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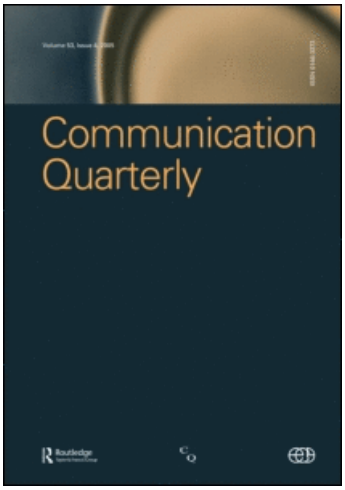

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Hypermediating the Game Interface: The Alienation Effect in Violent Videogames and the Problem of Serious Play

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Hypermediating the Game Interface: The Alienation Effect in Violent Videogames and the Problem of Serious Play

Jason Farman

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This article looks at the practices of customization in violent urban videogames (such as Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas) that create "hypermediated" interfaces. Drawing from Bolter and Grusin's theory of hypermediation (which stands in contrast to immediate and immersive interfaces), this study looks at gaming practices that resist immediacy and instead focus on the disjunctions and contrasts created by forming avatars that starkly juxtapose their surroundings. Such an approach offers gamers the ability to create a space of cultural critique while simultaneously interrogating the term "serious game" because this category creates false binary oppositions between serious–trivial and serious–play.

Keywords: Avatars; Immersion; Interface; Serious Games; Urban Environments; Videogames

> I decided to take the Robertson Boulevard exit off the 10 Freeway and, as I turned north, things looked a bit odd. To the east of Robertson the neighborhoods have been working class for many years, which starkly contrasted the neighborhoods west of Robertson, which were defined by their lush front yards and old-growth trees. Today, things were different. There was a homogeneous look to the whole street with condos, strip malls, and high-rises. That look remained the same as I continued driving. I turned right on Burton and, no longer having to worry about that burdensome median any longer, I immediately turned left onto Arnaz Drive toward my apartment's driveway. Again, things looked very different to me. There

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> was no construction going on. The condominiums on the west side of the street were complete, but turned out to look just like every other complex on my drive so far. My apartment complex across the street mirrored this generic aesthetic.

This was my first experience driving through Los Angeles in the videogame, *True Crime: Streets of L.A.* (2003). The developers of *True Crime* sought to reproduce every street in the Los Angeles Metro area to scale, allowing me the opportunity to explore my neighborhood through this virtual remapping. The game designers accurately recreated 240 square miles of the Los Angeles area using satellite imagery, topographical maps, Global Positioning System (GPS) mapping software, and driving "up and down the streets with video cameras in hand" (Rosmarin, 2003). As producer, Brian Clarke, said, the game designers also attempted to recreate the "general flavor of each neighborhood and block" (Rosmarin, 2003). Successful in this endeavor at times (licensing the images of landmarks such as the Staples Center, the Egyptian Theater, and even Pink's hot dog stand) and unsuccessful at other times (as in my expectations of what my neighborhood would look like), the desire to map the streets of Los Angeles onto the game interface has been attempted not only in *True Crime: Streets of L.A.,* but in several videogames in recent years. From *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (*GTA: San Andreas*; 2004) to *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* (2005), players can virtually explore and interact with the streets of Los Angeles—a virtuality not unfamiliar to those who drive the streets on a daily basis. The ability to navigate through the city streets of Los Angeles in "real life" has often been compared to navigation in mediated forms. Baudrillard (1988, pp. 52–62) compared driving through Los Angeles to America's larger cinematic nature. Case's (1996, p. 92) comparison of driving a car to "driving the mouse" of a computer also evokes the relationship between the mediated nature of Los Angeles city streets and the interface of the personal computer (PC). The move from navigating the interface of a car among the highly mediated (and remediated) streets of Los Angeles, to navigating the streets in a gaming interface such as *True Crime* or *GTA: San Andreas*, has become an almost seamless translation in Californian culture, which has come to privilege the interface as a primary metaphor for everyday life.

The interfaces of the games I investigate in this study, especially focused on *GTA: San Andreas* (2004), rely heavily on the recreation of a sense of place so familiar to many Southern Californians. Creating a sense of place within a virtual environment is a process that now corresponds to the process of inhabiting material space in the digital era. Navigating a car in the "material" Los Angeles often relies on a correspondence between the visualization of the urban landscape through the vehicle's windshield and the virtual representations of that space (e.g., the map on a GPS device showing what street you are on; or, the recognition of cultural landmarks such as the Hollywood sign or Rodeo Drive as seen in popular media). As virtual spaces become more and more intertwined with our material spaces, it is important to ask how we—after proprioceptively locating ourselves in digital spaces such as the videogame landscape—enact the process of navigation through this "mixed-reality"

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space.[1] With the mapping of virtual space onto material space (or vice versa), the cultural metaphor of the interface is altered so that "digital" and "material" spaces are no longer distinct, but instead inform and influence one another to the extent that the border between them appears to dissolve. The consequence of this dissolution is the imminent threat of a clear loss of borders and distinct spaces—a threat that has led to the critiques of videogames as influencing real-world actions toward violence, drug use, and promiscuous sexuality. Violence in videogames such as *GTA: San Andreas* has been the focus of much critical attention and has even led to a genre of games termed "serious games"—games that seek to be useful in ways other than functioning simply as entertainment. By charting the anxiety surrounding the blending of interfaces and the reactions to this dissolution, this article argues for a reexamination of popular entertainment games—even the most violent—as tools for social critique through the employment of hypermediation and Bertolt Brecht's (1957) "Alienation Effect" to foster critical distance.

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The Interface of Everyday Life

In the digital age, the term *interface* has taken on new capital. It conjures images of computer monitors, touch-screen phones, portable media devices, and even sci-fi inspired screens that respond to user gesture. Galloway (2009), quoting Vilém Flusser, noted that the interface can be understood as a "significant surface . . . a two-dimensional plane with meaning embedded in it or delivered through it" (p. 936). Galloway went on to show how interfaces are not always screens or surfaces, but often doorways or windows, "not something that appears before you but rather is a gateway that opens up and allows passage to some place beyond" (p. 936). Often these interfaces are designed to lead to a "place beyond" by drawing complete attention to the place and drawing attention away from the interface. For Bolter and Grusin (1999), immersive media (such as film and videogames) typically depend on the audience looking beyond the interface to a "truer," more intimate interaction with the media. Bolter and Grusin wrote:

> [W]hat designers often say they want is an "interfaceless" interface, in which there will be no recognizable electronic tools—not buttons, windows, scroll bars, or even icons as such. Instead, the user will move through the space interacting with the objects "naturally," as she does in the physical world. (p. 23)

They contrasted this notion of "immediacy" with the idea of "hypermediacy," which constantly calls attention to its own status and process as a mediated interface. The medium of cinema does not often call attention to its own process of mediation (with notable exceptions in the avant-garde and French New Wave, to name two examples), relying on the audiences' identification with the protagonist as an immediate and immersive experience. In the same way, those navigating the city streets with the aid of a GPS device that corresponds to the interface of the windshield, drivers are immersed in the interface of everyday life—an embodied, mixed-reality space.

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Early in the digital age, two acronyms provided the distinction between actions in material space and the actions on the computer interface: VR (Virtual Reality) and IRL (In Real Life). Whereas VR (in the ''goggles and glove'' sense) might have fallen out of favor and parlance with popular culture and digital aficionados alike (or, more likely, transformed into phrases like ''virtual worlds'' that apply to everything from Second Life to other online social networks), IRL is still in common usage and is still understood as being the opposite of the virtual–digital world. Although this opposition is a faulty one (the virtual is indeed very ''real'' to both users and the material infrastructure that supports it), the anxiety of maintaining a ''real'' in the face of a society surrounded by interfaceless interfaces is what fuels the term's repeated use. Galloway (2009) wrote, ''Digital media are exceptionally good at artifice and often the challenge comes in maintaining the distinction between edge and center, a distinction that threatens to collapse at any point like a house of cards'' (p. 938). It is my estimation that this collapse already takes place on a daily basis. This is not the loss of the ''real'' in the sense that Baudrillard (1994) wrote about. No, this collapse is not a fall into a simulacrum. For users of digital media—videogames, in particular—*everything* has become ''the real.'' The real is a phenomenology, as opposed to a platonic ideal. It is a perception of encountering something embodied and substantial. This understanding was noticed early on in digital environments, as noted in Dibbell's (1998) article, ''A Rape in Cyberspace,'' in which users felt physically violated by the actions of a user in the LambdaMOO chat room. The ''virtual'' was indeed very ''real'' and continues to be so. Sometimes, the ''virtual'' becomes more ''real'' than the real for gamers. *World of Warcraft* (2004) players often go days with little to no food while they embark on conquest after conquest. The virtual overtakes the real. A 2006 *Newsweek* article discussed the case of a young Chinese girl who died of exhaustion from playing the game for several days without a break (Levy, 2006, para. 12). Similarly, a teenage boy playing the game in Sweden collapsed after 24 hr of nonstop play (Brown, 2008). These examples prompt an interrogation of the term IRL and the term ''real'' when used in opposition to ''the virtual.'' In the digital era, we have not lost the real—it is simply that the real does not stand in opposition to the virtual; instead, it includes it. (As a consequence, the term *real* becomes one of the most misused terms in the digital age.) As Hansen (2004) noted, arguing for a ''body–brain achievement'' of VR perception, ''[t]he virtual and the digital cannot be equated'' (p. 169). Hansen quotes the neuroscientist, Humberto Maturana, who said, ''[w]henever we have an illusion . . . we really have it. In our experience we cannot differentiate between what we call a perception and what we call an illusion. Whenever we have an illusion, we experience it always in the same way as we experience what we are used to calling a perception'' (p. 168). Hansen—noting that ''illusion and perception are *affectively* identical: from the standpoint of the experiencing, feeling body, simulation and perception are, quite simply, indiscernible'' (p. 168)—pointed toward the way that the ''real'' and the ''virtual'' are both based on a phenomenology of the affective body. Thus, the user's experience in a virtual world can be experienced as a ''real'' experience because it can be an embodied and substantial encounter. Derrida (1994), approaching the topic of VR in a significantly

different way than Baudrillard (1994), showed how the ghost of Hamlet's father functions as "the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible . . . the tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh" (Derrida, 1994, p. 7). Such a claim demonstrates the ways that, as Poster (2001) put it, "the virtual is essential to the real, that 'ghosts' haunt the full presence of the real in the forms of the debt to the past and the promise of justice in the future. . . . Virtual reality is always already inscribed into the event" (p. 139). This phenomenological reading of signs (what I term *proprioceptive semiotics*) always enacts these signs as "reality" due to the way human perception interprets them. Thus, the claims that "everything is reality" and "everything is virtual" are simply two sides to the same coin. As Hansen summarized, "Human perception—to the extent that it involves a distanceless 'correlation' or 'survey' identical with the perspective of this or that particular 'I-unity'—can be conceived only as an actualization of an inexhaustible virtuality or potential" (p. 170).

This is the trauma of the interface: that it has disappeared or, rather, that it has encompassed everything and has done so without us being able to distinguish between digital space and virtual space. This trauma fuels the anxiety around videogames that appear to exploit this loss of boundaries between spaces as a means to inform material world actions from digital world practices.

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Training for Violence: *GTA: San Andreas*

The anxiety of the interfaceless interface (especially in violent videogames) is demonstrated by the many examples of those who utilize videogames as a means of training the body. Penny (2004) discussed the uses of videogames and simulation technologies as a form of training both military personnel and those with acute phobias, such as heights. Penny noted that, "[t]raining simulation and interactive entertainment were born joined at the hip" (p. 75). The level of embodied interactivity videogames offer has led many to fear the types of violent training possible in games. Penny wrote:

> [W]e are drawn to the conclusion that what separates the first person shooter [videogame] from the high-end battle simulator is the location of one in an adolescent bedroom and the other in a military base. And having accepted that simulators are effect environments for training, we must accept that so too are the desktop shooter games. The question is: what exactly is the user being trained to do? (p. 76)

A significant amount of scholarship has been dedicated to the study of media effects on children, especially focused on attributing violent behavior to videogame play. Many psychologists align with Anderson (2000), who noted:

> [T]here are several different ways in which watching or playing violent media can increase aggression and violence. The most powerful and long lasting involves learning processes. From infancy, humans learn how to perceive, interpret, judge, and respond to events in the physical and social environment. We learn by observing the world around us, and by acting on that world.

On the other hand, there are many media theorists who argue that videogames do not affect actions in the material world. As Jenkins (as cited in Young, 2007) argued

(to the same Senate Commerce Committee on videogame violence at which Anderson, 2000, testified), ''Banning black trench coats or abolishing violent video games doesn't get us anywhere. . . . These are the symbols of youth alienation and rage, not the causes.'' Although the debates on the subject have grown more intense and camps have become more divided on the issue of the effects of violent videogames, this study does not seek to drive a wedge further between these viewpoints. Rather than establishing case studies or simply dismissing other case studies as paranoid, I instead seek to elaborate on a fundamental paradigm shift that has occurred: The major issue at stake is the loss of clear boundaries between the virtual and the material in the digital age. The anxiety over violence in videogames is merely a symptom of a larger problem (which is much more difficult to legislate than placing restrictions on media): How do we inhabit an environment in which the ''virtual'' and the ''real'' are no longer opposites but, in fact, categories that seamlessly blend and blur together?

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Huizinga (1938) argued in the foundational book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture,* that one of the key characteristics of play is that it takes place within its own ''sacred'' space. It requires its own playground that is separate from the ''real'' world happening around the play space (thus, is always distinct from ''real life''). This characteristic of game play is becoming less and less a part of game play, as seen in many digital games that take place within real-world space and intersect with real-world events. Key examples are seen in the emerging GPS games such as *GPS::Tron* (2004), *Geocaching* (2000), and Blast Theory's performance game, *Rider Spoke* (2007), which require the player to simultaneously inhabit the screen space of the GPS device and the real-world space that the GPS represents. The correspondence of the GPS interface to the interface of your car's windshield and the streets the player sees before him or her is crucial to the success of these devices and of the games that utilize them. Other key examples are seen in the emerging alternative reality games (ARGs), such as *World Without Oil* (Eklund et al., 2007) or the *Year Zero* (2007) game developed by 42 Entertainment for the 2007 release of the Nine Inch Nails album of the same name. Such ARGs take place in the material world, often using media forms to guide the actions and maneuvers of the many players around various material spaces. *Year Zero*, for example, required players to join an underground resistance organization, which met underneath a mural in Hollywood and equipped them each with mobile phones. Told to expect a call, the members awaited instructions. Rose (2007) chronicled in his article, ''Secret Websites, Coded Messages: The New World of Immersive Games'':

> Five days later, the phones rang. The players were told to report to a parking lot, where they were loaded onto a ram-shackle bus with blacked-out windows. The bus delivered them at twilight to what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse near some railroad tracks.

Players then maneuvered through the Los Angeles warehouse to eventually find a stage where the band, Nine Inch Nails, emerged to put on a private show (which was interrupted by an in-game SWAT team with flash bombs and riot gear).

The loss of a distinct "playground" for gaming and its correspondence to the material world has been a draw for many players in the digital age but has also led to the biggest critics of gaming. For many, such an immersive interface (as encountered through violent videogames) will have a negative effect on what we now understand to be the interface of everyday life. One game that has garnered such critiques is *GTA: San Andreas* (2004). Much of the controversy surrounding the game (including the media-saturated outcry from Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton) centered around the relationship between the game's simulation of violence, sex, and racial stereotypes and the potential for this game interface to affect the "real-world" actions of its players. This game is a third-person shooter game that takes place on the streets of a fictional state called San Andreas (the cities in this state are puns on cities in California, and the characters themselves are often considered exaggerations of California stereotypes). The main narrative backstory, which is significant to my study of the game's interface, involves the protagonist, Carl Johnson (CJ), who was recently released from prison (framed for the murder of a police officer). While he was incarcerated, his mother was killed, and her death remains a mystery. After returning to his neighborhood (a gang-run area named Ganton, a close mock-up of Compton), he rejoins his old gang. What follows are a series of missions, ranging from simple (getting a new hair cut), to highly involved (robbing the local National Guard of their guns). The missions can be attempted whenever the player wants and, in the meantime, he or she can roam the streets of San Andreas and do almost anything desired—from stealing cars to getting in fights with random pedestrians (typically stealing their belongings after having beaten them bloody).

The default mode of the game is what many would term as a simulation (or, perhaps more accurately, a simulacrum). The game simulates cultural imaginaries of gang life in California (often echoing other media forms such as the popular film, *Boyz n the Hood* [Nicolaides & Singleton, 1991]). Many feel the game promotes violence, gang lifestyles, and animosity with the police. For example, David Walsh (Morales, 2005), president of the National Institute of Media and the Family, argued that, after an 18-year-old shot and killed police officers in Alabama and blamed his actions on playing *GTA: San Andreas* (2004), parents should "watch what your kids are watching. Don't choose killer simulations now that we know they simulate sex, as well." The "sex simulations" in *GTA: San Andreas* have led to the game's most outspoken critic in recent days: Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. Her objections to the game arose when the "Hot Coffee" modification was made available for the PC version of the game through the distribution of a hacker named Patrick Wildenborg. The modification, similar to the Sims Nude patch, opens up a new level of the game that was previously inaccessible. When the character, CJ, gets a girlfriend and adequately "woos" her, they go inside the house "for some coffee" (a euphemism for sex). When the "Hot Coffee" patch is implemented, the user gets to go inside with CJ and engage in sex with his girlfriend, actually determining his sexual moves. Although CJ is never "nude," the act is explicit and obvious enough to raise the concerns of the National Institute of Media and the Family and Senator Clinton while moving the rating of the game from "Mature" to "Adults Only." Although Rockstar

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Games and its parent company, Take Two, initially stated that the modification was not originally in the game and only accessible through extreme ''reverse engineering,'' Wildenborg contended that his modification only opened access to the code that was already written in the game.

Following Clinton's objections, the state of California filed a lawsuit against Rockstar Games. The lawsuit, started by Los Angeles City Attorney, Rocky Delgadillo, claimed that Take Two failed to disclose the hidden components of the game that would have changed the game's rating. Although the ratings change simply moves the age of purchase from 17 and older (rated Mature) to 18 and older (Adults Only), such a rating change would have significantly altered the number of stores in which the game could have been sold in California. The lawsuit required Take Two to change their marketing strategy (which the lawsuit argued was geared toward children), as well as paying fines close to $10 million.

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Hypermediating the Game Interface

Although the objections to *GTA: San Andreas* (2004) seem to be founded on the simulation-as-training for violence that Penny (2004) spoke of, the actual foundation of these concerns stems from our cultural imaginaries (especially the imaginary of Los Angeles culture in the digital age) around the interface and loss of distinct borders between material and virtual interfaces. Thus, the objection to *GTA: San Andreas* ought to be revealed as ''the game is dangerous because it creates a process of one interface informing and influencing another due to the immediate and permeable line between these interfaces.'' Although this cultural understanding of the metaphor (and phenomenological experience) of the interface has undergone a significant paradigm shift in the digital age, the concerns about media interfaces effecting an audience has effected most emerging media (e.g., the telephone was disparaged because it would create a new and unnecessary distance between neighbors who no longer needed to visit each other face to face, but could simply call). However, as videogames become more advanced and involve the gamer's movements in significantly embodied ways, this medium has come to be the epitome of the dissolve between material and digital interfaces.

Bogost (2007) argued that games, although useful for embodied training in some contexts, find their fullest appointment elsewhere. Bogost wrote, ''I argue that videogames' usefulness comes not from a capacity to transfer social or workplace skills, but rather from their capacity to give consumers and workers a means to critique business, social, and moral principles'' (p. x). Arguing along similar lines, one significant proponent of an examination of the correlation between media interfaces and material interfaces was Bertolt Brecht (1957), whose theories and practices in the theatre parallel the possibilities inherent in videogame interfaces. Brecht continually sought to combat the sense of immersion in the performance space to utilize a ''hypermediate'' space for social change. Brecht's process, termed the Alienation Effect, created a theatrical performance that highlighted its own mediation and, thus, created a critical distance for the theatre-goers to analyze and critique the characters

and narratives. By destroying the "interfaceless interface" of the theatre of realism (which is the fourth wall), Brecht created a mediated space in which "[t]he spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play" (p. 71). By employing simple techniques—from leaving the lights on and having actors be stagehands between scenes, to having minimal scenery that allowed the tools of mediation to be exposed, such as lighting and electric cables—the audience was constantly aware that the performance was a mediated production. By "alienating" the audience and the actors from full immersion in the performance, all parties involved could critique the narrative and be compelled toward social change.

Brecht (1957) noted that realism in the theatre drew people into identificatory relationships with the protagonist, which ultimately led them to say, "[y]es, I have felt like that too—Just like me—It's only natural—It'll never change—The sufferings of this man appall me because they are inescapable" (p. 71). The Alienation Effect in the theater conversely leads the audience and actors alike to say, "I'd never have thought it—That's not the way—That's extraordinary, hardly believable—It's got to stop—The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary" (p. 71).

Brecht's (1957) theories are particularly apt for the highly immersive medium of the videogame. Although *GTA: San Andreas* (2004) can be considered to simply be a gang-violence simulator that immerses its player to the point that he or she is experiencing an immediate interface rather than a hypermediate interface (to draw from Bolter and Grusin's, 1999, terms), I argue that the relationship between this digital interface (and the material space that it informs) can be altered in such a way as to create a sense of alienation (or to better translate Brecht's term, create a sense of "distanciation"). This distanciation is necessary to reading the gaming interface as the site of social commentary.

What emerges out of game play in *GTA: San Andreas* (2004) is one of two options: Players will experience the game as an immersive interface that ultimately becomes a gang-violence simulator, or players will experience the game as a hypermediated space that satirizes the violence and the media that such violence alludes to (e.g., the blood-soaked action film). The key to the latter experience is the player's interactions with the customization controls that allow an alteration of the CJ avatar. The player can alter CJ's hair, clothing, vehicles, and his physique. The game offers the options of giving CJ a normal haircut, a huge blonde afro, or even a pink mohawk. During the game, if the player desires, they can load CJ up with food without counterbalancing it with exercise. The result is a significant weight gain that makes the CJ avatar obese and much slower on the streets as he runs and maneuvers. On one early mission in the game, CJ must go into the local clothing store, Blinco, to buy clothes that connect him to his local gang (typically something in the gang's color of green). The options here allow the player to put an array of ridiculous clothes on CJ—from a leopard-print cowboy hat to Groucho Marx joke glasses; or, the player can simply have CJ wear nothing but underwear. The ability to create a character that starkly juxtaposes the dark and gritty streets of San Andreas through the wearing of clothes

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that would never be socially acceptable in this environment points to the ways that game customization allows for the player to create this hypermediated interface. The distanciation created through hypermediating the interface allows the social satire to be read in the larger game narrative. This satirical narrative is most pronounced in the ability for players to customize their avatar to fit in as a type of clown character in the gang neighborhood. As CJ emerges from Blinco in his humorous and obnoxious outfit, he returns home to begin a new gang mission. As he converses with his fellow Grove Street gang members about the forthcoming mission, his starkly contrasting appearance is never discussed, mocked, or challenged. He is allowed to exist as an affront to the status quo, clearly marking the social satire and exaggeration the game gestures toward from the outset. As Murray (2005, pp. 95–96) argued in, ''High Art/Low Life: The Art of Playing Grand Theft Auto,'' ''What emerges is the game's subtext: an experience of the dystopic metropolis, punctuated by a keen satirical comment on the omnipresent corruption and hypocrisy that would mitigate such a reality.'' Although Murray argued for this subtext to be explicit in the game narrative itself, such a reading does not clearly emerge without the direct customization of the character to exist as the clown among the ruthless gang members in San Andreas.

The type of critique that such customization enacts parallels Bogost's (2007) approach to ''persuasive gaming'' that utilizes a rhetorical approach that he terms ''procedural rhetoric.'' Summarizing his approach, he wrote, ''[p]rocedural rhetoric is a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created'' (p. 3). Although one respondent to my study of *GTA: San Andreas* (2004; at the Electronic Literature Organization conference in 2008) stated that, ''[p]utting your avatar in a funny hat doesn't make it any less problematic,'' the rhetorical tradition of juxtaposing two contrasting images to make an argument has a rich history, and putting this approach into action inside a videogame serves Bogost's procedural rhetorical method; and, although countless forums demonstrate the popularity of avatar customization to the point of the absurd (*True Crime: Streets of L.A.,* 2003, has a customization option that allows the player's avatar to be a blindfolded donkey smoking a cigarette), it is important to ask what such procedural rhetorics are accomplishing. What kind of critique is actually taking place as players gain a sense of distanciation from the violent simulation environment? Murray (2005) pointed to a few possibilities:

> [W]ith [*GTA:*] *San Andreas,* Rockstar has taken the poor black male body, which is encoded as a human stain on the fabric of a squeaky-clean American dream of opportunity, and pushed it into the center of our attention.... Ideologically configured as base, grinning, dirty, incarcerated, and exhausted, the black body is the remnant of a national equation; a glitch that cannot be assimilated into the system. But now, that signifier of the black body, that shell upon which so many negative associations has been projected, becomes a mirror for a thorny cluster of societal relations in America. (p. 96)

Murray went on to note that the game (and the game designers and publishers, Rockstar Games) points toward the desire to commodify this particular body.

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Murray wrote, "[a]t the same time, Rockstar reminds us of how fetishized that body actually is—or, more accurately, *will become*—subsequent to the cultural moment of the game" (p. 96). Although many adolescent gamers may not have the theoretical acumen to tackle these major issues through the procedural rhetorics of the Alienation Effect, by simply distancing themselves from a sense of immersion in the gang-life simulator, the player is afforded the opportunity to critique the actions of the characters, mock the dialog that sharply juxtaposes the ridiculousness of CJ's appearance, and simply "play" with the representational defaults that the game presents them with. The potential of such actions should not be discounted.

Serious Games and the Dilemma of Hierarchical Design

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Although many first- and third-person shooter games reiterate the popular genre of the violent action film, the outspoken critics of these games are overlooking the possibility of turning these games into learning environments—media that can be used to engage the procedural rhetorics of media stereotypes, identity creation in virtual environments, and causal relationships between material and digital interfaces. Another key community that is failing to recognize the larger potential of the popular, entertainment-focused games is the designers of what has become known as "serious games." This category of games seeks to combat the "non-serious" characteristic commonly attributed to games. Bogost (2007), who also critiqued the approach of serious gamers, wrote:

> [R]ecent movements in the videogame industry, most notably the so-called *Serious Games* movement . . . have sought to create videogames to support existing social and cultural positions. But videogames are capable of so much more. In addition to becoming instrumental tools for institutional goals, videogames can also disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term change. I believe that this power is not equivalent to the *content* of videogames, as the serious games community claims. Rather, this power lies in the very way videogames mount claims through procedural rhetorics. (p. ix)

Such approach is based entirely on a false opposition between "play" and seriousness." As Huizinga (1938) noted, "[T]o our way of thinking, play is the direct opposite of seriousness. . . . Examined more closely, however, the contrast between play and seriousness proves to be neither conclusive nor fixed" (p. 5). Drawing from this notion, designers of serious games have created games that address serious issues, from environmental problems (*World Without Oil*; Eklund et al., 2007), to the humanitarian crisis in Darfur (*Darfur is Dying*, 2006). The key problems with this ideological approach to game design are twofold: The category of serious games only reiterates the binary opposition between play and seriousness by primarily emphasizing serious *content*, and is problematized by introducing such content through a top-down model of design. One such advocate, Frasca (2004), noted that games need to be designed toward a model that "deal(s) with social and political issues . . . used as a tool for encouraging critical thinking . . . offer(ing) an alternative way of

understanding reality'' (p. 85). Although I agree with Frasca that ''videogames could indeed deal with human relationships and social issues, while encouraging critical thinking,'' I disagree with the approach that requires a top-down, hierarchical model of design. Beyond the fact that such design requires the intersession of skilled designers (which most gamers are not, a problem Frasca acknowledged but simply responded, ''[A]s the public becomes more familiar with manipulating and modifying simulations, the concept of designing their own may become more appealing'', p. 93), such ''serious games'' are not likely to compete with ''entertainment games'' in the larger market; and, although such games do not necessarily need to compete in the larger market, serious game designers—by requiring a hierarchical approach to design—are overlooking the potential already present in wide-release games for social critique and change. Frasca, who works closely with Bogost, maintains a view of gaming that very much parallels the arguments in my study. The key distinction is the elimination of popular games from the gaming tools useful for social critique. Whereas Frasca and Bogost designed ''persuasive games'' together to accomplish this goal, Bogost (2007) importantly pointed out the usefulness of popular entertainment games:

> [T]he concept of serious games as a counter movement apart from and against the commercial videogame industry eliminates a wide variety of games from persuasive speech. It is a foolish gesture that wrongly undermines the expressive power of videogames in general, and highly crafted, widely appealing commercial games in particular. (p. 59)

The designers of serious games (and often even designers of ''persuasive games'') mistakenly approach game design from the perspective that they need to author a game to achieve their ends rather than utilize what already exists to achieve that same end. Although some argue that utilizing tools that are outside of the ''master representations'' of the popular media industry to subvert these dominating structures would be ideal and perhaps necessary from the serious game designer's perspective, such an approach is a produced myth. Although it can be argued—as Derrida (1978) has—that ''all discourse is *bricoleur,*'' it must also be noted that there is no ''subject who supposedly would be the absolute origin of his own discourse and supposedly would construct it 'out of nothing', 'out of whole cloth' '' because this subject ''would be the creator of the verb, the verb itself'' (p. 285).

Brecht's (1957) Alienation Effect, when utilized in games such as *GTA: San Andreas* (2004), can be used for positive change by affording the players the critical distance needed for critique of the protagonist and his surroundings (both ''virtual'' and ''material''). When not utilized in violent videogames, perhaps the player becomes more aggressive in the ''real world'' or simply enjoys game play in this separated playground (clearly distinct from the ''real world,'' as Huizinga [1938] would have argued, although still pointing toward its significance and ''seriousness''). The social effects of play in an immersive environment are either negative (i.e., violence) or nonexistent (nothing more than play); however, when game play utilizes the Alienation Effect within a game, the players can more fully critique the protagonist's actions, the social setting in which he or she is placed, and the common stereotypes

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given in media representations. By critiquing these things, players can utilize this valuable critical distance to interact with social problems through the process of game play, which is "a significant function" in our cultural process and a process "which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action" (Huizinga, 1938, p. 1). As Jenkins (2006) persuasively argued in his study of "convergence culture" (which resonates strongly in Bogost's, 2007, procedural rhetorics), understanding how to navigate among the ever-changing landscape of interfaces is the key to producing sound critiques of the media that surround and create our lived environment. Jenkins stated:

> [W]e are already learning how to live betwixt and between those multiple media systems. The key battles are being fought now. If we focus on the technology, the battle will be lost before we even begin to fight. We need to confront the social, cultural, and political protocols that surround the technology and define how it will get used. (p. 212)

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Note

[1] As Rashid, Bamford, Coulton, Edwards, and Scheible (2006) noted in their article, "PAC-LAN: Mixed-Reality Gaming With RFID-Enabled Mobile Phones," "[m]ixed reality is the merging of real and virtual worlds to produce a new environment where physical and digital objects can co-exist and interact" (p. 1).

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