ARTICLE

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Real Lives 2004: The Devil You Know...

"Modernity seeks to colonise the future; its watchword is control."
(Philip K Lawrence[1])

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the educational game software, *Real Lives 2004* (Educational Simulations, 2004) as a means of raising and reflecting on the relations between simulational practices and statistics. These relations animate many modes of the framing and interpretation of experience in the information age. They manifest in diverse phenomena and pose enormous questions for the analysis of contemporary technoculture. I have chosen to discuss this game as it presents an attenuated instance of a key problem posed by how experience is handled today. While this short commentary on one particular game cannot account for the scope and depth of the challenges posed by the technocultural "processing" of lived experience, it is my contention that *Real Lives 2004* provides a window onto key issues concerning the interplay of simulation and statistical analysis. The game presents as a "stripped back" simulational object lacking the detailed 3D interactive milieu of today's big budget commercial games. It also promotes the educational (and implicitly, critical and ethical) potential of ludic, simulational forms. As such, the game can be read as an under-sketching of the statistical simulation of existence that looks back over the history of this key tradition of governmental and instrumental control, while proposing its continuity in the pedagogical practices of the new media age.

As Philip K Lawrence argued in *Modernity and War*, controlling contingency became a central concern of the institutions and governments of modern, industrial, mass collectivities. Major traditions of critical social analysis, such as those of Marxist social and cultural critique and work inspired by Michel Foucault's analysis of the production of the modern subject have detailed the systems and dynamics of institutional control and debated both their significance and the means of contesting them. Statistics has been a key technique across these modern, rational (that is, calculative) systems. Paul Virilio suggests that the "statistical vision" is a

modern reincarnation of myth's analytical capacity to delineate implicit tendencies in the becomings of the social order.[2] Originating in early modern research on probability – and, more precisely, on risk in the context of gambling games – statistical analysis was applied systematically in the early decades of the nineteenth century to the study of populations precisely as a way of regulating the risks of the unknown potentialities of the burgeoning urban masses of industrial modernity. Statistical analysis and prediction techniques enabled governments and large corporations to make it more likely to encounter the new subject of modernisation as a known factor rather than as the "devil you don't know." Around the same time, warfare was becoming subject to the rational calculus of wargaming techniques for modeling armed conflict and to logistical procedures for coordinating the industrial, communications and transport infrastructures of the state with the strategic and tactical disciplines. The enemy other was also to become the devil you can know, budget for and plan to encounter with a winning set of coordinated procedures.

The birth of contemporary technoscience – and the technoculture that developed through adoption of its principles and instrumentation – in the crucible of total war saw a merger and cross-fertilisation of these two modern traditions. As Andy Pickering has argued, the "constitution" of postmodernity can best be traced in the outcomes of the military technoscientific assemblage from the Second World War onwards.[3] The disciplines and technical innovations of areas such as operations research (later to evolve into systems analysis), cybernetics, and strategic simulation are unthinkable without the techniques of statistical analysis. Conflict modeling and logistical flow-charting profited from these and fuelled other key developments for contemporary technoculture, such as the drive toward the computer-supported virtualisation of the real to better monitor, control and anticipate it (smart weapons development, automated nuclear defence projects, flight and vehicle simulator training). As I have argued elsewhere, following Paul Virilio, our computer-based, information culture cannot *not,* in my view, bear the marks of these military-industrial origins.[4] This is so for computer games in general, and also for the recent growth in pedagogical and "serious" gaming. Indeed, as Douglas D Noble points out, the foundations of modern educational theory in the US are to be found in a "militarized pedagogy" seeking improved problem-solving and decision-making training for the officer corps.[5]

This is not to say that educational games, or technocultural forms in general, can only be thought of as end-products of this history of military-industrial technoscience. There is a need, however, from time to time to refocus attention on these forms of contemporary existence from this perspective as it is often overlooked in discussions of their nature and merits. Now, in the time of the potentially everlasting war on terror, is one of those times. As we will see, *Real Lives 2004* is a game that simulates individual existences across the globe. The century of total warfare is not hard to discern in the facts and figures of its database. Beyond that, it is the game's adoption of the anticipatory, virtualising logics forged in the military-technoscientific assemblage, in the name of undoubtedly productive and ethical ends, that is of most interest here.

LIFE SKILLS

The makers of *Real Lives 2004* market it as a game that instantiates their philosophy of "enhancing understanding and compassion in an increasingly global society." This is a game aimed at (principally) high-school level social science students in the United States and similar educational milieux. Playing it, claims Educational Simulations' website, "challenges your life skills (not your hand-eye coordination) as you make difficult, high-stakes choices that lead to your success, or failure."[6] The player will learn about the real-life decisions that people must make as they pass from childhood to maturity, at the same time as s/he gains an increased awareness of how these decisions (and these decision-making skills) are conditioned by the real world contexts different people in the world find themselves born into as an accident of their birth.

Gameplay begins by being born at a certain locality in the world in a particular family configuration, determined by probability estimates based on global population and demographic statistics (although in this updated version of the original *Real Lives* game the player can select his/her own birthplace and gender). The game is turn-based, each turn representing a year. At each turn certain events may happen to affect the player's circumstances, such as social or political change, war, famine, family or individual health problems, accidents, and so forth. As the player-character grows older choices become available in areas such as leisure activities, whether to work or remain at school, whether to move to another residence or region, financial management, and personal relationships. The game interface is not immersive but informational, and decisions are made via dialogue boxes and the completion of "forms" representing choices related to activities such as budgeting, the apportioning of leisure-time between different pursuits, and so on. The "results" of player decisions arrive in message windows at the commencement of the next turn, initiating a further round of decision-making. The game is extensively supplemented by website links and detailed information (with citations) about the real world locality upon which the gameplay is modeled for the particular player-character.

Real life, "high stakes choices" or, rather, virtual "high stakes choices," are the core of the educative strategy of player engagement in *Real Lives 2004*. These choices are rendered personal to the extent that the player's avatar has a life that must be lived through this informational interface. It is, however, a limited engagement to the extent that the probabilistic, statistical basis of this virtual life is unceasingly marked through the game's interface and supplementary material. As Joan Copjec has shown in a discussion about the "modern phenomenon of statistics," statistical data collection and analysis are the centrepiece of the modern democratic state and its regimes of societal control and regulation. Here is Copjec on the origin of the modern state and its bureaucratic administration of numbers:

> Entire bureaucracies grew up around these numbers to count, cross-reference, and analyse them. But it was not merely numbers that were being manipulated by these bureaucracies; it was people, their happiness and well-being, that were primarily at issue. The interest in numbers was part of the modern nation state's concern for the welfare of the population, with whose well-being the state's own was now intimately linked. What statistics calculated was the 'felicity' of citizens

> and what they aimed at was indemnification against every sort of infelicity, every accident and misfortune. Statistics structured the modern nations as large insurance companies that strove, through the law of large numbers, to profit from the proliferation of categories of people, the very diversity of its citizens, by collectivizing and calculating risk.[7]

The translation of individual and cultural difference into numerical values is, in Copjec's analysis, a decisive technical development in the history of political modernity. It opens the way for the mathematical treatment of social and political issues via statistical analysis, modeling and prediction. Moreover, the appearance of the modern practices and disciplines of anthropology, geography, demography, economics, military logistics, urban planning, and (of most relevance to *Real Lives 2004*), development studies cannot be understood without understanding the importance of the techniques and technologies of statistical analysis to the episteme of democratic, technological modernity. Statistical measurement and analytical processes share a mathematical basis with the algorithms and computer programming enabling the simulation of a life in *Real Lives 2004*. The modeling of the specifics of the player-character's existential individual and contextual determinants fulfils the predictive function of statistical analysis in a virtual world that, while very different in its mode of appearing before the player, is closely related to the virtual spaces of flight simulation, adventure, immersive role play or first-person shooter games inasmuch as they are all playable fictions resulting from mathematical operations on a mathematically composed database.

While *Real Lives 2004* "challenges the player's life skills (not the hand-eye coordination)" it does so in such a way that the difference between it and a commercial computer game implied in this comment is overplayed. That is to say, like a supposedly "manual" skill-oriented game, the key to playing *Real Lives 2004* successfully lies in learning the game's program, or, as Lev Manovich describes it, discovering the algorithm operating the simulation's database.[8] This means that the game fulfils the classic function of simulation, modeling a phenomenon (in this case human existence today in its global diversity) through mathematical abstraction based on the statistical tradition of numerical selection and reproduction of the material recorded in the historical discourses of modernity. In this case the database is a product of the history of European colonialism and the knowledges of the non-European other originating from this history. This database is drawn from existing informational archives which nourish development studies, "human geography" and the rest of the above-named disciplines, which archival resources include: statistics from the World Health Organisation, UNICEF, the United Nations Population Division, "Human Development" Indices, "Life Expectancy" estimates, "Infant Mortality Rates," gross national product and other economic indices, satellite mapping image databases, and so on. This is the fuel provided to the "inference engine" of computational potential, enabling the computer-assisted simulation form to deploy the elements of hypothetical experimentation: replayability, programmability of initial conditions, iterative variation, comparative analysis.

Real Lives 2004 opens little alternative to its calculative, hypothetical experimentation with the mathematical database inherited from the project of global, technological modernity. A critical account of the representation of human existence today through this statistical rationalist tradition is not a designed outcome of *Real Lives 2004*. The naivety of this

educational project is evident in the lack of orientation implicit in the game's presentation of a hypothetical becoming-any-individual-whatever. I mean "naïve" here in the sense of "lacking in experience," something which is literally evident in the manner in which this simulation operates by means of probabilistic projections of/from the factical archives of human existence. The difference of this fictioning from that found in narrative, dramatic or other similar cultural forms for recording experience is crucial in this respect. In a fictional narrative, imaginary characters take significant form in a determined, meaningful sequence of events that *records a particular interpretation of lived spatio-temporal existence*, that is, one *arising from experience*. As Bernard Stiegler has argued in his study of the human-technical relation, experience is a process of individuation (of the individual and the collective) that unfolds in and through an engagement with the technical and social givens of one's existence.[9] These givens, those of the technical milieu and the socio-cultural heritage which precede the appearance of the individual, are made possible, that is transmissible, by the forms of "retentional apparatus" that each and every technical object is. The human as such, that is as "living technical being," is constituted through this possibility of the transmission of singular experience of the sensible world, says Stiegler, "that is to say, to the extent that experience is always itself singular and unexpected."[10]

The game's simulation of statistically imagined entities renders them all equally potentially significant as possible fictional extrapolations of the simulation's initial conditions. The strictly speaking oxymoronic notion of "simulated experience" is produced from these initial conditions. At this level of virtual equivalence between the player-characters as probabilistic speculations, the lesson of gameplay approaches the opposite of Educational Simulation's goal of "enhancing understanding and compassion in an increasingly global society." This is a paradoxical situation, given the game's enormous capacity to deliver masses of relevant, "accurate" and detailed information about social, political, cultural and environmental conditions around the world today. The paradox expresses the contradiction inherent in taking simulation on its "face value" as simply another (proliferating) tool for learning, training, thinking and for orienting people in the world. As Hans Christian Arnseth has argued in a recent assessment of discourses promoting educational research on computer gameplay's pedagogical potential, "the crucial issue in regard to learning is to situate meanings so that children or students are able to make sense of the principles and patterns of a domain through their participation in practices associated with the domain."[11] Situating the meaning of *Real Lives 2004* would have to commence by doubling back onto the domain of statistical and simulational control from which it emerges as a pedagogical iteration.

The matrix of equivalent possibilities of existence from which *Real Lives 2004* generates its hypothesised lives is not a viable starting point for an educative or compassionate encounter with the other, the other to the player's existence. It lends itself rather to a tendency toward what Stiegler would call a "synchronization" of processes of individuation – that is, to a reduction in the potential diversification of the possible ways of taking up the social and technical heritages that provide one's potential future. The player is presented with the experience in the game of their own statistical equivalence in and as existential potential available to the game's simulation engine. The diminution of the sense of life experience as always itself singular and unexpected is in effect a deterrent to the encounter with the other in his/her/their unexpected

otherness. This deterrent effect is in direct relation to the game's redefinition of the player's own sense of individuation wherein the potential of becoming (unexpectedly) other appears as mapped out within tolerances prescribed by the simulation engine. In Stiegler's terms, the game may provide "comprehension" of real lives today, where comprehension is understood as "the reduction to the identical," but it precludes any possible "sur-prehension" or surprise encounter with life through which "the experience of the singularity of the sensible" would disturb pre-existing expectations and open up repressed potentials for living and being-with the other.[12]

One could argue that perhaps this is precisely where the critical force of *Real Lives 2004* lies – that is, in its inscription of the Western, affluent, computer-literate player in an analagon of the real life experience of political, cultural and economic control conditions that so powerfully operate to delimit the potential individuation of the majority of human lives in the contemporary era of global multinational capitalism. Unlike the player at his/her computer experimenting with the life decisions of a poor Sudanese child or a Guatemalan share farmer, statistics tell us that the majority of people today do not have the material wealth, health and social support conducive to a large range of career or lifestyle options. Such a critical insight could be provoked by gameplay through interpretative reflection on the assumptions informing the deep structure of this global life-modeling machine. This describes my encounter with the game and, no doubt, this is not the only such encounter, even if the game's marketing does not address its meta-simulational critical potential. In this regard the game works best as an educative interactive experience when it incites speculation on its failure to work – that is, on its inability to enhance "understanding and compassion in an increasingly global society." As encounter with the horizon of "comprehensive" knowledge in which life is modeled through the statistical apparatus of Western modernity, the horizon of the notion of the "global society," *Real Lives 2004* works as an experience of inexperience of the other. In so doing, it makes possible the disturbance of this formidable horizonality, constituted precisely on the basis of this inexperience, but also therefore on the possible "return" of other experiences over the horizon. The game makes this possible, but in the ostensible, designed engagement with the game outlined in the game's marketing, help files and menus, this critical, "surprising" potential is well hidden.

1 PK Lawrence, *Modernity and War: the Creed of Absolute Violence* (Basingstoke: St Martin's Press, 1997), 62.

2 P Virilio and S Lotringer, *Pure War*, trans. Mark Polizzotti and Brian O'Keefe (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 20.

3 A Pickering, "Cyborg History and the World War II Regime," *Perspectives on Science: Historical, Philosophical, Social*, 3 (1995), 21.

4 P Crogan, "Gametime: History, Narrative and Temporality in *Combat Flight Simulator 2*," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, eds, Mark JP Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003).

5 Douglas D Noble, "Mental Material: The Militarization of Learning and Intelligence in US Education," in *Cyborg Worlds: The Military Information Society*, eds, Les Levidow and Kevin Robins (London; Free Association Books, 1989), 13-42.

6 See Educational Simulations' Homepage, http://www.educationalsimulations.com/index.html. Last accessed on 30 October, 2008.

7 Joan Copjec, "The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in *Film Noir*", in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 171.

8 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2000), 223.

9 Bernard Stiegler, "Desire and Knowledge: The Dead Sieze the Living," trans. George Collins and Dan Ross, paper presented at the Tate Modern Gallery, London, May 2004, available at Ars Industrialis website, http://www.arsindustrialis.org/. Last accessed on 30 October, 2008.

10 Stiegler, "Desire and Knowledge," 3.

11 Hans Christian Arnseth, "Learning to Play or Playing to Learn: A Critical Account of the Models of Communication Informing Educational Research on Computer Gameplay," *Game Studies*, 6:1 (December 2006), 9, available at http://www.gamestudies.org. Last accessed on 30 October, 2008.

12 Stiegler, "Desire and Knowledge," 13.

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