Playful Identities

The Ludification of
Digital Media Cultures

EDITED BY VALERIE FRISSEN,
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Through their deployment of interactivity, virtualization, and simulation, video games are prime examples of the contemporary form of what philosopher of technology Bernard Stiegler has termed the "industrial temporal object" (2009, 241). This is his term for mass produced media works designed to provide experiences that unfold over time through the user's provision of his/her conscious attention. From the phonograph's replaying of musical performances, to editing together film shots and the compilation of longer sequences of experience in television scheduling, to the design of systems for user-configured perceptions in newer media forms, industrial temporal objects have played an increasingly significant role in the formation of individual and cultural identity since the launch of industrialization in 19th century Europe. In Stiegler's view, "industrial temporal objects" amount to much more than novel forms of entertainment or communication. The experiences produced by these media are constituted in the course of the flux of the interior consciousness of the individuals engaged in following – and in the interactive era, in co-producing – the flux of their unfolding. The very nature of experience, as what is lived by the individual in and as a necessarily shared milieu of mediated, collective experience, is to a significant degree determined today by industrial temporal objects. In this our "postindustrial" moment, the influence of digital industrial temporal objects tends to outweigh that of the other, older forms of mediated experience as they are integrated into the convergent paradigm of the "being digital" of mediation in general.

In an era when concepts such as "experience design" and the "attention economy" define the milieu of commercial digital media production, it is crucial for critical accounts of contemporary audiovisual culture, and of video games in particular, to take account of the nature of these forms as industrial temporal objects. As the first major entertainment media "native" to the digital computer, video games offer a privileged vantage point from which to develop such an account. This paper proceeds from the conviction that the experience of video game play in its conventional, commercially designed form makes readable a major influence digital industrial temporal objects have in shaping contemporary experience. The predominant tendency manifest in "game time" is toward an anticipation, indeed a preemption, of events that are experienced as phenomena requiring a solution or a

decision. The user learns to anticipate game challenges, which are designed to arrive as configurable – that is, readable, navigable, decidable, solvable, and treatable – through the instrumentation provided by the interface. A certain temporalization of the future events, that is, a certain way of experiencing what happens in time, in short, a certain experience of time or a certain temporality of experience, is provided in the conventional adoption of the video game industrial temporal object by its player.

I have elsewhere characterized this "preemptive temporalization" with reference to the histories of digital simulation, computerization, and interactive virtualization (Crogan 2003). The task there was to show how these key components of today's digital culture emerged from the logics – or, in Paul Virilio's terms, the logistics – of Cold War techno-science (ibid.). What I will offer in this chapter are some reflections on the challenge to individual and cultural becoming associated with this tendency toward the temporalization of the future as anticipated, configurable eventuality. I say individual and cultural becoming here to signal the importance of approaching this question of game-time as one that bears directly on, precisely, the dynamic that links individuals and collectives. This is what philosopher of technology Gilbert Simondon calls individuation (2007). Individuation as a process, rather than preexisting, individual entities entering into relationships, is the key conceptual shift Simondon produces with this notion. Individual entities must always be understood as elements related to other elements in groupings and, moreover, it is the development of these relations that constitutes the elements rather than the converse. Simondon has been influential in a number of major philosophical and critical projects, including those of Paul Virilio, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Stiegler. The focal point of this influence is Simondon's insistence on the primacy of the dynamic of the reciprocal becoming of the individual and its ensemble. This was elaborated first in his account of technological evolution and subsequently as a general principle for understanding all manner of phenomena natural, technical, and social.[1]

This challenge to individual and cultural becoming, then, is related to – indeed it coincides with – the challenge to critical thinking of and in the coming digital age. Drawing on Bernard Stiegler's activist mobilization of Simondon's account of individuation, I will argue that the ludic industrial temporal object exemplifies a wider digital cultural tendency toward the radical destabilization of the dynamic of individuation constituting contemporary identity and sociality. Being precisely a dynamic relation between individuals and collectives, individuation is always *mediated* by specific techniques, technologies and technological systems. Individuation

rolls on at the always technical and prosthetic nexus of the "and" between individual and collective.

From this nexus, however, arises also the potential for critical and creative detourings of this preemptive tendency. I will explore some of these that are being pursued in critical game design, and via other interventions in the routines of gameplay cultures. These detours play out contemporary playtime differently, seeking to lengthen and complicate the circuits of communication, response, reflection, negotiation, translation, and so forth that comprise the interactions between individuals and collectives in and between the virtual digital "spaces" of gameplay and its contemporary techno-cultural context. They serve both to sharpen the apprehension of the ludic industrial temporal object in its mainstream development and to play with/in that developmental trajectory. If, as Johan Huizinga claimed, *homo ludens* remains a constitutive and crucial characteristic of humanity (1955), then today it does so more on the basis of such counter-adoptions of the digital techno-cultural "program" than based on the observation that all computer-mediated activities appear increasingly game-like. What today goes by the neologism of "gamification" – the creation of game-like interfaces and the inclusion of game-like elements in all manner of digitally provided goods and services – may in fact constitute the very antithesis of what Huizinga called the "play-element" of culture.

Second Person Shooter: Dislocative media

The experimental games artist/activist and theorist Julian Oliver has been playing with a variant of a First-person shooter game (FPS). The FPS has been one of the most influential proponents of the commercial video game form of interactive engagement in an illusory three-dimensional space. First exhibited in 2006 at the exhibition organized by Furtherfield entitled "Game/Play", *Second Person Shooter* disturbs the player's routine identification in FPS gameplay with a dynamic perspective of the world provided by the game's scene generation engine (Game/Play 2006).[2] Instead of seeing the virtual space as if one is looking at it from the point of view of one's in-game avatar, the player sees (from) the point of view of the other. Instead of driving the vision of what can be seen and therefore targeted in the conventional mode of situated immersion in the simulated space of play, the player's control input can bring him/her face to face with themselves in the form of their avatar. Their actions are then perceived as both divided from and reunited from their perspective of the virtual space. As Oliver

has it, seeing from the "outside looking in", they now no longer embody the "vision machine", but must negotiate and navigate its machinations differently (Selectparks 2010).[3]

Oliver has commented on the occasion of his recent return to the task of developing a downloadable playable demo of *Second Person Shooter* that it amounts to a "displacement of agency and [...] a crisis of control – a Dislocative Media if you like" (Selectparks 2010). The dislocation in virtual spatial orientation is an apparently simple artistic and technical gesture, but it enacts a profound temporal and conceptual dislocation of the FPS industrial temporal object and, more generally, of all the ludic forms adopting the first person view as a mode of interactive gameplay. This mode, aside and often in combination with the third-person view showing the player's avatar in action in the virtual space, comprises the majority of play modes in the majority of commercial video game genres, from adventure to massively multiplayer online games, to flight, vehicle, and sport simulations, and all the FPS variants from classic shooters to survival horror. Agency and control, as Oliver says. These are the constituents of the experience being constructed through the attention given to gameplay by the player. The player learns to make the vision machine show him/her that agency in the virtual space.

The industrial temporal object is an experience generator. Cinema was one of the first global industrial temporal objects. Its most significant predecessor, the phonograph, offered a temporal experience of a musical recording, but it made the technological means of its delivery – recording and playback system – its key commodity. With cinema, the collective experience of its unfolding became the commodity in the form of a ticket to see rather than to own the film. One encountered an experience prosthetically grafted onto one's consciousness; an experience not lived by the viewer except in its "recollection" where its unfolding, as Stiegler argues, coincided exactly with the unfolding of the consciousness who comes to constitute it in and through this coincidence (Stiegler 2011, 23). And this was a collective, indeed a mass phenomenon.

There was nothing new, however, in the fact that one's particular individual experience was prosthetically supplemented by those of others. As Stiegler argues, this is the very condition of human beings as cultural beings, that is, as historical beings that inherit the past experiences of those forbearers who no longer exist. This inheritance comes in the form of the passing down of techniques and the artifacts that go with them. Stiegler's philosophy of technology turns on this apprehension of technical artifactuality as the exterior form of memorization that is co-constitutive of

cultural transmission, along with the interior, experiential memory of the psychic individual, itself composed with the genetic memory of the biological organism. In this regard, cinema is a technique and a technology whose lineage stretches way back to the earliest marking and sculpting tools, pigment production techniques, and other forms of recording and making communicable the psychic, interior response to experience (Stiegler 1998, 152). The production, reproduction, and evolution of cultural experience rests on the memorious capacity of these "exteriorizations" which outlive their creators.[4] With the phonograph, and even more the cinema and its progeny – including computer games – what was new was the capacity to industrially design and produce experiences made of the very flux of attentive minds on a massive, indeed, international scale.

In the tradition of modernist artistic gestures such as the Russian Formalists' *ostranenie* ("making strange") and Brecht's *Verfremdung* (alienation-effect), Oliver exposes the norms of the FPS industrial temporal object by displacing their usual taking place. The player has learned to anticipate an engagement in the task of successfully constituting an experience of interactive mastery over the challenging elements in the virtual space. The rewiring of his/her input-output node in the game system frustrates mastery and immediately confronts the player with an uncertainty that industrial temporal objects are designed precisely to avoid: what is this experience I am "having"? Is it entertainment? Will it still be "fun"? What am I paying attention to, paying with my attention, spending my time on?

By expropriating the player's usual point of view and reallocating him/her the position of the virtual other, *Second Person Shooter* disturbs the reigning "worldview" of FPS forms of play. The opponent is no longer just over there, encountered as a challenge, obstacle, or competitor. The confusion of first and second person, of virtual and actual opponent, of self as "director" of the gameplay (a ludic "vision switcher", in the terminology of live television production) and as avatar surprising the player with its appearance on screen, undoes the cybernetic functionality of gameplay. What Peter Galison called the "ontology of the enemy" informing the early development and promotion of cybernetic thought, and faithfully maintained in all the shooter game forms, is deconstructed through Oliver's technical sabotage (Galison 1994).

Hyper-synchronization

The experience of gameplay as an event where the other (and the self) is encountered, is the profound terrain to which Oliver's *Second Person Shooter*

quickly relocates one from the habitual expectation of an entertaining experience of interactive control. This is achieved because the FPS form, as a major mode of the video game industrial temporal object, currently conditions experience and eventfulness on a massive scale. In both single-player and multiplayer modes, online and offline, individual and collective interactions are planned and played out in these contemporary technologies and techno-cultural practices. First-person perspective gameplay is a significant component of what Stiegler calls the "relational technologies", which increasingly occupy and supplant the role of older "relational techniques" in the ongoing efforts of industry to design, standardize, and commodify experience of all kinds (Ars Industrialis 2010).[5]

For Stiegler, Simondon's notion of individuation is key to grasping the implications of the passage toward the digital era of real-time, online connectivity where technologies increasingly condition the terms and shape of collectivity. As I outlined in the introduction, Simondon emphasized the dynamic of permanent becoming where what was most important were the relations between elements in an ensemble, and between individual elements and the collective in which they operate. Rather than beginning from a notion of preconstituted, discrete elements that enter into relations with each other, Simondon insisted on the primacy of the relation so that the identity of any individual component only ever emerged as a contingent and at best meta-stable form in what he called the "transductive" becoming of the components in relation to each other.[6] This was fundamental to his theoretical struggle against entrenched notions of technology, which were so many variations on the idea of the tool. From this perspective, the technological object is essentially the instrument of (an equally essential) human user realized in different forms across different histories and cultures.[7] Technology is relegated in this conception to the margins of human being and becoming, playing a purely contingent role as means to human ends. For Simondon, however, the technical object must be understood as a "social organizer", absolutely intrinsic to social and cultural becoming (Simondon in Barthélémy 2010b).

Stiegler's critical adoption of Simondon emphasizes the crucial role of technology in the human socio-historical becoming that Simondon identified as a particular mode of individuation that he called "trans-individuation" (2007). I will venture a brief overview here of Stiegler's reading of trans-individuation because it will enable a key characteristic of video game experience design to be identified from a perspective that properly frames its critical significance in the context of our concerns. This will also occasion a dialogue between Huizinga's work on cultural ritual

and play and Simondon's ideas on the individual and collective dynamic. If video game play can be, and has been, approached as a continuation of the centrality of what Huizinga called the "play-element" of culture, we will see that this continuation is techno-culturally conditioned and, as part of trans-individuation, does not proceed from some essential origin in a way that would guarantee its ceaseless re-emergence as the kind of elemental cultural doubling or suspension Huizinga analyzes.

As with individuation more generally, in trans-individuation the individual and the group are theoretically separable, but not in reality. "The psychic individual," Stiegler argues, "is originally psychosocial, and the social is not an 'intersubjective' aggregate of already-constituted individuals" (2011, 94). Individuation is a process, and incompletion is its key characteristic, indeed, its engine. With human trans-individuation, the questions of agency, decision-making and politics in general immediately arise around the themes of identity and its horizon: who or what should "we" become? For Stiegler, the political must be approached through a critical apprehension of Simondon's notion of trans-individuation because only in this way can contemporary technological dynamics be effectively conjugated with the urgent ecological, economic, and political questions confronting an increasingly global human becoming. The digital mediation of the (experience of) world assumes its full significance in this perspective. This is increasingly the milieu in which people and cultures negotiate a response to their incompletion by individuating themselves.

I and We are two faces of a single process of individuation. What is common to both along with their incompletion is the reservoir of potential that Simondon called "preindividual reality":

> Participation [in the social], for the individual, is the fact of being one element in a much bigger individuation through the intermediary of the charge of preindividual reality that the individual contains, that is, of the potentials it conceals (Simondon in Stiegler 2011, 95).

For Stiegler, this preindividual reality needs to be thought, indeed, equated with the heritage of technical artifacts which amount to an exteriorized memory enabling human cultural transmission. The recollections stored in these artifacts are analyzed in the *Technics and Time* volumes as "tertiary retentions" inasmuch as they form a retentional complex with the two other forms of memory informing human becoming – the primary retention of the conscious perception of events and the secondary retention of events as remembered experiences (Stiegler 1998, 246ff.).[8] Tertiary retentions comprise

the "already there" of culture, its language, stories, rituals, techniques, arts, objects utilitarian and sacred, all the norms and prescriptions carried on and passed down in the form of practices and things. All this amounts to an archive of exteriorized memory (ibid., 249).

The constitutively incomplete psychic individual inherits this archive and negotiates with it the emergence of his/her individuality. The individual's own recollected experiences (secondary retentions) and indeed his/her consciousness of and in the living present (primary retention) have the tertiary retentional archive as their structural substrate (Stiegler 2011, 97). There is no "proper" human being that does not individuate on the basis of a specific adoption of particular cultural practices and identifications made possible by tertiary retention. Just what constitutes this propriety, this humanity, is ethically and indeed politically debatable, a debate which would always have to negotiate particular historical and cultural contextualizations. It is precisely the comprehension of this that is on the critical horizon of both Stiegler's project and that of this essay.

In its dynamic response to incompleteness, the psychic individual mobilizes the resources of preindividual reality in generating its "group dynamic" of the negotiation and evolution of identification(s). The stock of tertiary retentions is also, and through this same process, what the collective bears as its potential for change. Each individual member invested in the group repeats this process differently by adopting and actualizing the potentiality stored in tertiary retentions. Stiegler has a neat formula for this elsewhere: techno-cultural artifactuality is the "and" in the phrase "individual *and* collective individuation" (Stiegler 2006c).

Huizinga's "play-element" of culture can be understood, then, in relation to preindividual reality inasmuch as the latter is never a static or idealized ground of identity. Rather, it is lived in individuation. The play-element would seem to characterize a major mode of engagement with the inheritable tradition of techno-cultural forms. For example, Huizinga discusses how the "savages" participating in "archaic rituals" retain an awareness of "only pretending" to incarnate spirits and deities (1955, 22). The suspension of disbelief in the entity invoked by the ceremonial mask is taught by tradition inasmuch as it is reproduced in the execution of all the techniques of preparation for the ritual. Similarly, the "magic circle" is a technique as much as it is an irreducible, "primary" category of life (ibid., 3). The interior mentality of pretending is transmissible precisely because of its exterior, artifactual retention.

From the perspective I am seeking to develop here on video gameplay as a techno-culturally enabled form of contemporary trans-individuation,

it is less significant than it appears to be for Huizinga that play is an ir-reducible, "primary" element humans share in common with the higher mammals. For Stiegler, who draws extensively on André Leroi-Gourhan for his perspective on the emergence of the human being from an animal being, genetic and biological modes of transmission and becoming are no doubt components of human individuation, but they are no longer exclusive or essential. On the contrary, a human being is a becoming based on a non-basis; on a "being-in-default" of essence (Stiegler 1998, 188). What distinguishes (if it does not absolutely oppose) the human from other animals, even tool-using and technology-building species, is that human collective development and differentiation is principally techno-cultural. The phylogenetic becoming of animality is no longer the primary ground of human "evolution". Ethnic, that is, *cultural* becoming has already supplemented and supplanted this with what Stiegler calls an "epiphylogenetic" process (ibid., 177).[9] The recording of individual ex-perience that enables the creation of the artifactual heritage of collective cultural records supplements human development and in the process transforms it from species to ethnocultural evolution. Technicity is the key medium of this transformation through the formation of the artifactual "preindividual reality". We can think of *homo ludens* then as a figure of the human-in-potential at play in the *Spielraum* of individuation afforded them via the stock of tertiary retentions.

To be fair, Huizinga in *Homo ludens* is concerned not with a simplistic essentializing of human beings, but with the developmental trajectory of play from "lower" to "higher" forms across the history of cultures and civilizations. Moreover, he recognizes the potential for this trajectory to end in the transformation of cultural practices into other non-playful modes of living. To cite a famous (and not irrelevant) example, in discussing war as an instance of the play-element, Huizinga proposes that so long as war is made through a system of limitations it remains a form of play, but "the theory of total war" banishes war's cultural function and extinguishes "the last vestige of the play-element" (1955, 90). It is not simply the theory, however, but the techno-cultural "invention" of total war out of the industrial, logistical, and techno-scientific revolutions in the conduct and preparation of war (with wargaming not playing an insignificant role) that must be considered as key to the extinguishing of the play-element. What calls forth the theory's crystallization in the early decades of the 20th century is the dynamic of the mobilization and transformation of the preindividual milieu known as industrial modernization, rationalism, capitalist political economy, the development of techno-science, and so forth.

The collective, then, is not simply a spiritual or ideal projection. No spirit without the artifactual, no interior without the exterior, no individual without a technically facilitated gesturing toward the potential future of the group. The gestures are always techniques, and today, more and more of these are technologically conditioned and prescribed. In a reciprocal fashion, Simondon states that "an individual who is absolutely, perfectly complete and perfect individual can never be part of a group; the individual must be the bearer of tensions, predispositions, potentials" (Simondon in Stiegler 2011, 97). Stiegler adds that individuation "puts the I in motion, which moves the I (emotion). The I has space to project many ideal possibilities of itself as a we," entailing it in the living out of all kinds of "dramaturgies, intrigues and stories; metastability is resolved in movement, structure and transformation" (2011, 98). I would add here to this list the games, rituals, and ceremonies with which Huizinga is concerned. His identification of the play-element in the *droemonon* (action, rite) of ancient Greek culture can be considered as a source form of the long-running Western drama of inadequation (1955, 14).

Stiegler does not have much to say specifically about video games, but his analysis of the tendency of the contemporary expansion and penetration of industrial temporal objects into the spheres of lived experience offers an insight about their contribution to the shifting of the technical conditions of trans-individuation today. For Stiegler all media, as technical components of human becoming, are both necessary supplements and dangerous *pharmaka* – forms that like medicinal compounds can be both poison and cure (Stiegler 2010a, 5).[10] In terms of our discussion of individuation, the principal danger Stiegler identifies today is to be found in industrial media programming trying to overdetermine individuation. As experience generators, industrial temporal objects provide increasingly larger proportions of the material upon which the to and fro of individuation is transacted. This material is the store of experiences available for recollection by the "living-present" of consciousness, having passed through it in the form of lived experiences. The proliferation of digitally mediated experience tends to construct a pathway toward a quasi-"living present" of the psychic individual, a kind of predetermined, quasi-complete individuation.[11]

The danger, then, has resonances with what Heidegger characterized in *Being and time* in his analysis of the "They" (*das Man*, in French, *l'On*, the One; Stiegler 2011, 102). For Stiegler, what is most troubling is that this "synchronization" of the individuation of individuals confuses the I-We dynamic; worse, it tends to annul it. It tends to annul what he calls "dia-chronization", the movement of individuation in time. This is where the

play-element can reside as a potential mode of the replaying of inherited and received experience (ibid., 96). That is, it annuls becoming, which is to say it annuls human time, insofar as it is the timing of the drama of incompletion. At least, this appears as a tendency today, on the horizon of contemporary trans-individuation.

Now, as Stiegler makes clear, synchronization itself is not the danger, but rather it is a necessary, technically enabled component of individuation. Stiegler points out: "A synchronization is always at work in public commemorations, private or public festivals, and other cultural moments, but always as moments of exception" (ibid., 100). The play-element resides as much in the provision of these synchronizing moments as in their playful reinvention through diachronization. Contemporary digital media's extensive expansion of intensive synchronization (tending toward the becoming-mediatized of all work and social instrumentalities), however, floods experience with a continuous flux of "moments of exception" – specials, spectaculars, new technologies of presentation (HD, 3D), communication (mobile devices, pervasive media) and interaction (Kinect), new devices and apps, unmissable new releases, models, sequels, add-ons, plug-ins, among others. A hyper-synchronization arising from the competition to capture and retain the attention of users, to regulate and sustain consumption in the service of the most rapid amortization of investment in production, undoes the meta-stability of individuation, and undermines belief and consequently investment in it. Hyper-synchronization breeds hyper-diachronization: atomization, fragmentation, discrediting of political and cultural values, extremist politics, generalized cynicism, pathologies of civility, de-sublimation of the idealized objects of social identity, order, and morality (ibid., 102). This is the scope of Stiegler's diagnosis of the pharmacological risk of the predominant logics informing the implementation of the global digital techno-cultural medium of trans-individuation. As major forms of the contemporary digital entertainment milieu, video games participate in and might even be thought to exacerbate this problematic hyper-synchronization. The virtualization characteristic of mainstream video game forms is found among so many genres that it is delivered through the modeling of a preemptive *droemenon* encountered in technologically designed and interactively controlled space. "Serious" simulation designer Robert G. Sargent calls this the software model of reality's "problem space" (2005). As a default mode of engagement, one is synchronized with the task of attaining control over the problem through virtual agency. The replaying of experience in this mode tends to squeeze out the *Spielraum* of Huizinga's play-element. Its function is already programmed as an anticipatory preemption of the event.

From this perspective, video games can be approached as industrial temporal objects that tend, paradoxically, to extinguish the play-element in culture rather than inherit and reanimate it. To take up and play a video game in the "designed" manner may not be to "play" in the sense of playful adoption of tradition that we have drawn out as one important element of Huizinga's play-element. More often than not it retains the agonistic component also identified by Huizinga as a core characteristic of play. In its widely recognized cybernetic character, however, perhaps it is best approached – along with much of contemporary digital culture, as a casualty corresponding to the extinguishing of the play-element of war in total war that Huizinga acutely observes – total war amounting in effect to the collapse of any distinction or limit between war(time) and peace(time).[12]

Digital artist and activist Joseph DeLappe's intervention in America's Army provides a telling example of the stakes of hyper-synchronization. Using the ID tag, "dead-in-iraq", DeLappe logs in and joins multiplayer squad-based shooting contests in this successful US military-designed tactical shooter. Rather than participate in the gameplay he uses the in-game chat window to list the name, rank, and death dates of US military personnel killed in Iraq since 2005. Commentators have examined the way *dead-in-iraq* confronts players with the "reality" that their virtual game world both evokes for the purposes and objectives of gameplay and avoids in its virtual, circumscribed modeling of armed conflict (Stahl 2010, 63; Blackmore 2005, 75).

From our perspective, however, the genius of *dead-in-iraq* is the way it confronts the player with the collective dimension of their definitive incompletion. DeLappe's project is an ongoing memorial intervention in this hyper-synchronizing mediatized experience of permanent virtual combat. DeLappe counterposes one synchronizing gesture of recollection against another: the Army is proud to showcase its tradition of professionalism and achievement, as the "Real Heroes" pages on the official America's Army website demonstrates (America's Army 2010). These pages provide profiles and links to media relating to selected personnel who have been decorated as a result of their actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. *Dead-in-iraq* tries to create another kind of pause for an exceptional, suspensive mode of synchronized recollection amidst the permanently respawning, intensive play of virtual combat. It can be read "epistemologically" as an assertion that "this is real while you play a fake game", but it is closer to DeLappe's method to say *dead-in-iraq* gestures towards a time that the players have "lost" in their agonistic, but perhaps, no longer playful simulation.

Fig. 1: Joseph DeLappe, *dead-in-iraq* (2006 – ongoing).

Playing (for) time

Hyper-synchronization is, for Stiegler, a tendency of contemporary digital techno-culture, a counterpart and, indeed, a crucial agent of the possible breakdown of the ecological milieu in which humans currently continue to exist – ever more precariously scientists advise us – in their present techno-cultural state of development. As our examples have already shown, along with many other critical and creative adoptions of the simulational and virtual industrial temporal object, the latter may be adopted, lived out, and lived through other than in the predominant logics of commercial experience design. Such alternative works seek to interrupt these logics playfully, and make a crucial gesture toward opening up other potentials in these forms that are now part of the substrate of preindividual reality.

If I have presented a rather gloomy prognosis for contemporary digital techno-culture, it is somewhat to echo and amplify the forebodings about the dominance of a mechanistic, technocratic reorganization of society that Huizinga saw all too clearly from his vantage point in occupied Netherlands during the era of total war. Even if we do not share his conditions of incarceration, and military occupation, we are nonetheless also living during a "wartime" today.[13] We are in a permanent war on terror, in which

the "post-war warring" that James Der Derian analyzed as the latest phase of Virilio's "pure war" – the permanent preparation for war has become the organizing principle for "peacetime" lived in the shadow of thermonuclear war – and our experience in post-9/11 in the redefinition in the US and elsewhere of national politics and international relations in terms of "security" (Der Derian 2001, 59).

Roger Stahl argues that America's "militainment" media culture is best understood as a wartime media culture, but one that serves through its reprocessing of war as an entertaining spectacle to keep it at a distance from consumer society in order to avoid any critical reflection on the civil and political responsibility of waging war in the name of "the people". It also exacerbates, however, some of the contradictions of this distancing through its intense and immersive involvement of the spectator-player in the (often) interactive experience of armed conflict (Stahl 2010, 8). Whether one concurs with this reading of militainment, Stahl is right to start from the observation that war is not missing from video games and many of the other industrial temporal objects of mainstream entertainment media. On the contrary.

All the more important, then, are those efforts to question the default settings of these relational technologies through which we live (through) wartime. The British new media artists Langlands and Bell's *The house of Osama Bin Laden* (2003) is an interactive installation that explores the Western world's efforts – military, cultural, and economic – to refashion Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11. A centerpiece of the installation is an interactive virtual recreation of a residence once occupied by Osama Bin Laden in Daruntah in the eastern province of Nangarhar. Among other things, *The house of Osama Bin Laden* re-stages the experience proposed by the shooter video game system. Like the other works I have examined, it interrupts the industrial temporal object's routine adoption.

Executing a commission from the Imperial War Museum in London, Langlands and Bell worked multimodally to interfere with the spatial and temporal orientations to this other sphere – this sphere of others – typically provided by the news and entertainment media of the principal partners of the NATO coalition coordinating this effort at eradicating the terrorist threat. Examining the contradictory position of the plethora of non-government aid organizations operating in Afghanistan, for example, they produced a number of digitally composed still images where a pattern of NGO logos overlay images of bomb-shattered buildings, landscapes of destroyed vehicles, and discarded munitions (Langlands and Bell 2004, 164-77). The ambivalent and often conflictual relations between Western

Fig. 2: Langlands and Bell: *The house of Osama Bin Laden* (2003).

aid efforts and development are juxtaposed with military operations so that a paradoxical, structural complicity is posed. The default "narrative" of war followed by the restoration of peacetime is disturbed by the simultaneity of these composited still images.

The centerpiece of the installation was the navigable virtual rendition of the house once occupied by Osama Bin Laden. This was created using the *Quake* engine. Visitors used a joystick to move about in the virtual space, but there was no other interaction afforded by the system. Nor were there any virtual others to encounter. What to do then? There is an obvious metaphor being put in play here: the target has long gone. The "mission critical", most-wanted Ace card (if an Afghanistan theater version of the Iraqi "personality identification playing cards" had been produced), the primary motivation of the US-led Afghanistan invasion, is still at large. The whole Afghanistan military "adventure" can be asked this same question: what to do then?

The technological system of perspectivally produced, virtual interaction is designed to provide a solution: the game engine enables the building of a virtual arena for navigating the challenges of targeting and avoiding becoming the target. It is a technical system reproducing what Sam Weber has called a "certain kind of targeting" predominant today in Western techno-culture:

one in which the ambiguities, uncertainties, and complexities are precluded from the production of the representational and operational media for identifying and dealing with the target (Weber 2005, 12).

Langlands and Bell build such a virtual space, but the experience it generates does not produce the routine synchronization of the player in the meta-game of a certain kind of targeting. Instead of seeing the anticipated, virtual other appear as an identifiable and therefore eradicable enemy other, the target is absent, already gone – no problem in this "problem space". That is its problem: what is this space without its problem? The artists have documented their rigorous efforts to locate, and then record and survey the house and its surrounds with its digital reconstruction as a virtual simulation in the mind (Langlands and Bell 2004, 89-93).[14] In doing so their process faithfully imitates that of military and entertainment simulations in providing sufficient authenticity for the virtual suspension of disbelief. In *The house of Osama Bin Laden's* (non-)video game, the historical, geographical, and techno-cultural links between the place and the virtual space fail to function in this way; they emerge in the form of questions for the one holding the joystick, unaccustomed to such a response to his/her control input.

I suggested above that today video game play is tending to foreclose on the routine of a playful suspension of virtual disbelief rather than perpetuate it, and that it is not so much disbelief in the simulated reality but a discrediting of reality in general (as trans-individual milieu of individuation) that is at stake today. In both their simulation of virtual spaces of interaction and their programming of that action in terms of problems, targets, and decisions in need of anticipatory preempting by the user, mainstream video games are exemplary digital media forms. The recent trend alluded to in the introduction to this essay toward a generalized "gamification" of interface design in other commercial applications assumes its full significance from this perspective – and its most troubling cast. The "consumer", who has already for the most part replaced the citizen in the trans-individual dynamic, is now being further remodeled to play the role of the permanently engaged player. No better instance of the disbelief and discredit in contemporary cultural life that Stiegler examines in the series with that name – a life lived in this sea of digital solicitation of the user-consumer's attention – can be found than in the immediate cynicism inspired by the becoming game-like of what are obviously not games that would offer nurture to anything like Huizinga's play-element (Stiegler 2004-2006).

The house of Osama Bin Laden, in stopping the routine playing out of the techno-logics of targeting, pauses for long enough to at least pose some

questions about other kinds of synchronization of and with others, other We's with which "we" are individuating ourselves, other trajectories for "our" *droemonon* of incompletion. Western techno-culture's globalizing trajectory – borne increasingly in the virtualizing spatiality and preemptive temporalization of its increasingly ludic digital media – is in urgent need of this kind of questioning.

Notes

1. Such was the order of publication of Simondon's two major works, whereas in fact the conceptual development was the converse. The work on individuation, *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* [Individuation and its physical-biological genesis], published in 1964, was Simondon's main doctoral dissertation (or, at least, part of it), and followed the publication of what was its complementary thesis, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* [On the mode of existence of technical objects].

2. Game/Play was a networked national touring exhibition focusing on the rhetorical constructs of "game" and "play". It was a collaboration between Q Arts in Derby and Furtherfield's HTTP Gallery, London.

3. The "vision machine" is a term used by Paul Virilio for the evolution of visual and weapon technologies and the dissemination of their coupled techno-logics across all fields of human endeavor (Virilio 1994).

4. Exteriorization is a term Stiegler borrows from André Leroi-Gourhan for this process. He insists, however, on an originary complex of interiority and exteriority (that is the very crux of technicity) to avoid the assumption of an already constituted human psyche preceding the development of technics (Stiegler 1998, 152-3).

5. Stiegler's project is constructed in part as a return to and critical revision of the *Kulturindustrie* critique of Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See Stiegler 2011 (Chapter 2) and Ars Industrialis 2010.

6. Simondon describes transduction as a developmental process that involves multiple elements in a "domain": "A process – be it physical, biological, mental or social – in which an activity gradually sets itself in motion, propagating within a given domain, by basing this propagation on a structuration carried out in different zones of the domain: each region of the constituted structure serves as a constituting principle for the following one, so much so that a modification progressively extends itself at the same time as this structuring operation" (Simondon cited in Mackenzie 2003, 16).

7. Simondon characterized the predominant conception of technology as "hylemorphic", i.e. as emerging from the classic metaphysical division of form and content so that the ideal notion of the tool as instrument in the hand of the human found expression in the shaping of matter according to the

idea of the tool. Barthélémy shows how Simondon insisted on an approach
to technology as a compositional element in an open-ended dynamic not
ruled by ideal forms or teleological determinations (2010a). This transduc-
tive dynamic leads, at best, to meta-stabilities, which is to say also beyond
them.

8. This notion is developed in a critical transformation of Edmund Husserl's
    notion of "image consciousness" that makes it co-constitutive of human
    retention along with the primary and secondary retentions manifest in
    consciousness. For Husserl the interplay of these two, the one enabling the
    perception of present phenomena as they are experienced and the other
    the recollection of past experience, constitute the continuity of conscious-
    ness that is the focus of his phenomenological project. For Stiegler, tertiary
    retention is the structural substrate and supplement to consciousness, and
    ties its development inextricably to that of the collective. It plays an in-
    creasingly central role in the second and third volumes of the *Technics and
    time* series as they elaborate a critique of contemporary industrial temporal
    objects.

9. "Epiphylogenesis, a recapitulating, dynamic, and morphogenetic (*phy-
    logenetic*) accumulation of individual experience (*epi*), designates the
    appearance of a new relation between the organism and its environment,
    which is also a new state of matter. If the individual is organic organized
    matter, then its relation to its environment (to matter in general, organic or
    inorganic), when it is a question of a *who*, is mediated by the organized but
    inorganic matter of the *organon*, the tool with its instructive role (its role
    qua instrument), the *what*. It is in this sense that the what invents the who
    just as much as it is invented by it" (Stiegler 1998, 177).

10. Stiegler draws on *Plato's Pharmacy*, Derrida's influential and rigorously
    playful reading of Plato's dialogue, the *Phaedrus*, in mobilizing this concept
    (Derrida 1981). See Stiegler (2010a, 33-5, and 2010b).

11. This is one that would function for all the I's as a kind of precomposed
    Kantian synthesis of experience, or a Husserlian "primary retention" able to
    be technologically disseminated en masse. These are the philosophical con-
    ceptualizations through which Stiegler develops this analysis of the "time
    of malaise" (*mal-être*, which can also be translated as "ill-being" to mark the
    allusion to Heidegger's *Dasein*) in *Technics and Time 3*, modifying the overly
    metaphysical framings of both in order to insist on the other potentials of
    the technical conditions of human becoming.

12. I have developed this position in more detail elsewhere, for instance in Cro-
    gan 2003, 2007, and 2008. Furthermore, we are in the terrain here of Roger
    Caillois' critical response to Huizinga in *Man, Play and Games* (1961). Writ-
    ing in the Cold War and in the period "after Auschwitz" – to cite Adorno's
    famous question about the continued possibility of art in Western civiliza-
    tion – Caillois argues stridently for a concept of gameplay that is less *agôn*-
    centered than Huizinga's, and for the necessity of the maintenance of a

space (or rather, time) for play unsullied by its incorporation in the serious business of military, political or commercial activities. The subsumption of gameplay to these is a sure sign, for Caillois, of the terminal condition of cultural becoming.

13.   "We", i.e. the inheritors and adopters of the European, "Western" traditions of humanities and social science scholarship, "we" the adopters and inheritors of the global digital, connected network of "researchers" – recalling Heidegger's prescient portrait (1969) of "research" in "The Age of the World Picture" – "we" with access to the resources and commodities of Western "lifestyles", "we" with the time and resources to investigate questions concerning video games, technology, individuation, hyper-synchronization, and so forth.

14.   Richard Stamp, in "'No sense in this situation': targeting animation in *The house of Osama bin Laden*" (Animation Deviation, Bristol, July 2010), discusses the tension between the critical effort of the artists in constructing this reflection of the digital mediation of Afghan territory, and their inevitable complicity with the Western techno-cultural over-mapping and appropriation of the former.

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