Working on and at Play

Perception and Visibility in Games

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Abstract

As media objects, video games are imbued with values held by their makers. This is done intentionally by serious games practitioners but also occurs independently of design goals. One of the more problematic manifestations of 'values at play' is playbour, a putting-to-work of play that recalls Agamben's mourning the loss of 'menuchah'*, an inoperativity that is more than a means to prepare one for more work. But is there a way to rescue leisure from its subservience to labour? Or, if not, is there a way to make the work done through play operate against the logics of late capitalism? To make sense of the conversations around player, game, power, and labour, I articulate two concepts:* visibility*, or the degree to which a system can account for the actions of those operating within it, and* perception*, a measure of an actor's understanding of the methods through which a system understands their movements. Through several gameplay examples, I use these concepts to lay the foundation for suggesting that play is a force for critique, for laying bare a game's operational logics so that they may be subject to our scrutiny. To conclude, the concepts of glitch and queer failure are introduced to argue for a working* on *and* at *play that interrogates not only video game machines, but the larger machines of ideology that drive them.*

Keywords: critical play, countergaming, playbour, play as critique

Introduction: Power (at) Play

I begin with what may seem to be a self-evident proposition: the relationship between a player and a video game is one rooted in power. This is not to be read as a comment on some social pressure to consume media objects nor is it a rehashing of the idea that a player is pitted against a game as a thing to be won or lost. Instead, I employ Foucault's sense of power as "the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate" (Foucault 1990: 92) to frame the relation between player and game as follows: *just as a game is built to account for a player's actions, the player may equally aim to account for the game's*. At stake in this discussion is not simply the relation between player and video game (however that

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is my focus here), but rather the relation between actors and the systems under which they act writ large.

In this sense, I am deeply invested in Mackenzie Wark's conviction that "games are no longer a pastime, outside or alongside of life. They are now *the very form of life and death and time itself*" (2007: 6, italics my own). For Wark, it is only the disciple of "gamer theory" (ibid: [255]) who can properly understand and navigate the world as 'gamespace' in order to seek out alternative ways of being. And while I agree that the operational logic of 'game' pervades the world we live in, I also worry about Wark's suggestion that only intellectuals have a hope of unpacking or upending gamespace. Indeed, such a claim grates against Hardt and Negri's assertion that "a political alternative to Empire" will never "arise from a theoretical articulation" alone – "it will only arise in practice" (2000: 206). The form that such a practice may take is left intentionally open by the authors.

In the case of games and game studies, many have endeavored to bring about change through the practice of *making* games. However, in this paper I wish to examine the revolutionary potential of how we may *play* games. Play, both within natural and virtual space, is something that we are all ostensibly capable of doing in some form, which cannot be said for the work of either Wark's gamer theorist who must read and understand critical theory or designers who must know how to code and have access to costly technologies. Rather than offering an account of the uncomfortable likeness between labour and play that game scholars have been observing for some time, I now wish to suggest that players might orient their workful play towards something more emancipatory. It is therefore my aim to explore play's critical potential in a manner that updates underdeveloped concepts such as Galloway's "countergaming" (2006), Schleiner's "ludic mutation" (2017), and Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter's "games of multitude" (2009).

It is in this spirit that I put to work the concepts of *visibility* and *perception*. **Visibility** here refers to *the degree to which a larger system can account for the actions of those acting within it* while **perception** is *a measure of an actor's awareness and understanding of the methods through which a system understands their actions*. Recalling Wark, these definitions are left intentionally broad to account not just for the relation between player and video game, but of anyone taking part in any game-like structure, whether knowingly or not. However, I limit myself to video game play here since, following Crawford (1982), I believe that virtual worlds present "safe ways to experience reality," (15) particularly to experiment with the values of our late-capitalist age.

Visibility and perception will be elaborated upon through a discussion of the ways that these concepts overlap in video game play. Through the use of several gameplay examples, I outline three 'gradients' of visibility and perception that, while non-totalizing, are helpful to signpost the variety of ways that the relation between player and game can unfold. I will then conclude by broadening my discussion to larger questions of the critical potential of play and the reclamation of leisure from the logics of labour and capital.

By moving this conversation into the specific context of games and players, it is my hope to develop a richer understanding of play as something that can be contained yet radical, limiting yet iterative. Rather than suggesting that work and play ought not mix, I argue that working *on* and *at* play is a necessary form of labour if we are to find ways of living in opposition to the dominant. Playing critically here is a force for laying bare a game's operational logics so that we may judge them and change them accordingly.

Labour, Leisure, and the Power of Play

Throughout this piece, my understanding of labour is informed by Hannah Arendt's use of the term. Labour, for her, is the ongoing process of sustaining oneself which "never designates the finished product" – it is "to be enslaved by necessity" (1958: 80, 83). This contrasts with work, which produces "stabilizing" contributions to the "durability" (ibid p. 137) of the world, such as buildings and laws. In speaking of labour, Arendt writes: "It is indeed the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind" and "that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent" (ibid: 87). "And yet", she continues, "this effort, despite its futility, is born of a great urgency [...] because life itself depends upon it" (ibid: 87). Labour, then is characterized as a toilsome, but necessary process which is without end.

Giorgio Agamben amplifies this necessity of labour to the point of erasing the distinction between it and its supposed opposite in leisure. Central to my understanding of leisure is Agamben's (2011) claim that "we are no longer able to reach menuchah," a sacred sort of "inoperativity" (106) that is epitomized by the Jewish Sabbath. He suggests that the feast day once consisted "precisely in neutralizing and rendering inoperative human gestures" (ibid: 109) whereas now it has been instrumentalized. While I am not as certain of Agamben's "faint air of nostalgia" for the ancient feast day, the question of whether all human activity, even rest and leisure, ultimately "aims toward production" (ibid: 106, 105) is an important one. Agamben, here, seems to suggest that any supposed leisure can be viewed as a necessary reprieve from work in the service of making us ready for more work. Given this, I am inclined to ask: is there a way to 'rescue' leisure from its subservience to labour? Or, if not, is there a way to make the labour done through leisure operate, even modestly, against this logic?

Game scholars have spoken about this conflation of labour and leisure from multiple perspectives, most notably through the concept of 'playbour', or the various ways that players have been rendered productive, whether through helping to shape the game world (Humphreys 2005) or through earning a living as a professional e-athlete (Taylor 2006, 2012), for example. However, while it may be true that players opt in to such playbour practices, one must not forget that games are generally made in ways that support such post-Fordist, capitalist values.

The figure of the taxi (or Uber) driver who is free to work whenever they want and yet must stay behind the wheel for most of the day to get by (Sharma, 2014) comes to mind here, as does Wark's suggestion that a game "grinds" and "shapes its gamers [...] according to its algorithms" (Wark, 2007: 221). Indeed, game studies at large has been concerned with the notion that games are containers of values and arguments for some time.[1]

In *Persuasive Games* (2007), Bogost puts forth the concept of procedural rhetoric to describe "the practice of authoring arguments through processes" (29). The influence of this concept when applied to the coded rules of a game is difficult to deny. That designers might be able to *push* or at least *strongly coax* players through an argument or experience has proven to be an attractive idea for scholars and designers alike. As Bogost's book rose to prominence, it became much more common to see works written from a design perspective that expanded upon this text to make arguments for what one can do or convey with or through video games.[2]

In Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play* (2009), the author defines her titular concept as "to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life" (6). Despite this initial mention of how one occupies play environments, the book largely explores ways that games can bring about critical reflection by design rather than through play. Here and in Bogost, the focus is on how one can create a game that deploys a particular argument or brings about a particular experience. And while I do not wish to suggest that these ideas are wholly flawed, it is telling, for our purposes, that the focus for these authors is not what players might experience through play, but rather how one might make a player experience something through play.[3]

An issue emerges from these works that frame the video game designer as a keeper and dispenser of privileged knowledge and the ultimate arbiter of any virtual play experience. These and other authors from what has been called the "proceduralist school" (Sicart 2011: para. 25) have been criticized for sidestepping the issue of player agency within the game as a system. More recently, Soraya Murray and others[4] have shed light on the fact that games "powerfully mirror, but also engender, a certain sense of how the world is" (2017: 2). Focusing on how to make games critical belies the fact that framing them as systems of rules is a helpful lens for deconstructing the political assumptions that they both inform and are informed by.

1 See Nissenbaum and Flanagan 2014 and Treanor and Mateas 2013 for examples not considered here.

2 See also Laff 2007.

3 This way of thinking about game design is so widespread that even students of design think in these terms. I recently helped with an undergraduate class in design, for instance, and I was struck by how students would ask questions like 'How do I *make* the player feel sad?' or 'How can I *get* the player to do what I want?'

4 The relations of games and/as culture are discussed from numerous perspectives including Chess (2017), Crogan (2011), Paul (2018), and Anable (2018), among others.

In response, Murray endeavours to shed light on the various ways that games "as powerful invocations of the lived world in playable form," contain "the core fears, fantasies, hopes, and anxieties of a given culture in a specific cultural context" (ibid: 2). Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter's assertion that the video game is the "exemplary medium of empire" (2009: xix) and late capitalism resonates with this work. Still, as has already been noted, they, along with other scholars such as Galloway (2006) and Schleiner (2017), have gestured to the various ways that players might undermine the game as rule system.[5] Robert Yang complicates this further when he writes that "software has no rights in itself, human users can always turn off a machine or delete a program. There is an inherent power dynamic that prevents software from ever meaningfully negotiating with humans" (2014: para. 8). Whether one sees games as flawed and mutable texts, or whether the player is a cultural dupe who acts at the behest of the designer's will, there is a clear tension surrounding how one might speak of the relation between player and game.

However, as Jess Marcotte explains, to treat this problem as one in which either games are designed systems of rules or free and open spaces of playful experimentation is to create a "false dichotomy" (2018: para. 29). As they rightly note, "as structures that facilitate play and encourage certain actions over others, the rules of a game cannot help but contain arguments. Such arguments are contextually-dependent, and may be interpreted differently depending on who is playing" (para. 29). Their work and similar writings from other scholars[6] instead suggest that considering player and game as one ecosystem (or power relation) is therefore a richer frame of reference, a provocation that I seek to implement in this piece.

The Play of Perception

We will begin with player perception in all its forms. While this paper will operate on the premise that there are three distinguishable degrees of player perception, I can certainly conceive of there being more, or indeed of it being a much less readily quantifiable relationship. The levels of perception discussed here are not

5 In the case of Schleiner, at least, this claim stems from her accounts of players "seizing back some of that which was lost to the game" (2017: 11). However, the notion of power as something that can be seized comes from the work of Michel de Certeau (1984) and not Foucault, for whom power is purely relational, never transactional. While this work is useful for broader discussions of play as critique, its lack of engagement with the Foucauldian framework places it beyond the scope of the present investigation. As will be noted in the conclusion, I also take issue with her suggestion that the critical potential she sees in 'ludic mutation' is limited to hackers, modders, and other privileged specialists. The critical language of play must be available to all.

6 See Voorhees, 2013 and Kocurek, 2018.

to be taken as airtight concepts, but rather as ways of teasing out the work of perceiving the systems in which we play.

A player is engaging with a **surface perception** of a game when they treat its operational logics at anything beyond a narrative level as unimportant. Most players new to a game begin in this mindset and game design literature's so-called 'ideal player' resides here indefinitely. Player perception is more grounded in performance than in understanding since even a player who has intimate knowledge of a game's code can play that game as though they had a 'surface perception'. Put simply, surface-perception play is a relative passivity with regards to whatever underlying operations are being performed by the game as software. In everyday life, one might liken this to only being concerned with a set of rules larger than oneself only insofar as it has a direct impact on their daily business.

I use the term **middling perception** to refer to players for whom the play space is one of exploration and experimentation beyond the scope of a game's explicit narrative. It is true that certain genres (such as sandbox games) produce this sort of interaction more deliberately by including a range of possible goals and side-quests that are extemporaneous to the main plot. What I am more concerned with, however, is a player's curiosity about how the game *works*. Such a player might tinker with a game's physics engine by interacting with objects in non-intuitive ways or may see what happens if they deliberately fail to enter an input at a critical moment. In other words, this level of perception is rooted in the 'play' of play.

This mode of interacting with a game recalls Suits' (2014) notion of 'trifling' or play that "recognize[s] rules but not goals" (47). By shirking the goals of a game, one abandons the intended path to progress. While such trifling can take many forms, it is at this point that the player may begin to discover discrepancies between what I have elsewhere[7] called a game's implicit rules (those which appear to exist based on the belief that a game's narrative is immutable) and the explicit rules (those that actually apply based on the game's code, glitches and all). Given the propensity of such exploratory play to reveal unintended exploits left in a game's code, a tangent on the nature of glitch is necessary.

Whereas most of game studies (and indeed this paper) use the term glitch to refer to an unintended error in the operation of a piece of software, the term has also been used more broadly. For Menkman (2011), a glitch is any "not yet defined break from a procedural flow, fostering a critical potential" (27). It is at once a rupture in a process and a revealing of how that process operates. This, coupled with Ahmed (via Heidegger)'s assertion that it is only when a technology is "no longer ready for action" that its "properties [...] are revealed" (2006: p. 48), brings the critical potential of glitches to the fore. For as much as we frame glitches as grumblings from within the impenetrable black box of technology, the larger architectures of power that shape our daily lives are no less 'black-boxed' when they are working as intended. In this sense, the glitch is something that is fundamental for

7 Scully-Blaker 2014.

a more universal understanding of either set of rules. This idea will be returned to in the conclusion, but for the moment we may be content with noting that in-game glitches may be both the inspiration for and fruits of trifling within the game world.

Finally, **total perception** in play is something that is generally developed over time by working within the playful experimentation of middling perception. As one exists within a certain system of rules (game), they develop a better knowledge of how the system operates and how they might operate within it. In the case of video games, this can result in players learning more about a game's inner workings than those who made it. However, not all individuals necessarily use this understanding to deviate from a designated path nor do they necessarily stray intentionally. This may be best illustrated with an example.

Consider *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998), in which you play through the story of the legendary hero, Link, and his quest to save all of Hyrule by defeating an evil king. Along the way, you must enter dungeons and cleanse them of aberrant beasts to remove all traces of evil from the land. At the end of each dungeon, you are presented with a sacred relic, a stone or medallion, as a testament to your bravery and prowess. Within the narrative of the game, Link must first collect all three 'Spiritual Stones' as part of a prophetic rite of passage before progressing from both one major segment of the game to another and from childhood to adulthood.

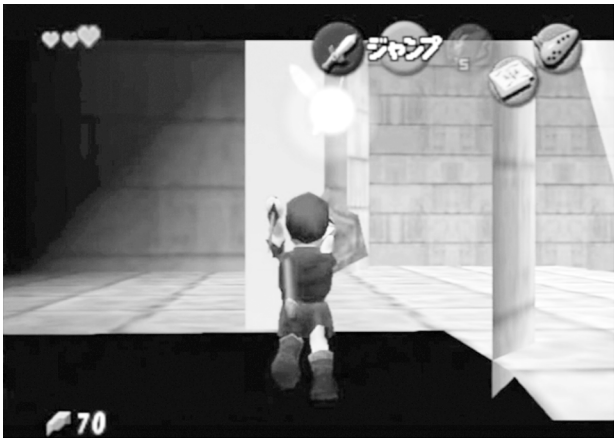
Players who perform a *surface perception* enact the legend as it is written. They collect all stones in their quest to smite evil. These players may be immersed enough to feel that the acquisition of each treasure is another step towards fulfilling their virtual destiny, or they may simply approach these tasks as necessary steps to completing the game. The rules of the game and the story it tells are effectively one and the same for this player and they are content to 'play along'. As noted above, such play is characteristic of a 'first playthrough' experience, however anyone can perform surface-level play.

If one is not necessarily committed to the script as it is written, they may be exploring a *middling perception* of the game. It may be more common to resist doing this until one has gone through the game 'as intended' at least once, however nothing stops one from tracing the boundaries of the possibilities afforded, explicitly or otherwise, by the game. In some cases, a first playthrough can be taken 'off-track' by the accidental discovery of a glitch that becomes more intriguing than normal play. In the case of *Ocarina of Time*, a player may decide that collecting all the spiritual stones is tedious. Prophecy aside, all the stones really do is signal to the powers that be (the gods of Hyrule or the game's code, depending on one's point of view) that our player is at a certain, quantifiable point in the quest.

Perhaps this player heads to the Temple of Time (the plot-significant structure where Link deposits the stones and enters into adulthood) and toys with the game's various movement options to see just how well the programmers blocked progression without the stones. Perhaps the player is not even trying to push against what I have previously called a game's rules, maybe they are just bored

and trying new things. Whatever the reason, a specific set of inputs in a specific spot reveals that Link can sometimes clip though objects and emerge on the other side. In this case, the object is the Door of Time, the literal threshold between two phases of the game (See Figure 1). A cutscene begins to play, signaling the transition from the childhood section of the game into adulthood even though not all of the trinkets of legend have been collected.

Fig. 1: Link clipping through the Door of Time, taken from a YouTube video by ZFG



At this point, one of two things may happen: this event may be written off as a freak glitch, an anecdote to recount to skeptical friends, or our adventurous player may continue toying with this newfound trick. Was it a fleeting accident or something reproducible? Here, again, our adventurer may approach the problem in one of two ways. They may continue to experiment in the game itself: when does this trick work? When does it not? Does it work anywhere else? Alternately, some may be capable of circumventing the play of guessing and testing by checking the game's code.

Regardless of *Ocarina of Time's* plot, it is a game made by people who have coded certain assumptions into the game. In this case, one major assumption is that any player who is seeing the cutscene that triggers Link's transition to adulthood has opened the Door of Time and so the game does not bother checking for those key items that should have already been necessary to arrive here. Since our intrepid player has clipped through the door, the cutscene plays and the plot advances even though, in-universe, it should not. If one can access and understand the game's code, then this and many similar assumptions can be found[8] and a new narrative, that of how the game was made, can emerge.

8 For a detailed list of this and other things that *Ocarina of Time's* code assumes, see Takahashi (2014).

These degrees of perception do not seek to paint a clichéd narrative of mastery through practice, but rather an accounting for the various extents to which people may make sense of the systems of rules to which they are subjected. In the case of a video game, one may inadvertently arrive at an understanding of how a game accounts for their exploratory, non-intuitive play habits just as they may discern exactly how a game is structured by reading its code.

It is also important to note that this process is seldom a solitary endeavor. I speak of 'the player' throughout this piece for the sake of clarity since the case studies present here all come from single-player titles. In the case of the speedrunning community (for whom tricks like clipping through the Door of Time become standard practice), the process of deepening one's perception of how a game operates begins with and is consistently informed by evolving communal knowledge bases.[9] While I would like to further explore the implications of this elsewhere, for the moment I suggest that the collective nature of player perception resonates with other theories of resistance to hegemony, which see strength in numbers rather than any one person.[10]

This, then, is the power in a perception honed through play. If one wishes, they may begin to trace the contours of how a piece of software was put together. This is only half of the equation, however. For all that we may celebrate the ability to plumb the murky depths of the proverbial black box, we would do well to remember that all the while, the black box may be gazing back at us.

Making Play (In)visible

We reset and start anew with the concept visibility and another broad claim. The 'better made' a game is said to be (the more seamless and less glitchy the experience), the more readily it accounts for the actions of the player and so the less alternatives to measurable progress exist. Returning to Foucault (1995) here, if the player's actions are limited to only those that the game can observe (i. e. those that are *visible* to it), then the video game is a mechanism that seeks to produce "docile bodies" – "subjected and practiced" (138) entities who police their own behaviours.[11] As with any broad claim, this bears unpacking.

9 For more on the speedrunning community and how it operates, see Scully-Blaker, 2016.

10 I am thinking of Hardt and Negri's (2000) multitude and Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) nomads, here.

11 Marcotte (2018) does well to tie this in to 'flow' as a design goal which seeks to eliminate a player's desire to reflect on the game they are playing in lieu of being 'in the moment'. As they note, "When a system is designed with optimal flow, people forget they are being subjugated" (para. 20).

In the world of professional sport, all players are more or less familiar with the rules of their game and have agreed to play by them, fully aware that an *observed* transgression of any sort will have a corresponding punishment. In soccer, for instance, a foul may result in a free kick or a penalty shot depending on context. It may even be that a referee does not see the foul at all, and play continues. While some professional sports use instant replay to minimize error, this is by no means the norm across all individual instances of a sport being played and even these technological remediations of play can be misinterpreted.

In the case of amateur sport, if one does not understand the rules of basketball, they may be a detriment to their teammates, but the game will still move from beginning to end with the flow of time. Perhaps, if a particular game of basketball is not being taken too seriously, players may do as De Koven (1978) suggests in *The Well-Played Game* and simply "change some of the rules" (45) to better accommodate all players. The laws of a game in natural space are generally malleable, to a point. In the case of video games, however, the software 'teaches' players a more rigid set of rules.

At the most basic level, progression through a video game is *only* achieved through a player's learning how to play. As others[12] have noted, this process is achieved through a careful deployment of failure after failure until one learns to play 'well'. It is through interaction that players learn how to embody the rules of a video game. Of course, these rules may exist only *implicitly*. That locked doors require keys is no great leap of logic and so players with a surface to middling perception in a particular game will likely abide by that rule unless they are taught otherwise.

In this sense, then, the ideal player – one who performs only a surface perception in their play – is a docile body, acting out the designed experience of the virtual world with only that world's goals in mind. This style of play exemplifies what we might call **total visibility**. As a system of rules, the game has fully accounted for the player's movements in that the player has not sought out in-game actions other than those the system has anticipated (and likely suggested as ideal) by design. The player perceives that if they stray from the recommended path, then something will see them and correct them, and no progress will be made.

Here and throughout this discussion, my reader must recall that I am only speaking of visibility and perception as they exist *between a player and a game*. Whether a player is somehow 'better' at a game than another has no bearing on these factors, however what Taylor (2012) and others call "power gamers" (10) are worth mentioning here since they are oftentimes the *most* legible players of a given game despite potentially displaying a high degree of perception as well. The relation I am describing is not a simple dialectic between low perception/high visibility and high perception/low visibility. These concepts overlap in a much wider variety of ways (See Table 1).[13]

12 See Juul 2013, for example.

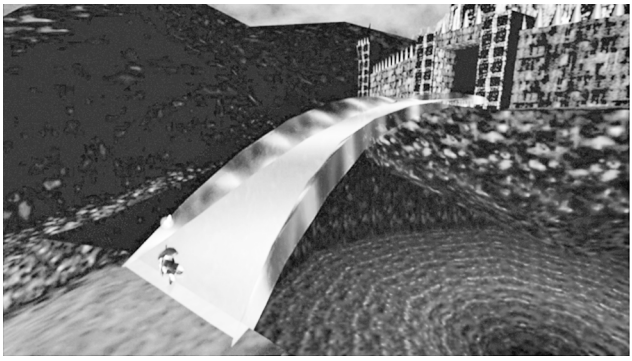
13 While I only have space to discuss certain parts of the table in this paper, it is telling for my purposes that it is much easier to find academic writing on the play practices

Table 1: Some relations between perception and visibility

	Total Perception	**Middling Perception**	**Surface Perception**
Totally Visible	eSports	Glitch hunting (failed)	Ideal Player
Partially Visible	Speedruns	Glitch hunting (successful)	Accidental glitches
Invisible	Modding or Glitch art	Determining why a crash happens	Accidental crashes

If one's play achieves only a **partial visibility**, then the game is able to account for the player's actions to a certain degree but the player has discovered through experimentation that certain implicit rules do not actually apply. Returning to *Ocarina of Time*, after Link has become an adult, he must awaken six sages and collect their medallions before gaining access to the final area of the game, a corrupted Hyrule Castle that is floating above a pit of lava. The player is told that it is only when Link enters this area with all six medallions that a path to the castle will be revealed (See Figure 2). In actual fact, however, in the cutscenes leading up to the final area of the game, the game's code only checks whether the player has collected the Shadow and Spirit medallions, the final two McGuffins that one earns in a standard playthrough.

Fig. 2: A corrupted Hyrule Castle, complete with rainbow bridge that only appears once Link awakens the Sages, image taken from Zeldapedia



that involve near-total perception than work being done to understand the practices of glitch-hunting and game crashes. I also wonder whether there are near-total perception/invisible play practices that do not require the sorts of specialized knowledge that make modding or glitch art possible.

Why the game is programmed in this way is not known for certain but it seems likely that the designers assumed players would collect all medallions in a certain order, or at least that players would be unable to acquire the last two medallions without acquiring the first four. Imagine, then, that a player figures out a way to collect only these two *explicitly* necessary medallions (as indeed some have) and foregoes acquiring the *implicitly* necessary ones. They then proceed towards the final area of the game and, after the game checks for the requisite items, the game's narrative unfolds as normal.

In this case, I argue, the player's actions are only *partially* legible to the software. Such play reveals which of a game's rules are only *implicit* in nature while still abiding by the *explicit* rules. It is as though one is at a border crossing with some piece of documentation out of order, but the guard does not ask to see that particular form on that occasion. The notable difference here, of course, is that any play that is or is not wholly visible to a video game remains as such (barring patches etc.) while the whims of a human agent are less consistent. It is precisely because a video game cannot change itself in the same way that we might change a pick-up basketball game that players are able to tinker within a space of middling perception and even acquire a total perception over time without having to read code.

Even so, such play is still *partially* legible to the software – the player may be distinguishing between which rules apply and which do not, but they are still therefore *following the rules*, even if the rules do not apply in the way that they appear (or even in the way that the designers intended).[14] The game can still 'read' the actions that it is coded to read and make an appropriate response.

For play to be truly **invisible** to a game, it must not only do something that the game's designers did not anticipate, but *something that the code itself cannot understand*. At present, I can conceive of at least two ways[15] that this might be achieved, though there may be others:

The first mode of invisibility is *altering the game code*, whether through the development and implementation of mods or, in rare cases, through exploiting a flaw in the software itself. I argue that such practices are illegible to the software because code cannot 'know' that it is being altered. It is perpetually situated in the present. If someone wishes to alter Link's sprite in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017) to look more like Cloud Strife from *Final Fantasy VII* (Square Enix 1997), then they can do so with the requisite knowledge (See Figure 3). Such a practice becomes illegible to the original game code since, following successful implementation of the mod, Link has always-already looked this way.

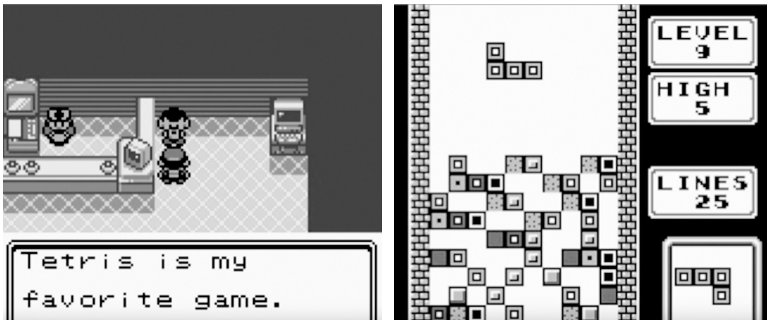
14 For a more in-depth rumination on the tension between speedrunning as subversion that still ultimately respects hegemonic goals, see Ruberg, 2019.

15 In addition to the two that I outline in the following pages, I believe that various cheating practices may possibly fall into this category, however, recalling Consalvo (2007), what might constitute cheating seems too nuanced to properly treat here.

Fig. 3: Screenshot of a YouTube video by user 'FDR – Fierce Deity Rick' about the Cloud Strife skin made by yamgaming

Related to but distinct from modding practices are programming oversights which allow one to rewrite a game's code through play itself. One notable example of this is *Pokémon Yellow* (Game Freak 1998), in which a carefully timed shutting of one's console while the game is saving transforms the in-game menus into a rudimentary hex editor. While speedrunners use this exploit to complete the hours-long game in minutes, others have used this glitch to create a variety of what are called 'arbitrary code executions' which are not at all geared towards completing the game. As the name suggests, arbitrary code executions can take many forms, but are often made to play elaborate cutscenes and customized songs in a manner that recalls machinima videos (See Figures 4 and 5).[16]

Fig. 4 and 5: Screenshot of an arbitrary code execution by MrWint which runs a working game of Tetris in the Pokémon Yellow software



16 Now a major YouTube channel, the term 'machinima' originally referred to the practice of making films in the virtual worlds of video games. For more on the subject see Lowood (2006).

A second mode of invisibility is achieved by *ceasing a game's operation altogether* through what game testers call 'hard' locks, those glitches that bring a game to a crashing halt. Executing such acts has less of a barrier to entry at the level of perception since such things often happen by accident to even those whose play would seem to be *totally legible*. This is not necessarily as robust a sort of invisibility as the first however it cannot be denied that in these cases, the player's actions are incapable of being accounted for to the point that one or more vital processes within the system cease to function. As noted in Table 1, a form of critical work that one might do through play involves learning how such crashes occur and whether they are repeatable.

Invisibility, then, is articulating what Franklin (2009) calls a "nonexistence in relation to software," (176)[17] something that may not have a counterpart in everyday life. Perhaps this is due to a limitation of Foucault's framework (or a unique affordance of the video game's) since, for him, there is no existing 'outside' of power relations. Having now described both perception and visibility at several 'gradients' and how these different playstyles may relate to one another, the primary focus of this paper is now achieved, but it is time for the other shoe to drop. Thus far, I have focused on glitches as they occur within the context of the game and its operation. It is now time to return to Menkman's broader notion of glitch and Ahmed's account of the value such interruptions and revelations may have.

Conclusions: Working 'on' and 'at' Play: The Labour of Critique

This paper began by claiming that the relationship between a player and a video game is one rooted in power and that this power relation could be illustrated with the help of two concepts: visibility (a system's ability to account for and understand the actions of those acting within it) and perception (one's ability to account for and understand this this process in the system that they inhabit). These concepts were expanded upon through the articulation of three 'gradients' of each, which were described in greater detail through the use of examples and a brief digression on the nature of glitches. Returning now to the idea that a glitch need not be an interruption to a *digital* process, I wish to ask: is video game play limited to revealing only programming oversights, or can it also bring to light a game's underlying sociopolitical values?

I am not simply referring to procedural rhetoric here, which is a conscious effort by the designer to impart some argument through processing. I am more interested in those larger systems of (often implicit) values discussed by Murray and others, more difficult to detect precisely because they are working as intended. Furthermore, if, as Wark suggests, the logic of game is not limited to pieces of

17 Although admittedly he uses this phrase to characterize the partially legible play endemic to speedruns, which I disagree with.

software, can play also be a means for enabling alternatives to the dominant logics that undergird everyday life? These are both large questions, but I would like to devote the rest of my space here to the beginnings of some answers.

Recalling Ahmed (2006), the oppressive norms set by the dominant (the State, the Patriarchy, the military entertainment complex[18], etc) "[disappear] from view" (91) because they are working as intended – they are the standards by which all are judged. As she notes of sexual orientation in particular: "orientations, too, involve work, as a work that is hidden until orientations no longer work" (ibid: 100) or, in other words, until they fail. It is in this context that queer theorists like Jack Halberstam (2005; 2011) discuss the idea of queer failure, a conscious choice to fall short of the standards of the dominant which "quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being" (2011: 88). I suggest that Menkman's notion of glitches as simultaneously interrupting and revealing larger processes that are not necessarily digital applies here. Indeed, Halberstam himself has also framed queer failure as a sort of glitch, a rupture from the processes of the dominant that simultaneously renders those processes perceivable.[19]

Through augmenting the experiences of these glitched lifestyles that stand in opposition to the dominant and focusing instead on how the system *fails* marginalized people, one can begin to trace the contours of the 'black box' of power itself and perhaps even disrupt its operations. This recalls the endlessly necessary and necessarily endless work of figures like Ahmed's feminist with a complaint who inhabits "what seems negative as an insistence that worlds can be otherwise" (2018: para. 8). As Ahmed illustrates, however, to contend with the slow violence of institutional time in this way is a fundamentally draining process which poses great risks to those marginalized individuals who are always-already oriented against the dominant.

In everyday life, one is generally loath to 'see what happens' if they try and break the rules of society. The consequences of discovering that what might have seemed an illegible or partially legible act was nothing of the sort can be great. In the context of a video game, however, this risk is lessened.[20] As Crawford (1982) suggests, "Games provide safe ways to experience reality" (15) through which one can explore "the psychological experiences of conflict and danger while excluding their physical realizations" (14). Recalling Wark's assertion that larger architectures of power can be understood as games and Murray's work to show how video games are encoded with (most often, dominant) ideology, I argue that games are precisely the sort of spaces in which we may articulate critical resistances to the various oppressive forces in our lives that cannot be assailed directly without taking great risks.

18 A term I take from Wark (2007).

19 See Ruberg (2017).

20 Issues of online harassment in particular keep me from suggesting that risk disappears altogether.

Just as we willfully play video games, so too, I think, may we willfully critique them by failing to play as intended. If, as Agamben suggests, all leisure is effectively labour, then we must work *on* and *at* play in ways that threaten the status quo instead of reifying it. This labour, which can be understood as a collective deepening of player perception, is necessary for the maintenance of *all* lives and not just some over others. My admittedly utopic desire is that, through play, we may change the games of power and the dominant in a way that undermines them and promotes social justice. At present, I call this practice *play as critique*.

Play as critique is a willful failure that can occur regardless of one's perception of how a game works. It is the laying bare of a game's operational logics so that they may be subject to the scrutiny of *all* who play, not just Wark's gamer theorist, Flanagan's critical game designer, or Schleiner's ludic mutator. Through the process of making manifest how a game functions, play-that-critiques equally allows us to interpret the vision of the world that is captured in those lines of code and held, either implicitly or explicitly, by the software's architects.[21] It is a call to players everywhere to become better readers of games as a means to become better readers of culture. It is a practice that is invested in De Koven's (1978) optimism that any game can be changed by those who play it, with the caveat that this work will not always be easy. It is a striving to be an embodiment of the glitch in whatever system one finds oneself, especially if that means fostering counter-hegemonic communities of care.[22]

If, under late capitalism, play and labour are inextricably linked, then we must work *on* and *at* play in a manner that interrogates not only video game machines, but the larger machines of ideology that drive them.

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21 For more on the encoded values of software see Noble 2018.

22 While the communities of players described by De Koven come to mind here, a more contemporary and salient example of a play community pushing for change might be found in the Game Workers Unite Movement.

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