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Videogame Cybersubjects: Questioning the Myths of Violence and Identification (Implications for Educational Technologies)

In this article I explore the question of videogame cybersubjects and the myths of violence and identification made available by the new interactive media so as to vivify what is at stake when it comes to educational technologies. I introduce the concept of *interpassivity* to provide an aspect of technological interactivity that is missing in the current discussions. I use a Lacanian psychoanalytic paradigm as an antithetical research orientation to gain a better grasp of the fantasy formations of what I deem, following the lead of Deleuze and Guattari (1977), to be a schizophrenic identity position of students today.

How to Read This Essay: Some Preliminary Questions and Responses

I begin in a somewhat unusual manner by addressing several questions necessitated by a peer review of an earlier version of this article: Why discuss videogames in the context of education? What is research in the context of this article given that **ajer** is a research journal? And finally, what have videogames to do with educational technology anyway? All three questions point to a policing of what should and should not appear in **ajer**'s covers. My opening is a rhetorical move to open up and rethink the boundaries of research, technology, and education to let in what is often screened out in their respective discursive domains in order to advance the force of an argument that has no pretense of certainty.

What could be farther from education than violent videogames? This is precisely the point as to why they deserve our attention in education itself, because as an institution in its modernist form, education has worked hard to keep itself framed as a serious endeavor. As "pure" entertainment, videogames appear to be the antithesis of the serious business of education. Although creative play has always been part of educational discourse, most often easily justified and contained within the confines of elementary grades where such rhetoric can still sell, its binary opposite—work—begins to dominate as the pressure to find a job in the social symbolic order becomes more and more pronounced and pressing in high school and later in postsecondary institutions. The separation between major and minor subjects, primary and complementary subjects, rests along these same binary lines: as subjects of leisure that have lost ground in our schools (the fine arts, physical education) and subjects of cognition, notably the sciences. However, C.P. Snow's (1993) somewhat forgotten charge that there are two separate cultures (science and the

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humanities) has begun to break down, causing difficulties for educators in preparing students for the job market. How do we balance skill acquisition and pragmatic degrees with the more “useless” subject areas that seem (at first) periphery to business interests? Capitalism needs flexible creative subjects who are able to span technology with social science, but all too often the choice in the legitimate marketplace is either between the immediacy of McJobs that pay little, or to wait between seven and nine years by attending a Canadian post-secondary institution, the time required before a professional position is secured (Finnie, 2002).

The postmodern condition has broken down this once established modernist binary of work/play, making education more and more a performative task of entertainment: a sophisticated *Muppet Show* supported by the technological wizardry of “smart rooms” and the constant stream of technological innovations. In our media-saturated environment, we see everywhere this breakdown between work and play, as the aestheticization of knowledge takes place through the influences of designer capitalism. Even the driest of subjects like philosophy has to take on the mantle of entertainment. Books—such as the series written by Mark Rowlands, which includes such titles as *The Philosopher at the End of the Universe*, *Philosophy Explained Through Science Fiction Films* (2003), and William Irwin’s edited series that includes the philosophies of *Seinfeld* (2000), *The Simpsons* (2001), and *The Matrix* (2002)—now combine (low) popular culture with (high) theory to present the hybridic equivalent of an infomercial as serious scholarship. Science, as the Discovery Channel amply shows, has followed suit. Mathematics education, again considered as one of the most dry, difficult, and cerebral subjects, has been flooded with “interactive manipulables” and visuals to help learners grasp abstract concepts.

Education has become a juggling act nestled between pure entertainment and raw bankable facts: by now that familiar dilemma where the confusion of fact as fiction and fiction as fact has become standard fare leading to paradoxes and Derridean issues of undecidability. As a hegemonic public discourse, it can no longer entirely toe the modernist line of objective, testable knowledge (although it tries, as in Bush’s fantasy of *No Child Left Behind*), nor can it fall entirely into pure entertainment. To do so would be a loss of public responsibility and trust, like those accusations first levied against A.S. Neil’s experimental and residential Summerhill School founded in 1921. The practice of education ends up split or fractured. In its classrooms the serious business of learning goes on, while in its corridors social clubs, dances, and after-hours sport events: entertainment prevails.

Generally speaking, from this fractured state of managing the contradiction between modernist and postmodernist identity formations—that is, between an education of the mind that constantly bumps against its limit, the body—a crisis of identity emerges that I identify as schizophrenic, following the lead of Deleuze and Guattari (1977, 1987), who specifically link such an identity to the workings of postmodern spectacular capitalism. Students schizophrenically live out this impossible split on the one hand, as the necessity of discipline offered to them by the school or a postsecondary institution to find work. And on the other hand, the “freedom” associated with the entertainment industry (as media consumption, mall-ing, partying, clubbing) lived out after school or

outside school and on the weekends.¹ For students who must further support themselves through postsecondary institutions by taking on service-sector Mc-Jobs, the escape into the excesses of consumption becomes even more pressing and schizoid. Alcohol binging and drug use are especially prevalent (Weitzman, Nelson, & Wechsler, 2003).

To avoid the schizophrenia of pleasure (discussed below psychoanalytically as *jouissance*) and discipline brings us back to the contradiction of learning itself in a postmodern age; that is, to find how to overcome the mind-body split bequeathed by Enlightenment rationality. Transpositionally, this schizophrenic contradiction manifests itself between violent videogames, which can be characterized as “pure” affective body, and the seriousness of the discipline of education, most often theorized as “pure” mind. I argue that examining violent videos opens questions of identity that trouble our students today. The violence that videogames present is simply symptomatic of postmodernity, expressive of the paranoia, dystopia, and conspiracy rhetoric that shape the mediated culture with which our students live as they take their seats in our classrooms.

The extraordinary aspect about videogames is that they also tell us something about the influx of educational technologies into our schools and postsecondary institutions. Technology as it is most commonly thought of in education refers simply to the tools, equipment, machines, and instruments that aid and enhance learning. We get caught up in what such instrumentation can do for us. Heidegger (1977), in his well-known essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” worries about this commonsense assumption and understanding of technology, arguing that technology is in its essence a way of *revealing*. As he famously argued, this form of technological revealing in Western thought has enabled the hegemony of representation to maintain its sovereignty. Under its instrumental regime of *Ge-stell* (enframing), objects are reduced to a “standing-reserve” (*Bestand*; we need only think of computer databanks here), as resources for use value. *Ge-stell* constitutes the essence of modern technology. Although this critique was well known to critical science educators like Wiezenbaum (1976) and Dreyfus (1992), who tried to steer a different path for technology, in the broad picture of education little has changed to offset it. Rather, computerization and digitization in schools have simply furthered the ordering process and closed off other modes of revealing to which technology is capable. To mitigate this charge of technological instrumentation, the rhetoric of interactivity has been effectively used by its supporters to claim an involvement in student subjectivity and thereby agency to enhance learning. The benefits of the interactive computerized classroom are the standard response to quell any alarmist concerns of standardization. I dispute this claim in this article by drawing on videogame interactivity as a paradigm case.

Now oddly enough, videogames also give us insight into where educational technology that continues in the direction of representation is likely to lead. In order to pull the student into its screen of learning, obviously more and more of the affective body has to come into play. One of the stark criticisms of earlier educational technologies was how bleak, uninviting, and cold they were. Recall the criticism of the impoverishment of Papert’s (1980) drawings of

computerized flowers in *Mindstorms* when compared to young children messing with real paint, brushes, paper, and so forth, which incorporates as much of the body's senses as possible. To remedy such educational technology, we will have to move in the direction of the aestheticization already advanced by video computer games. As any number of earlier studies indicated (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Provenzo, 1991; Sheff, 1994), what make videogames so enjoyable are the advances in graphic technology that have taken place. A hyper-aesthetic has evolved where color intensity has been enhanced; three-dimensional characters are able to move in various directions; in some games they can be made to grow or shrink; the background settings have become more dramatic and fantastic; the speed and repertoire of movements of the characters have increased; and so forth. Even the console player can be self-reflexively split. In some game situations the player can engage in the action as an "ego-shooter," as if he or she were the avatar; or it is possible to stand back and watch the action from a distance, taking a point of view anywhere on the screen. A third option is to move back and forth from these two options. Yet it should be noted that no matter how much freedom the console player seems to have, ultimately he or she is shaped and guided by the software, which has only so many degrees of freedom built into its circuitry. In and of themselves, violent videogames have simplistic plot structures so as to enhance the affective incorporation of the body. Making the narratives more sophisticated (and therefore more cerebral) distances the body's involvement, raising the question: What form of revealing should education be engaged in if it is not to continue to head in the direction of learning as a sophisticated, spectacularly engaging infomercial?

When it comes to the question of research in this article, my immediate retort is to ask, Just what sort of research avoids falling into yet another technological enframing (*Ge-stell*)? It should be pointed out that whenever "empirical" data are used, especially in the varieties of ethnographic researches, *power differentials* are set up, and data are most often used as a means to an end, confirming Heidegger's (1977) charge of technological abuse. Rather laughable (without being overly cynical) are the responses of teen informants (and adults) when asked by researchers why they play these violent games. Responses like "They're cool," "I dunno, I just like to play," and "It's fun" are empty of insight, whereas the talk of special effects, the weapons, action, gore, scenery, and so forth are common. No articulate reflective explanation is given of the *why* of such passionate attachments. Equally amusing is the conclusion reached by Media Awareness Network (1998), a Canadian research arm devoted to helping teachers sort out how students are to use media and the dangers inherent in them. In a major study on videogame culture, researchers concluded,

The main surprise came from the fact that the young people we surveyed were largely in agreement with the criticism of harmful effects of violent games and the potential for videogame addiction. Many of them felt that there were some negative consequences associated with playing violent games and that many kids played too much.

The emptiness of informants' responses and the common disavowal by media viewers such as the above statement (it is always my little brother or

sister who is harmed by media violence, but I, being older or an adult, am not, so there are harmful effects (I think?), but it is the *other* who experiences them, not me) are commonly found in media research. For my article I chose the discourse of the analyst as developed by the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan (1977) in order to provide another way of revealing in research that avoids a play of the power of enframing. To escape this circuitry of power, I deliberately take a “no-madic” position as the discourse of the analyst that focuses on desire and struggles with how unconscious desire is revealed by what is unsaid and invisible, through what is fetishized and disavowed. No-madic research, if it can be called that, attempts to read the unconscious transferences of desire in media texts, transference being the central means by which a person’s unconscious desires and conflicts manifest themselves in analysis (jagodzinski, 2004). Lacanian psychoanalysis recognizes an impossible gap between the speaking unconscious subject and the subject of discursive speech; between the uniqueness of the individual and the spoken, heard, and seen language of enunciation. Desire is the excess of language that dwells in this gap and properly belongs to the unconscious. It seems, however, that what is not convertible into information and mobilization for the sake of power appears deficient, indefinable, and lacking in being, and by the scientific community not considered research. There is a certain unproductive mode of such an attempt to grasp the workings of unconscious desire, a letting be of the force of the argument itself. So is Lacanian psychoanalysis research perhaps not to be included within the pages of *ajer*?

Avatars of Identification?

The virtual world of videogames and the acclaimed interactivity that accompanies it present an unprecedented challenge to theorize the subject caught up in its spin. Neither television nor film, although related via the screen, offer a comparable experience. Educational technology has a long history of embracing the value of such interactivity when it comes to the transference of learning. Videogames are the epitome of what might be called the illusion of the fiction of presence. The relay time between a player and its avatar appears instantaneous, as if time did not exist—only space, confirming Paul Virillio’s longstanding critique of the loss of time as duration. More than any other media—short of self-contained virtual environments like the Computerized Automatic Visual Environment (CAVE) where the console user is inside—videogames enable a fetishistic disavowal to take place between the screen and the player: “I know that this is ‘just’ a game, but nevertheless I am playing it as if it were ‘real.’” Although various attempts at deconstruction and poststructuralist theory have worked hard to dispell this illusion of separation, it stubbornly persists, revealing that it is fantasy that supports reality and not the other way around.

In this article I question not only media interactivity, but also the violence that surrounds videogames. I do this so that educators might rethink their stance toward two commonsense assumptions that have become the staple of the current technological and educational paradigm: namely, media interactivity (chat rooms, blogs, e-learning, and so on) and the negative effects of media violence as best exemplified by videogames. In terms of educational media interactivity, the videogame (minus its violence) could be considered

the ideal technological learning environment in a postmodern climate where entertainment and knowledge have collapsed in on one another as entertainment. I present the exploration of this question from a Lacanian psychoanalytic viewpoint.

For the first time—ever, it seems—the spectator-player can identify with his or her own body as an object immediately on the screen; as an alter ego in the form of an avatar that occupies a space of fantasy that is virtual and imaginary. It is as if the avatar were an ephemeral being capable of acting, like a ghost, a guardian angel or devil. It occupies a space that belongs neither completely to the game world (or a chat world), nor can it be conclusively identified with the console-player. Rather, it hovers somewhere between them in virtual cyberspace. It acts like an empty linguistic shifter, an *I* that can be occupied by anyone. A chat-room avatar, no matter how sophisticated and tailor-designed it may be, although awkward at first, can still be occupied by virtually anyone. On the one hand, the console-player does have a continual identification with his or her avatar as it roams through a game's diegesis, but on the other hand, this identification is oddly empty. The avatar is like a shell covering its imaginary occupant, which is occupied only as long as it remains alive. Such a libidinal investment is strongly associated with an avatar's agency, which the console-player does not fully control. After all, the game has rules, limits, and goals. It has a certain independence of its own. Once dead, however, it can be revived again. This is highly significant because this initiates an endless loop of death and resurrection, facilitating a compulsion to repeat obsessively an action so that a player can confirm himself or herself through such an alter ego. One learns in this way, yet failure is being perverted. This desire to repeat is driven by a sense of mastery, which is informed by aggression because perfection is seldom achieved. Incremental satisfaction rather than failure is inherently built into the game. All players reach a certain level of skill, which then becomes impossible to surpass. The videogame may be abandoned or the player can become fixated, obsessed in wanting to "beat the game."

Such behavior caricatures perfectly Freud's (1920) description in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of a dialectic between two games that he watched his grandson play. The first game, characteristically called *fort/da*, describes the mechanism of desire (*Begehren*). The child throws the cotton reel outside his crib, wanting it to come back and secure his position in language. A goal is to be attained for the child is a subject who lacks in being. The attempt is to capture a missing part that would give him the comfort of feeling complete. The cotton reel and his mother are the "lost" objects he must learn to cope with. There is a *failure* in his attempt to retrieve the cotton reel. The action will be repeated to bring back what has been lost. Such failure often results in fits of temper. However, the child learns that he or she must live with such failure, that he or she is ultimately a fallible human being.

The second game describes the mechanism of the drives (*Triebe*), as it directly addresses the videogame experience. Freud's grandson would hide beneath a mirror for a time, and then suddenly jump up to see his reflection, repeating this over and over again. Here the game is not structured by failure, but by satisfaction. This is its *aim*, not goal. Sometimes this game stops when it becomes too painful to laugh from so much fun. In the Lacanian

psychoanalytic paradigm, this is referred to as *jouissance*: painful satisfaction or "enjoyment." This is not simply pleasure, but pleasure that reaches an excess. It is this excessive pleasure, of course, that raptures the body in videogames, and it is this same pleasure that educators continually discipline in their classrooms. To let a class get out of hand already identifies a body out of control. Subjects of the body (like drama, music, visual art, and physical education) clash with subjects of the mind (mathematics, science, social studies), causing management problems as students move from one class into another defined by another discourse and expectation. This separation of subject areas, as is well known, is a modernist legacy, a cultural survival that continues to hamper educational possibilities.

Videogames pervert the structure of desire (the first game) through the drives (the second game). They are structured more by the experience of *jouissance*; by the painful pleasure of having one's avatar live and die in an endless loop. The goal of *beating the game* becomes a secondary matter. Beating opponents in the game or other players who challenge for mastery can sublimate aggressivity. In videogames like *Myst*, for example, the goal is intentionally missing. Knowing the narrative is no longer important. A player has to figure out its purpose. But it is the *jouissance* of the journey that provides the entertainment: in the aim of not knowing what the purpose is rather than being directed by the purpose (goal) itself. Each moment of a videogame's diegesis is structured to satisfy the player's drives; that is, the auditory and visual sensations that affect the body below the level of consciousness. The action of an avatar (from a ping pong paddle to a gun, tank, or spaceship) is more like a bumper car exhibition ride. The ride has no direct goal other than getting hit or dodging an oncoming vehicle, depending how brave the driver is. The minor shocks to the body are part of the painful fun and dependent on risk, yet not pushed to the degree of the broken bones that go along with extreme sports. It is basically a safe ride. At the same time, learning does take place. The driver learns how much he or she willing to risk. However, with videogames the danger of physical pain drops out. Videogames enable a vicarious experience: the thrill without the danger like the addictive clips (virtual reality disks) Lenny Nero peddles in Bigelow's (1995) *Strange Days*. These videodisks are inserted into a Superconducting Quantum Interface Device (SQUID), a device that fits over the head and looks like a squid, its tentacles forming pressure points on certain parts of the cranium, emitting electric impulses that reach deep into the brain's hypothalamus. The user vicariously and synaesthetically reexperiences a memory through his or her body. So one wonders if this is the future of technological education based on representation. What exactly is lost when medical and surgical students dissect computer-simulated cadavers to learn their skills? Or on a smaller scale, what is lost when the biology student slices up a three-dimensional computer-simulated frog with a laser mouse? The fantasy that the SQUID device suggests is that whatever is lost can be recovered and then directly transferred into another body, making learning a technologically instantaneous affair.

Ego games (sometimes called first-person shooter games) abet this drive experience by organizing the interface around a software-simulated camera or an external camcorder that puts a player into the picture to enhance this bodily

affect; something exciting and intense is always happening. An avatar's immortal cyberspace existence enables the repetitiveness of an action to continue, as physical death is rendered null and void. This raises all kinds of ethical and political problems in some chat communities about the agency of the avatars in them, which researchers such as Turkle (1995) and Stone (1996) have interrogated. A player forms a love-hate relationship with his or her avatar, enabling full flights of *jouissance* to take place. Frustration and joy can be vetted through the virtual creature. At one moment it is loved for having accomplished the desired moves (destroyed the enemy, jumped to a new level, dogged an impending obstacle, etc.), whereas in the next it becomes a piece of "good-for-nothing sh*t" for having failed in its task. These extreme states of emptying and filling the drive (im)pulses are what keep the player interested. The libidinal investment flickers back and forth like Freud's grandson jumping up and seeing himself in the mirror. There is as much enjoyment in the failure as in the success; as much intensity of losing as winning in the context of the moment. The avatar literally "falls to pieces" (disintegrates, fragments, evaporates), reverting to what Lacan (1977) referred to as a "body in pieces" (pp. 9-10), a pre-egoic time of human development when a child had not yet formed a gestalt of its bodily image. It feels helpless in relation to its desired idealized mirror image. When the avatar is magically restored, psychically the player's ego comes together again to continue the game—perhaps with more determination and cautionary care. In this way a player "beats himself or herself up" for not having done better, experiencing masochistic pleasure while doing so. Satisfaction is achieved when the gaming circuit has been completed, not unlike those computerized self-taught programs where a student receives so many credits for also having completed the course. The predominance of such drive subjectivity in postmodernity reveals how identity is experienced, what Gergen (1991) popularly characterized as the "saturated self."

There is something quite sinister in all this participatory action that has consequences for educational technology that insists on following a similar path. From this hyped interaction between a player and its avatar emerges its shadow side: *interpassivity*. Interpassivity is a term coined by an Austrian philosopher Pfaller (2000; see also Zizek, 2002), who was perhaps the first to argue that in a strange way, the avatar enjoys the game as much as the player. It is the uncanny notion that in this flickering back and forth of drive impulses, the avatar (more accurately the computer program) is also in control. This is simply illustrated by all word-processing programs. The program writes you as you write it. The cursor hails you. You must find it on the screen. Its software establishes constraints of formatting and grammar should the writer choose to pay attention to them. Complex sentences are soon reduced to simple sentences if the writer chooses to obey the program. Like R2D2 of *Star Wars*, the computer "communicates" with its console user through a soundscape of auditory clues. It makes a startup noise to let one know it is ready. Videogames are even denser soundscapes of clues that must be attended to. They act as an auditory supplement to enhance the body's involvement through the various tonal vibrations of sound.

What appears as interactive flexibility also has interpassive structuring effects on how we write, think, and of course play games. The paranoid fear of interpassivity is that the machine will eventually take over our lives, that we will have no choice but to obey its programming. The console player loses interactive mastery as the program begins to do it “all for you.” Already word programs self-correct spelling as we mistype words. The machine now begins to “enjoy” at the expense of the player as mastery is forfeited and we allow it to take over human decision-making. This already happens with illicit video lottery terminals (VTLs) where the player hardly ever wins because the odds have been tampered with. In a bizarre way, it is the VTL who plays the player. Walt Disney’s *Tron* (Lisberger, 1982) was probably the first science fiction film that explored such a paranoid vision, raising the fundamental obsessive question: “Am I human or a machine?” Videogame avatars can be thought of as simple artificial intelligence (AI) devices, ancestors to the walking and talking dolls built by bio-engineer J.F. Sebastian in Scott’s *Blade Runner* (also produced in 1982). The avatars of the future will be our walking and talking mannequins that are programmed to take on our imprints, characteristics, know our family history, and so on—as poignantly explored in Isaac Asimov’s short story adapted to the screen by Chris Columbus film *Bicentennial Man* (1999); or they might be like *SimOne*, Andrew Niccol’s (2002) fantasy about a digitally created actress who becomes a screen star. *SimOne* is nothing more than a sophisticated software program.

The obsessive fear of educational technology emerges when questions of an emerging posthuman body begin to complicate learning with the possible use of nanotechnology, neuromorphic robotics, molecular engineering, autonomic computing, and bioengineering such as smart skin. Our students are already cyborgs, as are their teachers. The day is not far away when the i-pods, cell phones, and various video-transmitting systems that are used now for entertainment purposes become integrated into teaching and learning. To think otherwise seems folly. Design communities composed of fine artists with technological prowess and technicians with aesthetic sensibilities, however, will have to face not only the usual ethical questions being raised by religious zealots and more sober rationally minded philosophers such as More (2004), but the human psyche itself. As a vast number of sci-fi movies have explored (as mentioned above), it is the question of unconscious identity and the circulation of desire that remain the true question marks of science. No amount of neurological tampering will somehow make our brains transparent. The most innovative work brings the science of neurology together with psychoanalysis, as neuro-psychoanalysis (Solms & Turnbull, 2002). Once more, videogames and psychoanalytic theorizing can offer us insights here as well to question the *Ge-stell* of educational technology.

Fantasies of Identification

The most damaging accusation levied at violent videogames seems to be that they simply reinscribe patriarchal norms and normative concepts of sex-gender (Provenzo, 1991). Computer game producers simply reinforce the heterosexual binary by producing games targeted for each sex, naively identified biologically. To appeal to hetero boys, women are often represented in a negative light as sex objects, scantily clad, abducted, murdered, and so forth.

Yet the industry has cleverly developed postfeminist characters (like Lara Croft, Joanna Dark, Jill Valentine) such that a wide range of female characters exist, including androgynous and lesbian figures to offset this criticism (jagodzinski, 2004). Further, identity is not simply and naively spelled out along biological and gendered lines. This is dramatically demonstrated by Rand's (1995) study of a girl's "queer" Barbie. How dolls, games, and toys are appropriated and played with by child consumers can be dramatically at odds with the images and meanings that are culturally embedded as acceptable or intended by videogame manufactures. This is all the more reason why a psychoanalytic understanding of identity is necessary.

The drive culture of violent videogames is able to address the schizophrenic self of postmodernity in ways that schooling, it seems, cannot. A videogame avatar sets out a subject position that a console player is invited to embody. This allows for cross-gender and same-sex identifications, which run the entire gamut of possibilities. Adolescent heterosexual boys may enjoy becoming a buxom gun-toting girl who "kicks ass" for any number of psychic gratifications. It may well be a way to overcome shyness with the opposite sex; it may be a way to master the opposite sex; it may be a way to show secret admiration for strong women, and so forth. Heterosexual girls, similarly, can enjoy becoming a muscle-bound hero for similar unconscious desires: to cope with the opposite sex, to compete against her brothers, to master the opposite sex, and so forth. Lesbian and gay identifications complicate the fantasy structures further, providing a rich hypercomplex dense number of possibilities of "getting off" one's *jouissance* (Allison, 2001). The range of avatars available—from hypersexed to androgynous bodies—enables a variety of fantasy scenarios to be played out. The avatar becomes the site of a contested space. Admittedly videogame avatar bodies have tended to remain heterosexual and hypersexual: heteronormativity does dominate the market. But in genres where fans write their own characters online by developing a collective story—in fanzines, slash zines, and Japanese animé—an entire range of transsexual characters appears. It is through these figures that the domination of the symbolic order that structures identities by labeling them through discursive signification (e.g., what a real man and woman should be like) is resisted and played with. *For educators, this should be perceived as a healthy activity for the psyche because it enables conflicts to be sublimated and worked through.* It offers queer youth a way to deconstruct the masculine/feminine binary.

Such a view goes against the usual claims by followers of Althusser (1971), who argue that console players are always already interpellated and sutured into the ideology implicit in the diegesis of the videogame, made possible through the transparency of the apparatus that conceals the enunciation of the symbolic order. But fantasy life on the screen does take place on two simultaneous planes, which are heterogeneous to each other. One is ideologically discursive as structured by the diegesis of the game itself; the other is *figural*. Figural is Lyotard's (1971) term that identifies the visual and aural aspects of discourse that deconstruct the "letter" of meaning by recognizing the aesthetic "line" that forms it. The "letter and the line" are heterogeneous but not mutually exclusive planes of experience. One cannot exist without the other. The figural, therefore, is an allusive property of the visual: a side product. It is what

cannot be entirely framed. The story alone is not sufficient to structure identification. Rather, the affective dimension of figurality is where the bodily identification takes place *below the level of consciousness*. This is a conflicted zone, shaped by a “logic of sense,” as Deleuze (1990) would say, by intensities and forces that appear imperceptible to our conscious attention. This is where neurology takes over to create an affective virtual body subject to (largely) universal affective reactions (Solms & Turnbull, 2002).

It is in the concern with this figural bodily zone that parental and educational critique is most pronounced, especially when it comes to violent videos games that make up most of the market in North America (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). Parents, teachers, and politicians have generally condemned the blood and gore that they see graphically demonstrated in these games. They fear that boys will become desensitized brutes and exhibit aggressive behaviors toward others, especially when it comes to solving social problems as a result of playing hours and hours of such games as *Counter Strike* and *Mortal Combat*, to name but two that have been singled out in the news over the years, linked to high-profile spectacular events like the shooting at Columbine High School (Littleton, Colorado) and Gutenberg-Gymnasium (Erfurt, Germany).² This is obviously an unfounded fear given that millions of children in North America are engaged in violent videogames, yet only a handful commit actual acts of violence. For those few a psychoanalytic explanation is more to the point as discussed below. Ironically, politicians and well-meaning parents have used media as a scapegoat to blame the perceived increase of aggressivity in their communities and schools. Violent computer and videogames provide an excuse to generate moral panic, as well as entitling conservative government officials to call for stricter censorship laws in the name of protecting citizens. Lucrative, well-funded government research on violent videos has taken on increased statistical sophistication. Profiling has become the new standard where violence researchers attempt to construct a profile of a potential perpetrator who plays violent videogames by identifying all the variables that can lead to acting out aggressively, including possibly committing mass murder. Sex, gender, age, family background, school records, divorced parents, and so forth provide a cross-section of who is most likely to commit such crimes (Anderson & Dill, 2000).³

Psychoanalytic Research

Under normal neurotic circumstances, computer and video violence help to *sublimate* aggressivity, especially in boys. By sublimation, I mean the ability to work out frustrations and pent-up behaviors creatively so that the body’s libidinal drives are satisfied through harmless fantasies rather than through actual acting out. Jones’ (2002) journalistic accounts of his experiences over many years working with youth as a cartoonist and workshop art teacher is an unusual testimony of how important it is for children to “kill their monsters” through the fantasy frames of computer and videogames. This has been the standard defense for enabling children to act out symbolically aggressive fantasies that goes back to Bettelheim (1976). To take this approach means that educational practices of technology would have to take into consideration the excessive *jouissance* that remains repressed in schools; that technology be used against itself to sublimate aggressivity artistically.⁴ *Currently not enough oppor-*

tunities are provided in schools and in society at large for children to work out their aggressions transformatively and artistically. Schools on the whole do not risk this therapeutic ground because it again questions the seriousness of work and explores bodily drives (*Triebe*). However, the technologies harnessed by the visual and dramatic arts offer another form of revealing in Heidegger's (1993) sense. As he put it,

There was a time when it was not technicity alone that bore the name *techne*. Once the revealing that brings forth truth into the splendor of radiant appearance was also called *techne*. There was a time when the bringing forth of the true into the beautiful was called *techne*. The *poiesis* of the fine arts was also called *techne*. (p. 339)

Against the *Ge-stell* of Western *techne* as a mode of revealing that calculates, orders, and organizes being into a standing resource, *poiesis* by contrast is a transformative event that changes relations in an unproductive mode of simply letting be. The difficult question remains, to what extent are videogames *poiesic*? This is the great challenge of educational technologies that must engage the body as well as tackle issues of ethical concerns.⁵

However, I present a balanced view as to what the dangers of videogame violence might be. Unfortunately, it is always the spectacularized examples that bring to light the dangers that do indeed exist. I approach the question of identity from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, primarily that of Lacan (1977) and his development of the subject and of fantasy. In this view, virtual reality (VR) and real lived life (RL) are intimately connected. These are not separate realms. How we perceive ourselves is in terms of fantasy; that is, our lives are narrated as fictions. Normal perception enables us to maintain a fantasy frame as to who we are and how we are perceived by others: by society as such. VR and RL are framed together in the belief systems that we hold. In Lacan's terms we have an Ideal Ego of how we perceive ourselves and an Ego Ideal of how significant others gaze at us. For example, teachers have in their mind what an ideal student should be like. Although this is a fiction that can never be occupied by any student, some students in the class come close to behaving like an ideal student. Their gaze structures how they perceive their class. As symbolic representatives of society, they desire their class to behave in a particular way. This is what we mean by Ego Ideal. Of course, the Ideal Ego of the student and the Ego Ideal of the institution of education are often at odds, causing conflict and transgression.

The computer screen acts as a fantasy space for our desires. It is an imaginary space that is structured by a missing piece, a final signifier, what Lacan called the *objet a*—the object *cause* of desire. This means that the fantasy space that engages our desires, our imaginary fictive life, is structured by something we *unconsciously* wish or want, but that is unavailable. The screen is only a lure or frame, a container that beckons us into its space to satisfy this missing piece of our desire. This missing piece would make us whole, satisfy our cravings. For Lacan (1977) the subject is therefore structured by this missing piece, this final signifier, this hole or *lack* within ourselves. We want to be whole: feel fully framed as an ego, but there is a hole in the w(hole). Unconscious desire tries to fill the hole or lack that we consciously feel but are unable quite to articulate. There are, then, two different but complementary ways of understanding

desire. There is a conscious desire through the fantasy formation of the screen image, as well as unconscious desire, which is *not to be found* in the screen image. This unconscious desire (the lack, hole, missing piece) is what *structures conscious fantasy in the first place*. It is what drives us to repeat a behavior that would satisfy our ego. Such satisfaction is what sublimation is all about.

With this background in mind, I psychoanalytically discuss several fantasies that have emerged in violent computer and videogames. I do not discuss the content of these games; that is, there is no need to discuss videogame narratives as these are too numerous to mention. (Generally speaking, the generic narrative of violent videogames is simple: the earth is under siege by some kind of alien enemy, and there is a mission for the player to accomplish.) The approach, rather, is to discuss the *structure of the fantasy* that is driven by the missing piece, by the lack that structures the fantasy in the first place: to raise the question of why violent videogames are so fascinating, particularly in the sociopolitical climate of postmodernity, where not only is violence ubiquitous, but a crisis of identity has come to the fore (Frosh, 1991). The proviso is, as argued above, that videogames pervert this structure of desire by forwarding the structure of the drive in its stead.

Psychotic Fantasy

No doubt the most spectacular account of violent videogames has been their implication in school shootings. Kliebard and Harris, who were responsible for the Columbine High School killing spree in Littleton, Colorado, were heavy players of *Doom*, an ego-shooter game where the issue of interpassivity is on full display. The figures do all the shooting for the player, and the player vicariously lives out the drama on the screen. A former United States Lt. Col. David Grossman (Grossman & Frankowski, 2004), an evangelical born-again Christian, blamed the shootings directly on this game, offering seminars to teachers and concerned parents to show how Harris and Kliebard had used the same tactics in the school as in the game and had perfected their aim by playing it continually. However, the US secret service's Threat Assessment Center investigated major incidents of school violence since the 1970s to discover whether violent videogames were involved. Of the 41 cases they investigated, only five involved such games. The report concluded that of these five cases, there was no direct evidence that they caused or led to the shooting (Benger, 2002). The company went public to reaffirm the obvious fact that thousands of games of *Doom* are played each day that do not result in killing sprees. In Erfurt, Steinhauser ("Steni" or "Rocky") was an avid player of *Counter Strike* and the band *Slip Knot*, and again the politicians and parents implicated the game in causing the violence.

The psychotic break of the fantasy frame by such young people as Kliebard and Harris happens when VR collapses into RL. The drives win out. In other words, psychosis results in the lifting of the repressions of the Superego, the Law itself. As Freud pointed out, the superego is a two-sided coin: it asks us to obey the laws as well as to transgress them. Psychosis is when the transgressive side of the superego overwhelms the lawful side. These kids really become "outlaws" in this sense. What caused this psychotic break to happen is anyone's guess, because it is a contingent event. In the psychoanalytic literature, such mass killing sprees are a desperate cry for recognition, for not being

subjectivized by society. Both these boys had been rejected at school, and it came to a point where the “dead voice” of the superego told them to get even. Rather than seeing violent games as the cause of this tragedy, it points out how the fantasy frame actually prevents such tragedies from occurring. Kliebard and Harris demonstrate the collapse of interactivity with interpassivity. The interpassive avatar has taken over. They have become RL avatars. Under normative circumstances, the fantasy frame is able to contain the anxiety of what we cannot control. It helps pacify and sublimate these anxieties, which threaten the body and can lead to a suicidal nonsublimated death drive. It is precisely when these bodily drives (oral, anal, gaze, voice) are no longer “civilized”—that is, when they no longer can find a creative outlet—that aggression and trouble break out. At its most extreme, this leads to the spectacular act of mass murder. Psychotic serial killers are another matter, which we need not discuss here.

Obsessive Fantasy

An obsessive fantasy about computer games grips boys more than girls. Boys become addicted to violent games to the point that it consumes their life. They care little about school or what their parents want. They neglect their friends and siblings (unless they are part of the culture) and everything else that interferes with playing videogames. This is typical addictive behavior, which is the opposite of the psychotic fantasy. Real Life (RL) collapses in to VR. Life is led *in* the screen. This is perhaps the most remarkable example of pathological interpassivity because the avatar has become the virtual alter ego. The existential question that structures the obsessional is: “Am I dead or alive?” (according to Lacan). This means that paradoxically, Eros and Thanatos become reversed phenomena. The video player is only “alive” when he is playing the game and feels “dead” if he is not playing. In other words, everyday life is really “boring dead,” whereas virtual life is alive and exciting.

Why does such an obsessive fantasy emerge during this particular historical period? One explanation is to claim that many young people have lost their faith and trust in the symbolic order of society, which causes an identity crisis. They feel cynical or that they have no great jobs to fulfill their lives. The “crisis of masculinity,” especially in the US’s working-class, white poor, has been raised by scholars (Robinson, 2000) and fictionalized in such books as Palahniuk’s (1999) popular novel *Fight Club*. Others feel that schooling and parents cause too much pressure on them, more than they are capable of accepting, or they feel entirely abandoned and neglected by their parents. VR becomes an escape to avoid confronting the anguish of the social order. Many young adults spend time in online virtual cities because it is far more exciting than going out and facing real people. Becoming obsessively addicted to videogames is a way of avoiding the anxiety of having to face the symbolic order of society; that is, finding a place of recognition in it. This addictive activity is particularly obvious while a person is growing up, the Oedipal struggles that adolescents have to go through: playground bullying, meeting the opposite sex, being cool like the *in* crowd. All these anxieties can be escaped in VR, which brings us to the next fantasy.

Hysterical Fantasy

Adolescence is also a time of anxiety about the opposite sex. Identity becomes a real issue as both boys and girls are on their way to becoming sexualized beings: the Ego Ideals of what it means to be a woman or a man. Postmodern consumerism is charged with libidinal energy in how it presents performing bodies. Both heterosexual and homosexual identification have come to the fore as an area of heightened sexual anxiety. The pathologies of the body (bulimia, anorexia) are potentially in play for everybody. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual (LGBT) identities are often closeted in our schools. The sexual interrelationships between boys and girls come to heightened terms with the expectation that one must have a great body, dress well, have a boyfriend or girlfriend, and so forth. This postmodern anxiety over identity formation results in a hysterical fantasy. Although girls are most likely to become hysterical, whereas most boys are most likely to display obsessive behavior, I claim no clear sex/gender division. The hysteric is structured by the existential question: "Am I a man or a woman?" (according to Lacan, 1977). In other words, the hysteric does not accept what is being offered by the fantasies generated by the symbolic order of society. She does not accept her role as it is defined by society's Ego Ideal, and she will actively avoid taking that subjective position. This can go for the male as well. He may not accept the kind of masculine role that is expected of him and so search for alternate fantasies, which place him in another imaginary space. A frail boy may well be asking himself, "Am I a man or a woman?" as he struggles with his masculinity. Identification with a macho avatar is a way to prop up his manhood. In this sense he is hystericized, uncertain where he belongs in the symbolic order.

The question of identification is even more pronounced by LGBT youth who struggle to find fictive narratives with which they can identify. The point of this background is to suggest that violent videogames have become sources for cross-gender identifications. Girls online are involved in virtually every conceivable violent videogame that boys play. The reason is that such game-playing is empowering. It provides a fantasy status that they may not have in their own RL situations. It also enables them to face the aggressivity of masculinity and deal with it in their own way. Cross-gendering also takes place with boys. Many videogames now have strong female figures (like Lara Croft and Joanna Dark), where cross-identifying with these avatars also helps them sublimate their feelings toward the other sex. On the one hand, a boy may be absolutely terrified of the opposite sex. By playing with such avatars he can come to some terms with these emotions. Whether boys are playing with female action figure avatars for revenge or for respect, their feelings are sublimated. For LGBT youth such cross-identification is even more important because it is perhaps one of the safest fantasy spaces where they can play out their affective bodily feelings. Although cross-identifications are certainly complex when it comes to unconscious desire, we can only see them being beneficial in this case. Hysterical fantasies are a defense much like obsessional fantasies because often the symbolic order does not legitimize fantasies where sex/gender becomes an explicit category. More progressive countries have health education programs where the moralism of virginity and abstinence from sex is not preached, but the reality of sexual relations is discussed.

To End ... is to Begin

To conclude these thoughts on violence and identification in videogames for education, the benefits are by and large healthy, but there are edges to them that inevitably result because postmodernism is a time where the decentering of the grand Western narratives has led to a decline in belief and trust in authority with its ensuing identity crisis (jagodzinski, 2004). Postmodern forms of traditionalism, cynicism, and neo-liberalism have arisen in such a climate of uncertainty. As the 2004 reelection of President George Bush shows, there is equally a strong desire to return to centering traditional values around the Church and patriarchal forms of the family where marriage is clearly defined and where men and women have clearly defined roles to play. The physical violence of war and terrorist activities around the world reestablishes any confusion about sex-gender identifications. "Real" men know the job that they must do. Fear of the draft looms large. It is no wonder that so many young people find escape routes into VR and find ways to cope with their emerging struggles with identity through the safety of fantasy. However, we should not be too surprised when such tragic moments like Columbine and Erfurt occur to awaken us to the fact that human suffering is bubbling just below the surface: repressed. Van Sant's (2003) brilliant film *Elephant*, a succinct statement on the Columbine tragedy, shows just how little teachers and parents understand of the inner struggles of today's youth. More dejected bodies are roaming the hallways than we care to admit. Parents and educators need to allow youth to explore their anxieties through the artistic means of their own fantasy formations. However, often such sublimating activities are too little or come too late. The pain has found its aggressive outlet: "god" only knows how much pent up aggression is manifested in real bullets in war-torn Iraq by young men on both sides who are searching for a meaningful life, a cause that they can believe in.

The extremity of violent videogames and the fantasy scenarios they provide for their console players are useful for grasping the schizophrenic RL of students that is maintained by the often radical separation between schooling and the media world that beckons them to consume. To incorporate popular culture into the curriculum through media technologies has its possibilities as well as its pitfalls. Media educators struggle to find a way to preserve its seriousness by applying the same forms of analysis found in print technologies to media technologies, as if textual discourse were able to deal adequately with the figural excess that screen images provide. The point I make obliquely in this article is that psychoanalysis offers a strategy to deal with the fantasy life of screen images that the new technologies have made ubiquitous. And that the schizophrenic identity crisis that is shaped by the disciplinarity of the school that still mostly runs on mechanized time, and its mediated outside world of entertainment, requires poetic technologies with different forms of revealing that directly grapple with the *jouissance* of the bodily drives.

Notes

1. Nowhere is this schizophrenia so dramatically illustrated as in Japan, a society with more violent videogame players per capita than any other, which has generated the most violent popular culture of video, comic, and film by way of *manga animé* and *cosplay*. Yet Japan is perceived as one of the least violent post-industrial societies in the world (crime is organized and syndicated there, like the Yakuza, for example), and where students once they have graduated from high school and made their way into universities have the notorious

- reputation of going wild. Japanese businessmen have the same reputation of hard drinking, dealing, and womanizing in the evenings (Yoshimura, & Anderson, 1997).
2. I would point out that studies about media violence almost always refer to boys. Physical violence is the most common understanding of aggression. Girls are aggressive as well, but this tends to be more psychological and structural rather than physical.
 3. Such profiling proved controversial. Teachers in the US began to punish harmless aggressive behaviors severely in schools once the profiles of Harris and Kliebard became known. A nationwide security firm, Pinkerton Services Group, with its own Web site (Working Against Violence Everywhere, W.A.V.E.) was set up so that students and parents could report suspicious kids in schools who then would be investigated.
 4. The work of Jaar (2000), an interventionist artist, offers a dramatic example. Jaar burned down a cultural center (a museum) made of paper and wood that he was commissioned to construct in the paper-mill town of Skoghall, Sweden. The pyrotechnic event was predesigned to make the point that the city council would need to take their own initiative if they indeed wanted a permanent culture center to exist. Here technology is turned on itself to make an ethical statement.
 5. Molyneux's (2001) videogame called *Black & White*, which raises the question of good and evil (albeit in a binary way), at least points to the problem I am signaling here.

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