

Gaming with Ghosts:  
Hauntology, Metanarrative, and Gamespace in Video Games

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis undertakes a hauntological analysis of video games and their ludonarrative structures. It argues that video games are haunted by what Jacques Derrida (1994) refers to as spectres, or figures that undo the ontological assumptions of time, space, and being in the world. Video games are considered haunted by spectres both within and external to their diegetic content, including the gamer communities that emerge in response to a game's narrative. Central to this analysis is McKenzie Wark's (2007) concept of gamespace, or the material world, and Richard Grusin's (2004) concept of premediation and the ways new media generate multiple possible futures in an attempt to insulate the present moment from traumatic, unforeseen ruptures.

Chapter One proposes a premediated hauntology of video games, arguing that the ability to manipulate time and space in games like Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (2008) generates digital, algorithmic, and allegorical spectres and avatars. Algorithmic spectres simultaneously premeditate future playthroughs and attempt to remedy a present moment that is haunted by the ghosts of past premediations, and in so doing represent the radical potential of similar movements through gamespace.

Chapter Two shifts from primarily narrative-driven analysis to what is termed "metagamespace," or how algorithmic spectres like *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*'s non-playable character Vivec mutate the wall between game and gamespace but, by enacting such metanarrative, demonstrate the limits of a narrative-driven hauntological mode. A revolutionary figure within *Morrowind*'s diegesis, Vivec represents not only the necessity of overturning the assumed relationship between game and gamespace, but also the impossibility of doing so from within the game itself. Because the game is meant to

be an ideal form of gamespace, then, the hauntological mode should be translatable to gamespace itself.

Chapter Three therefore focuses on where digital spectres are translated into gamespace by communities of players, though these communities are not necessarily revolutionary per se. It takes two moments into consideration: first, the anonymous, online confessional sites wherein contributors upload “secrets” related to their experiences of playing their game of choice; and second, the 2012 Retake Mass Effect movement. Drawing on research by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009), as well as Hardt and Negri’s (2000, 2004) scholarship on Empire and Multitude, this chapter argues that these communities enact what is termed a banal form of multitude within gamespace. Though they are not strictly activist in nature they nevertheless emerge in response to mechanisms of Empire in the gaming industry, and such activities are considered banal insofar as they have become commonplace and cannot necessarily be considered resistant or activist in nature. Considered as the gamespace counterpoint to moments of metagaming within or in response to gamespace, however, gamer communities become the logical extension of spectrality in video games and represent what it might mean to play gamespace.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis project proposes a hauntological mode of video game analysis by examining the role of spectres both within and without video game worlds. The figure of the spectre, proposed by Derrida in *Spectres of Marx* (1994), is one which actively undoes the ontological certitudes relating to time, space, and being in the material world. The spectre demands that questions be asked about what it means to exist in a world where figures like ghosts, and spectres more broadly, can simultaneously exist and, in some sense, not exist. Spectres destabilize; they act as reminders that the past always exists within the present, and that the future is similarly a presence and absence. A video game hauntology seeks to locate and interrogate such spectral presences in video games, where they perform according to the digital logic of what Richard Grusin (2004) has termed premediation: attempts to represent the future before it emerges fully into the present, which can also generate and sustain a constant, albeit low level of anxiety that permeates cultural awareness. Taken together, premediation braids with hauntological spectres to create a present that is polychromic, in which the past and future continuously linger.

Video games here are not taken as isolated experiences. Rather, they are situated within what McKenzie Wark (2007) has called gamespace: the material world surrounding a game's production, consumption, and play that, he argues, increasingly acts according to the digital and algorithmic logic of a video game. Gamespace refers, too, to the ongoing dynamics of the biopolitical structures that are increasingly dominating a global sociopolitical sphere; that is, they are structures that seek to govern all aspects of social and cultural life by transforming subjects' personal, affective, and cognitive energies into forms of labour that can be capitalized on. Moreover, Wark

argues that games are an ideal expression of gamespace. Where the material world's rules and algorithms are too large and unwieldy for any one person to be able to know and interpret, and where structural inequalities in gamespace necessitate that the playing field is never truly fair, games present a level playing field and knowable rules and algorithms that enable a player to successfully advance. In this way, Wark proposes that games can be used to critique culture as much as culture has been used to critique games.

Chapter One uses Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (2008) as a case study to examine the confluence of hauntological spectres, premediation, and gamespace from a largely narrative perspective. The inclusion of the rewind mechanic in *Braid* turns the player-character, Tim, into a spectral figure within the game as he navigates and manipulates time and space in order to progress through the game. By playing the game, a gamer generates a specifically algorithmic, digital spectre that represents the ways in which the divide between games and gamespace are permeable and unstable. The game premediates possible futures, in the form of playthroughs that are constantly rewound by the player, which then become spectres within the present moment of action. Because they are specifically algorithmic spectres, however, such repetitions are more beneficial than not: looping gameplay, spectral avatars, and polychronic actions enable one to move "contrariwise" (*Braid*) in the game, and to potentially translate such actions into gamespace. It is therefore the hauntological that allows gamers to counter gamespace on its own terms.

Because *Braid*'s spectre is so dependent upon the game's structure as a platformer game, Chapter Two turns to the open-world role playing game, *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002) to analyse what forms of spectrality are generated by a different genre

of game. The chapter focuses on the character Vivec, a god who attempts to manipulate the gameworld by accessing the game's code and script and rewriting the world to suit his needs. By breaking the fourth wall in acts of metanarrative, Vivec places himself in a liminal space that exists between game and gamespace. Using Alexander Galloway's (2006) semiotic square of gamic moments, Chapter Two argues that Vivec's metagaming and metanarrative combine to collapse any purported difference between a game's diegetic and non-diegetic components in acts of metagamespace: that is, attempts to access gamespace from within the diegetic space of the game. Non-diegetic components are incorporated into the gameworld until there can be no external, non-diegetic space from which to act. In addition, *Morrowind*'s lore posits the existence of Dragon Breaks: moments which have sundered linear history in the gameworld, caused by players each time they save a new game, and creating a cultural sense of amnesia and confusion. It is Vivec who ultimately recognizes the presence of gamespace from within the game, and *Morrowind* therefore enacts an ideal version of gamespace insofar as Vivec's spectral permeation and permutation of the game's boundaries and nonlinear histories undoes the distinction between gamer, game, and gamespace. He is the spectre who calls the order of knowledge into question, and encourages players to do the same. Vivec, however, is limited to the space of the game.

Chapter Three turns to the political aspects of *Morrowind* and Vivec, beginning by analyzing the role love plays in Vivec's characterization. It argues that the game qualifies as what Dyer-Witford and de Peuter (2009) have termed "games of Empire" or a game that reinforces mechanisms of Empire without necessarily creating alternatives to them. Vivec fosters a sense of love for the world in *Morrowind* that he cannot extend



to acts of revolution, or what Hardt and Negri call multitude: the revolutionary potential that lives in Empire and is at once its sustenance and antagonist. Vivec's spectrality does not inherently qualify him as a figure of multitude. But premediation and hauntology both speak to a sense of an unprogrammable future, insofar as the future cannot be predicted with great (if any) accuracy and should not be consigned to repeating the same failures of the past. Spectres are inherently radical insofar as they represent the potential for change and the unknowable forms the future, as a virtual presence in the present, may take.

Shifting focus, Chapter Three moves from narrative analysis to an analysis of online communities of gamers that emerge in response to game narratives. Thus, where Vivec cannot move from game to gamespace, but where the hauntological logic of games should be able to move freely into gamespace, game communities online continue to generate spectres within gamespace based on game narratives.

Ultimately, these communities form what can be thought of as banal forms of multitude: though neither activist nor necessarily political in nature, online confessional sites and actions like the Retake Mass Effect Movement of 2012 are structured and act similarly to Hardt and Negri's multitude. As much as fan intervention and interpretive acts may generate spaces for otherwise marginalized discourses to flourish, acting on the multitude's tendency toward the democratic, however, their potential is also compromised by the fact that they can equally be avenues of oppression. Yet, they also engage with issues of spectrality, premediation, and narrative, and have been responsible for the generation of spectres that linger on the edges of the games they play.

## 1. Gamers Without Borders: Haunted Gamespace in Braid

“Of what use is the past to a gamer?”

McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (51)

McKenzie Wark’s *Gamer Theory* begins with an assessment of the conceptual shortcomings of Plato’s allegory of the cave in relation to video games and game theory. He requests that game theorists—or, more appropriately, gamer theorists, as practitioners of his gamer theory—suspend the traditional assumption that video games are merely “failed representations of the world” and therefore are inherently flawed in their representational capacity. Wark conceives of the relationship between digital games and the material world as the inverse: the “world outside of [the game] . . . appears as an imperfect form of the computer game” (Wark 22)<sup>1</sup>. The material world beyond the game, which Wark terms “gamespace,” operates increasingly if imperfectly according to the digital and algorithmic logic of a video game. To borrow Alexander Galloway’s phrasing in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2006), gamespace is “the information systems of the millenary society” (2), and games express “processes in culture that are large, unknown, dangerous, and painful” (16). It is the unknowable of gamespace that makes it dangerous, in Wark’s assessment. Gamespace is too large and complicated, and too imperfect for its algorithms, rules, and scores to ever be wholly internalized and known by subject-players in their daily lives or elsewhere. A person does not necessarily *play* gamespace per se, but it can play you. Gamespace feels more like a “vast and useless game” and an imperfect reflection of the more coherent, closed logic of digital systems than it might feel like real life. And gamespace, compared to a game, is “much less

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<sup>1</sup> Citations for Wark’s *Gamer Theory* refer to lexia rather than page number.

consistent, coherent, and fair” (3). Games at least have a “knowable algorithm from which you can escape” by turning off the game: “gamespace is an unknowable algorithm from which there is no escape” (35). You cannot power down the every day. That video games are arguably the ideal version of reality, rather than the inverse, is why Wark feels digital games are “our contemporaries, the form in which the present can be felt and, in being felt, thought through” (225).

The question of what constitutes the present in gamespace, however, is a fraught one. The actual present does not resemble the futures imagined by the past prior to digital games’ emergence, even if the present itself is best thought and felt through that media. The futures envisioned by the past have failed to materialize. The “digital cul-de-sacs” of the twenty-first century are haunted not by ghosts of the past necessarily, but by “all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate” (Fisher 16)—what William Gibson calls “semiotic ghosts” in his short story “The Gernsback Continuum” (29). Simultaneously, according to Richard Grusin’s concept of premediation, “the desire to colonize the future” has led to a chronological dislocation, such that an “extension of media networks into the future” now ensures that the future is “unable to emerge into the present without already having been remediated in the past” (Grusin 36-37).

According to both hauntology and premediation, the present is not “monochronic” and it is concerned with much more than “the instant” and immediate experience (Virilio, qtd. in Grusin 21). The present, and therefore gamespace, is occupied by the past and preoccupied with the future. Premediation attempts to ensure that the present will remain insulated from any traumas the future may bring to bear upon it, based on past experiences. The present is thus a heterogeneous combination of past and future, haunted

by the former while it premediates the latter. Taken together, the hauntological and the premediated braid together in a logical (and admittedly temporal) sequence. The predicted and premediated futures that fail to manifest later become the failed futures that haunt the present. Video games, as the form most demonstrative of the systematic and algorithmic form of the present, are deeply implicated in this process.

Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (2008), an independently developed (indie) platform game, enables users to play through such a premediated hauntology, but the game also demonstrates how a hauntological premediation can be a remedial process. This is due, in part, to its inclusion of a rewind mechanic, iterative loops of gameplay, and its fractured narrative content. If video games are an ideal version of gamespace, then they also offer a way to "[p]lay within the game, but against gamespace" and to "hold gamespace accountable to its own terms" (Wark 19). *Braid* demonstrates one way the heterogeneous present and a subject's relationship to gamespace can be beneficial rather than wholly detrimental, and need not include the repetitive looping of Fisher's cul-de-sacs: the algorithmic logic of video games generates a specific type of premediated spectre that has the potential for change across multiple attempts as the game integrates failure into play, progress, and action.

In *Spectres of Marx* (1993), Jacques Derrida posits a hauntology of spectrality. Hauntology supplants an ontological focus on being and presence by prioritizing the spectral: that which is neither being nor non-being, and which occupies a space where the ontological distinctions of time, space, and being dissolve into the unknowable. Repeatedly summoning the ghost from the ramparts of Elsinore in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Derrida's hauntology addresses the ways in which "[t]he time is out of joint" (Derrida

20). The past, present, and future are drawn into Derrida's hauntological framework, where they are joined by contemporary anxieties over time, space, memory, and the alleged techno-teleo collapse that new media proliferate. Ghosts and spectres are "What seem to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum" and which have no "*there*" (emphasis in original). They are the opposition between ontology's traditional focus on being and presence—the "to be" of Hamlet's soliloquy. Derrida's spectrality locates (if not necessarily occupies) the gap between life and death, past and present, what is and is not. The instant the spectral is properly named or articulated is the same instant a spectre cannot be sustained, for it presumes to know what *it* is. The spectral, as that which is not, or is not yet, is therefore virtual.

Derrida associates the literary with the spectral, in particular, as a space "beyond the opposition" of the objective assumptions about the otherwise "sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and inactual, the living and the non-living" (12). That literature is "allowed to play games with reality, to speculate about things we know (for certain) could never exist or happen" (Niall 113) is a claim hardly specific to the discourse of spectrality, but it is one these grounds that literature—and consequently any narrative-bearing medium—is drawn into the realm of the virtual and spectral. Some literary scholars have adopted hauntology specifically into their work via the figure of the ghost, which they take as representative of textuality and critical interpretation as such. "Spectrality is not (or is not only) a literary or fictive 'thing'" that functions within texts to "play around" with ideas of being and non-being, but is a feature of narratives and their various manifestations across mediums always. For Julian Wolfrey, "to tell a story is always to invoke ghosts, to open a space through which something other returns."

Every story is, therefore, a kind of ghost story (Wolfrey, qtd. in Davis 378). It is on these grounds that video games and their narrative (and therefore ludological) content can be considered constitutive of the territory of virtuality: first as texts which explore the nature of reality, and as representatives of gamespace; and second, as a medium which is frequently used to tell (or provide playable forms of) stories.

Like the past and textuality, the future is “always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production” (Fisher 16). Troublingly, after the twentieth century’s vivid imaginings of what the future might look like, the cultural sphere was confronted by the future’s failure to actualize. The so-called “hackneyed futurism” of the twentieth century—its jet packs, flying cars, and extopic flights across the galaxy—were vanquished. The imagery lingers, however, in the popular imagination as Gibson’s semiotic ghosts: spectres of envisioned futures, recycled and incorporated into the present as “bits of deep cultural imagery that have split off and taken on a life of their own” (Gibson 29). The future was as much an aesthetic mode as anything in the early-to-mid twentieth century, as well; one that seemed to “[worship] blue mirrors and geometry” (27) by invoking smooth curves in technology and architecture, streamlined cityscapes, and typefaces like the aptly named Futura. It was a style that could be cultivated, but not reimagined, past a point—thus Jameson’s popularly recited claim that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, “lead[ing] us to repeat ad nauseam that there is no alternative to capitalism” (Aguirre 128). Even utopian futurism was reduced to “a settled set of concepts, affects, and associations” (Fisher 16). These visions now haunt the present as a

spectre of failure, semiotic ghosts that are habitually remediated and represented. Fisher summarizes:

“More broadly, and troublingly, the disappearance of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live. It meant the acceptance of a situation in which culture would continue without really changing, and where politics were reduced to the administration of an already established (capitalist) system. In other words, we were in the ‘end of history’ described by Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama’s thesis was the other side of Fredric Jameson’s claim that postmodernism—characterized by its inability to find forms adequate to the present, still less to anticipate wholly new futures—was the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism.’” (16)

Where ghosts from the past entering into the present produce an impossible temporality, coexisting with the present and calling its self-efficacy into question, the past’s failed futures render it difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of wholly new futures that will not also fail. Pessimistically, the future is over; culture regurgitates an aesthetic and labels it futuristic. The future will be Futura. The future cannot be anything but this, nor exist beyond it. Somewhat more propitious, however, is the fact that the future is inherently unpredictable. Spectrality gestures toward an “unprogrammable” future that cannot be prescribed. For Derrida, any radical imagining of the future and its transformation in the present is not shackled by the “deterioration” of the social imagination. Instead, an envisioned future “must include the desire to emancipate the present from the ideas of a programmed future” (Niall 117). Futura may *not* be the future.

Perhaps the best future to imagine is one that cannot be represented at all, a virtuality that can exist in all of its impossibility but is otherwise unknowable and unnamable.

While the future cannot be predicted, it can be premediated. Building on his work with Jay Bolter in *Remediation* (1999), Grusin's concept of premediation claims that not only are "all mediations . . . remediations," but that "the future itself is also already mediated, and that with the right technologies . . . the future can be remediated before it happens" (Grusin 18). Premediation, like hauntology and spectrality, incorporates the present's polychronicity in an attempt to construct a sense of coherent order in a moment of postmodern anachronism. Grusin identifies the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in the United States as the moment that "marked an end to . . . the U.S. cultural desire for immediacy fuelled by the dot.com hysteria of the 1990s" (21). The desire for immediacy to which he refers was one propelled and enabled by new media technologies. This desire results in an alleged teleo-techno collapse of space and time—albeit not a collapse that incorporates the past and future as much as one that subsumes all moments in the present.

Geographically distant events become available immediately. The "erosion of spatiality" (Fisher 19) caused by the proliferation, consumption, and increased use of technology has been augmented by what Marc Augé refers to as "non-places" (ibid) such as airports, chain stores, and malls across North America. The creep of capitalist globalization results in spaces that are more similar than not: one can find big box shopping complexes on the west coast that uncannily resemble those on the east.

It is in part due to this collapse that Paul Virilio claimed that the "current historical moment is 'monochronic'" and that society is "preoccupied with the present, or the 'time freeze' of 'real time.'" The past and present became consumed by the desire for the "real



time of media interactivity that privileges the ‘now’” (Grusin 21-22). At least since the 1990s, however, and certainly since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, Grusin claims that focus has shifted once more to the future: “In a kind of cultural reaction formation, the desire or demand . . . has been to make sure that when the future comes it has already been remediated, to see the future not as it emerges immediately into the present but before it ever happens” (21). Thus the role of news media outlets, for instance, is increasingly to predict what may happen in the future and the threats it contains (24), whereas predicted future catastrophes are repeatedly aired throughout cinema (25-26). Premediation has several consequences: it generates and sustains a low level of anxiety; it displaces the obsession with and desire for the immediate with a fear of catastrophic immediacy, so that events like September 11<sup>th</sup> will not irrupt into the present in the same way again; and thus premediation generates anxiety-laden but ultimately unpredictable futures (26-28). It seeks, ultimately, to insulate the present moment from an unmediated future.

Grusin claims the logic of premediation is inherently like that of video game design. Premediation does not aim to predetermine the future, but tries to create as many branching paths as possible. Like the options presented to the player-character of a game, “within these premediated moves there are a large number of different possibilities available, most of which are encouraged by the protocols and reward systems built into the game” (28). Here reality once again echoes the ludic logic expressed by Wark’s notion of gamespace, which is “built on the ruins of a future [gamespace] proclaims in theory yet disavows in practice. . . . Like any archaeologist, the gamer theorist treats these ruins of the future with obsessive care and attention to their preservation, not their destruction” (Wark 22). Overall, however, “premediation simultaneously insists on

imagining the future in terms of new media practices and technologies and on extending the media networks of the present so that they can seem to reach indefinitely into a securely (if indeterminately) colonized future” (Grusin 36-37). The supposed collapse and homogenization of space and time is complicated, if not outright eradicated, because there can be no instant moment of unmediated reality. The present colonizes the future; its media technologies consume and then represent the future prior to its emergence. It insists on the plurality of the present rather than the homogenization of space and time through technology.

Hauntology resists admitting the homogenization of time and space in much the same way: space is haunted by time, as well as through time, while time is experienced as a “broken . . . fatal repetition” (Fisher 21). This sense of broken repetition is not unlike a player attempting to navigate, repeatedly, a difficult level of a game. Time, then, is out of joint in several ways, beside itself always. The present is haunted by the past, by the past’s multiple futures, and by the many virtual futures it predicts and premediates. Most, if not all, of the predicted futures will fail to manifest, much as the futurism of the twentieth century continues to pervade the popular imagery of the twenty-first. Where the hauntological and premediated converge, however, is in the video game. The logic of premediation is inherently ludic, and even hauntology’s claim that textuality provides a place to explore the past, present, and future resonates with playfulness. When hauntologists speak of the difference between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the changes in the social imagination under a global system of capital, they trace the shift from the analogue topography to the digital, topological space, “all nodes and networks” (Wark 139) where “both space and time are elastic” (140). The shift is described by

Deleuze in “Postscript on Control Societies” (1990) as “societies of control.” Galloway elaborates on Deleuze’s work, explaining that societies of control are “characterized by the networks of genetic science and computers, but also by much more conventional network forms. . . . Deleuze points out how the principle of organization in computer networks has shifted away from confinement and enclosure toward a seemingly infinite extension of controlled mobility” (Galloway 87). Their infrastructure increasingly resembles horizontal and rhizomatic spreads of networks instead of the top-down hierarchy of surveillance societies.

Wark looks to this change in time, space, and organization, describing it as the emergence of the topological: “Any and every space is a network of lines, pulsing with digital data, on which players act and react. In work and play, it is not the novel, not cinema, not television that offers the line within which to grasp the form of everyday life, it is the game” (Wark 58). Unlike the novel, which “languishes,” and the cinema, which “fails to realize its allegorical potential” (62), games represent this topological, digital, and informatic logic of the twenty-first century through the allegorithm: the allegory of the algorithm. To play a game “means to know the system. And thus to interpret its algorithm (to discover its parallel ‘allegorithm’)” and how that allegorithm is part of “a massive, multipart, global algorithm” (Galloway 90-91). Especially crucial to the allegorithm for Galloway is the fact that “video games don’t attempt to hide informatic control; they flaunt it” (90), meaning that when players engage with the algorithm, the “structural core” of the game, they “are in direct synchronization with the political realities of the informatic age” (91). Gamers do not, in effect, merely play games. They play and embody an idealized version of the algorithmic, allegorithmic, and topological

logic of the twenty-first century. Gamers consequently engage with how that system has led to the spectral intrusions of the past, the future, and the dislocated logic of time, space, and the impossibility of ontology that hauntology posits.

Games not only reflect the current situation, but they are also potentially ways beyond it, as Wark's earlier recommendation of playing games against gamespace suggests. *Braid* suggests that the past's very repetition in the present may be a way to navigate the topology of gamespace, as long as the present is aware of its own digital, iterative, contradictory makeup. *Braid* incorporates a cleverly designed rewind mechanic into its gameplay that reverses both time and space in the game. Structurally, *Braid* resembles the platform-style games popularized in the past: the player-character, Tim, traverses 2D levels where he can be moved horizontally or vertically, either in short jumps or by climbing specific portions of the game's scenery. The player must solve puzzles to progress, and is often required to revisit levels that prove too difficult the first time through. The player can also manipulate time in several ways. The most simple, and most frequently employed, is by rewinding time in order to reverse their<sup>2</sup> actions and fix errors or miscalculations that would otherwise lead to Tim's demise. Tim thus never dies because he is constantly being reversed the moment before he would otherwise perish, and time and space in the game are as elastic as Wark states gamespace is. Certain objects in some levels are also immune to the rewind effect; thus, for example, an enemy may continue marching forward even if the player's actions are recalled. Other levels link time and space directly together. Walking right, for example, will cause time to pass and the world to move around Tim. Walking left, and thus backward according to the game's

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<sup>2</sup> This thesis employs the gender-neutral singular pronoun "they" rather than defaulting to "he" or "she" when referring to gender-nonspecific subjects like "the player," both in the interests of gender neutrality and to avoid perpetuating a strictly binary gender paradigm.

left-to-right logic of progression, reverses the motion of objects and enemies. Time and space are effectively indistinguishable. Go back in time, move back in space. Go forward, move forward—until, after the final level and its dramatic reversal, Tim is once more running through the world’s opening tableau of Manhattan.

*Braid*’s narrative is fractured, and its exact chronology either indeterminate or irrelevant. Story content is presented through books set upon pedestals that open as Tim runs by them, through the puzzle pieces the gamer collects throughout the levels, and in gameplay. Several motifs recur throughout the game’s script. “Time” appears in four of the world’s titles: “Time and Forgiveness,” “Time and Mystery,” “Time and Place,” and “Time and Decision.” Even the title of the sixth chapter, “Hesitance,” is a gesture toward the temporal and whether or not to continue. These chapter titles reflect the gameplay mechanics in each level and the story section that accompanies it. In “Hesitance,” for instance, the player acquires a ring that slows, but does not entirely stop, the diegetic flow of time. Any character that moves through the ring’s sphere of influence is drastically delayed. This enables Tim to avoid potentially lethal enemies and to navigate more complex terrain, as long as the player can perfectly match the timing required to take advantage of the bubble of slowed time. “Hesitance” opens with a description of how Tim “learns to deal with others carefully. He matches their hesitant pace, tracing a soft path through their defenses. But this exhausts him, and it only works to a limited degree” (*Braid*). (Here, too, gameplay reflects the narrative. Trying to work and play with the ring can be exhausting in its frustration.) Each chapter is accompanied by a similar narrative moment and mechanic, the two modes reflecting one another. Game design replicates game content, often explicitly, even if the narrative cohesion of the game is difficult to

piece together—not unlike the puzzle pieces that must be collected in each level. But like time, themes of memory, guilt, and forgiveness recur throughout the game’s narrative and design.

On the surface, *Braid* is about Tim, who is “off on a search to rescue the Princess.” She “has been snatched by a horrible and evil monster. This happened because Tim made a mistake” (“Time and Forgiveness”). The Princess may exist (“Time and Place”), or she may be a metaphor for the development of the nuclear bomb, a point in history referenced when “[t]ime stood still. Space contracted to a pinpoint. It was though the earth had opened and the skies split” and “Someone” said “Now we are all sons of bitches” (“Epilogue”). This final phrase was initially uttered by Kenneth Bainbridge after witnessing the first detonation of a nuclear device during the Trinity Test in 1945. The previously mentioned narrative reversal of the final level demonstrates the potential of the rewind mechanic, reversing the narrative in addition to the gameplay. After chasing the Princess in an effort to save her from a monster, the final level reverses. Tim is no longer chasing after the Princess, who is shown at the top of the screen, and trying to save her from a monster. Tim instead becomes the thing from which the Princess is trying to escape, who chases her until she finds sanctuary in the arms of the monster/knight Tim initially tried to save her from. In effect, then, the game’s narrative exists as a virtuality, concerned with what may or may not be, what may or may not have happened, which may or may not be in the past, present, or future. It incorporates a reference to a moment in history that, like the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, irreversibly changed the course of human history and called into question the very nature of being and what could be. If the Princess being chased is, metaphorically, also the atomic bomb and a moment when

ontological distinction and order was sundered irreversibly, then what haunts Tim/the game is the past's certainty and potential. There is also the question of whether or not the passage of time leads to forgiveness and knowledge, or if the change is "irreversible" ("Time and Forgiveness"). Given how time and space are so intricately interwoven in *Braid*, the answer seems to be 'no.'

That is, of course, only if *Braid* is about anything at all. Game designer Jonathan Blow, when asked what *Braid* is about in 2011, offered vague non-answers that affirmed the game is not about "Time stuff" (Caldwell). Alternatively, in 2008, Blow explained that *Braid* is about the space between the "scientifically grounded people" and those "Who are doing the literary bullshit." While for Blow, philosophy has "for all of time concerned itself with existential issues [such as] what should we be doing in the world, and what does it even mean to exist," contemporary philosophers are allegedly ignoring the scientific progress being made: "Some people are paying attention, and some people are not. And *Braid* is trying to occupy that middle space, where it's paying attention, and also *not* paying attention." The reversal mechanic in the game was Blow's "early idea of how to explore a fundamental law of quantum mechanics" and what would happen if time were not unidirectional (Dahlen). In other words, *Braid* was purportedly designed to be an exploration of time, space, and what it might mean to exist in a world where the two are not forward-facing, ontologically definite, intractable features of it. The game represents a world that is temporally unsound, hauntologically fractured, its logic topological, digital, and algorithmic—gamespace.

While the purpose of this work is not to suggest one interpretation over another, nor even to suggest that Blow's comments must be taken into account when interpreting

*Braid*, it is worth noting that to some extent Blow functions as his text's own phantom. Davis traces a brief alternative history of hauntology which precedes Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*: Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's collection, *L'Écorce et le noyau*. Abraham and Torok's subject of analysis is transgenerational communication and the ways trauma is transmitted through time and across generations, "even *and especially if* [the descendants] knew nothing about their distant causes" (emphasis in original). What Abraham and Torok call a phantom is "a dead ancestor in the living Ego, still intent on preventing its traumatic and usually shameful secrets from coming to light" (Davis 374). Derrida insists that the spectral be spoken with, and made to speak. Abraham and Torok's phantoms, in contrast, are repressive and defensive figures occupying similar territory. They are a presence in the present attempting to continue concealing the secret they carry, haunting subjects, texts, and time to ensure the truth of each is never revealed. A phantasmic criticism operates according to the assumption that interpretation relies on exorcising the phantom from the text and restoring the phantom to "the other of knowledge" (378), or closing the space they exist within by reaffirming the ontological distinctions necessary to articulate their secret. The texts phantoms occupy are considered "in distress" (375), and the astute critic or reader can interpret the "truth" of the text. Abraham and Torok's hauntology is in opposition to the ontological insofar as a phantom must be wholly eradicated in order for the present to be considered coherent and contained; the past's secrets bleeding into the present are a contaminant. Its logic assumes that time should *not* be disjointed. Problematically, this mode of interpretation issues a closure of meaning and critical practice. Once the phantom is banished, meaning is restored and fixed, the present coherent but insular. Derrida's spectres, however, and the



unknowing and unknowable they represent, are not “unspeakable because [they] are taboo” like the phantoms. They are unspeakable because they reside at the boundaries of the known and the unknown, not yet able to be articulated and suggestive of something which may not exist, but which paradoxically must because it has been represented in some form. Spectres must be spoken to, and spoken of, because they cannot be returned to the order of knowledge. The spectral cannot fully actualize or be completely incorporated into the present; nor can it be completely exorcised from it. It is of the past and present simultaneously, reflective of the aporetic relationship between ontology and hauntology, without definite origin but with an impossible presence. Blow functions more as a phantom than as a spectre: he feels there is some definite meaning in *Braid* that most, if not all, narrative analysis misinterprets. He positions himself as a secretive and repressive figure defending the unspeakable element that is being downloaded across platforms, averting the gaze from those doing the “literary bullshit” from whatever “big and subtle” meaning the narrative possesses. The meaning “resists being looked at directly” (Blow, qtd. in McElroy) and cannot be meaningfully addressed or communicated in any other form (Dahlen; McElroy). The system of the game is key to representing an idea which is massive in scope, intricate in its complexity, and attempting to convey a message about the nature of time and (game)space in the twenty-first century.

Whether Blow is correct or not in his assessment of systems as more meaningful, or “less bullshit” (Dahlen) than literature or fiction, what is more salient about his comments about *Braid* is that video games are, indeed, exceptionally well-suited as a medium to address issues of the spatial, temporal, and topological today. *Braid* echoes spectrality’s notions of the past’s traumas and failures residing in the present when it

invokes the Trinity Test. But *Braid* also invites questions about the potential for forgiveness when such traumatic developments occur. The “world, with its rules of causality, has trained us to be miserly with forgiveness. . . . But if we’ve learnt from a mistake and became better for it, shouldn’t we be rewarded for the learning, rather than punished for the mistake? What if our world worked differently?” (“Time and Forgiveness”). *Braid* requires mistakes to progress. It requires rewinding time and repeating levels until solutions are known. At the end, players find themselves at the opening screen, looping back to where they began. The past emerges into the present in that moment, while the future hovers as a second playthrough, already mediated and played through. Tim, as the player-character, can be understood as a spectral figure whose future is played through.

Galloway points to the importance of actions in video games, especially when video games are interpreted allegorically, because “the interpretation of gamic acts is the process of understanding what it means to *do* something and mean something else. [ . . . ] The customary definition of allegory as “extended metaphor” should, for games, be changed to enacted metaphor” (105). The rewind mechanic and acting as the rewinder is the core of the algorithmic in *Braid*, for a player “creates the gamic text by doing” (105) and acting; in this case, the player creates a spectre. The player is constantly drawing the past into the present in the form of rewinds and repeated trial-by-death (they are expected to die in order to progress) attempts through the levels. The game ends where it begins, in the opening scene of Manhattan, but only after dramatically restructuring narrative expectations by shifting the perspective lens like a kaleidoscope until Tim is not the hero, but a monster who, like all monsters, occupies a space as

something other and unknown. The game's ending moment in Manhattan echoes Fisher's summary of the hauntologically premediated twenty-first century as a broken, fatal repetition; a "digital cul-de-sac."

The mistakes the player makes aids them in learning the controls of the game, the specific nuances of the timing required as levels become more intricate and demanding, and eventually beating the game. The failures in the beginning of a game lead to knowledge, progression, and success—even if success only bleeds into the first scene of the game. The virtual hauntology of what was not, or what may have been, unfolds into a general betterment, even if it is one with no specific end because the braiding together of the past, present, and future renders that impossible. The future is not merely premediated, but potentially played through repeatedly until it is, if not different, then easier, more manageable, knowable in the way that algorithms are known, and not unequivocally catastrophic.

When Wark asks "of what use is the past to a gamer?" (51) in gamespace, *Braid* provides an answer: video games are capable of representing the ways in which the past influences the present, the ways the present incorporates the future, and how the future's catastrophes that premediation attempts to avoid can be averted by cultivating an awareness that a gamespace-like present is polychronic. If the logic of video games not only mimics the logic of late capitalism today but perfects the algorithmic mode of reality, and if all space beyond the game is gamespace, *Braid* posits that gamespace is not inescapable and that there is a way "through it to get beyond it" (224). We cannot literally rewind the clock of time—"the mortal flaw of an irreversible time" (35)—but we can understand it as a type of virtuality that can be played with and played within by

recognizing the past's spectrality as a force within it, and the future as an unprogrammable but nevertheless potential space of moving forward. To rewind in gamespace would be to continue attempting to move beyond it. Where Derrida "might say that in order to be political we must let ourselves be guided by ghosts" (Niall 118), playing with hauntology's awareness of spectres in the present in order to liberate the present from its awareness of the past's failures, and where Grusin realizes that premediation is not "chiefly about getting the future right" (Grusin 28), the presence of each in video games requires an awareness that we have more than one attempt, more than one future, and multiple pasts operating simultaneously.

Algorithmic logic does not consider the repetitive and traumatic nature of the past, and the present's leeriness of a recurrence of such moments, as strictly negative. Rather, looping gameplay, spectral avatars, and multitemporality enable beneficial repetitions. Strictly speaking, we have but one life in the agon of gamespace: game over, "you are either dead, defeated, or at best out of quarters" (Wark 6). But within gamespace it is also possible to go against the assumed flow of time, like *Braid's* Tim, who flows "contrariwise" and looks to the past as reparative of the present—or, if not the present, then one way to build toward a better future where the past is not entirely "burning down the place we've called home" ("Chapter 1"). Some sense of hope and safety remains, rather than an omnipresent longing for the past and anxiety over the future's unpredictability. Gamespace, making gamers of us all, can be countered on its own terms because it demands iterative repetitions—repetitions that are something other than the past's repeat performances in the present due to the past's failings. And in games, as gamers, who create through doing and whose every interpretation engages with the

informatic controls that video games “flaunt” (Galloway 90), it is not necessarily being guided by ghosts of the past into a future, but rewinding into the past in order to cultivate a better future that is imperative. It is the rewind that is necessary for a player to learn the game system and the game’s algorithm; it is the ability to remediate the past and generate a better future that makes playing in gamespace something other than futile. What *Braid* makes playable is the possibility of learning the present as a system of algorithms that includes within its variables the past and future, with all of its disappointments, catastrophes, and the necessity of moving in time and space in order to progress rather than lingering on the borders of actuality and ontology. The spectral must, after all, be spoken to.

The purported line between games and gamespace has been disintegrated, arguably, ever since it was posited. Gamers often blur the line between the real world and the game world, and “the desire to ‘play’ real-world problems” by gamers continues (McGonigal, “Not a Game” 7). To propose a hauntological play against gamespace is not to disregard or nullify the history of activism, hacktivism, and counterplay articulated by scholars such as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter in their work, *Games of Empire*. These same moments can be recognized as occurring within gamespace, as part of the processes of hauntological premediation in which video games engage, and perhaps as spectres in their own right that irrupt into the present seeking to produce a more progressive, radical future reminiscent of the twentieth century utopian futurists. A video game hauntology, however, is less about the spectrality of the past and future as they linger on the permeable borders of time and more about the translation of the game into gamespace with the assurance that a repetition of past traumas are not the ultimate game over—they

have happened and are always already folded into the present's spectres. It is not about being guided into the futures by ghosts of the past, but about rewinding until the present is playable and its algorithm clearer than it was before, its ghosts not exorcised but engaged with. The new media logic of premediation enables not only new futures to be generated and proliferated, which are then taken as hauntological spectres, but for new *kinds* of spectres to be generated: ones that are algorithmic and can thus be engaged with as algorithms, allegorithms, and as practical interpretations of gamespace and what it might mean to play, or rewind, the game.

## 2. Metagamespace in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*

### 2.1 (Non)Diegetic Metanarrative and CHIM

Although Braid demonstrates the interpretive potential of a video game hauntology and its generation of digital, specifically allegorithmic spectres, Tim is nevertheless best thought of as a *platforming* spectre. The player's ability to navigate time, space, and narrative are facilitated by the game's 2D platform structure. Platforming games typically incorporate the left-to-right side scrolling and puzzle solving that makes *Braid's* linking of time and space possible, where movement through one dimension generally signifies the passage of the other. Other game genres, it follows, generate different spectres. Game series with multiple titles that occur in the same game world may even generate their own hauntological narrative histories rather than solely player-character spectres. Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda* series has, for example, recently attracted interest online as a game series whose former titles haunt the latter, a process complicated by the fact that the order in which games are released does not often conform to the series' narrative timeline (McIsaac). Overall, the hauntological aspects in games like *Zelda* take the form of a purging: exorcising the ghosts and remnants unsettling the present restores order to the world and concludes the game. Winning in a game like *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* requires banishing ghosts and spectres from the present. But these titles contain their hauntological components within the game itself, and while *Zelda* is a philosophically interesting example of a fictional narrative incorporating ghosts and phantoms into its nonlinear timeline, it does not take into account the ways in which games are engaged with by players or their essential nondiegetic components.

Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002) is an open-world, fantasy role playing game (RPG), and it is massive: its lore spans hundreds of years of in-game history, including collectible texts that can be read or ignored at the player's discretion. These texts detail the history of Tamriel, the continent where *The Elder Scrolls* series takes place. *Morrowind* also uses customizable avatars while allowing for flexible play styles: players are free to play as one of several races, as well as to tailor their avatar's abilities to their preferences, depending on whether they wish to emphasize stealth, strength, or magic use. Like *Braid*, the hauntological aspects of *Morrowind* are a result of its structure as much as its narrative, and some of these elements should not be generalized to the RPG genre as a whole. But *Morrowind* deviates from generic tradition, and game tradition more generally, by incorporating an awareness of gamespace into its lore. Characters, both playable and non-playable, are said to achieve what is called CHIM, a fictional conceit within *Morrowind*. While there is no direct translation or definition of CHIM, it is effectively a concept that directly confronts and manipulates the fourth wall that normally separates the player from the story; a more detailed analysis of its mechanics and use in the game will follow. For now, however, it is sufficient to understand that rather than merely breaking the fourth wall by speaking to the player from within the game, CHIM manipulates the permeability of the wall until there is no clear distinction between a player, the game, and the characters within it. Characters and players can consequently gain access to the game's construction set and alter the reality of the game accordingly without breaking the coherence of the narrative reality.

This component of the game's lore is not isolated to *Morrowind*, and requires some knowledge of the events of the previous title, *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall* (1996); but



it is *Morrowind* that renders CHIM somewhat more explicit and integral to the game narrative. Vivec, a dual-gendered poet-god who is “without borders” (“Sermon Six”), plays an important role in the final chapters of the player-character’s quest. He also writes *The Thirty-Six Sermons of Vivec*, an in-game anthology that describes how he achieves CHIM prior to the events of *Morrowind*. CHIM enables Vivec to metagame through metanarrative: he uses his awareness of the game’s rules and participants via the construction set to strategize, from a place external to the game’s narrative environment, his involvement in the game. Ultimately, *Morrowind* invokes CHIM when it is necessary to blur the diegetic and nondiegetic elements of the game, reconfiguring the assumed relationships between game and narrative, as well as between game and gamespace.

In the first chapter of *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Galloway distinguishes between two types of actions in video games: the operator act and the nonoperator act. Operator acts are those performed by the player in order to effect something in the game; pressing a button to swing a sword, for instance, or moving the player-character via a joystick. Nonoperator acts are controlled by either the hardware or the software of the gaming platform. The operator-nonoperator axis is crossed by the diegetic-nondiegetic axis in Galloway’s semiotic square (see fig. 1). Elements that are a naturalized part of a game’s narrative are considered diegetic. Those external to the game world are nondiegetic, and frequently “diegetic objects are used as a mask to obfuscate nondiegetic (but necessary) play functions” (32). Nondiegetic elements include a player’s heads-up display (HUD), which can give the player critical information concerning the status of their character and orient them within a large virtual world or in the hectic chaos of live combat, as well as the pause screen that can interrupt the narrative world but not

necessarily gameplay. Rather than investing in a critical apparatus that relies on a strict binary between gamer and game, or operator and nonoperator, and perpetuating a gamer's version of digital dualism (Jurgensen), Galloway admits that “the division [between operator and nonoperator] is completely artificial—both the machine and the operator work together in a cybernetic relationship to effect the various actions of the video game in its entirety” (5). Nevertheless, the division remains useful for a critical analysis of the relationship between a game's formal properties and its supported narrative.

Fig. 1: Galloway's diegetic square of gamic moments; Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2006. Print. 37.

Operator and nonoperator acts are one way of articulating the relationship between games and gamespace. Put another way, it is possible to recognize how a player situated within gamespace interacts with a game and forms a cybernetic feedback loop that cycles between gamer and game. Simultaneously, however, the ways nondiegetic elements of video games are frequently designed to obscure their nondiegetic status in order to better integrate with a game's narrative—that which is enacted as a result of the cybernetic

relationship between gamer and game—is inverted in *Morrowind* because of the extreme level of meta-awareness the narrative incorporates. The metanarrative surrounding CHIM transgresses the purported boundary between games and gamespace, the virtual and the actual, or the player and the game by necessarily drawing attention to the fact that the narrative is a digital, algorithmic element of the game. The diegetic becomes, if not specifically nondiegetic, then emphatically constructed (literally, in *Morrowind*'s case) via a construction set. *Morrowind* simultaneously obfuscates the construction of the game by incorporating it into the world's lore, and emphasizes its status as a nondiegetic construct. The key to its ludonarrative integration of game and gamespace, however, is distinctively spectral: it relies on a history of revolution, similar to the “spectrality of [emancipatory] desire” (Niall 117) in *Spectres of Marx*. Revolutionary rhetoric and a desire not only to overthrow the game's primary antagonist, Dagoth Ur, but also to move beyond the boundaries of the narrative world, pervade *Morrowind*'s lore. The two goals are not necessarily distinct. In addition to recognizing the generative potential of avatars as spectral figures like *Braid*'s Tim, then, the second integral component of a video game hauntology is recognizing the spectral's potential to disintegrate any alleged barrier between nondiegetic and diegetic elements, as well as operator and nonoperator acts, by rendering them simultaneous and indistinguishable. *Morrowind* demonstrates this potential through characters, both nonoperated and operated, who can achieve CHIM, effectively obscuring not only the nondiegetic elements but also the separation between gamer, gamespace, and game, in what amounts to an act of metagamespace—using metanarrative and metagaming to access gamespace from within the game.

*Morrowind*'s player-character is known as "The Nerevarine," who is the reincarnation of a hero named Indoril Nerevar. The Nerevarine, it is foretold, will defeat Dagoth Ur, an immortal lord who attempts to take over Tamriel with his cult of followers. The Nerevarine is therefore responsible for restoring some semblance of order to Morrowind. Dagoth Ur's ultimate goal is to drive Imperial occupiers from Morrowind by using ancient artifacts that the original incarnation of Nerevar died attempting to keep from Dagoth Ur's control. Much of *Morrowind*'s history is shrouded in mystery and contradicts itself. It is unclear if Nerevar died at the hands of Dagoth Ur, or at the hands of the Tribunal, the three gods (including Vivec) who are worshipped by the majority of Morrowind's citizens. Regardless, the player controls The Nerevarine, and the game begins with the protagonist's transportation from the mainland prison to the island of Vvardenfall. This pattern is characteristic of every title to date in *The Elder Scrolls*: player-characters begin the game as prisoners in some capacity, although their specific crimes are left ambiguous and players are free to construct their own backstory. Characters are then summoned from obscurity and embark on their journeys. In *Morrowind*, the Nerevarine is freed from prison at the behest of Emperor Uriel Septim VII. The Septim dynasty's founding myth involves a Dragon Break: the sundering of linear time, which is symbolized by the draconic god of time, Akatosh.

Multiple Dragon Breaks occur throughout *The Elder Scrolls* series. Certain collectible texts in *Morrowind* attempt to clarify, as much as they can, a fractured history that was experienced diegetically as a non-linear event, including "Where Were You When the Dragon Broke?" and "The Dragon Break Re-Examined." Subsequent

generations attempt to account for conflicting perspectives between cultures and people across Tamriel. The introduction to “Where Were You” elaborates:

“Every culture on Tamriel remembers the Dragon Break in some fashion; to most it is a spiritual anguish that they cannot account for. Several texts survive this timeless period, all (unsurprisingly) conflicting with each other regarding events, people, and regions: wars are mentioned in some that never happen in another, the sun changes color depending on witness, and the gods either walk among the mortals or they don’t. Even the ‘one thousand years,’ a number (some say arbitrarily) chosen by the Elder Council, is an unreliable measure.” (“Where Were You When the Dragon Broke?”)

In the same text, another speaker references Daggerfall, which is both the second title of *The Elder Scrolls* series and the name of a province in Tamriel: “You did it again with Big Walker, not once, but twice! . . . The second time it was in Daggerfall, or was it Sentinel, or was it Wayrest, or was it in all three places at once?” (“Where Were You”). The “Big Walker” is the giant used by Emperor Tiber Septim to conquer Tamriel and establish his dynasty after he achieves CHIM<sup>3</sup>. The Dragon Break after Tiber Septim refers to the events of *Daggerfall*, when another player-character stepped into Tamriel and progressed from the rank of prisoner to mythic hero. In her series of web postings, “The Metaphysics of Morrowind” (2010), blogger Kateri astutely points out that Dragon Breaks as described in *Morrowind* bear a striking resemblance to the nondiegetic operator

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<sup>3</sup> Amusingly, Tiber Septim also reshaped the landscape of an area called Cyrodiil using CHIM: according to texts from *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, the Emperor eradicated a jungle in Cyrodiil and replaced it with terrain reminiscent of Northern European agricultural land. Ostensibly this was done because he knew his people “hate [the] jungle” and, as a gesture of his love for them, he reshaped it (“From the Many-Headed Talos”). It was also a piece of retconning on the part of the developers, however: Cyrodiil had previously been described as dense jungle in the lore prior to *Oblivion*’s development, but needed to be reshaped for *Oblivion*. CHIM is good for gardening as well as conquering.

act of saving a game: “How many Dragon Breaks do you have in your saved games folder? Every time a player abandons, or is forced to abandon, the path they have chosen in a game and reloads an earlier save, do they ever consider how the denizens of that game world might experience it?” (“Part 2”). Put another way, Dragon Breaks address the issue of nondiegetic actions ostensibly intruding upon the diegetic components of the game, and attempt to integrate the necessarily multilinear and occasionally failed paths taken through a sprawling game like *Morrowind*. Structurally and narratively, *Morrowind* deviates from the diegetic hauntological interpretation of a game series like *The Legend of Zelda*. *Zelda* titles are comparatively linear experiences, insofar as there is one prescribed way to progress through each game’s narrative with few instances of player choice, customization, and one defined ending in each title. In comparison, *Daggerfall* builds player choice into its narrative.

While structurally the efficacy of including branching or otherwise nonlinear narratives in such games is dubious, aiding “the delivery of a more organic story” but not necessarily supporting the main storyline (Ip 125) and only offering the illusion of meaningful choice, branching quest lines and narratives also present difficulties for game stories attempting to deliver a coherent and continuous narrative across multiple titles. *Daggerfall* includes seven different endings. For Bethesda’s development team to declare one ending canon in *Morrowind* would be to discount the choice system built into *Daggerfall*, which also includes character customization, class, and statistics in its play. Dragon Breaks allow for the narrative to continue across titles, unhindered by these nondiegetic operator acts, albeit at the expense of a unilinear, singular world lore. The game world becomes littered with paradoxes, with entire cultures questioning their own

understanding of time, history, and progression, self-consciously accounted for in texts like “Where Were You”. “The Dragon Break Re-Examined”, another text found in Tamriel, is written by the historian Fal Droon and attempts to explain the discrepancy in historical dates caused by the Dragon Breaks. Droon attempts to explain the thousand year discrepancy in Tamriel’s archives not only as “unreliable” (“Where Were You”) but as the result of conflicting cultural calendars: The author of the Encyclopedia Tamrielica was apparently unfamiliar with the Alessian “year”, which their priesthood used to record all dates.” Droon continues, arguing that the cults of Lorkhan spread the doctrine of the Dragon Breaks after archivists and historians had written the Encyclopedia Tamrielica, and that subsequent scholars took it as fact rather than the result of historical inaccuracies. Thus, “the Dragon Break was invented in the late 3rd era, based on a scholarly error . . . and perpetuated by scholarly inertia” (“Re-Examined”).

The narrative context of *Morrowind* is thus spectral in a way similar to *Braid*: the present is the result of a fractured past, coexisting but not strictly integrating with multiple temporalities. Unlike *Braid*, however, some playable and non-playable characters in the world have come to understand that they are in a game—or, if not in a game, that they are in least a world where, beyond its jagged borders, there exists a language of “if-thens” (“Where Were You”) that can be manipulated: the code itself.

These if-thens are, arguably, the core of CHIM. CHIM itself is never defined directly in *Morrowind*, nor in any *other Elder Scrolls* title. CHIM resists definition and chafes against any simple summary of its terms. More directly, it is referred to as “the secret syllable of royalty” by Molag Bal, the King of Rape (“Sermon Twelve”). “Sermon Twelve” marks the moment Vivec gains conscious awareness of the concept. On the one

hand, CHIM is *Morrowind* breaking the fourth wall. But *Morrowind*'s diegetic context negates the presence of a wall in the first place, incorporating Dragon Breaks and self-referential, nonlinear histories that take player action into account from entirely different titles, so there is no fourth wall to break. In addition, an exact, diegetic definition from within the game would break the diegetic coherence of the narrative because CHIM marks the dissolution of that cohesiveness. It necessarily reaches beyond the purely diegetic in order to incorporate the nondiegetic elements of the game itself, such as the construction set and pause menus, and consequently moves beyond the ontological certitude necessary to define itself. CHIM, in other words, is a spectral concept that permeates the game but cannot be named with any certainty. It is that which moves, and allows others to move, between any formal distinctions by dissolving the order they rely upon. Structurally, CHIM's spectrality allows *Morrowind* to integrate nondiegetic components into the game world without disabling, to borrow Galloway's term (31), the game.

CHIM is also inseparable from the game itself: while it is possible for a player to complete *Morrowind* without seeking out information concerning CHIM, or without being consciously aware of it, from the opening moments when the Nerevarine is being transported from prison to Vvardenfell, CHIM is active. The player-character's release from prison is at the behest of the latest Septim Emperor, whose dynasty was founded because of his ancestor's involvement in a Dragon Break; the player's ability to cut "sleep holes in the middle of a battle to regain his strength" ("Sermon Twenty-Three"), or, in other words, to pause the game and activate a healing potion, is available from the moment the player first takes control of the avatar. The game's opening tutorial and



guidance of the player through the mechanics of gameplay is a tutorial in CHIM. In “Sermon Thirteen”, Vivec writes that the Nerevarine will “come as either male or female,” indicative of the player’s ability to choose their avatar’s gender. “Sermon Thirteen” also states that “I am the form he must acquire,” a statement with double meaning. It suggests both violent revolution and overthrowing those in power, and that the Nerevarine must slay Vivec (this is, indeed, an option in the game). The statement also signifies what is known as the “I” of the Tower. The Tower<sup>4</sup> “is an ideal, which, in [a] world of myth and magic, means that it is so real that it becomes dangerous” (“The Tower”). It is established in the game that ideals are not merely metaphors, nor part of an inaccessible realm.

Just as video games are not merely allegories but enacted algorithms, there are never merely metaphors in *Morrowind*. The Tower is real (albeit not actual). *Morrowind* enacts Wark’s position on gamer theory as that which inverts Plato’s allegory of the Cave and its fundamental premises, or the assumption of a more real world beyond it. Here, “the game shadows the ideal form of the algorithm” in a literal and diegetic sense. What’s more, the Tower signifies “the existence of the True Self within the Universal Self,” or the simultaneous recognition of a “True Self” – “I” – within another self, a God (or godhead). God is the game; or, more accurately, the godhead is every writer and developer involved with *Morrowind*’s creation, particularly Michael Kirkbride, the developer responsible for the documents concerning CHIM (Qwerty). The presence of a named author should not be confused with the positioning of an author figure as a godlike deity—the deceased author-god of Roland Barthes, for instance—or a claim for authorial

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<sup>4</sup> “The Tower” as an ideal and core concept in the metaphysics of *Morrowind* should not be confused with The Tower as a birthsign, which players can activate in some *Elder Scrolls* games to activate certain skill sets in the game.

intent foreclosing interpretation or their self-actualization. CHIM is a character's awareness of their status as a fictional character, and their encapsulation within another, broader self, but not necessarily that this "Universal Self" or godhead dictates interpretation. On the one hand, an NPC's future is, strictly speaking, perfectly dictated by the game's script and the game code. Digital characters are afforded no improvisational opportunities to deviate from script, and are perfectly at the mercy of the development team. The godhead dictates their actions. On the other hand, communities of gamers turned hackers, machina animators, fan fiction writers, and so on frequently move characters into entirely different creative realms (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 26-27). The godhead cannot dictate what their actions mean in *Morrowind*, or beyond.

CHIM is the ability to "feel with all of your senses the relentless alien terror that is God and your place in it, which is everywhere and therefore nowhere, and realizing that it means the total dissolution of your individuality into the boundless being. Imagine that and then still being able to say "I." The "I" is the Tower"" ("The Tower"). But the Tower is also the universe, when the universe is looked at sideways: envisioning the universe as a wheel, Vivec instructs Nerevar to imagine it lying on its side. It would appear as a straight line, or an "I," or a Tower. CHIM is consequently looking at the universe sideways; and CHIM is the moment a character can realize they are simultaneously their own distinctive subject, an "I," without dissolving into the contradiction of simultaneously existing only as a fiction. Some who realize this contradiction and cannot sustain their identities in the face of such a paradox dissolve into their own abject (non)subjectivity, instantly blinking out of existence. It is theorized within the game that the Dwemer, an entire race of intellectually and industrially advanced dwarf-like

creatures, all achieved CHIM simultaneously and consequently vanished from the world, leaving only their architecture and devices behind (“Full Report to Trebonius”). But other characters, like Vivec and the player-character, successfully exist as both singular subjects and absolute non-subject.<sup>5</sup>

The secret of the Tower, or of the entire diegetic universe, is its own fictionality and a priori integration with the nondiegetic and, ultimately, material world beyond the game. There is no cave for gamer theory in *Morrowind* because there can be no other, external spaces. CHIM means recognizing gamespace from within the game. CHIM is thus what renders cheating, hacking, and character manipulation completely diegetic within Tamriel. It is, consequently, incorrect to claim that CHIM merely breaks the fourth wall when CHIM enacts its metafiction. CHIM rotates the wall ninety degrees and turns it sideways, constructing it as a horizontal platform that connects operator and nonoperator, player and game, as well as game and gamespace. Mortals who achieve CHIM cause Dragon Breaks; players cause save files to proliferate. If ideals are literal (albeit within the context of playing a game, and therefore digital) constructs and are therefore accessible and capable of materializing, then the game as Wark’s ideal version of gamespace is here achieved through CHIM’s spectral permeation and permutation of the game. The game undoes all boundaries at their seams.

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<sup>5</sup> Vivec’s third sermon provides one possible reason that he is successful where the Dwemer are not: his awareness of love, an emotion that is entirely foreign to the Dwemer. Vivec notes that “[love’s] role and value in society at large are controversial.” Chapter Three focuses on Hardt and Negri’s concept of the multitude in conjunction with gamespace and hauntology in light of Vivec’s relationship to the concept of love in *Morrowind*.

## 2.2 Metagaming Spectres

“Metagame: Victory is having the power to define the nature of the game.”

(Bainbridge and Bainbridge 72)

“Reach heaven by violence.”

Vivec’s repeated refrain in *The Thirty-Six Sermons of Vivec*

CHIM’s presence as a spectral concept and avenue of action in *Morrowind* is significant in two ways. First, it allows Vivec to metagame: he acts upon the game world based on what would normally be knowledge external to the game itself, or at least nondiegetic information and mechanisms. Secondly, CHIM itself is wreathed in revolutionary rhetoric, reminiscent of Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* and the spectre of revolution which continues to pervade public consciousness despite the alleged failure of the “revolutionary spirit or promise within . . . Marxism . . . which can’t be separated from it” (Niall 115). It is not merely that CHIM exists and can be accessed, but that obtaining CHIM requires an overturning (in the literal sense of *revolution*) of the otherwise staid order of the world. This should not be taken to mean that Vivec is a clandestine Marxist (although that interpretation is lent some merit when one considers that his success is twinned with the disappearance of the industrially advanced Dwemer, and that Vivec is associated with the Chimer, a race of typically disenfranchised dark elves). It is, instead, a claim that CHIM and the disintegration of the fourth wall via Vivec’s metagaming relies on the same revolutionary spectres that have pervaded gamespace, and of which

Derrida speaks in *Spectres of Marx*. It is as much an act of metagamespace as it is an act of metagaming.

Through CHIM, Vivec can access a “non-space” (“Nineteen”) that is situated on the outskirts of the game world. This non-space, also called The Provisional House throughout *The Sermons*, is effectively *Morrowind*’s construction set. The construction set is a program that allows players to personalize, rebuild, and otherwise alter the world of the game using a drag-and-drop interface. Those familiar with code also have the option of using the game’s scripting language to add or remove features that the developers themselves may never have thought of (*Planet Elder Scrolls*). Changes made using the construction set can include changing a character’s statistics, so that the player-character can be stronger than normal, as well as relocating and altering the abilities of enemies in the game to present new challenges (or easier ones). In Vivec’s *Sermons*, the construction set is described as “fill[ed] to capacity with mortal interaction and information, a canvas-less cartography of every single mind it has ever known, an event that had developed some semblance of a divine spark” (“Nineteen”). It is the space of the “if-thens.”

From this omniscient vantage, players and Vivec can interface with *Morrowind* and “[peer] into the middle of the world” (“Twenty-Two”). The construction set grants Vivec two types of omniscience. The first grants the ability to locate characters in space and events through time. The second involves his ability to clarify what is otherwise muddled, such as fractured timelines and the obscured events of a multilinear history as a result of the Dragon Breaks. Vivec’s ability to clarify otherwise ambiguous events, he writes in “Sermon Eleven”, is why he is necessary: he is capable of interpreting signs,

symbols, and themes that resonate and unfold throughout time and space. In other words, Vivec is capable of speaking to the nostalgic ghosts from the past who continue to infringe upon the present, while not being confounded by them. He is, perhaps, Derrida's ideal interlocutor. But Vivec primarily uses the construction set to assassinate monsters that he birthed after his interlude with Molag Bal, the King of Rape, who initially utters the secret syllable CHIM to Vivec. Vivec realizes that these monsters will wreak havoc upon the world, and builds the Provisional House in order to locate them.

Vivec's *Sermons* are an incredibly abundant source of lore and narrative that are ripe for analysis; unfortunately, despite their relatively short lengths, they are dense texts which speak directly to (and often contradict) themselves, as well as to theories of textuality and semiotics, and there is neither time nor space enough to treat them with the attention each deserves. The account of Vivec's firstborn, however, is notable for its attack on presumptions of a digital divide that conceptualizes the digital and organic as two separate realms. Named Moon Axle, Vivec's firstborn has a face "faceted like a polyhedron," not unlike the low-resolution (by current standards) rendering of all characters in *Morrowind*, Vivec included. Moon Axle claims to be made "of many straight-lines, though none last too long," and he is immune to Vivec's straight-edged spear as a result. Moon Axle effectively represents the purely digital side of *Morrowind*: he is the game code, the bits and bytes that power the game, written in script. Moon Axle is raw information in technology, in the sense not only of binary code, but also of that which "connotes a cosmic principle of organization and order [and] provides an exact measure of that" (Gleick 9). A bit of information represents a choice: a one or a zero, a yes or no, a toggle of a switch in one direction or another. There is an exactitude and a

certainty that accompanies it, which is precisely what Vivec—and *Morrowind*—cannot tolerate in its world of back-and-forths, spectres and inconstancies. Vivec goes so far as to identify himself as “a letter written in uncertainty” (“Sermon Four”) who typically embodies a double-gesture of neither here nor there, a character who refuses to settle as either a one or a zero. Information in *Morrowind* is configured as something that is perpetually in motion; stillness is rendered an organic restraint. Given that the code operating in the background and the scripts generating gameplay are turned on and active at any moment (reminiscent, perhaps, of Galloway’s claim that *action* must be the word for game theory), the relationship between information and motion in *Morrowind* makes some amount of sense. Theoretically, as far as the game is concerned, information is not information if it is not moving. It would relegate the game to an elsewhere, a powering off. Vivec accordingly defeats Moon Axle by forcing him to be still and imposing curvatures upon him, organic aspects that negate his digital nature.

Vivec imposes such curvatures upon Moon Axle this through the use of his sword, a symbol that recurs through *The Sermons* and is continually linked to duality. Vivec explicitly states this in “Sermon Six,” noting that “by the sword [he means] the dual nature.” Vivec’s mother, in addition, is called a sword in “Sermon Eight,” doubly associating the sword with maternity and gestation as well as her eventual transformation into a mechanical simulacrum. As sword, she is both the simulation and the original. When the Nerevarine and Vivec encounter the edge of the world, which appears to be a sharp and jagged cliff where the graphics necessarily cease as the game world ends, the Nerevarine calls the “spiked waters at the edge of the map” a row of swords. On the one hand, this seems a paradox: the game map’s “invisible walls” (Juul 165), or the point at

which the game world ends for no fictionally appropriate reason. The “spiked waters” represent the very edge of the game’s digital constructs and therefore negate the sword’s duality. They are the clear divide between the game world and gamespace. On the other hand, however, metagamespace merges digital and material constructs and the edge of the map can be conceived of as the moment the two are joined. Thus Vivec corrects the Nerevarine by saying the spikes are “the bottom row of the world’s teeth” instead. Like a mouth, they represent a point of entry and consumption, a merging. Ultimately, it is organic stillness and the imposition of a dual organic and digital nature that negates Moon Axle. Vivec then turns his straight lines into the spokes of a wheel, reminiscent of the original Tower, and fuses the digital and organic rather than suffering the existence of a creature that would divide the two. The fusion resonates with CHIM’s effects more generally, bringing together the digital streams of the game’s information and code with the organic and material reality of gamespace.

Vivec’s victory over Moon Axle is emblematic of how he uses the construction set to metagame, altering reality by bringing certain concepts to bear upon it—in Moon Axle’s case, the bridging between game and gamespace, or the actual and virtual. In their 2007 study of online communities that exploit glitches and errors in games in order to cheat, or otherwise play a game in ways not unintended by designers, Bainbridge and Bainbridge define metagaming in video games as “having the power to define the nature and rules of the game” (61).<sup>6</sup> Vivec, rather literally, is capable of defining the rules of the game world through the construction set, as are other characters, like the Nerevarine and

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<sup>6</sup> Metagame analysis was initially developed by Nigel Howard in the latter half of the twentieth century and productively applied to the nuclear proliferation and arms race concurrent with his research. In game studies, however, metagame has come to refer to using knowledge external to the game itself.



Tiber Septim, who achieve CHIM and can therefore alter the game's reality to suit their needs.

Metagaming requires a character/player to transcend the limitations of the game itself, "maximizing autonomy rather than subservience" (Bainbridge and Bainbridge 75) to the predefined rules and codes of the system. Understanding that games are closed information systems operated by algorithms brings with it the implicit assumptions coded into the machines themselves, which can dramatically affect the way a game is designed and played. The engine that will be running BioWare's *Dragon Age III: Inquisition* in 2014, for instance, is a drastic departure from the engine running the first two titles in the series, and has consequently enabled the game designers to integrate new features and ludic structures which simultaneously allow for different narrative conceits and modes of delivery, according to pre-release interviews (Juba). But in addition to what more advanced hardware and software can enable a game to do, the codes and scripts active while a game is played are not precisely ideologically pure, either. When the game *Dead Island* was released for PC in 2011, a shipment error through Steam, an online video game distribution program, caused users to download the game's developer build rather than the release version. In effect, PC users had access to a version of a game never intended for public release, unpolished and unfinished.

Part of this release, however, included placeholder text for the abilities for a character named Purna. Purna is *Dead Island's* only playable female character, and in the placeholder text for her abilities she was referred to as the "FeministWhore." Her ability was named "Gender Wars" and grants increased damage against male characters; her backstory involves acting as a bodyguard for male VIPs "in dangerous places all over the

world” (Farr), which she is successful at in part because she is considered attractive and because she has a history as a police officer and enforcer. The script did not survive to the final, intended release of the game and the skill was renamed. *Dead Island*’s developer, Techland, promptly released a formal apology (Purchase) once the issue was made public. What the incident reveals, however, is that code is free from metaphor and is frequently socially normalized, if bigoted, commentary. This is the code which Bainbridge and Bainbridge claim that metagamers subvert. In the case of the *Dead Island* developer release, Mark Sample notes that comments such as Purna’s “exude what Mark Marino calls extra-functional significance. They have meaning beyond the program” and speak to other readers, here figured as other programmers whose coding practices are equally misogynist and, therefore, ideologically loaded (Sample). What runs in the background of a game is as meaningful to audiences, whether intended (programmers) or not (players and forum readers), as the visible, playable game content. In addition, binary, the “denominator for the language of technology . . . the ground of the electronic communication” today, is “wrought with discursive problems” (Druckery 10) when scholars attempt social analyses, despite the popular belief and technomysticism that would claim it is outside of ideological influence (Farr; Gleick 262; Druckery 10-12).

Although information (or code) cannot exist apart from ideological contaminants, it can still suggest a binary-based, yes/no, on/off ordering. It is this dimension, the presumption of a “pure” binary, that CHIM subverts and refuses to be subservient to (including, perhaps, and given Vivec’s status as a dual-gendered entity, the traditions of misogyny and sexism that *Dead Island* perpetuated in its development). With *Morrowind*, using CHIM to metagame, and to ultimately achieve either heroic (in the

case of the player-character) or deity (in the case of Vivec) status, is an inherently revolutionary act, insofar as the game's software is a normalized system and CHIM reaches beyond and subverts the yes/no, one/zero binaries. Software becomes as much an ideological and cultural expression as the narrative content it operates. To achieve CHIM and manipulate the construction set is to overturn the limitations it would normally impose upon a game and the player's potential actions. In Galloway's semiotic square, CHIM is the crossing over between the diegetic and nondiegetic, and the blurring of, specifically, the operator and nonoperator functions by allowing the operator to override the nonoperator's machinery. This claim admittedly elides the question of whether or not Vivec and player-characters are capable of transcending the norms, values, and hardcoded limitations that information technology defines within the game when the narrative itself takes into account this same collapse of the alleged division between system and operator. Just as one cannot cheat in a game where cheats are part of the rules (Wark 118), it is perhaps more apt to say that Vivec trifles over the wall, and CHIM enables trifling with the rules of gamespace itself.

The narrative itself, however, does imply that accessing the construction set and achieving CHIM is an act of revolution. For Vivec, CHIM is the mutation of the world's embedded norms and values, as mentioned; those implicit in the game's engine and code, to be sure, but also those of Morrowind's diegesis. For the Nerevarine, achieving CHIM is a matter of overthrowing Vivec, who is "the form [the Nerevarine] must acquire." Vivec's stated intention is to test the player-character's abilities, "murdering him time and time again" ("Sermon Thirteen")—which is practically trivial, considering that the avatar's death is nothing but a "diagram back to the waking world" ("Sermon Eleven"), a

momentary tug back into the entirely nondiegetic gamespace from which it can return with the press of a button. Galloway writes that the death act is the most emblematic of nondiegetic machine acts, because the game must stop accepting the user's input and gameplay is ceased (31). Both *Braid* and *Morrowind* interpret death acts differently: they do not appear at all in *Braid* because the player is constantly rewinding rather than having their progress terminated. *Morrowind* conceives of character death as a return to the waking world that proves the player-character's access to CHIM. Hauntologically, games rework or rewrite death in order to integrate it as something neither utterly debilitating nor entirely nondiegetic. Either it does not occur or, if it does, it is not disabling.

Perhaps due to his ambivalence toward ontological certainties, Vivec is also aware that if *Morrowind* is to have "an end" then the Nerevarine must remove him from the world. To remove Vivec is to restore the stability at the centre of a world that will otherwise unravel in its incoherence, and to ameliorate the spectral effects that plague the present: its confusion, its dread, and the echoing resonance of the past's Dragon Breaks. Interestingly, while the player is given the option of removing Vivec from the game, it is not necessarily in order to defeat the primary antagonist of the main quest; it is not even an explicit side quest. The lore is merely there, and the player can engage with it at their discretion, or continue unaware until the game is completed and ostensibly done. Texts about CHIM bear, perhaps, some resemblance to Gibson's aforementioned concept of semiotic ghosts, insofar as they are embedded deeply within the ideological and cultural diegesis of *Morrowind* and are remnants of a plethora of pasts that are meant to point toward some optimistic future where the "centre" of the world is once more whole. In the eleventh of the Sermons, Vivec writes that the present "is the amnesia of dream. All

motifs can be mortally wounded. Once slain, themes turn into the structure of future nostalgia”. The future, it is suggested, will look wistfully to the past’s themes and motifs; semiotic ghosts will linger in the lore but not necessarily actualize. It is unclear whether or not any culture or sect in Vvardenfell contemplates the future as potentially utopic, but Vivec consigns it to the nostalgic mode immediately. He is, additionally, one such theme and motif that can be mortally wounded, since he occupies the double-space of the symbol and the literal simultaneously. Slaying Vivec will return the centre to the world and conceptually stabilize it, but not without repercussions.

It is nevertheless Vivec who teaches Nerevar, and consequently his reincarnation, the player-character, about CHIM. When he notes the potential of a purely nostalgic future, he cautions Nerevar not to abuse these powers, lest he find himself in control of a broken state. Vivec’s repeated advice to Nerevar, however, is also to “reach heaven by violence.” That is, Vivec advises him to transcend Morrowind—or *Morrowind*—through violent revolution, because activating CHIM and using it to metagame breaks the established order. In addition to the spectres that haunt the lore, CHIM is haunted by the spectre of revolution itself. Insofar as it is premature to assume Communism is dead because it would be denying the revolutionary spirit that continues to linger virtually, a similar spectre resides within Morrowind. Niall writes that Marxism, in Derrida’s estimate, put the future at risk because Communism threatened to bring about revolution and to jettison the future into unknown territory. The present as envisioned by the past (particularly the mid-twentieth century) was also under constant threat of nuclear war (notably when Howard’s theory of metagaming was initially developed, as well). The defeat of Communism reassured the future, insofar as it could be totalized, capitalist, and

somehow stable (Niall 115), but believing in the defeat of Communism and its future prospects also required faith in the current order. Communism, by contrast, represented unknown, untested territory, and inserted distress into the contemporary order by threatening its stable conception of the present and ideas of a knowable future order.

Accessing gamespace from across the game is, similarly, distressing, insofar as it breaks the assumed rules and calls into question a stable order. Doing so requires either interpreting or overturning the normalized tropes of gameplay. This is not to suggest that no game breaks the fourth wall, only that it is typically done differently, and not as heavily incorporated into the fundamentals of both diegetic and nondiegetic spaces. And Nerevar, who is not quite so metaphorically astute as Vivec, takes the poet-god's words too literally in some instances. To reach heaven by violence, he literally attacks the moon with an axe ("Sermon Sixteen"). But it is also Nerevar who recognizes the basic mechanics of revolution within Vvardenfell. When the Dwemer were still present within the continent and threatened its stability, and when Vivec was still a nascent presence within his mother's womb, it was Nerevar who pointed out that he and Vivec must use the machinery of the Dwemer without shame ("Eight"). That is, to use the machinery of the enemy in the name of revolution is neither implicitly nor tacitly to support the status quo, but rather a necessary step in undermining or overturning the current order. As the Craters in the moon point out while Nerevar is attacking them with an axe, "Appropriation is nothing new" ("Sixteen"). By the thirty-fourth sermon, Vivec has invited Nerevar to the Provisional House, and they both have the same vision: that the King who rules Morrowind (and beats *Morrowind*) will have two heads. On the one hand, the two-headed figure may refer to Vivec, who exists both as himself and as the God-

figure of the game's developers. On the other hand, the player-character who eventually prospers in the game is equally dual, consisting of both the avatar and the player.

Eventually, Nerevar is made to declare that he is the mightiest of Vivec's children, for Vivec has either slain those mightier through CHIM, or otherwise reduced them to powerless, abstract concepts (like Moon Axle).

That Nerevar says these words out loud is important: speech is associated with power in *Morrowind*, to the point that slaves who are taught to speak even incoherently threaten society ("Twenty-Six"), until "[c]olumns of nonsense and litany" are wrought—and it is unclear whether these are columns of writing, or of enslaved soldiers intent on overthrowing their oppressors. CHIM itself is the royal and divine syllable, not the connotative property of the underclasses. Revolution becomes associated with speech, and eventually Vivec declares that "[t]he truest body of work is made up of silence: as in the silence that results from no reference" ("Twenty-Seven"); but he has also declared that it is the way of children to overthrow their fathers, and therefore, Nerevar is prophesied to overthrow Vivec. This is the coming of The Nerevarine. It is also a manifestation of the emancipatory desire that seeps through *Morrowind's* lore as a spectre. If, for Derrida, the desire for emancipation in Marxism was never spectral enough (Niall 117), perhaps in *Morrowind* it is. Players may not even realize it haunts their game experience, nor that The Nerevarine is obligated to propel a revolution from the virtual past into the actual present as they play.

What threat, however, might such spectres pose to gamespace? Certainly *Morrowind* is a spectral game, and as far as a hauntology of video games is concerned, it embodies the necessity of abolishing boundaries and barriers between typically

established binaries—operator and nonoperator, machine and gamer, gamer and gamespace. The answer rests somewhere with the gamer, as it necessarily must. *Morrowind* is one machine within an assemblage of machines, situated in gamespace, and it complicates or otherwise revolutionizes the assumed relationship between gamer and game. But Vivec, as the primary nonoperated actor in this process, can only sit upon and mutate the fourth wall. He cannot fold both sides of it together. Metagaming through metanarrative in order to tap into gamespace summons the necessary ghost of revolution and engages with it in intricate and complicated ways, undoing and entangling the player within a network of non-linear histories (of both *Morrowind*'s and of the physical world's), but it cannot implicate the player in revolutionary activities per se. Narratively, it subverts tropes and motifs while simultaneously appropriating them for the metanarrative's cause. In terms of gameplay, it is easily bypassed or ignored, and the lore itself so dense that to engage with even a small part of it is necessarily to bypass other areas. But if the game itself is the ideal version of gamespace, as Wark has argued, then the logic of metagaming within the game should apply to gamespace, albeit imperfectly. The benefit of a hauntological mode of gameplay is that these spectres can be translated into gamespace and the material world. Chapter 3 will focus on communities and multitudes of players and the potential for the wall between games and gamespace to be mutated by operators rather than characters; for now, however, suffice it to say that a hauntology of video games must take into account the dissolution of normalized tropes of both narrative and ludic structures, which is necessarily an overturning and act of revolution.



### 3. Playing Gamespace (per se)

#### 3.1 *Morrowind* and the Multitude

“We can already recognize today that time is split between a present that is already dead and a future that is already living — and the yawning abyss between them is becoming enormous. In time, an event will thrust us like an arrow into that living future. This will be the real political act of love.” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 385).

While Vivec is a principally mutable figure whose primary function in *Morrowind* involves the blurring of boundaries and the dismantling of walls, one aspect of his characterization that remains consistent throughout the game is his association with love. Even when most, if not all, other facets of his character are either dual in nature or are otherwise capable of some form of transformation, Vivec the poet-god repeatedly comes to represent the wealth and dangers of love’s multiple manifestations. There are three moments in *The Thirty-Six Sermons* when Vivec’s association with and devotion to the concept of love are particularly salient in their representations of Vivec as a loving figure. The first occurs in Vivec’s third sermon, which posits love as one possible reason for Vivec’s successful access to and subsequent manipulation of CHIM. The second, in the twelfth sermon, details Vivec’s relationship with Molag Bal, a relationship in which rape plays a central role, spawning monstrous children. The third, in “Sermon Twenty-Four,” sees Nerevar remark that “[l]ove is under [Vivec’s] will only” after Vivec suspends a comet over his city of worshippers. The city, also named Vivec, is understood to be another manifestation of the poet-god. The city is Vivec, or an extension of Vivec, and it is home to the citizens who worship Vivec as a deity. The comet suspended in the sky

reminds Vivec's followers that only their continued love for him keeps their destruction safely static in the sky. Whereas static, organic stillness was Moon Axle's undoing, Vivec's propensity for warping connotations in his metagame also enables him to use the same concept to his advantage and to hold his citizens hostage. Love sustains Vivec, and he is willing to weaponize it and use it as a tool of manipulation in order to preserve this one aspect of the status quo: his position as a deity within Morrowind.

For all Vivec disrupts the normalized conventions of gameplay and (non)diegetic narrative within his own character arc and narrative diegesis, his status as a deity is fragile. His love is ultimately destructive, manipulative, and self-sustaining, but also overtly political and used to separate the people from the heavens and, by association, from knowledge and power. The city is held hostage by its devotion to Vivec, and that love holds the world in place. He functions as a gatekeeper: as long as none try to reach heaven of their own volition, the province of Morrowind can continue to exist (The Nerevarine's prophesized ascension notwithstanding). Vivec, while an intriguing figure of dualism, revolution, and permeation rather than stability, is primarily interested in collapsing barriers that seek to contain him, not others. His methods speak to a multitude but do not seek to include it, and he does not become a figure of common revolution.

*Morrowind*, therefore, qualifies as what Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter refer to as a game of Empire. In *Games of Empire* (2009), they provide an account of the ways in which video games, from their production, consumption, and cultural reception (or rejection and appropriation), have a tendency to be imperialist in content but multitudinous in form (228). Building on the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004), Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter situate the digital game industry as an

industry of Empire, or the global capitalist system that ascended in the twenty-first century and that is “administered and policed by a consortium of competitively collaborative neoliberal states” (xxvii). Game content, argue Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, is frequently hyper-militarized and necessarily interpolates gamers as ludocapitalist, machinic subjects. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter agree with Galloway that video games flaunt neoliberal systems of control rather than conceal them. But games also require a response from their subjects on those terms in order to successfully operate (or be operated). Games therefore strive to “[make] being a neoliberal subject fun” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter xxx), insofar as identifying as a gamer and playing a game means to respond as a neoliberal subject: one whose skills are the results of one’s own cognitive and affective labour, situated within a militarized market that exploits a subject’s work to some degree. This tendency toward militarization and exploitation is especially true of bestselling (or at least mass-marketed) games produced by the larger and more monetarily successful corporations within the industry; *Games of Empire* draws attention to titles from EA Games, Rockstar, and Blizzard in particular. Where games are mass-marketed, exploitative products whose content skews toward the violent, the militarized, and the excessively capitalist, gamers are nevertheless not so easily swayed.

*Games of Empire* is as concerned with Empire’s symbiotic relationship to the multitude as it is with the relationship between Empire and exploitation. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter contend that while video games may be the paradigmatic and defining media of Empire, there also exist games of multitude. Games of multitude are simultaneously a threat to the hegemonic power of the global video game industry as well as its driving force. While *Games of Empire* consequently takes into account similar

theoretical territory as Wark's *Gamer Theory*, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter are careful to distinguish their work from Wark's. *Gamer Theory* highlights gamespace's production and domination by the military-industrial-entertainment complex, and situates games as an atopian refuge that grants player the level playing field that the agon of gamespace denies its participants. *Games of Empire*, however, presses the extent to which the hypercapitalist content and the material production of video games has already infiltrated an otherwise "ludic refuge" (xxvii).

According to Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's interpretation of Empire and multitude, *Morrowind* should not be considered a game of multitude without first recognizing that it is also a game of Empire. Vivec's efficacy is limited to sundering the game's diagetic and nondiegetic boundaries. While *Morrowind*'s lore may thematize Empire and multitude, it does not present any alternative or exit strategy. A similar lack of alternatives in games which otherwise represent or satirize Empire and multitude's relationship is Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's primary criticism of *Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City* (2005). *GTA* is a "no exit situation," and the only playable option is to explore (and benefit from) systems of corruption, racism, and greed in Liberty City. Thus in *Liberty City*, "a prominent theme is that of the poor exploiting the very poor. There may be other options; *but you can't play them*—and that is what makes *GTA* a game of Empire" (180, emphasis in original). Similarly, in *Morrowind* a prominent theme is that of the relationship between Empire, represented by the historical presence of Imperialist occupiers in Tamriel as well as the themes of dominance and history which resonate throughout Vivec's *Sermons*, and multitude, represented by, for instance, the dark elves who frequently figure as historically oppressed populations under the heel of the Imperial

invaders, as well as by Vivec's insistence on revolution as oppositionally inflected transcendence. But much of these representations are limited to the game's collectible lore and no alternatives are made playable (although they are certainly encouraged to be engaged with through texts like Vivec's *Thirty-Six Sermons*). But Vivec's efficacy is limited to the game's diegetic and nondiegetic borders and *Morrowind* is, therefore, considered a game of Empire, insofar as it does not generate spaces for dissonance and expression within its own boundaries, nor does it turn political activism into a game in which "players can and do fight back against games of Empire" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 187). But the multitude is perpetually inherent in Empire and resides as a potential that can be activated and turned against Empire. Any game of Empire is potentially a game of multitude where gamers can "get out of the control of their corporate military sponsors" (190). *Morrowind* is no exception.

For Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, games of multitude are presently "tentative . . . . But though gamers' contributions to toppling the global power structures will, [they] suspect, be modest, it is not as irrelevant as some might suppose" (191). They detail six "pathways" of multitudinous activity: counterplay, dissonant development, tactical games, policy simulators, self-organized worlds, and software commons. None of these six arenas is necessarily militantly activist in nature. Rather, they often represent gamers' relatively modest efforts to speak back to Empire and game developers. Thus, while Vivec's adherence to love and his penchant for collapsing traditional boundaries between gamers and games is limited to the game's diegetic and nondiegetic borders, and while *Morrowind* thus remains a self-contained game which thematizes matters of transgression and multitude without rendering alternatives playable, the players of *Morrowind*

transform it into a game of multitude. In particular, players have turned to generating common sites of multitude beyond the game's world and software.

Vivec's third sermon provides one possible reason for his success with CHIM, especially in light of the Dwemer's failure to maintain dual, actualized existence in *Morrowind*. The poet-god once "channeled his essence into love, an emotion the Dwemer knew nothing about" ("Sermon Three"). Vivec's familiarity with love sets him apart from the Dwemer, who otherwise attempt to reach the same state of metaphysical ascendance and fail. While "[love's] role and value in society at large are controversial" (in Vivec's estimation), love nevertheless serves a decidedly political purpose when *Morrowind* is considered a spectral space. Hardt and Negri take a firmer stance regarding love's role in society. In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri claim that "the real political act of love," in a moment that is "split between a present that is already dead" and a future that thrives only in its potential for manifestation and actualization, will be an event that thrusts the present moment into the future and bridges the gap between the two temporalities (385). The present moment is, on the one hand, produced and controlled by Empire, which "spreads globally its network of hierarchies and divisions that maintain order through new mechanisms of control and constant conflict." On the other hand, Empire contains within it the potential of an active and revolutionary multitude, and globalization "is also the creation of new circuits of cooperation and collaboration" (xiii) that generate the potential to form a democratic, global society in the future. It is this potential that, once activated, will force the biopolitical regime of Empire, including its attempts to dominate all aspects of social and cultural life by transforming subjects' personal, affective, and cognitive energies into forms of labour that can be capitalized on, to defend itself.

The project of the multitude is, in part, to recover a material and political “sense of love . . . as strong as death” (352) in order to facilitate the flight from Empire, because love is what enables the multitude’s encounters within a common, and its collaboration, to be both meaningful and affective (351). Hardt and Negri write that the “multitude must discover *the common* that allows them to communicate and act together.” Their coinage of the term common is related to, but attempts to diverge from, the historical commons that “refers to the pre-capitalist shared spaces that were destroyed by the advent of common property” (Hardt and Negri 2004, xv), highlighting that the common is not a return to a nostalgic (nor is it a hauntologically resonating) idea of the past prior to biopower and capitalism’s infusion, socialization, and eventual banalization. Rather, the common is a new development within Empire. “The common” refers to both what the multitude has in common with one another that brings them together, their collective commonality, and to the sites of multitude that are formed as a result. The common is not so much discovered as it is produced by the multitude: the multitude’s communication and collaboration with one another occur in the common, but also generate it. The common is thus inseparable from multitude, insofar as any space, virtual or physical, that can host and sustain a multitude can be conceived of as a common in some form.

Within a common, or as part of the multitude’s commonality, love becomes a tactical strategy of the multitude. It allows differences to thrive amongst its constituents, which, conceptually, sets the multitude apart from its predecessors, like the masses, the people, or the working class (2004, xiv). Hardt and Negri argue that allowing people to discover their commonality in a generated common will enable them to act coherently, if diversely and necessarily ephemerally. If the overall project of the multitude is to render

possible the creation of a globalized democracy in which differences can be expressed while life is lived and acted in common, then it is a project of love, whose inverse is the dissatisfaction of the exploited class of labourers for whom reform and revolution are now one and the same (289).

Love is a more contentious aspect of Vivec's godliness, at times more connected to imperialism and rape than affection. Thus Vivec's love is "accidentally shaped like a spear" ("Sermon Fourteen") following his tryst with Molag Bal. Nevertheless, it empowers him in the third sermon. At this point he is still an egg within his mother's womb, who is commonly referred to as only "the netchiman's wife" and never formally named. Vivec's mother enters a cave, whereupon the Dwemer detect the egg, deduce its decidedly metaphysical nature, and capture her. The Dwemer attempt to cut her open, and after successfully eviscerating her with "cornered spheres" ("Sermon Three"), she dies. Vivec is taken out to be studied, but he "confounds" the Dwemer by channeling his being into love. The Dwemer are left "vexed" and, as a race of consummate semioticians, they attempt to "hide behind their power symbols." The Dwemer later vanish from the world in their efforts to harness the power of a tool called The Heart of Lorkhan, who was the god of mortals, and believed by some to be the demon who hinders progress toward a realm beyond Morrowind from which all life within *Morrowind* originated. That is, the Heart of Lorkhan potentially functions as an access point to CHIM. Vivec, in contrast to the Dwemer, accesses the Provisional House and can thereby manipulate the world. The Dwemer are generally represented in the Sermons as intellectuals with a fondness, to the point of parodic and myopic blindness, for semiotics and the chasms and paradoxes of language and meaning. Their focus on the power of symbols, words, and their



(mis)interpretation (“let us go and misinterpret this” is their response to Vivec’s confounding them) provides Vivec with the opportunity to confront them with something that is, at least in *Morrowind*, more pure and essential: love itself, rather than its potential misrepresentation via symbolic language or systems of metaphor. Vivec describes love as a raw, and therefore directly ideal and real ingredient used in relationships, moods, and affairs – including exasperations, regret, and “riddles laced with affections.”

Vivec himself is one such riddle. His character encapsulates love as its most consistent component, and he communicates through his sermons either through the use of predominately oblique commentary on his life’s events or through retorts that are frequently interlaced with affection for the world and its people. But Vivec’s is also a brutal, fractured love that contains within it the possibility for violence as much as affection. Easily missed in “Sermon Twenty-Three” is a remark about his origin myth: “[t]he birth of God from the netchiman’s wife is the abortion of kindness from love.” If Vivec is love, he is love separated from kindness, here embodied as his mother and later replaced only by the simulacrum that bears him. Vivec’s abortion at the hands of the Dwemer distinguishes between love and kindness, devotion and affection, and associates love with its darker manifestations: obsession, violence, and manipulation. His love does not have the capacity to ameliorate.

In “Sermon Twelve,” Vivec locates Molag Bal, whose epitaph is, as mentioned, The King of Rape. Molag Bal’s six arms are “decorated [with] runes of seduction and its reverse,” pairing oppositional elements—seduction and rape—within one figure in a way similar to Vivec, although Molag Bal is considerably less changeable. By “Sermon Fourteen,” however, Vivec has bitten off one of the runes from Molag Bal’s neck in order

to assimilate the power of rape and violence into his own body. The mutilation occurs as part of an exchange: Molag Bal gave Vivec the secret syllable, CHIM, and Vivec was to teach Molag Bal how to be less violent in return. Instead, Molag Bal is banished, Vivec declares the King of Rape will never be called beautiful again, and begins to hunt down the children he bore with Molag Bal. Molag Bal's beauty was directly tied, according to Vivec, to his ability for violence. Vivec's love is thus merciful, insofar as he believes it is merciful to teach Molag Bal about love rather than rape ("Fourteen"), but also manipulative as well as terrifying in its power. He is capable of slaying deities and assimilating their power, and with it he effectively commits genocide against anyone associated with Molag Bal, his own children and the children of the heavens included. The dark underside of Vivec's love is thus rape, a tool of power, control, and violence. It does not make Vivec an affectionate creature, nor one whose love is idealist and romantic. Moreover, as in times of war and political conflict, rape is here employed as a political tool of violence and fear.

It would be remiss to overlook the gendered aspects of Molag Bal and Vivec's so-called marriage in *The Sermons*: Vivec is, on the one hand, a dual-gendered creature against whom violence is carried out. Molag Bal refers to Vivec as "it" ("Sermon Twelve") rather than he or she, a pronoun only rarely seen referencing Vivec directly. Despite his fluidly transgender status, masculine pronouns are typically employed in connection with Vivec, even when he is otherwise called "mother-father" and associated with the stereotypically maternal ("Sermon Twenty"). It is a masculinized Vivec who teaches Molag Bal about affection; and it is a masculinized Vivec who ultimately takes the power of rape from Molag Bal, combines it with affection, and deploys it as a

political tool in his attempt to control and manipulate the world. Where Vivec purports to exist as a trans-, or at least dual-gender being, the writing implies that rape remains a masculine tool and that Vivec only moves toward the feminine end of a gendered spectrum when he is on the receiving end of Molag Bal's attention. With regards to entrenched gendered stereotypes and expectations, therefore, Vivec is staunchly traditional and not remotely a revolutionary or even radical figure. Rape, while predominately a political and violent act rather than a gendered act in *Morrowind*, remains tacitly gendered and considerably problematic in its lack of emphasis on the collapse of that particular binary. It is, perhaps and unfortunately, the only binary Vivec does not strive to tear down, aside from his self-referential "mother-father" epitaph.

The third and final instance of Vivec's love is in the twenty-third sermon. Vivec is, at this point, the lord of an eponymous city (one whose founding is blessed with "the dark corners still left of Molag Ball" ["Sermon Twenty-Four"]). Lie Rock, one of the offspring of his relationship with Molag Bal and therefore a child he must eradicate in order for Nerevar to succeed, launches an attack on the city of Vivec. Vivec suspends him in the heavens and then slays him. He leaves the comet there, however, as a reminder to the people of the city: should their love of him ever disappear, "so shall the power that holds back their destruction." Nerevar realizes that love is something that exists according to Vivec's will. That is, Vivec dictates what kind of love may manifest, and when. His use of CHIM is therefore affective and, like the structures and symptoms of Empire, concerned with "tapping" its citizens at multiple socio-political points; it also concerns itself with the control over and politicization of love and death, and is biopolitically motivated. Vivec exploits and controls emotion as well as the infrastructure of his city.

But the city's love for him is predicated on Molag Bal's remains, and thus the fear, power, and manipulative force of rape forms its very cornerstones. Any shadows of revolution within the population, should they ever wish to overthrow and eradicate Vivec, are forestalled by Vivec's threat of instant annihilation. Thus, while Vivec may represent the potential for revolution and the dissolution of barriers between game and gamer, per Chapter Two's analysis, he stops short of being a figure of outright (albeit diegetic) revolution. He personally chooses Nerevar, and his reincarnation as the Nerevarine as his successor. The revolution will not arise from the people of the city (let alone of Vvardenfell or all of the province of Morrowind), but only under Vivec's jurisdiction. Consequently, because Vivec seeks to structure and dictate how his people's love of him manifest and persists, the love and passions of the people that would otherwise organically grow—that is, what might constitute multitude within *Morrowind's* diegesis—cannot thrive.

### 3.2 For the Love of Games

“The new knowledge communities will be voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments. Members may shift from one community to another as their interests and needs change, and they may belong to more than one community at the same time.” (Jenkins, *Fans* 137)

*Games of Empire*, in combination with Galloway’s scholarship on what he terms “countergaming,” isolates a genre of “serious games” which more directly confront issues of revolt and resistance in contemporary society (185-214). Similar scholarship is covered in Jane McGonigal’s *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2011). McGonigal argues, broadly, that issues of countergaming, tactical play, and the gamification of daily life in the hopes of improving living conditions on either a societal or individual basis involve issues of gameplay, and gameplay’s relationship to practiced life. McGonigal claims that game design is “a twenty-first century way of leading and thinking” (13); Dyer-Witford and de Peuter see games as a way of developing, protecting, and proposing alternatives to the apparatus of Empire (188). In addition to these common sites of active and tactical resistance and, in some cases, militant and overt revolutionary activity, there exist what might best be called “banal” sites of multitude; that is, sites of digital common generated by those who play games like *Morrowind*, extratextually crafting narratives to their desires. They also therefore proliferate alternative narratives that can impress upon the legitimate or canon narratives in games. These are gamers, enthusiasts, and fans that congregate online to

communicate their passions, displeasures, and interpretations of video games. While there are many such sites available online, ranging from forums to Twitter feeds, it is the online confessional that this chapter takes as its initial site of inquiry. These sites' participants do not necessarily qualify as a traditional multitude as articulated by Hardt and Negri. They do, however, perform in similar ways.

Banal multitudes are proposed in both comparison and companionship to what Hardt and Negri in *Empire*, and subsequently Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter in *Games of Empire*, refer to as the general banalization of Empire and its tactical strategies. Hardt and Negri, and Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter discuss the "banalization of war" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 12) in particular. War is perpetuated on a daily basis, against foes that are elusive and faceless, appearing in the indeterminate haze of the future (30), similar to Grusin's account of premediation as that which attempts to forecast the future but cannot definitively predict what will occur on either a global or a local scale. Consequently, against a "diffuse and ubiquitous" enemy, military activities must become equally boundless (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 99-100). The result is an endemic state of exception. For Giorgio Agamben (2005), the paradoxically perpetual exceptionality "signals the slow disappearance of meaningful political action" (Humphreys 678). Dyer-Witthford, de Peuter, Hardt, and Negri concur that perpetual, banal warfare manifests as and within daily life, normalized in the day-to-day interactions between people and nations.

Similarly, this chapter contends that a banal multitude is one that is perpetual, insofar as it cannot be eradicated; but it is also normalized and have become mainstream, in the sense that they are not directly military or activist in nature. Their resistance seems

minor, even trivial compared to the revolutionary activities multitude can be spurred to in the streets or amidst its networks; Jenkins notes that fandom tends to be “dialogic rather than disruptive” (*Fans* 150), for instance. The banal multitude is not interested, precisely, in “bettering” the world through overt activity (which is not to suggest that interests do not intersect and that a member of a banal multitude would not protest in the streets, either). A banal multitude nevertheless constitutes a form of the multitudinous subject in a common. Like Hardt and Negri’s multitude, they are involved in the “biopolitical production” of social life, culture, and politics (Hardt and Negri 2004, xvi), and are organized according to lines of networked communication that “displace authority in collaborative relationships” (xvi)—if only to a degree. The other characteristic of the multitude that Hardt and Negri describe is its “democratic tendency” amongst “the genealogy of modern resistances, revolts, and revolution,” which is what displaces centralized authority to begin with. A banal multitude does not necessarily involve themselves in these activities.

Thus, while the banality and normalization of Empire through processes of daily socialization and infiltration are often paired with war, revolt, and revolution, the banal multitude can be understood as existing within this same banal *mode* of Empire without necessarily, actively resisting it—though it is active, collaborative, and formed by individuals coming together in a digital common, at least in the case of spectrally-inflected fan communities. It is the generative potential of Empire’s dimensions of affective, cognitive, and immaterial labour, manifesting in networked, diffuse communications and communities rather than sites of revolt. This is not necessarily Hardt and Negri’s multitude, but one that operates similarly and plays with certain dynamics of

Empire. Of note, moreover, is the fact that any coming together of gamers is not necessarily openly democratic and benevolent: gamers bring their prejudices with them into these sites.

This section takes two sites of banal multitude into consideration: first, online confessional communities that frame gamer investment as something to be expressed anonymously and in confidence, if paradoxically publicly and to a community of followers; and second, the *Mass Effect* trilogy fandom's successful reformation of the game's storyline after the consumer base was, seemingly en masse, dissatisfied with the "canon" ending. Gaming or banal multitudes thrive in online fan communities where games of multitude cannot necessarily find purchase within any particular title. That is, they are the gamespace counterpart to a figure like Vivec. Where Vivec cannot metagame and access gamespace, beyond the boundaries of the game are the gamers who can and do metagame, rewrite narratives, and collapse the boundary between game and gamespace.

In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri propose the internet as an initial model for the shape of multitude because its many nodes remain different and distinct but connected, just as differences can thrive within multitude without being overcast by any totalizing concept of a "mass" or "class" or people. Because the boundaries of the internet are constantly open in such a way that new nodes can always be connected to it, the internet has also become a common site for game communities and, consequently, what can be configured as banal, gamic multitudes. Blogging platforms such as Tumblr have become especially popular sites for fandoms and game enthusiasts to congregate. Tumblr in particular makes transmitting information easy: it is a microblogging website that



facilitates the sharing of posts between users more fluidly than its predecessors, meaning that posts can quickly spread between users. Before Tumblr, however, there were sites such as Livejournal. Before the prioritization of “sharing” online (i.e. aggregating links and activity to be shared between a user’s circle at the press of a button that is linked to several social media sites at once, a process Tumblr has streamlined within its own user base), Livejournal focused on long form, personal blogging service. Several Livejournal clones, built using the same source code, were less popular but still active during the early twenty-first century online (the “Web 2.0” turn), including JournalFen and, later, Dreamwidth. Indeed, prior to fandom’s regular internet access, zines and independently produced fan media were circulated among fandoms.

Tumblr has become particularly important for certain portions of fandoms today because of its ease of sharing and general usability, as well as its allowance for screen names rather than legal identities (Facebook and Google+, in contrast, tend to insist on legal names and close down accounts where users sign up with aliases). Video game fans write fan fiction, create fan mixes (playlists of music inspired by characters, pairings, or series more generally), create art and crafts, and discuss the politics of race, gender, sexuality, and representation in hundreds of series online. Henry Jenkins has written extensively on the political implications of fandom in this regard. By his definition, fans are those who reject any notion of “aesthetic distance” and instead “passionately embrace favoured texts and attempt to integrate media representations within their own social experience” (*Fans* 39), turning fandom into “a vehicle for marginalized subcultural groups . . . to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations . . . transforming mass culture into popular culture” (40). The multitude must forge, or

discover, a common; today fans forge spaces of fandom online in digital parallel. Like the multitude, online fandoms that enable individual fans to connect globally with people who share their interests do not eradicate local differences to form one globalized culture based on the passive consumption of media and circulating narratives (158). Rather, fan cultures tend to reproduce local difference in dialogue with other fans doing the same.

These communities, which collaborate and communicate based on the sharing of knowledge and information, are necessarily “voluntary, temporary, and tactical . . . defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments” (137). They are not, however, homogenous in their participation, interaction, nor even their response to their chosen media. In an article on the politics of displeasure amongst “star-chasers” in Hong Kong, Egret Lulu Zhou provides a useful general taxonomy of fans: the devoted “online chaser” (146) whose activities take place only online (rather than physically attempting to “chase” their idol and meet them in-person); the “de-organized” fan who refuses to join formal fan clubs (148); members of official fan clubs who participate in fandom as a way of generating and cultivating social capital (150); the unofficial fan clubs who feel the official clubs are somehow exploitative or unpleasant for other reasons (152); and the more flexible, temporary, informal fan group (154). Zhou’s research is specific to the cultural and sociopolitical interplay between Mainland China’s media output and its competition with America, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand. The taxonomy is useful, however, insofar as it recognizes that fandoms are not monolithic enterprises, and that individuals act independently of one another even when converging into a community of fans online. In this sense, fandom echoes Hardt and Negri’s composition of the multitude: communication paired with collaborative efforts on a

common site of meeting, where individual identity is not subsumed en masse (or by *a* mass) but may continue to thrive in a diverse group. The banality, however, persists: fandom is not precisely a multitude, even if it is something similar that engages in acts of political reinterpretation of texts rather than activism, or even acts of overt resistance. Fandoms retain similar dynamics, echoing Hardt and Negri's account of multitude and its relationship to immaterial labour, but plays host to a legion of disparate intentions and motivations.<sup>7</sup> If the potential for multitude is there (as it implicitly is, given that the media industry is a mechanism of Empire) it is not easily actualized.

Immaterial labour signals the production of immaterial products, including, but not limited to, information, ideas, affects, knowledge, and relationships (Hardt and Negri 2004, 65). Immaterial labour renders the division between work and nonwork, or work and play, at times indistinguishable. It demands that labourers become more flexible and mobile and, ultimately, allows immaterial products to be enlisted by superiors. Hardt and Negri believe immaterial labour holds the potential for social transformation because the production of relationships and affects differently produces social relationships. Immaterial labour is thus biopolitical, because generating new forms of social relationships entails the generation of social life and situates immaterial labour within a framework of cultural, political, and social forces. Networks are formed on the basis of communication, collaboration, and affect between labourers—the preliminary basis of the multitude. Similarly, fans involved in the circulation of ideas, dialogues, and their affective responses to characters or stories are similarly biopolitical, affective, and immaterial labourers—especially when game industries subsequently realize the potential

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<sup>7</sup> This is made strikingly clear in Zhou's research, as well: when asked whether or not displeasure in fandom would lead to consumer resistance by blatantly registering their displeasure, "almost every interviewee" responded they would not (158).

of appropriating this labour and integrating it back into their products in a cyclic relationship between consumers and producers.

In *Convergence Culture* (2006), Jenkins notes that the gaming industry attempts to market “interactive experiences” rather than commodities, setting the game industry’s products apart from other, presumably more passive experiences.<sup>8</sup> LucasArts, for instance, included gamers and Star Wars fans in the design team during their development of a massively multiplayer online game (148). Confessional or secret-sharing sites demonstrate the extent to which gamers may feel invested and personally responsible for game narratives even prior to the collaborative efforts between fans and development companies. On these confessional sites, users anonymously submit “secrets” about a game series, and these sites are typically active for as long as there is a strong user base for the game. Submitted secrets are then made into an image, normally by the site’s administrator, and posted for the public (see Fig. 2). *Morrowind*’s confessional base is relatively new as of the time of this writing, with only three months of archives, despite the game being a decade old, while other series, such as the massively popular *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) and *Mass Effect* (2007) series, are considerably more active with much more expansive archives.

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<sup>8</sup> Jenkins also identifies this as a false stereotype: fans of other media are not passive consumers, nor is any other consumer of literature, television, or cinema. Video games are set apart more because of their formal properties as a medium which demands physical interaction, via a controller (if play is not motion-activated), and often prompts players to make meaningful choices with regard to narrative action and gameplay.

Figure 2. A *Morrowind* confession. The text reads: “I wanted Nels Llendo to be my in game husband, so I used console commands to place him in my house in Soltheim. He walks around all day saying “Searching for special tools? My prices are the best,” to my character. It’s a happy marriage.

<<http://tesiiiconfessions.tumblr.com/post/44876612106>>

Figure 3. A *Red Dead Redemption* confession. The text reads: “When I beat Red Dead the first time I couldn’t believe the ending [sic] I was mad and had slipped into a deep agonizing depression it was terrible. I later found the mission [called] I remember you and couldn’t believe it. It was beautiful and I just hugged that game forever.” <[http://red-](http://red-dead-confessions.tumblr.com/post/39788301427)

[dead-confessions.tumblr.com/post/39788301427](http://red-dead-confessions.tumblr.com/post/39788301427)>

Figure 2 represents a fairly typical post on any series' confession site. It claims a gamer's affective response to a non-playable character and their desire to engage with the character more frequently and in-depth, to the point that they were willing to use the console commands (Vivec's "Provisional House" once again) to alter or hack the NPC's canon role in the game. Figure 3, meanwhile, signals the extent to which gamers can feel personally invested in a game's storyline. Players report feeling depressed after beating *Red Dead Redemption*, a game infamous for its daring to murder the player-character gamers have spent upwards of sixty hours playing the game as (and then not making it immediately obvious that the player can continue to play as the protagonist's son). Secrets also frequently reflect a player's desire for in-game relationships that are otherwise unachievable, especially in games with companion or romance options like *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*. They are also a way for players to give voice to their desires for options that not only are noncanonical in the text, but are typically marginalized in a patriarchal and heteronormative society.

The multitude, per Hardt and Negri, is always driven by a desire for increased democracy. Fandoms are often driven by a desire for greater inclusivity and more diverse representation, perhaps best articulated as a form of multitudinous play, or a banalized expression of multitude. Not quite achieving the same immediacy and potency as Hardt and Negri's multitude, active and politicized sections of game fandoms nevertheless engage in discourses that echo the sentiment of multitude that permeates media (haunts it, one might say, as Derrida's emancipatory desire). These postings function as an operator act situated in gamespace, engaging with the game's diegesis from the other side of the wall that Vivec was only capable of hovering over. This is not to say the opposite is not

true, either: there exist pockets of fandom that deride or counter the calls for inclusivity and equality (see, particularly, Hepler's treatment below). Generally, however, it is recognized that fandom, fan fiction, and fan communities are where those marginalized in the hegemonic discourses can, or must, turn to in order to generate their own representation.<sup>9</sup>

Confession sites also represent gamers expressing dissatisfaction with media narratives circulating that conform, sometimes overwhelmingly, to societal norms. These confessions are also, however, relatively harmless. They are individualized and personal despite their masks of anonymity (i.e., they are not monolithic and cannot be taken as a singular group of anonymous participants), and they do not often spur much debate in a wider fandom that frequently strives to be accepting of individual "headcanons" (what any one person incorporates as a given in their personal interpretation of a text) that may go against broader and more popular interpretations of a text. The banality of such an event derives in part from its perceived harmlessness: these are not gamers making demands of the industry per se, and any one confession can be written off as personal interpretation, not the overwhelming desire of the gaming community at large.

Anonymity and personalization here is a boon that makes it difficult for any one person's headcanon to be reincorporated by industry and put on the market for a profit. It is

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<sup>9</sup> This recognition has not always been immediately evident, in part because early reception studies could not foresee the extent to which consumer agency would be incorporated into corporatization. Pitor Suida refers to the first wave of academic research as the "deviation wave" (2), in which fans were treated as pathological or social deviants who could not control their behaviour, nor act acceptably. In addition to constructing fans as irrational subjects whose consumption practices were uninformed and ridiculous, Marcuse's concept of false needs created by the popular culture industry, in collaboration with Adorno and Horkheimer's writing about the ways in which culture promotes blind consumerism (1944), strengthened the position that fans were merely manipulated, indoctrinated audiences held captive by market fetishization and incapable of acting either rationally or intelligently. As fans become more visible in academia and elsewhere (particularly the internet), audiences were viewed as more resistant to dominant ideologies and eventually as "prosumers" in whom modes of media production, consumption, and appropriation merge (Suida 11-14).

simultaneously a problem, however, where anonymity eradicates perceived efficacy and communication. While other Tumblr users can respond to posts on confession blogs, the initial node of communication is inert unless the submitter steps forward to claim the confession as theirs, and the banner of anonymity subsumes the potential for identity to thrive in what might otherwise be a more generative space.

When fans gather en masse to voice their dissatisfaction, however, the results are often ambivalent and full of noise. BioWare's *Mass Effect* fandom rallied after the release of *Mass Effect 3* in 2012, expressing dissatisfaction with the trilogy's closing arc. Fans protested and petitioned for the ending to be rewritten. But the BioWare fandom has a contentious history of sexism, violence, and antagonizing developers of whom certain portions of the fandom disapprove of, and thus any positive and democratizing interpretation of the fandom as a multitude in action in 2012 should, ideally, be contrasted with the other, more grim effects of their mobilization.

The first *Mass Effect* game was released by BioWare in 2007, published under Microsoft Game Studios. *Mass Effect 2*, a direct sequel, followed in 2010, and the third title of the main trilogy launched in 2012. The first game alone requires, on average, thirty hours of playtime. *Mass Effect 2* averages thirty-five hours, while *Mass Effect 3* averages thirty-three ("How Long"). Each downloadable content package adds approximately two to three hours of playtime; for *Mass Effect 3*, there are five packages available. Suffice to say the game asks for considerable time and investment by players, which is simultaneously what enables fandom to thrive and what ensures *Mass Effect* is marketable: the franchise "provoke[s] and reward[s] collective meaning production through [its] elaborate back stories, unresolved enigmas, excess information, and



extratextual expansions of the program universe” (Jenkins 145). The games themselves are science-fiction action-adventure titles that attempt to balance customizable characterization, interactivity, and storytelling with third-person shooter gameplay. The *Mass Effect* universe includes a galaxy’s worth of backstory. The overarching narrative binding the three games together concerns the entire known universe, which is periodically destroyed by a race called Reapers. It is the player’s responsibility to stop the Reapers, and to convince a dubious political council that they exist in the first place. The game world is haunted, Shepard comes to realize, by remnants of past reappings. Other influential figures in the game remain skeptical and more concerned with their own local (normally racialized and planetary) concerns.

Like *Morrowind*, players are free to customize their protagonist, Commander John or Jane Shepard (the first name can also be filled in by the player, and then is almost never referred to again). Shepard can be either male or female, and can specialize in six skill classes. Unlike *Morrowind*’s player-character, however, Shepard is considerably less of a vacuum: whether male or female, Shepard’s dialogue is fully voiced (in contrast, the playable characters in *The Elder Scrolls* have, to date, no voiced lines). Players are also provided with several pre-scripted backgrounds for their character that influence, to degrees greater than *The Elder Scrolls*, how Shepard is treated and what galactic-wide biases they must confront in their travels, and, in particular, their ability to politically sway those in charge. Based on which dialogue paths they choose, players can operate either a Paragon or Renegade Shepard in the first game. These binary choices become considerably more integrated and intertwined in later titles. Paragons are Commanders who are considered heroic, diplomatic, and charming, and Shepard typically bonds with

their squadron based on personal conversations and empathetic reactions. Renegades are sarcastic, aggressive, and occasionally outright violent, earning Shepard respect and fear as a ruthless, but nevertheless capable leader. There are typically at least three conversational branches available when Commander Shepard is in conversation with a non-playable character. The more often a player opts for Paragon or Renegade dialogue options in these branches, the more alignment-specific choices are available to them in the future. Each player can, therefore, nuance their Shepard's personality according to their preferences, and see those choices reflected back to them. *Morrowind's* avatar is relatively vacant by comparison: although the entire history of Vivec and the Dragon Breaks are documented and anthologized in the game, the player is provided with no history, voice, nor personality, let alone a game world which responds to their personal imagining of how their avatar acts. Shepard becomes a more fully realized character, each incarnation specific to every game file and player interpretation of character. It is little wonder that players become invested in their particular Shepard, especially after spending upward of a hundred hours cultivating relationships with each member of their crew and tailoring the game narrative based on the choices they make.

The majority—or rather, the more vocal and therefore more self-evident portion—of *Mass Effect* fans registered their displeasure over *Mass Effect 3's* ending. In the original release, Commander Shepard meets the Catalyst, a childlike AI that reveals itself as the creator of the Reapers. The Catalyst's primary purpose is to mediate between synthetic and organic life in the universe. The Reapers harvest all organic life in the universe once per universal cycle so that organic life in the galaxy can ostensibly be preserved; those harvested become the Reapers. Ideally, the Catalyst desires to merge

organic and synthetic life, using the whole of the universe as an (incredibly Sim-like) experiment in how best to fulfill its purpose. Shepard/the player has three options in their confrontation with the Catalyst, all of which result in Shepard's death (or, if not her death, then her synthesis with the Reapers and/or synthetic life forms in the galaxy which nevertheless demand sacrificing corporeality and no longer continuing to exist as Shepard). No choice is necessarily easy to make, and even the "best" endings—where the most prepared players were left with the highest number of crewmembers alive rather than all of them dead, for instance—are difficult to obtain and were generally deemed unsatisfying.

Gamers felt that the canon endings robbed of them of both agency and a sense of meaningful consequence to the choices that had carried over three games and hundreds of hours of gameplay (Thier). On a poll hosted on the BioWare forums, 91% of respondents—a total of 68,717 votes—voted that the "[e]ndings suck, we want a brighter one." There is a thematic resonance between the fan displeasure with the trilogy's trio of endings and the ways games in general are forced to structure themselves. Traditionally, the only way players can have "real" choice and control over a narrative is to turn to fan spaces and rewrite canon, incorporating it into either a community-wide canon (or "fanon") or their own personal headcanons, through sites like the confessionals. And game design must balance the illusion of choice with the fact that games are hardcoded systems with no real options save those that are built into them. Gamers need to feel invested and that their choices have outcomes; when the curtain falls, as it did with *Mass Effect 3*, the result is a deeply affective and committed community of fans who feel as if their time and effort—their own immaterial labour—has been appropriated and they have

been cheated. “The question is,” writes Thier, “does the story belong to the writers or the fans?”

Fans clearly felt it belonged to them. They petitioned BioWare to rewrite the ending and raised eighty thousand dollars (later donated by BioWare to Child’s Play) in a movement called Retake Mass Effect (Rubin). BioWare responded by releasing the “Extended Cut” downloadable content, which revealed more information than the original ending concerning the effects of Shepard’s choices on the universe. It also includes more scenes and dialogue to ameliorate what fandom perceived to be plot holes or otherwise unresolved elements of the narrative that were particularly unsatisfying. The three revised options with the Catalyst now include voiceover elements and slide shows demonstrating the effects the player’s choices throughout the trilogy have on the galaxy post-*Mass Effect 3*. “Extended Cut” also offers a fourth ending: Shepard can refuse the choices altogether, or attempt to kill the Catalyst, which ends all civilizations in the galaxy and allows the Reaper cycle to continue unhindered. It is then suggested that the next generation to discover any information about the Reapers makes the “correct” choice by making any choice, and are victorious over the Reapers. Fans effected a victory over the writers. They rallied, they petitioned, and they protested until they had control over “their” texts once more.

This achievement is especially noteworthy because BioWare has been owned by Electronic Arts since 2007, and EA is one of the more notoriously profit-driven, industry-driving companies. *Games of Empire* offers a stinging critique of their working conditions, their colonization of worker’s spare time to the detriment of their relationships and social lives, and how, in effect, EA creeps toward being the de facto

agent of Empire in the game industry. This is not to suggest that other companies do not participate in Empire in a similar manner, but that EA does not attempt to veil their activities and has become a particularly notorious example of the Empire-inflected ethos within the industry. (Indeed, it was rumoured during the Retake Mass Effect movement that the reason the ending was unsuccessful was because of EA imposing rush deadlines and intolerable working conditions on BioWare writers, though these rumours were never verified.) Idealistically, the Retake Mass Effect effort demonstrates the potential of fandom within Empire, functioning as a multitude that demands its voice be heard and its energies be taken into account. Multitude, even banal multitudes, are “not merely protest movements” but “also positive and creative” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 218), and fandoms in action are not necessarily resistant forces but ultimately reformatory (Jenkins 54)—if not politically and globally (a grand task to ask of anyone), then of the narratives that are circulated and that they participate with. Thus if games like *Morrowind* or *Mass Effect* fall short of being “game[s] of multitude” or tactical countergames, insofar as they are not serious games that seeks to interrupt processes of Empire nor present playable alternatives and exits, there are nevertheless multitudes of gamers who carry these narratives with them and craft them to their desires. The mechanisms Empire uses to appropriate immaterial labour, the social networks and communities forged, are equally avenues of reformation.

The democratization of the common and the potential for positive action against Empire should be tempered, however, by the alternative modes of expression that fandom can foster. While no fandom should be singled out as being particularly vehement or violent in its engagement, BioWare’s fandom in particular has a history of markedly less

positive interactions with game developers. Reminiscent of Jameson's reminder that "the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and terror" (*Postmodernism* 14), communities carry within them the same internalized biases, tendencies toward violence, and heteronormative and patriarchal expressions of sexism and entitlement that function both tacitly and explicitly in the world. For example, in early 2012 BioWare writer and developer Jennifer Hepler was the target of extensive online harassment and bullying. Five years prior, Hepler remarked in an interview that video games should improve in their efforts to include demographics other than the stereotypical "hardcore gamer"—those who are generally white, male, heterosexual, and consequently privileged in their representation across all media forms (Polo, "Inclusion"). Hepler, notably, was involved in writing *Dragon Age: Origins*, a high-fantasy game similar to *Mass Effect* in its management of player-character customization, choice integration, and game length. *Dragon Age* is notable for its inclusivity: not only can characters romance non-playable companions of either gender, should they choose to, but it is also a diegetically naturalized expression of sexuality that is neither marginalized nor, generally, noteworthy in the game. Sexuality and gender become nonissues. Moreover, in her interview Hepler remarks that her least favourite aspect of the game industry is the gameplay itself, asking a demographic of hardcore players to imagine themselves as a "woman, especially a mother, with dinner to prepare, kids' homework to help with, and a lot of other demands on your time" who does not have the leisure time to invest a hundred hours in any game.

BioWare games focus as much on character interaction and social relationships as on combat and "gameplay." Those in the *Dragon Age* consumer base who disagreed more vocally did so through

requests that she commit suicide; imprecations that verbally reduced her to her genitalia and implied low intelligent and lack of subjectively appealing physical qualities; and accusations of forcing gay characters [down gamers' throats; and] accusations that she had a "fetish" for such characters and relationships. (Polo, "Inclusion")

BioWare's Community Coordinator Chris Priestly posted a statement from cofounder Ray Muzyaka in defense and support of Hepler. They also donated one thousand dollars to Bullying Canada and encouraged the community to donate if possible (Polo, "BioWare"). The views of the vocal minority within BioWare's fan community should not be taken as the norm; but when they are the most expressive, it is a salient reminder that fandom does not exist as an atopic refuge from the marginalization and violence enacted against minorities. The video game industry, in particular, is known for its early "recuperation of cyberfeminism" in its nascent years, which "stripped out the most radical elements of its revolt" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 21).<sup>10</sup>

The stereotypical image of the gamer as a young male who enjoys violent and hypermasculine shooters is similarly telling. The attacks on Hepler were gendered and ruthless, signifiers of the ways in which fandom can be equally optimistic and invigorating, arguing in favour of the multitude and channeling their love for narrative and representation into their primary avatar of expression, but also grimly brutal, sexist, and homophobic. In short, those who participate in fandom and banal multitudes are as likely as any other contemporary subject to have internalized the politics of oppression

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<sup>10</sup> Anna Anthropy's *Rise of the Video Game Zinesters* (2011) is an indie manifesto that implores trans-identified or otherwise queer gamers to, among other things, begin making their own radically expressive games because the industry likely will or cannot, in part because of this very problem. Anthropy's scholarship is problematic insofar as her treatment and casual dismissal of experiences not her own are concerning, but her analysis of the industry as largely sexist and insular is useful.

and marginalization, and the existence of a common does not, and cannot, negate those politics' existence. Hardt and Negri's optimistic account of multitude and its potential for democratization and global activism and resistance is tempered when sites of multitude are analyzed as equally likely to be avenues of continued repression. Where the politics of Empire have infiltrated gamespace, as per Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's claim, they have always and already infiltrated the gamers who populate it. Similarly, when Jenkins notes that fandom is a "vehicle" for the expression of marginalized subcultural groups, it stands to reason that fandom remains another avenue for the expression of those already privileged within media.

On the whole, however, to summarize any fan community based on its most negative and frequently most vocal (and consequently the most prominent in the media) components would be to mischaracterize fandom. Vivec's inability to incorporate a fondness for the revolutionary and multitudinous in *Morrowind*, where he otherwise fosters a breed of love and affection for the world, mirrors the real world's frequent mistrust and disparaging of similar movements, such as the video game industry's appropriation and subsequent banishment of radical feminism. Yet despite the arguments that occasionally break out between gamers and writers about the importance of gameplay over story writing, or between the diegetic and non-diegetic elements of games, fandom flourishes. It generates a banal form of a common and, in a sense, plays within gamespace. Gamespace does not necessarily *get played* in the same way a game might, but in the call and response between Empire and the multitude that necessarily sustains it, gamers play with story, with characters, and with their own affective investment in and labour surrounding games. Like Vivec, the love and devotion to games displayed by



gamers in these common spaces and affective, networked relationships is channeled into a productive force that sometimes gains ground in a symbiotic relationship between games and gamers—and sometimes not, because the multitude does not exist outside of its own context within a capitalist and marginalizing framework. Displeasure drives fandom as much as passion and, as Vivec's conceptual counterpart in gamespace, that love can be as destructive and brutal as Vivec's own. Nevertheless, even game communities not engaged with the direct gamification of the world in their efforts to make it a better place, or in acts of direct counterplay and activism, form sites of commonality that can be conceived of as actively against and within the mechanisms of Empire that move into an unpredictable, if necessarily premediated and haunted, future.

## CONCLUSION

Video games are intensely haunted spaces. They incorporate and premeditate visions of the past, present, and future, while generating digital spectres that call into question the purported divide between game and gamer. They are capable of mutating the ontological certainties that would typically attend issues of time, space, and what it means to exist within gamespace while playing a game. Rather than ghosts that should be exorcised in order to return order to the world, however, the spectral must be spoken to; haunted games must be played. *Braid*'s spectral avatar can allegorithmically represent what it means to play in gamespace, exploring and engaging with the semiotic ghosts that pervade the present. *Morrowind*'s use of CHIM demonstrates both the ultimate permeability and mutability of the space between game and gamespace, and the slippages that can occur when gamespace is addressed from within the space of a game. A hauntological mode of analysis also enables gamer theorists to productively address Wark's sense of gamespace and, while gamespace may play gamers more than gamers can play it, hauntology nevertheless asserts one avenue of play—and therefore action—when attempting to navigate gamespace's systems of controls and dominance: the proliferation and continuation of game narratives in common spaces online.

Any hauntological analysis of video games should consider video games as digital spaces haunted by spectres that can either be generated by a game's own diegetic content, as in *Braid* and *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, or by forces external to the game's self-contained narratives and ludological structures. These extratextual presences can include the communities of gamers that form in response to the narrative content of the video game, like the anonymous confessional sites and the affectively-motivated groups

like the Retake Mass Effect movement; or the presence of individual authors who attempt to exert some form of interpretive control over their audiences and hover as a critical phantom in the texts surrounding a given game, like Blow's response to *Braid*'s various interpretations by players. But spectres may also include the code driving the game and how developers encode their own beliefs, and sometimes bigotry, into the software.

There are, however, a proliferation of sites related to games and gameplay, which may be considered equally spectral: the proliferation of walkthroughs online, for example, which may premeditate any gamer's playing of a game in the hopes of avoiding traumatic (and failing) modes of gameplay that limit a player's process, or the reviews in the media that can influence whether or not a game is loaded in the first place. That is, it is never merely the narrative content of a game (if, indeed, a game is attempting to tell a story in the first place) that can be considered spectral and which may haunt a player's experience, or which may haunt the permeable space between game and gamespace and invite critical interventions.

A game's spectres will, in all likelihood, be unique to that game, in part because of how a hauntological analysis necessitates examining both a game's story and its formal structures and how the diegetic and non-diegetic function together. Not all platforming spectres will be made equal; nor will a futuristic dystopian role-playing game likely bear much in common with *Morrowind*'s more fantastical Dragon Breaks. The sense of iteration, algorithm, and repetition, however, may speak more broadly to most games, and the ability to replay and translocate spectres from game to gamespace is a productive (if not multitudinous) undertaking. Games are not left in the same digital cul-de-sacs spoken of by Fisher when they can turn those dead ends into different levels, and

if the present can continue to incorporate past and unknowable futures into it. For the time being, the question for the future appears to be which games function with which spectres, and where creators and gamers are playing with ghosts.

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