

“JACKING-IN”: NEW MEDIA PLAY AND THE PERMEABLE SELF

In David Cronenberg’s *eXistenZ* (1999), video-game designer Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh) and the security agent assigned her by the game company, Ted Pikul (Jude Law), are on the lam after an assassination attempt on Geller. Geller needs to play her game to make sure that its software has survived the attack and is dismayed to find that Pikul has not been fitted with a “bio-port,” the spinal-jack required to plug the game directly into one’s nervous system. Pikul somewhat ashamed admits to a “phobia about getting (his) body penetrated...surgically,” but agrees to the procedure. After a harrowing black-market insertion of the port, Geller fingers Pikul’s port in anticipation of play, commenting that new ones are often a bit tight. Pikul, a nervous techno-virgin, asks “how come bio-ports don’t get infected? I mean they open right into your body.” “Listen to what you are saying,” says Geller, “Don’t be ludicrous.” And she provocatively opens her mouth to recall to Pikul that there are many quite natural ways that our bodies are open to the world and to others.

I open this article with a scene from *eXistenZ* because it captures well both the anxiety and the exhilaration that new media still elicits in the social imagination. As he did in his earlier film *Videodrome* (1983), Cronenberg quite literally depicts new media’s penetration of bodies and blurring of realities and identities. The characters Pikul and Geller represent two, almost archetypal, responses to new media. Pikul’s “phobia,” his fear of being penetrated by media (and by Geller), foregrounds a tacit sense that the subject is impermeable; a feeling that defines the subject/object distinction and the everyday sense of reality that it underwrites. To a great degree such a view is ordinary and functional, but Geller is right that beyond the ordinary and functional such a view is “ludicrous.” As a proposition about biology, ecology, psychology, or aesthetic or erotic experience, a claim of human

impermeability is meaningless. We are in many and complex ways permeated by the world and others—and also by media. Geller unlike the anxious Pikul, welcomes all neural-input without distinction and, indeed, prefers to “jack-in” to her game, even at the risk of her own life. Apparently beyond petty investment in bodily and ontological boundaries, Geller embraces the game as her central reality. Geller is the game’s designer, however, and her sense of its significance is bound up with her own narcissism. She is a recluse, disdainful of the world, who typically wields her immense power away from real-world social interaction.

My working assumption in this article is that new media, particularly in the form of interactive gaming, have aroused the responses they have—responses I am associating with Pikul and Geller, anxiety and exhilaration respectively—because they have contributed to the cultural visibility of affect and enabled the emergence of a permeable model of the self, a self inextricably bound with others and the world. New media have contributed in the fashion by subverting the tacit presumption of impermeability, especially in its most patriarchal forms.¹ Affect is the marker of our permeability. Affect is the trace left by our intercourse with the world and with others; it is the tissue through which the unconscious bleeds into consciousness; it is the material strata of thought, the unthought within thought itself.

My claim is not, however, that new media as a matter of course can condition a new self more aware of the role affect plays in its connection to the world and others. Indeed, I argue that the positions represented by Pikul and Geller both work against an understanding of our permeability. There are powerful incentives to retreat to or recuperate a sense of bounded impermeability. Indeed as new media call attention to affect, they risk unleashing even more extreme forms of bounded subjectivity in reaction. Cronenberg recognizes the stakes: not only is Pikul “phobic,” he is a terrorist bent on destroying Geller and her game in the name of reality. Excesses of bounded subjectivity lead to violence, to war and to extermination.² My claim, rather, is more tentative, but still hopeful. We live in an era where the strong form of bounded subjectivity, the Cartesian subjectivity we inherited from the Enlightenment, has been thoroughly undermined by critical theory, biology

and psychology, though it persists in many institutionalized forms. We are more aware of our permeability and have more opportunities to explore such in ways which could alter our relations with others and the world in positive ways. New media, under the right conditions, can be a laboratory for such explorations and play, the means. In what follows I consider the two positions on new media gaming I am associating with Pikul and Geller, positions that wholly reject or embrace new media's penetration respectively; I, then, consider an instance of a game that opens rather than closes possibilities for the subject and gives us a sense of new media's potential.

The Perils of Pikul: Half-Life of the Modern Subject

I begin my discussion by considering an exhibit which works with video gaming as an artistic medium to stage the effects of gaming on its mostly young male fans. The work positions itself at the hinge between old and new media, between critical distance and immersion, and hence offers a perfect way into the issues this article seeks to address.

Marco Brambilla's *Half-Life* from the New Museum of Contemporary Art's media lounge (October 2-December 7, 2003) is an implicit indictment of video game culture that shows the persistence of Pikul's form of bounded subjectivity despite, indeed, in reaction to, the proliferation of so-called immersive technologies.³ The main feature of Brambilla's installation is a gallery with large LCD screens on each of its four walls. On three walls recorded projections of the block-buster first person "shooter" (fps) video game *Counter-Strike* show terrorists and counter-terrorists battling in a vaguely middle-eastern fortress. The soundtrack is amplified to fill the room and evokes gun-fire and exploding bodies. The screen on the fourth wall is subdivided into smaller screens, each showing a player of the game as he plays in a cyber-café in suburban Garden Grove, Orange County, CA. The camera is mounted on the monitor to capture the player/apparatus interface. The faces are nearly indistinguishable from one another. The players are all adolescent boys, devoid of affect, undertaking their task with apparent grim determination.

The gallery visitor feels assaulted by the jarring noise and images in the gallery and then somewhat unnerved by the zombie-like look of the game players. The most significant feature of the installation, however, is not the immediate content of its own screens, but is the opposition it stages between the gallery audience, the installation's own use of media, and the game players in the interactive new media environment. While the installation takes new media as its object and gives an impression of immersion in the game space by surrounding the visitor with nearly life-size game scenes, it does not, and cannot, invite the visitor into the game space in the way that the game does its players. What we see is a recorded and looped projection of a game sequence, not the game as it is actually played. The gallery visitor, hence, is positioned as external to the action depicted; she is detached from the game space and clearly meant to regard it as a critical outsider. And from this position, I would argue, it is difficult *not* to condemn the object of the installation and to be deeply suspicious of the media that make it possible.

As gallery visitors we know that the boys whose faces we see on the screen are not just witnessing gory militarized violence (as we are), but are participating in it. Their affect-less faces suggest a level of fusion with their soldier-avatars that takes what is theorized as identification in film theory to a new level of participatory engagement. The game, as it appears in the installation, largely dispenses with context and seems to offer little more than the excitement of targeting and killing the enemy while avoiding being killed oneself. *Counter-Strike* as shown to us in *Half-Life* presumes a simple world of us and them, kill or be killed, a world of intensity and instantaneity that doesn't abide questions and allows little time for recognition, reflection and conscious decision. The imputed experience of immersion and the game's interactivity seem like vehicles for the loss of identity and autonomy and a terrible reduction of the complex real world to a virtual world of mindless violence. The installation's title *Half-Life* is both a knowing reference to the game from which *Counter-Strike* derives and a critical commentary on the young players' experience and, by extension, on the society increasingly saturated with such media.

The installation echoes, in visual terms, the focus familiar from postmodernism on a distinction between distance and immersion as defining characteristics of modernity and post-modernity respectively. For such diverse critics as Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, postmodernism breaks down the distance between self and other and between self and world and in so doing irreparably endangers the critical subject. For Jameson the effect of the breakdown of key cultural boundaries is the loss of culture's ability to be "critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional and the like" (Jameson 125). Instead, the new cultural dominant produces an intensification of the present time and the experience of material reality often associated with schizophrenia (Jameson 118-119). For Baudrillard the possibility of alienation, the experience of distance, has disappeared. What is left is the "obscene," a "too great proximity of everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance" (132). "The schizo," Baudrillard says, "can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence" (133). According to such an account the game player of *Half-Life* appears to be an apotheosis of postmodernism. He seems immersed in an "obscene" world of experience from which he can gain no distance. The game player before his monitor becomes "pure screen," a mere conduit for the game, which, it may be more accurate to say, is playing him.

The fear of immersion evident in postmodern theory resonates with Pikul's fear of penetration. And the two taken together establish a range of worries from the psycho-sexual to the ontological that the visibility of our permeability unleashes. The interlocking sets of dualisms produced here—distance/immersion, critical/influenced, bounded/penetrated—suggest a dilemma: either a detached, critical, bounded subjectivity and a clear sense of reality or an immersed, influenced, penetrated self lost in a schizo flux. One is tempted to respond to this dilemma like Geller: to answer only with derision and an obscene gesture. This configuration has never been less convincing and indeed the disappearance of postmodernism from the theoretical landscape has much to do with the emergence of affect and emotion as subjects of

critical inquiry and the overcoming of an identification of critical subjectivity with the bounded Cartesian subject. Jameson and Baudrillard's modern subject, along with Bambrilla's gallery visitor, implicitly directed to condemn the immersed game-player, seem as anachronistic as Cronenberg's Pikul in *eXistenZ*: reactionary, fearful, paranoid, less a critical, contestatory subject of radical modernity than a descendent of the Descartes who peers from his window wondering if the men on the street below are automatons. We do not cease to be critical subjects when we acknowledge the inescapability of our permeability; indeed an understanding of affect is necessary for such.

Eve Sedgwick in her insightful "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," is explicit about the paranoid quality of critical theory. Even Freud, she notes, pointed out a "striking similarity" between his paranoid patient, Dr. Schreber, and his own work (125). And toward the end of the 20th century paranoia had become "a uniquely sanctioned *methodology*" (126). Sedgwick, drawing upon the work of Melanie Klein, uses the term paranoid to define a *position*—"the characteristic posture that the ego takes up with respect to its objects"—not a description of ontological reality or the structure of the subject *per se* (128). And as such she underscores that other relations to the object are possible, including one which allows for the "repair" of what is severed from the self "into something like a whole" (128). In the paranoid position the ego is deeply invested in its boundaries as an empowering developmental achievement and as a position vis-à-vis the world and others. But it is not the only position that the subject may take in relation to its objects.

That critical theory most often comes from the paranoid position, as Sedgwick argues, makes good sense. Critical theory has attempted not only to understand social reality, but also to identify and resist the sexism, racism, homophobia, and imperialism endemic to it: "the paranoid position—understandably marked by hatred, envy, and anxiety—is a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of, and ingests from the world around one" (Sedgwick 128). Postmodern theory's distinction

between distance and immersion fits easily into this framework, and can be seen, in essence, as a defense of the paranoid position from the position of the paranoid. The postmodern theorists' fear of immersion, upon this view, comes from the projected content of the "contamination" of the self by the world. The schizo subject of postmodern theory is the negative validation of the paranoid subject, the "too great proximity of everything," a confirmation of the persistence of alienation. The modern subject and the postmodern "schizo," form the zero-sum construction of an anxious mutually affirming self and other, not two historically contiguous forms as Jameson and Baudrillard suggest.

Half-Life gets its moralistic punch from the sense of distance from the game player that it gives the gallery visitor. For the player the illusion of distance is quite literally overcome. The game-player is actively engaged; the pose of detached observation is not an option. As the subject loses its sense of distance, its "objectivity," the clarity of the reality supported by a subject/object distinction is also lost. The sense that the real is "out here" in the gallery, not "in" the game becomes questionable. And this is not because the game replaces reality for the players, but because we come to understand that the gallery presents us with just another game with its own set of rules. The bounded subject that depends upon the dubious claim that "just looking" preserves the viewer's boundaries is deeply destabilized by the visible breakdown of that illusion of distance.

Once we begin to analyze the basis for the anxiety about new media, it breaks down. The special concerns about new media seem to depend upon a claim about analogue media that cannot plausibly be maintained: that media such as film, photography and print are less likely to "immerse" the subject in a fictional world or to influence its view of reality. Indeed, when such differences between new and now traditional media are dismissed, then the "immersed" subject of new media begins to seem like the real agent enabled to redefine reality through his actions. The bounded subject, who is "just looking," from the outside in, appears to be the one who has given

up its agency. And once this perspective begins to seem plausible, we are in a position to understand the view I'm associating with Allegra Geller: a view that embraces permeability, immersion and virtual reality.

Geller, Game Designer and the Boundless Subject

The most obvious criticism of Bambrilla's installation is that its design does not allow for the representation of new media in their own terms. The stark dualism between traditional and new media that Bambrilla's installation creates depends upon seeing new media from a safe distance. The non-interactive screens of the installation cannot reproduce the specificity of the game's media, its interactivity, and hence it is unable to capture the complexity of the game. Indeed, there is significant evidence of an active subject at work in the playing of *Counter-Strike*. The text accompanying *Half-Life* informs us that players play against each other as either terrorists or counter-terrorists and the killing depicted on the installation screens underscores this, but this too fails to capture the complexity of the game in which players work together in teams and are involved in a variety of activities: they can buy weapons, rescue hostages, plant or defuse bombs, switch identities mid-game, vary tactics and strategize cooperation and competition, and communicate through an in-game chat system or pre-scripted keyboard codes. Indeed, *Counter-Strike* especially in the period after 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, has become a locus for political debate and resistance to militarism. Initiatives like that of the *Velvet Strike* make available spray-on logos that can be applied in the game scene as anti-war graffiti and run an on-line site where the tactics for subverting the game's militarist presumptions are shared.

Talmadge Wright and his co-authors in their study of creative player actions in FPS online video games focus upon "creative game talk" as a "platform for showing off human performance" in *Counter-Strike*. For Wright, the meaning of playing *Counter-Strike* is not reducible to the graphics or the violent game play, but must be understood through the immense creativity and complexity of interaction that the game makes possible. Playing such games, argues Wright, "can both reproduce and challenge everyday rules of social interaction while also generating interesting and creative innovations

in verbal dialogue and non-verbal expressions” (1). Wright devotes his study to mapping the communicative exchanges of players and analyzing them as creative interactions, filled with good humor and cultural awareness. Wright’s work changes the impression one has of the game after seeing *Half-Life*, which derives much of its force from showing silent, seemingly socially-isolated young men, staring toward screens. For Wright these men are not drones, but highly active, interactive, improvisational and creative subjects.

Because he gives such a compelling defense of gaming as a practice, Wright encourages a more refined critique of *Counter-Strike* than Bambrilla does. Clearly to reduce the game to its violence would be a mistake and yet, its violence forms the horizon of all the game’s other activities and remains, for me, the most fundamental and most disturbing aspect of *Counter-Strike*. Indeed, the militarized violence and killing is all the more disturbing once such is seen in relation to the considerable improvisation and creativity that the game involves. It is not new media or immersion *per se* that is at issue here, but the way in which the game is invested in an entrenchment of the paranoid position. War games are a veritable carnival of projection and boundary elaboration; while there is cooperation in *CounterStrike*, it is undertaken upon the presumption of the boundary between us and them (the enemy) and all of the game’s strategy reinforces this boundary. The premise for such games is always thin. Political analysis is not the point. Rather, the game is a grand machine for the endless reiteration of bounded subjectivity. *Pave* Jameson and Baudrillard, it is not the difference of the “immersed” subject of new media from the detached modern subject that needs to be accounted for, but their similarity, the shared hyper-attention to boundaries and the repression of affect.

Should we doubt the role of interactive technologies in the production of the subjectivity required for war, we only need to note that Wright’s account of the game player sounds very close to the new highly-skilled high-tech soldier that one can find described on many of DARPA’s (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) webpages. The military uses interactive games to train soldiers and many new technologies depend upon the visual skills that complex computer graphics give to game players. At issue is not the

conditioning of a schizo-soldier into confusing virtual reality for the real world, but rather training for rapid interpretation of complex visual data and its implementation within a practical context. One DARPA project called MANTIS (Multispectral Adaptive Networked Tactical Imaging System) “will provide small units with network-enabled collaborative visualization for soldier-to-soldier image sharing, access to remote sensors and targeting handoff to off-board weapons, allowing soldiers to point, click and kill” (DARPA). MANTIS not only proposes three overlapping systems of night-vision, but uses inset displays of surveillance data shared by other soldiers or off-sight detectors. I have to wonder if this complex system would produce confusion in the heat of battle, but if it did work it would be an achievement of the training that the players of *Counter-Strike* have already begun: sophisticated interactive visual digital training and its clear unexamined goal. Rather than producing the confusion of self, other, and world, these games produce sophisticated, though instrumentalized, systems of detection of minute elements of such distinctions.

That this training is built upon a foundation of repression and projection is evident in MANTIS’ motto, “once again own the night,” which evokes primordial fear of the dark and a sense of justified seizure to take back the means to overcome that fear. The enemy it seems is the repository of all our fear and defeating it will return us to a position of fearless dominance.

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The apparent inverse of the fearful position that new media will precipitate a collapse of distance and threaten our sense of reality is the position that views new media as the means to the overcoming of the illusion of distance and its false sense of reality. This is the Allegra Geller position; it eschews the fear of new media as “ludicrous” and views it rather as a means to overcome the passivity associated with traditional spectatorship, as a means to realize oneself as a cultural agent, rather than as an ideological subject. Peter Weibel is perhaps the best advocate of such a view. The influential director of the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, filmmaker and new media artist sees the new technologies as finally catching up to what

advanced twentieth century physics and philosophy have long known about the subject's position vis-a-vis the world—that it is always already on the inside, that distance is always an illusion:

In the real world, the observer is always part of the world he observes, always an internal observer. The external observer exists only in an idealized, non-existent world...classical cinema imitates this idealized world (of philosophy, mathematics, and classical physics). With their internal observers, Virtual Reality systems therefore simulate an aspect of reality, bringing interactive images one step closer to the imitation of life ("Intelligent Image" 595).

So, rather than subverting the subject's critical distance, new media presents the subject with a more accurate working model of the real.

Weibel believes that the new technologies not only free the observer from the snares of ideology, the "idealized, non-existent world" that seems to precede the subject, but from the constraints of nature as well. They encourage us to see ourselves as involved in the shaping of the real and provide the means for its radical redefinition. Weibel speculates that new technologies break down the difference between real space and image space and "will be a next step toward liberating humanity from the natural prison of space and time" (601).

A view such as Weibel's that sets up a distinction between the passive subject of ideology and the active agent of new media turns the tables on the reading of *Counter-Strike* that Brambilla's installation elicits from its audience. Weibel's position would suggest that the installation does not offer critical distance from its subject, but rather interpellates the subject through the illusion of distance into accepting the installation's implicit claim about the difference between new and traditional media. While the installation appears to respect the subject's critical capacity, offering a detached view of the video-game, it is every bit as seductive as it suggests *Counter-Strike* is. The positioning of the viewer as external to the installation's object reinforces an

illusion about the subject that he is outside of the world he is observing, and flatters the viewer for “getting” the critique of the game that the installation itself produces.

Half-Life, as its title suggests, depends upon identifying the activity of the game player as something less than “real life.” And this dovetails the Baudrillardian claim that we have lost the real, that ours is a world of simulation. For Weibel, however, at least potentially, new media collapses the difference between the virtual and the real, not by subverting the real, but by giving us new powers for its construction. New media realizes the potential of the avant-garde for Weibel: it gives each of us the power to define and construct the real as such.

Such a position seems ripe for a charge of hubris though and it is such that Slavoj Žižek has in mind when he says of current “technological fantasies,”

What looms at the horizon of the “digital revolution” is nothing else than the prospect that human beings will acquire the capacity of what Kant and other German Idealists called “intellectual intuition/intellektuelle Anschauung/.” The closure of the gap that separates (passive) intuition and (active) production, i.e. the intuition which immediately generates the object it perceives—the capacity hitherto reserved for the infinite divine mind.

The optimism and enthusiasm of Weibel’s view indeed suggest just such a surpassing of all resistance to human intention and will: the creator finally become Creator, the grandest ambition of the subject *per se*.

Weibel’s view appears to be the direct inverse of the view that is anxious about new media immersion; he is exhilarated by its prospects. As is often the case with apparent oppositions, however, the one between detractors and celebrants of new media hides many shared presumptions. Weibel’s view does not allow for a view of the permeable self as much as it asserts the self writ large. Both positions are invested in a view of the subject that emphasizes its power to define its own position in the world—either through negation and differentiation, in the case of postmodernism or through creative production

of its own conditions, in the case of Weibel. And indeed, these are two critical dimensions of modern subjectivity: the ability to resist reality as a critical subject and the ability to produce reality as a free agent. Both the bounded modern subject and Weibel's boundless subject represent the subject as free only when free of indiscriminate influence from outside its boundaries. The difference between the positions turns more on their respective view of the subject's terrain of action than on their view of subject itself: Baudrillard frightens us with the image of the subject's "penetration without resistance" by new media; Weibel, on the other hand, suggests that new media offers us greater opportunities to overcome the resistance of material reality to our "penetration." In both cases, the subject's impermeable boundaries are presumed and threatened or aggrandized.⁴ In neither case is the permeable self intertwined with others and the world acknowledged or explored.

We can understand Geller's lascivious gesture toward Pikul a bit better at this point. While Geller seems to challenge the dominant patriarchal order when she calls attention to Pikul's permeability and in her very capacity as game designer, what she more accurately represents is a warrior in some sort of battle of the sexes, wherein she does not effectively overturn the structure of patriarchy as much as she seizes its phallus for herself. From now on Geller creates reality; she has the means to penetrate the populace according to her own design. It is no surprise then that the film itself is structured around acts of terrorism representing moves in a war of position.

I've set out two general positions on new media, which I've associated with Cronenberg's *Pikul* and Geller respectively. Both these positions are responses to new media's ability to make visible human permeability. The positions appear to be opposed to one another: one suspicious of new media the other fully embracing its immersion. The positions are not actually opposed to one another, I maintained, because they both aggrandize the bounded subject. *Pikul* represents the rear-garde attempt to retain a sense of impermeability by attempting to remain free of new media's penetration. Geller on the other hand seizes the opportunity that new media seems to offer for the aggrandizement of a virtually boundless self. Throughout, the stubborn reiteration of the paranoid position is in evidence. In the next

section I want to consider an alternative to both these positions which takes the visibility that new media gives to affect and human permeability as an opportunity to explore human permeability.

Playing with the Permeable Self

The foregoing discussion makes clear that the bounded subject is persistent and its virtual counterpart, the boundless subject, does not represent much improvement with respect to understanding our permeability. Nevertheless, I think that new media has the potential to support the exploration of new models of subjectivity less focused upon the subject's boundaries and its self-assertion and more attuned to the lower registers of its experience—affect, sensory intelligence, and everything which flows between us and one another and the world—everything that goes unnoticed by the bounded subject. I am not talking here about the postmodern “schizo,” insufficiently bounded to sustain subjectivity, but a subject, an “I,” that while still retaining subjective integrity recognizes and attends to the permeability of its boundaries. This is a subject that exposes the false dichotomy created by Pikul and Geller; a subject that is both bounded and permeable, both itself and inescapably and inextricably interconnected to others and the world.

Of critical importance here is a rich notion of play. Play, for the neo-Kleinian, D. W. Winnicott, “involves the opportunity to affectively integrate experience as one does in dreams, poetry, art, the theater and religion” by creating a transitional space wherein the boundaries between self and other and self and world are softened (Newirth 153). Play, so understood, constitutes a break from the concrete subject/object thinking of the paranoid position. It is, importantly, essentially non-purposive; it is open-textured exploratory and “facilitat(es) the development of a (players) capacity to integrate disowned aggression and the capacity for symbolic thought” (Newirth 153). This notion of play is very different from the one allowed within a game like *CounterStrike* regardless of the creativity and improvisation it involves, because *CounterStrike* is organized around a rigid concept, war, and a rigid goal, winning. While *CounterStrike* is not a good model of play in Winnicott's

sense, its interactive technologies facilitate the softening of boundaries. In a context free from the “prime directive” of war, such technologies provide immense potential for exploration and integration of affect.

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To see how new media might support an exploration of our permeable selves through affective play, I want to consider another new media installation, *AlphaWolf*, (FCMM Montreal, Quebec, October 9-19, 2003), produced by the MIT Media Lab Synthetic Characters Group. *AlphaWolf* produces neither the illusion of critical distance of Brambilla’s installation, nor the impoverished social script of *Counter-Strike*. It avoids the excesses of the bounded subject and, more remarkably, it seems carefully designed to avoid the grandiosity of the boundless subject of virtual reality. *AlphaWolf* is interactive, immersive, encouraging participants to play directly with affect, but in so doing it opens a transitional space that unleashes aggression and encourages reflexive understanding of affect, interactivity, and immersion in the complex and creative formation of self in community with others.

AlphaWolf, according to its designer’s description,

features a pack of directable three-dimensional animated wolves. Three participants direct the actions of three pups in a newborn litter. By howling, growling, whining or barking into microphones, participants tell their pups to howl, growl, whine or bark. In addition, by clicking with a mouse in the virtual world, participants can tell their pups where to go and with whom to interact. An interaction session with the wolves lasts approximately five minutes. During this time, the pups wake up and meet their pack mates. There are six wolves in all—three user-directed pups, and three fully autonomous adults. The individual wolves autonomously form and remember social relationships with each other based on their interactions with other wolves. In turn these relationships color the way in which the pups perform the actions that they are directed to take (Tomlinson 2).

While *AlphaWolf* is a game, it is not a traditional game. The goal is to explore the social world of the wolf, not to win a battle or finish a task. Many people have deep interest in animals, however, so the game is still potentially quite compelling to a popular audience.

The relationship between the participant and his or her wolf, is an especially significant feature of *AlphaWolf*. Again, from the designer:

In *AlphaWolf*, each human participant has high-level control over the action of a virtual wolf, but the wolf's emotional state is autonomously determined by a computer. This distinction between action and emotion makes it possible for participants to direct the actions of the virtual wolves without compromising the wolves' realistic behavior... the autonomously determined emotional states cause the wolves to behave like real wolves throughout the course of the installation (Tomlinson 1).

AlphaWolf does not position the participant outside the action as in Brambilla's *Half-Life*, nor does it position him or her inside, in the sense of creating fusion with the game action as encouraged in *Counter-Strike*. Several features of *AlphaWolf* work against fusion: the non-realism of the graphics, the awkwardness of the vocalizations, the otherness of a distinct species, and most importantly the fact that the characters are semi-autonomous: they are directed by the participant, but maintain their realistic wolf identities. We do not "become wolf" in *AlphaWolf*, even less does the wolf "become human," but we play between human and wolf identity, experiencing moments of harmony and dissonance, learning something, nevertheless, about each respective identity along the way. This feature allows the game to push back against the subject undermining its inflation to boundless grandiosity. Rather than leading the player to imagine that she may overcome the "natural prison of space and time" as Weibel believes, it reminds the player that the materiality of nature sets a limit to our fantasy ("The Intelligent Image" 601).

The use of wolf vocalizations to begin the program and shape character behavior produces an instant affective investment in the environment. We

understand the sounds to be simultaneously communicative and affective. Each of the sounds, the whimper, growl, bark, and howl, elicits behavior that shapes relations among characters in the moment and in future interactions. As participants in *AlphaWolf* then, we are forced to communicate and interact without conceptual language. This feature foregrounds the affective charge within communicative exchanges and its effect upon social interactions. The affective dimension of language figures into human interaction, as well as wolf interaction, but often works beneath the register of conscious attention for human language speakers. *AlphaWolf* explores this dimension by drawing participants into its explicit performance. Granted, players of *AlphaWolf* may not think of their experience in the terms I am presently using to describe it, but their performance within the game is itself an exercise in the exploration and recognition of the role of affect in social interaction. It was evident in the gallery where I saw *AlphaWolf* that the play had an effect on the mood of the participants and may well have reconfigured to some degree their communicative interactions. Players were tentative at first, but the ability to take on the wolf persona allowed a range of affective performance and interaction and play rare in the art gallery.

Half-Life and *Counter-Strike* both produce an effect of separation between “us and them.” *Half-Life* leads its viewers to believe that the players of *Counter-Strike* have been dehumanized through their interaction with new media, thus creating a separation between we knowing, still human, art consumers and the “post-human,” video game drone. *Counter-Strike* is predicated upon there being an enemy that we must destroy or be destroyed by. *AlphaWolf*, on the other hand, locates us in a social field of others with whom we interact and build complex relational histories. This dimension of *AlphaWolf* seems particularly realistic to the participant and may draw us into recognition that we are always already embedded in a community of others, that many of our actions are undertaken only half consciously and that we only come to understand ourselves and our behavior slowly and within the context of interaction. This recognition is encouraged not only by the program which simulates wolf society and allows us to participate in such, but also by producing an interactive social experience for its human participants in

the gallery space. Real life and virtual reality are in complex relation, not reduced to the same as in Baudrillard or Weibel, as the participant undertakes to discover, learn, create, and interact with the other human participants in *AlphaWolf*.

While *AlphaWolf* does not produce separation or alienation, it does open a space for reflexive understanding. It does so particularly well, I think, because it allows us to play at being animals. Ours is a culture long obsessed with distinguishing ourselves from other animals. This obsession has left a legacy of blindness to what we share with them, affect, embodiment, the givenness of community and led us to over-estimate the social and psychological significance of our intellect, consciousness and autonomy. In *AlphaWolf*, the hardened cultural script denying our animality is minimized and we can recognize aspects of ourselves within the wolves' social dynamic. It is that gap that remains between us and our wolf that opens a space of reflection on our respective identities and the role of affect therein. Arguably, some gap between his own identity and the identity of his avatar, may exist for the player of *Counter-Strike*, but this gap, I think, is filled by the powerful cultural fantasy of control and power that makes the game so attractive to its players. The *Counter-Strike* player is unlikely to reflect on how far he falls short of his avatar's masculinity, though the nearly compulsive play of many players suggests that the gap must be filled again and again for the fantasy to be maintained. *Half-Life*, as we've said, establishes a space of critical distance, but the distance produced by the installation makes it unlikely that the viewer will identify with the game player and learn something reflexively about their shared investment within their respective immersive environments.

I would like to conclude claiming that the openness of the game provides the perfect context for exploring the subject, that can attend to the complexity of its permeability. But the situation turns out to be more complex than it initially appears. As its name suggests, *AlphaWolf* implicitly acknowledges animal (and human) aggression and the violence of social hierarchies, rather than sublimating such in the context of war. Players choose, within the options given in the programmed wolf behavior, how to interact with others and have the potential to explore the rich interactions among characters and

context. However, during my observation, once players understood the basic premise of the game and identified their avatars, without fail they would attempt to show dominance over every other wolf pup they encountered. That is, the players at first opportunity reasserted the paranoid position and attempted to make the game little different from games like *Counter-Strike*.

The players attempt to dominate attests, I think, to the cultural expectation of game players and underscores how compelling the paranoid position is. It is clear that the game was designed with an understanding of the likely initial response of the players in mind. *AlphaWolf* offers little to players approaching it from the paranoid position. Overly aggressive pups cannot build the social bonds they need to interact well in the pack. If players want to play they need to learn to do so otherwise. The players were able in the end to play in Winnicott's rich sense of the term, but only after being coaxed by the game's designer, who drew players into the game by subverting the paranoid position: he hid in the game as a wolf pup and submitted to all new players. Once they were able to assert themselves, the new players gave up posturing as "alpha wolves" and begin to explore all the play the game made possible, as if they immediately recognized that there was more to the game than the assertion of their boundaries. Hence, my conclusion is still a hopeful one: while there is nothing about new media gaming that ensures such an outcome, the right game under the right conditions can quite readily encourage the emergence of an "I" able to play with its permeability. This permeable self takes us beyond the apparent contradiction between Pikul's bounded self and Geller's unbounded one, and hence beyond the phobic position alienated from others and one of monstrous arrogance seeking to assert the self above all, and gives us instead a self that can recognize itself in rich, complex, playful interaction with others and the world.

NOTES

1. C.f. Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* for an account of the armored male body as an expression of fascism and patriarchy.
2. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* theorize anti-semitism as the product of the repression of mimesis and a process of projection, which is close to the Kleinian account I discuss below. "Mimesis imitates the environment, but false projection makes the environment like itself. For mimesis the outside world is a model which the inner world must try to conform to: the alien must first become familiar; but false projection confuses the inner and outer world and defines the most intimate experiences as hostile. Impulses which the subject will not admit as his own even though they are most assuredly so, are attributed to the object—the prospective victim" (187).
3. Some of the examples addressed in this section and the following one were initially explored by me in "Subjects after New Media," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Volume 23, #1, 2006.
4. Weibel, it must be said, is only interested in work that overturns existing relations of power, but given his model of creation and reality it is unclear on what basis a critique of power could be made. His investment in a notion of the creative genius does not allow an exploration of how the artist is not only a maker of the world, but also already made by the world, always already ideological or "penetrated," not just the "penetrator" of material reality.

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