performer, game and gamer traverse the interpretation of a text while that text is being traversed (p. 146). The act of creating an active and engaged relationship with either performance or videogames does not stop once the curtains have closed or the game is turned off. We actively carry those texts and experiences out of their original temporal and spatial
origins and use them to make meaning as we engage other texts in corporeal and imaginary worlds.

Throughout this project I have explored specific ways that videogames and performance intersect one other. While my own experience with videogames is subjective or, to be more accurate, subject centered, my interactions with my co-director and my audiences have demonstrated that my personal experiences were not unique. In fact, they are quite similar to the experiences of others. I have examined my personal experiences in great detail in order to create a performance and engage audiences as a means to answer my three original research questions:

(1) What are the elements of congruence between videogames and stage performances and the ways they utilize theories of play?

(2) How do videogames function as a performance of self?

(3) How is the conventional meaning of fun complicated when videogames are examined through a performative lens?

In this chapter I have demonstrated how individual experiences, both my own and those of my audiences, can be important data for helping scholars understand that videogames deserve more serious attention as cultural phenomena that have important effects, particularly when considered from the perspective of gamers.
APPENDIX

SHALL WE PLAY A GAME SCRIPT
Scene 1: What is a Videogame?

[House Lights come down, a single dim spot comes up on Jake seated far up stage playing Super Mario Bros. Eventually, Jake dies in game, utters a curse, and turns around to notice the audience seated behind him.]

Shall We play a game? More precisely a video game. Let’s see what I’ve got; I’ve got Pac-Man, Pong, Super Mario Bros, Legend of Zelda, Sonic 2, Street Fighter 2, Mega Man 3, 4, and 5. Final Fantasy VII, Tomb Raider, Need for Speed, Metal Gear Solid, and Oh! I’ve always got a ton of sweet games downloaded on my 360. Like Just Cause 2, Mass Effect, Skyrim, Borderlands. I’m sorry I’m getting ahead of myself.

What is a video game? Well if we define what a videogame is we are also stating what it is not. I had to throw that in there.

But we have to have a working definition.

[A Dictionary is thrown on stage from Jo in the tech area.]

Ah! The Oxford American Dictionary, it’ll help us find a definition.

Video game, one entry, noun, a game played by electronically manipulating images produced by a computer program on a television screen or other display screen.

A simple definition for a simpler time of electronic media.

[Hands Dictionary over to random audience member.]

The first time this definition was employed was in 1947. Thomas T. Goldsmith Jr. and Estle Ray Mann drew up designs for the “Cathode Ray Tube Amusement Device” What a catchy name. Their design would be the prototype for every video game system to date; a controller would be hooked up to a screen and the user would manipulate the lights that appeared on the screen. This definition is fitting for the time period and for several generations of consoles afterwards. We are currently in the liminal space of the seventh and eighth generation of video game consoles, the 7th characterized by the Xbox 360, and Playstation 3 with the 8th being mainly the Nintendo WiiU with others to follow shortly. The first generation was marked by two consoles. By the Magnavox Odyssey, with the most literal interpretation of this definition ever, and The Atari 2600 that brought videogames into living rooms and made it a household name.

[Grabs dictionary from audience member]

But we’re come a long ways from the days of Atari and cartridge based systems.
So we need a new definition, should this definition just be expanded?

This definition doesn’t quite do it justice.

[Throws dictionary to the side.]

It doesn’t encompass the level of evolution that videogames and their consoles have taken in the past 30 years. The Atari 2600 was released in 1977 with a processing power of 1.19 MHz, The Xbox 360 has a processing power of 2.26 GHz. Now, for those that don’t speak geeky computer terms, that’s an increase in processing power of over 2000 percent. No other entertainment medium has evolved that quickly.

Videogames are more than just controlling electronic lights for our amusement. It’s more than just “Pure entertainment” as Ian Bogost (2008) states; Just a game? I don’t think so.

It doesn’t encapsulate all the excitement of tearing off the shrink-wrap. Or the expression of emotion one gets from getting enveloped in the story of a videogame. To explore by land, sea, air, and/or the space/time continuum. Worlds that are massive in size, depth, and scope. Or the ability to play a game with someone thousands of miles away to digitally connect where the corporeal reach fails.

A culture built around entire fantasies that have taken countless hours away and billions of dollars from gamers every year. And most gamers wouldn’t trade a thing for those experiences.

Step right up, buy the ticket and take the ride into the world of The Mushroom Kingdom, The Lands of Hyrule, The Kingdoms of Azeroth, or the northern exposures of Skyrim.

Behold, as the immortal Count Dracula is digitally reborn in fantastic 8-bit glory. Press “X” to flip the tank and take on Covenant forces.

Dawn the hood of an Assassin and take down the Knights Templar. Put on the N7 armor and board the Normandy to race across the galaxy to defeat The Reapers.

Ladies grab your dual pistols! Men grab your battleaxes and shields! And prepare to enter countless worlds designed from the farthest depths of the human imagination. Live out the mythic hero narrative you’ve always dreamt of, or
secretly taken indulgence in becoming the evil overlord you’re darkly fantasized about.

Buy the ticket take the ride.
Or more appropriately-

Drop the quarter, player one start!

[Black out!]
Scene 2: Time to Play

[This scene begins on a dimly lit stage as Jake slowly tiptoes around saying the next line over line.]

Step on a crack, or you’ll break your mother back. Step on a crack or you’ll break your mothers back. Step on a crack or you’ll break your mothers back. Step on a crack or you’ll break your mothers back!

[Jake steps on a crack and makes a face like he’s in trouble.]

We play all of the time, or we find ways to play even when we’re not suppose to. Play, “it resist analysis and logical interpretation” as Johann Huizinga argued. He said also that “play serves no biological purpose,” but to serve a “significant function—that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action.” “Play is older than culture” because “animals can play like man.” A dog can understand the play mechanics of fetch without being connected to a biological purpose or to a civilization. They know how to play. Or can learn to play.

[This is when Jake starts to use black boxes to build stepping stones to do the lava game.]

My father once said, “There is a time for work and a time for play, and the two shall never meet” My father worked at a steel mill for almost thirty years. Carrying on the long standing tradition started by the industrial revolution, where Victor Turner points out there was a division in the way we use time; a time for “leisure” and a time to “work” creating a liminal spaces for play to straddle. A time to work and a time to play. Play begins to become compartmentalized away from work and find its existence in games.

[The lava game ends. Next section is recited as fast as possible.]

We all know what games are. Mind games, videogames, physical games, playing the game, having game, the big game, game day, child’s games, adult games, love games, word games, body games, game changer, on to someone game, something not being a game, the game being a foot, being game for something, ahead of the game, play the game, the only game in town, make a game of it, and game over.

[Jake plays rock, paper, scissors with six audience members, one for each quality of games.]

When it comes to games Roger Caillois states that for play to be analyze through games, there are have six steps.

1. Free, it is not obligatory, but voluntary.
2. Separate, circumscribed within limits of space and time defined and fixed in
advance.
3. Uncertain, having some latitude of improvisation and innovation from the
players.
4. Unproductive, not producing wealth or goods, but ending the same way you
started.
5. Governed by rules, the game having rules that supersedes ordinary law.
6. Make-believe, a free unreality, against real life.

Ok. I’m playing a videogame now I can’t contain myself.

[Jake runs over to the console and begins to put a game in, but finds out it doesn’t work.]

Dammit. Ok as a culture grown up around cartridge based video games, we know
exactly what to do here. But like any adventure, it’s not simply a solo endeavor.
And I simply do not have enough air in my lungs to clear away all the dust,
debris, and worry from my day to play this game. So I’m going to need your help.
I’m going to run across the audience, with the game in hand, and as I pass you I
need you all to blow as hard as you can. Sounds good. Get ready!

[Run down the length of the audience]

One more time!

[And then run back again to starting position.]

Ok, I think that was enough, but to be certain, just one more little puff.

[Blows into cartridge one more time, and put the game into the console and sits down. Until,
Jake realizes he forgot a part.]

The role of play began before the game we chose started. The liminal space
between play starting and the game’s beginning is like the loading of a
videogame; watching the rise of the Nintendo logo to “bing!” like a meditation
chime, or the fast appearance of SEGA logo, or watching the four lights spin
around the power button of a 360, to flash once, and for the game begins. The
play began when you said “Shall We Play a Game?” and you shall.
Scene 3: Character Creation

I want to introduce you to a very special person today. He has been a companion of mine for many years. He is a total badass and incredibly awesome. I've been on many journeys with this man. He is everything I've always wanted to be. He has done more in one lifetime than I ever will in a thousand. Would you like to meet him?

[Wait for audience reaction?]

Ok I'll go get him, seriously you won't be disappointed, it might take a little bit, he has a bit of a flair for the dramatic. It’s just a minor character flaw, but it can be easily overlooked. Ok, I’ll go get him.

Jake walks upstage as lights dim. The them from Skyrim begins to play and consistently grow in volume. Jake begins putting on ZaZen costume, complete with sword, shield, powerglove, and cloak. Each down beat of the song is accompanied with a different light. AS the music grows in intensity, the light flash is reciprocation. Until a final swell of music and ZaZen appear onstage and moves through the space with a grandiose posture and gait. Eventually, music quiets down and ZaZen takes a seat on his “throne” down center stage.

ZaZen: I am ZaZen! You may know of me as Dragonborn, conqueror of Aluduin, Thane of Whiterun, Arch-Mage of the Wizard’s College. Scourage of the Alliance in the fields of battle in Azeroth, Defeator of Sin, Savior of the Capitol Wasteland, Paragon, SPECTRE of the Galaxic Council, and Captain of the spaceship SR-2 Normandy. And Pokemon Master!

To say I have many titles is an understatement. I have slain many dragons, creatures of hell and beyond. I have saved countless lives with my silver tongue rather than my silver sword. I have traveled across many planes of time and space to be with you today. Allowing you the privilege for you to revel in my heroic exploits. Jake has kindly informed me upon my arrival that my cloak made of fire would pose a hazard, and I wasn’t allowed to bring my sword on fear of being arrested. I simply stated I’d run the blaggard through if my sword was taken from my side, but alas Jake insisted.

But anyway, I was brought here today to discuss relationship Jake and I have. I am ZaZen! Owner of many titles, but my name is of great legacy. It is a compound word with great meaning. ZaZen is best translated into “sitting mediation, most notably in a lotus position were one’s legs are crossed on the floor.” An apt title indeed for me! I am an extension of him. While he sits and controls me, I can roam the vast expanses of Skyrim. I get to be everything he cannot or will not be. I was informed that if I were to die in this realm I would not respawn. The mechanics of this realm are strange indeed. But, alas I shall cope.
I am able to travel the great darkness of the galaxy to explore unknown planets and experience the world through fresh eyes. I am the “what if,” “the could be,” and most depressingly “what can never be.” I am strong when he is weak, gracious, when he is angered, collected and reposed when his world is crumbling apart. I am an extension of him and he is an extension of me. I will never known the joy of experiencing the world that is put in front of me, I’m simply, the . . . I believe the term you use is simulacrum . . . of Jake: a heightened and exaggerated reflection, but incomplete and sometimes unsatisfactory.

Being a hero is fantastic, and you lovely people I would love to one day come into the realm of Skyrim, or Azeroth, or any other digital realm of your choosing, I’ll be there.

[ZaZen makes a dramatic exit with the same song playing over again. Jake returns to address the audience.]

Jake: Well I passed ZaZen on the way back, but before I could wish him safe travels he glitched into the floor and sailed high in the sky, oh well. ZaZen is everything I cannot be, and it is fantastic to be able to represent myself in videogames. Who would like to become digitally represented within a digital world?

[This part I pull Jo onstage and have her participate. The following is the exquisite corpse style activity applied to video game character creations. Jo will pick out a list of character traits and abilities, pick from different races, character classes etc. I will compile the information as she goes.]

[From here the result is the exact same each time; I’ll present her results as a white buff masculine character.]

Most video game protagonists are white men. Even when the player can design a character, as in Skyrim, Mass Effect, or many other RPG based games, the stock, default character design is a white male. While female characters are reduced to a sexualized portrayal, and black characters in games are always placed in stories that involves drug or gang related violence. While my character of ZaZen has expanded over time with character creation interfaces becoming more complex in the options provided, but as long as I’ve played a white male character. Some progress has been made, but not enough. While it’s great that I can represent myself in ways never before realized, people of other genders, races, and sexualities are reduced to stereotypical representations of themselves. I have a complex story to talk about through multiple medias, do you?

[Black out.]
Scene 4: The Pit(fall)

[Lights come up with Jake standing center stage between two sets of black boxes on the left and right of center stage.]

I always play video games when I’m feeling depressed, and sad, and happy, and excited, and gassy, angry stressed sick, healthy. So in a nut shell I’ll play video games no matter what my feelings are.

I got my first video game console when I was 6, it was also the same time that I got my first TV. Two milestones in one day, alright! It was a Nintendo entertainment system and it plugged into one of those old dial TVs where the color barely worked. This was a big deal. As I grew I acquired other video game consoles, The Sega Genesis, The Nintendo 64, and a PC that I turned into a video game system.

I became obsessed with one PC game in particular Half-Life. It’s the story about a man....who just graduated with his doctorate in Theoretical Physics from MIT named Gordon Freeman. But then he gets a job at Black Mesa, this government contractor/ science experiment lab.

[Builds in excitement, volume , and speed.]

And before you get you first coffee break, a whole in the space-time continuum opens up and aliens from other dimension start coming through, and the place is exploding and government soldiers are storming the place, and before you know it you’re running around the building brandishing a crowbar trying to figure out what happened and how to get out.

I was obsessed with this game and through the taped-up busted headphones I could barely hear hell behind rumbling and the soul within screaming.

My parents started going through a divorce. Their banshee screams drowned out my own voice. My opinion on the subject fell on deaf ears, and I became as silent as Gordon Freeman. I tried to yell and yell and yell. But my words barely had the energy to ooze out of my mouth and plop on the floor.

One day while the storm raged beneath my room, I came across a pit in the game. It was really deep and really far for me to jump, but I had no alternative. I stepped back and hit the sprint key and hit the jump button just before the end of the platform and sailed across the pit hitting the ledge on the other side and falling into the dark pit with a gooey crunch and a flat-lining sound to signal I was dead. The game reloaded back up and I was back where I started staring at the Pit. I tried again and didn’t make it half way.

Crunch, beep, reload
Tried again from a different angle

Crunch, beep, reload.

Tried another way.

Crunch, beep, reload
Crunch, beep, reload
Crunch, beep, reload
Crunch, beep, reload
Crunch, beep, reload
Crunch, beep, reload
Crunch, beep, reload
Crunch, beep, reload
Crunch, beep, reload

And I started to get pissed, and I started yelling at the monitor, slamming the keyboard down and kicking the side of the hard drive to make it “work better.” I threw my headphone on the desk shattering them where they were held together by tape and was forcibly turned around in my computer chair to see my mother and father towering over me with shadowed glowered stares.

They yelled at me, “why are you getting pissed at that game, if it makes you so mad then why do you keep playing? You can just turn it off and walk away”

They glared at me and waited for my response, and I slowly turned my head up, and ask a very simple but defiant question “Well Mom and Dad, if the divorce makes you so mad at each other, then why don’t you just turn it off?”

You know those points in a movie when someone says something prolific to make a group of people stop fighting and it helps begin the resolving process. This wasn’t one of them. I was grounded effective as soon as my dad ripped the power cord of the computer out of the wall. I spent the next month thinking about that pit in silence though. I wanted to cross it, I had to. But before I got another chance at it, I was moving in my mom and grandma, leaving the world of Gordon Freeman behind me.

Three months past before I got to play again, three months of thinking about that dank dark pit and how I would cross it. Then one day my mother was unable to pick me up from school so I walked to my dad house and stayed there for a few hours. My dad was at work, but left the back door open for me. I went inside the house and it felt eerie and alien. I climbed the stairs to my old room and
found my computer sitting in the same spot untouched covered in dust that had accumulated since that day three months ago.

I grabbed the power cord and plugged it into the wall, hit the power button on the monitor and hard drive, listened for the bzzzz of the monitor, and wiped the dust off of it and the keyboard. I loaded up my game save of Half-life and found myself staring back into that pit, just like I did three months ago.

I started playing and made it across the pit without a second thought and before I realized I’d crossed it I’d already beaten the game. It took several hours, but I began to back track and realized how easy it was. I just needed to do it, and I had. This thought brought a smile to my face for the first time in months.

When my mother picked me up, she was taken aback by my smile and asked what was going on and I told her, “I’d crossed the pit” she smiled and nodded like she knew what the hell I was talking about. And I began to open up to her. About my story throughout the divorce, my feelings about her, dad, and everything. I told my counselor that I had crossed the pit, my friends, my grandma, my dad. And they thought I had created a cute little metaphor, but to me that pit was real.

My crossing that pit was real. Although it was virtually constructed and I passed though in Gordon Freeman’s body

I was the one who crossed it.

I was the Dr. Gordon Freeman.

The Freeman.

The Free-man.

The one true Free-man.

[Black out.]
Scene 5: War Games

[The scene is a movement-based performance with video projection. The video is a compilation of clips from the film Apocalypse Now, the videogame Spec Ops: the Line, and the music video “Hell Broke Luce” by Tom Waits. This collage video mixes and blurs together all three different discourses. Also, throughout the video intersession slides are place to show the amounts of videogame kills I’ve received from playing different videogames over the years.]

[My body in relation to the video starts on the floor holding a controller and with a green extension cord tied around my ankle. As the video progresses and becomes more dynamic, violence, and loud, I begin to take on very violent like poses and movement to illustrate the correlation between war digitally represented and war embodied on stage.]

[At one point during the video a quiet movement occurs and I come to from my reverie and notice the extension cord around my leg. The video’s intensity pick up again as I start to become completely entangled in the cord that it forces me to only be on the ground crawling. As the video end, I crawl slowly off to far back, center stage allowing the video to finish and a black out to occur.]
Scene 6: This is Not (not) a game.

[This scene picks up directly from scene five with Jake tangled up in an extension cord on the floor. I am coated in only a single blue light. A computerized voiceover in the style of HAL-9000 from 2001: A Space Odyssey, begins the scene. Once I speak my first line, several other blue lights fill up the performance space.]

VO: Are you not entertained? Shall we play another game?

Jake: Do you want to stop playing this game? To play something else? I have other realistic war games we could play?

No? Well that’s ok. Videogames shouldn’t be about how realistic we can portray war, they are a form of escape for the everyday thinking world. At least that’s what thought for a long time.

When Spec Ops: The Line came out in summer 2012, I would have passed it by, if it were not for one review where the reviewer stated that the game gave him “genuine feelings of weariness, guilt, and actual physical sickness”

This game made me feel like shit afterwards. It was one of the most unfun games I’ve ever played.

VO: Then why play a videogame if it isn’t fun? Isn’t that the whole point of videogames to be wasteful time of escapist entertainment?

Jake: Well, I mean it wasn’t fun in the capacity that it wasn’t happy-go-lucky kind of fun. It was more challenging and thought provoking, like watching a really critical documentary, or reading some colonialism theory.

VO: Is that really what you want to spend your free time doing? Feeling emotions other joy from a video game?

Jake: Well, sometimes I want to play something that isn’t mindlessly shooting at differently colored enemies. Sometimes I want to be engaged in something other that twitch-reaction gameplay.

VO: You don’t actually mean that do you? You’ve played countless hours of GTA: Vice City, San Andreas, GTA 4. Killing innocent pedestrians to incite the police who eventually kill you.

Jake: Well yeah, I was playing those when I was younger and violence and destruction seemed amazing and the game allowed me the ability to engage in those fantasies of violence. You can’t say that engaging in fantasies of violence doesn’t occur, just look at how violent other entertainment mediums are in America.
VO: You don’t want to admit that video games cause violence in people, that DOOM was the cause for the Columbine shooting-

Jake: That is simply not true and completely unfounded. Ever since the release of Mortal Kombat, videogames have be the target of massive scrutiny; the same happened with Film, and television, and comic books and those mediums are now deeply engrained in the way our culture tells stories.

VO: Is that why the most profitable game series in video game history is about the perpetuation of xenophobic stereotypes of Arabic peoples, or the re-institution of the Red Scare by using Russians as the other to reinscribe Cold War fears and perceptions of an entire culture? I guess some one has to be the bad guy.

Jake: But it’s more complicated than that. These games are a reflection of our culture-

VO: so you agree that America is Xenophobic?

Jake: Well, that’s just obvious, but not every game reflects our cultural xenophobia disguised as fun. But we can use video games to push forward ideas of tolerance, and use videogames as a vessel of exploration of other cultures. Whether those cultures are disguised as alien races or faux cultures for the game. WE have for the first time a media that is inherently playful and instantaneously engages with flow.

VO: Flow; a state of being. In sports it is called “being in the zone” within theatre this can be seen when an actor gives him/herself completely over to a role. Being completely consumed by the situation, and yet be entirely aware of that situation’s task. Within Zen philosophies, it is a perfect present state, not focusing on the past or future, but totally wrapped up in the present. Hours feel like seconds.

Jake: And videogames do this with precise instantaneous transmission. This is why when I first bought Skyrim, I played it from 10am on a Friday to 7pm on Sunday, with sleep breaks in-between and the occasional pizza run. I logged in 30 hours in one three day period but that time felt like seconds.

VO: This should not be allowed. This causes addiction in videogames, this is why people lose their jobs, homes, and families, and for some even their lives. Did you hear about the Korean boy that died in an Internet café after playing Starcraft II for over 20 hours straight, no breaks? Or the man who committed suicide after his World of Warcraft account was hacked and he lost all of his elite gear and weapons? This flow thing you’re talking about is dangerous and should be stopped. Videogames are too addictive and that’s how they suck people in.
Jake: But Flow is good in a game, and we see it all the time in other mediums, allowing ourselves to be wrapped in the story of that media. We can be consumed by the fun the game presents while growing an attachment to the story, the world, and the characters. In Final Fantasy VII when Aerith is killed by Sephiroth. Or In Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic when you are told you are the Darth Revan all along. In Mass Effect when you find out that Saren’s spaceship is actually a gigantic robotic alien that is completely sentient and is planning on harvesting all intelligent life in the galaxy. Or In Silent Hill 2 when you find out the town is actual a psychological projection of the character’s mind and his fears and that you’ve been dead the entire time. Just to name a few.

VO: Sounds like Flow is nothing more than addiction.

Jake: No. This is not addiction. Videogames can give us more for exploring a story than movies and novels ever have. We can almost crawl through the programming code, searching ever nook and cranny for where the story might take us. I believe that videogames pick up what novel ended with the ability to explore a story, to crawl through, examining every detail of a constructed world.

VO: “It does no good to dwell on dreams and forget to live”

Jake: But we can reflexively engage with those worlds while inhabiting them. To make videogames place not just for dreams to exist, but a place where we can look at the world through different colored lens. To find the cracks, the flaws, and mend them. Videogames can explore and critique theoretical concepts, like Objectivism in Bioshock, or simple little words like loneliness and put our face to the screen and reflect back to what we see, to what we created, and explore ever deeper.

These videogames are not the simple electronic games of controlling a solid white block to bounce a square ball back and forth. Videogames can be used for critique, investigation, and exploration of our culture and ourselves.

VO: but the biggest question is, are they fun?

Jake: No not always, Silent Hill 2 was a terrifying game that was not fun in the least. At times it felt like I was beginning to analyze my own psychological state of mind. The damn game gave me nightmares!

VO: Then why play something if it’s not fun or entertaining. To play a videogame that doesn’t provide an escape is a failed videogame.

Jake: That game was an experience, one I would never trade for anything else. We play different games to incite different emotions. Games that engage in chance, competition, role-playing, or games that alter perceptions. And Silent Hill 2 definitely alters perceptions. The reason I play Silent Hill 2 are different than the reasons I play Skyrim or Half-Life.
VO: If these games don’t make money, then what is the point of their games? Their rules, the play a user experiences? Videogames are for the socially inept weirdoes living in their parent’s basements. They offer nothing to society, and the games they play are nothing but digital drool, and those gamers are one small break away from snapping and killing everyone and living out the murderous fantasies they have played in their games. These gamers need help; they are lonely and will be forever alone.

Jake: The loneliness you talk about is one of misconception and misinformation. These games have helped me through troubled times. While these games are not perfect, I’ve become attached to the characters and the worlds, just as if I would with film or fiction. But videogames can be more than just pure escape! They are a window into a world- our world, they allow us to do more than just retell a hero story. Some games help us understand and talk about complex problems like PTSD or racial inequalities. Or they can help us understand a common concept like loneliness. Videogames can do a lot; we just have to start utilizing them for more than fun.

[This scene end with a video projection of Loneliness displayed on the back wall. I interact with this video, attempting to catch the white dot to make some sort of connection but I always fail, even when the white dot passes over my hand, I still cannot grasp it. The video slowly fades to black and I slump down against the wall and floor.]

[Black out.]
BIBLIOGRAPHY


TheSw1tcher. (2014). *Two best friends play*. Retrieved March 12, 2014, from https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC84X0epDRFdTrybxEX8ZWkA

