FCJ-091 Making Games? Towards a theory of domestic videogaming

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2 The debates which have marked videogame theory to date are wide ranging. However, the explicit focus on the medium of the videogame and the attempts to verify it as an idiom worthy of study, has tended to result in a technologically-determined account of gaming which underplays, even ignores, the longevity and lived practice of gaming on the one hand, and a textually determined approach which does much the same thing on the other. While attempts have been made to look at the wider culture of the videogame (and here I am thinking of Cassell and Jenkins 1998, Newman 2004, Carr 2006, and Dovey and Kennedy 2006) and assert the importance of thinking about the industry in its entirety, these debates are relatively small by comparison to the better known debates within the field. Indeed, whether we refer to the 'narrative versus gameplay' debate, the arguments of the Ludologists, issues relating to learning and literacy, the comparative approaches to the videogame as a visual and narrative media, the debates about pleasure and play, or a celebration of the videogame form; the tendency has been to focus on the technology and on the screen often to the detriment of the lived practice of gaming. By comparison to these latter debates, this article suggests that by decentring the technology from the analytic framework, gaming as lived practice can be better explored. Following nearly four years of interpretative ethnographic[1] research into the 'use' of videogames[2] in 11 adult gaming households in the UK[3] an analysis which works from the technology 'outwards' has proved unhelpful.[4] Indeed, my research highlights some inadequacies with videogame theory to date, where the tendency is to take the game as the first (sometimes only) point of analysis (Wolf 2001; Atkins 2003; Frasca 2003; King and Krzywinska 2002, 2006; Juul 2005). The main stumbling block for early videogame theory was how to theorise the figure of the gamer and their active role in the construction of gameplay. For me, this emphasises that there has always been a need to go beyond exploring what the technology could 'offer' gamers. Indeed, Carr (2006: 165) and King and Krzywinska (2006: 100) have (perhaps belatedly) commented that, while visual and diegetic characteristics should be analysed, this is only one element of gameplay when we consider that games also have to be *played*. While I am not advocating a negation of the text, it is time to shift the focus towards an investigation of the *mediation* of games by gamers.

3 David Morley argues that:

> 4 We need to transcend the unfortunate media-centrism of much work [looking at the 'domestication' of technology] in this area by decentring the media in our analytical framework, so as to better understand the ways in which media processes and everyday life are so closely interwoven into each other… The issue is both to understand how new and old media accommodate each other and coexist in symbiotic forms and also to better grasp the ways in which we live with them (2006: 29)

5 Morley's suggestion forms the methodological 'peg' of this article. Indeed it is an argument taken literally in this article, where an alternative framework of ontological narrative becomes the primary means through which an understanding of the relationships between gamers and technology is reached.

6 Rather than focus on the way videogames have impacted into the home, or the way certain games symbolise the culture in which we live, this article focuses on some key relations with videogames which gamers both expressed and practiced during the years of research. Indeed, rather than focus on what is 'offered' to gamers, I focus on the relationships and mediations with the technology. This does a number of things. Firstly, it decentres the videogame as the technology which impacts onto everyday/domestic lives, and re-positions it within an alternative analytical framework which prioritises performance, interpretation and identity. This is primarily as a result of the methodology, which insistently *asks* gamers what they think, and observes, interprets, and records them gaming. As a result, technologically-determined accounts become inadequate when gamers offer both stories of gaming experiences, and narratives of the game. Secondly, this move positions the videogame as enmeshed into the lives of gamers through longevity of use, and through mediatory gaming practices. Gamers' narratives of gaming memories figure the videogame as an ever-present technology, and it is positioned as a shaping factor in key social and cultural moments of their lives. This suggests that the novelty of the technology should not be

figured around issues of innovation, but around certain social or pleasurable properties ascribed to the technology through gamers' accounts. Thirdly, this move allows for a certain amount of technological 'agency' as the videogame is figured as a shaping force in gamers' narratives. However, this is not the technologically determined account of the videogame impacting onto the quotidian and changing it. It is an understanding of agency which is complicated through issues of performance, pleasure, identity and interpretation/mediation with the technology. Finally, this move highlights that the relations between gamers and technology and the practices of gaming are much more complex than the concept of 'convergence' can allow for.

7 As a concept meant to highlight the intricacies of communication and content across media platforms and as an idiom encompassing new media, 'convergence' is both too abstract and too encompassing for the purposes of this article. It is too abstract because it does not prioritise the politics of interpretation which the observer and the other gamers engage in through communication. It assumes an ability (by both the 'observer and the other gamers) to recognise, objectify, and name, all aspects converging, when this is not always the case. Instead as Ien Ang has highlighted (1989:101), 'convergence' is not the result of objective observation and account; rather, it is a process of *interpretation*. Consequently it involves a selection process at every level of discourse through which certain issues are highlighted, and others are suppressed (Ang 1989:101). This article for example, works towards a theory of ontological narrative while underplaying other relevant aspects such as the role the living room/home in the construction of the concept of gaming. It underplays the methodology of the research, simply offering examples and extracts rather than emphasising the constructive process involved in their presentation. It concentrates on the way gamers actively narrate their experiences but does not prioritise important identity signifiers also shaping the narratives and narration. In other words, the political and theoretical impetus of the article shapes both the focus and the interpretation of the extracts presented. However, this is not to say that all converging elements have been recognised: in the slippage between imagined and performed roles, in the movements of interpretation and practice, gamers always retain an element of subjectivity no amount of interpretive ethnography can account for. Furthermore, it is *precisely* because I ask gamers what they think, rather than supposing a role for them within my understanding of gaming culture, that an interpretative account of gaming practice is reached. Focusing on lived practice rather than on abstract forms of convergence, then, means that this research can never be a complete understanding of gaming culture: and this is the point. While convergences clearly occur, claiming I am representing gaming purely and simply as convergence culture not only underplays my interpretive role and my investment in this research, it also misses the point.[5] As Ien Ang suggests:

8 > Understanding "audience activity" is … caught up in the discursive representation, not the transparent reflection, of realities having to do with audiences… it is in the dialectic between the empirical and the theoretical, between experience and explanation, that forms of knowledge, that is interpretations, are constructed. What is at stake is a *politics of interpretation* (1989: 105)

Ontological Narrative

9 Before discussing the stories gamers offer, it is worth outlining the concept of ontological narrative as it is used in this article. By ontological narrative, I am referring initially to the term as it is understood by Somers and Gibson (1994) who suggest that narrative is an ontological *condition* of social life which is itself 'storied' (Somers and Gibson 1994: 38). It is expanded, however, by McNay's (2000) reading of Bourdieu (1990) and Ricoeur (1983), as well as Ricoeur's (1983) theories of narrative (1980) and temporality (1983), Bassett's (2007) approach to technology and narrative, and a wider feminist ethnographic methodology which prioritises interpretation and performance. [6] As Somers and Gibson suggest:

10 > [I]t is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities. (Somers and Gibson, 1994: 58-9)

11 By comparison with diegetic narrative (storyline), or closed formal structure (structural narratology), ontological narrative implies a lived, performative, and generative element. This is a crucial point. Within videogame theory, narrative implies a stasis: it is theorised as functioning to 'string together sequences of gameplay' (King and Krzywinska 2006: 46). Indeed, narrative is that which is represented to the gamer, and is a fixed story (ibid. 39) offering an overall coherence to

the game. Gameplay, on the other hand, is that which is produced through mediation of gamer and game: it is active (ibid. 9). Moreover, it is active progression through the game (*through* narrative) and is favoured as celebrated movement and technological innovation. Within videogame theory, narrative may offer a point of comparison with other representational media, but, when framed within a dichotomy of movement/stasis can only ever be a platform on which the preferred action and (active) progression of gameplay is enacted. Ontological narrative, on the other hand, brackets narrative, not with stasis, or as representational structure, but with movement. Furthermore, it is the movements of *discursive practice*, in which I include the mediations of technology; the movements from the imaginary to spoken rhetoric; and the movements of interpretation. Although I will return to ontological narrative in the course of the article, it is important to introduce it here as both lived practice, and as movement. Furthermore it is the relocation of gaming away from a technologically determined account and into the home which makes ontologicality a priority. Gaming relations and narratives are very much the lived relations of the everyday. Indeed what becomes apparent from this article is that once the technology is decentred, gaming becomes one element in a long line of power relations and mediations which constitute everyday practice. They are the 'banal' (Morris 1990:16) narratives of quotidian existences. Although this is not to undermine or negate the 'technicity' of the technology (which has however been sidelined in this article), it is to suggest initially that the everyday is *precisely* where gaming is, and has always been, located for these gamers.

12 The remainder of the article is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on the memories gamers narrate around early mediations of gaming technologies and they highlight the longevity of gaming for gamers. They also highlight that, despite any 'newness' of the technology either in terms of present gaming consoles or past innovations, the ways of narrating them are not new. The second section focuses on the recordings I made of gameplay. Here, I argue that the politics of performance which are storied through the narratives of past gaming experiences are also 'played out' during gameplay. Furthermore, gaming is an active and ongoing interpretation of not only the technology, but the material, discursive and symbolic elements of gameplay. Indeed, the relations that constitute and 'produce' gameplay (which are also bound up in subjective memory, history and identity) are also those which constitute and produce the everyday *social* routines in a domestic setting: the technology and the social are intrinsically enmeshed.

13 Finally, the extracts below are not meant as finite indicators of gamers' opinions and pleasures. They are examples of key moments of negotiation and are quoted here because they best represent the wider trends of all the households. They are used as a springboard for the wider theoretical and political aim of the article which is to situate gaming into the domestic context and think through what is going on in these instances. Although gaming in the home encompasses far more than can be represented here (I do not discuss computer games, nor do I offer a reading of the games played, or an understanding of the technological elements of gaming), this article is meant as an addition to current writings on the videogame. It emphasises what can be achieved when the technology is 'decentred'.

Gaming memories

14 As suggested above, the early gaming experiences gamers narrate work to position both the game and the culture of gaming as an intrinsic, and intrinsically social, aspect of their past. Furthermore, the act of narrating past gaming experiences highlight much more than past memories of gaming. They articulate present day power relations and identity signifiers which also shape the narrative:

Sara: well I had a Game Gear, coz I used to go round to one of my friends houses, and she had a Game Gear, and we used to have, she used to have all these really girly parties and everyone would go round and do makeup and put cucumber slices on their eyes and stuff. I didn't really know what was going on so I used to sit in the corner with my Game Gear and play that

Helen: [laughs] so you're saying[7]

Sara: and then I got one for Christmas, and we used to go round the neighbours house every Christmas day so I could take that around and play that

Helen: so, any social occasion

Sara: exactly

Helen: you'd be in the corner with your Game Gear

Simon: it would be an escape route

Sara: yeah any social awkwardness overcome through the Game Gear (household 1)

15 In thinking through the stories of past gaming experiences three things becomes apparent. The first is that gamers use wider ideological and cultural modes and methods of storying to 'construct' past gaming experiences, and that this gaming memory is just one of many stories of their childhood. This is apparent in Sara's narrative, where the early console experience is enmeshed in narratives of childhood social etiquette and feelings of awkwardness. In Bob's narrative below, stories of schoolyard relations and memories of owning inadequate toys are similarly entwined with early gaming memories:

Bob: there was always one boy at school, there would always be one spoilt kid that had loads like. I think Andy Holmes had fucking all of them like

Duncan: yeah

Al: they always used to turn up when you had your last day before Christmas

Duncan, Bob: yeah

Al: when you were allowed to bring your

Al, Helen: (together) toys in

Duncan: yeah

Al: there would always be these flash buggers wandering around with their *Tomy Tronics* or whatever, and you know, you'd be fighting over who would have a go on them and stuff

Helen: yeah

Al: you'd come in with your crap board game

[Everyone laughs] (household 2)

16 The second apparent element is the longevity of gaming experience: these are mid 20-30 year olds speaking about games they played as 8-10 year old children. Third, narrating past gaming experiences and scenarios play a major part in gamers' 'justifications' for present-day gaming, positioning it as a rational, social and logical activity by giving gaming longevity in terms of its existence and role in their personal and social lives. Furthermore the extracts suggest that gamers normalise gaming within their lives, not through a celebration of the technological qualities of the consoles, but through a cultural mode of telling which figures it as always-already an intrinsic part of their identities. The final extract below is as much a demonstration of sibling social performance as it is about pleasurable gaming memories. Here Grant and Cam almost re-enact the memory, offering sound effects and gestures of both the games and the shopping experience. The interplay between Grant and Cam, where they finish each others sentences, gesture frantically, perform each game, and become excited about the memories, are part of a performance which encompasses many topics:

Grant: nah we missed out on the Atari didn't we, we never had one of them?

Cam: there was all the kids at school always had like the new... I used to remember like...

Grant: I didn't like the joystick like

Cam: ...do you remember like, what's it called? *Cligovision* and all that stuff

Grant: yeah, don't think we had that either. Think we went straight from that white thing to the Spectrum didn't we?

Cam: aye

Grant: coz there's a few came out when the Spectrum came out wasn't there?

Cam: yeah we used to go to Dixon's for that

Grant: *Oric*

Cam: *Oric* yeah

Duncan: I don't remember them

Grant: you used to type in 'bang' and the TV would go 'pppuuugghshh'

[Laughter]

Grant: you'd type in 'laser' and it'd go 'psshew' (household 3)

17

Gaming becomes more than a past memory, then; this memory-work (of which gaming is an intrinsic part) constructs the speaker as authoritative and as the logical conclusion of the history and memory being narrated. In other words, the narrative structure of causality lends itself to justifications of present-day gaming so that the rational, logical gamer is a construct of both the *content* and the *mode* of narration. These memories of gaming facilitate a space in which gamers can prioritise certain gaming elements which, in turn, suggest allegiances and preferences reflective of their socio-cultural and political narrated identity. Indeed, as narratives of identity and as subjective performances these narratives are also, of course, inflected by other signifiers such as class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. Although there is not the scope to develop these elements within the article, the signifiers clearly resonate in different and shifting ways within the extracts represented here. Furthermore, these narratives shifted over the four years of research. Consequently, while such signifiers should be highlighted as complex factors shaping the narratives represented here, they are by no means finite indicators of each gamer's identity. Indeed, as I suggest below, one of the attractive elements of ontological narrative as a central concept is that it takes into consideration the active story*ing* of identity. In other words, ontological narrative is always contingent on temporal, social, ideological, motivational, and identity, considerations. Thus while gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity remain central, they are not dealt with overtly in the course of the article. Instead, they are left to filter through the discussions of memory, narrative, and gameplay below.

18 The gamers quoted all locate their memories of early gaming experiences in relation to social, shared, and personal 'places'. The memories have specific places in them; they have what Annette Kuhn terms 'memory maps' (2002: 16-18) and are in a sense 'grounded' in the places (real or imagined) in which those memories occurred. Of course, these places no longer exist in a temporal sense but are nevertheless used as locations for memories in quite a socio-culturally specific way (of telling). They provide not only a visual map for the other people present at the moment of narration, they also follow a socially recognisable trajectory or topology of telling, which works to familiarise both the performer of the memory, and the others within the conversation, to it. The places within these accounts work in multidimensional ways, operating between the locations of the past and present, as well as serving as a bridge between the narration and the place of the memory. These places are not *spaces* however. As Kuhn suggests, a memory has a specific location, it is a '*place* we revisit, or to which we are transported; it is the road we travel along and also the destination' (2002, pp16-17 my italics). Although memories may be imaginary in terms of physical existence, they are also to a certain extent embodied, and occasionally (as with Grant and Cam) even enacted in the process of recounting. Indeed, as Kuhn also suggests, 'memory… is mediated, indeed produced, in the activity of remembering' (Kuhn, 2002:9).

19 The recounting of a specific place has the effect, as suggested above, not only of 'making real' the location as a specific place of meaning, it also encourages a shared experience both because of the public nature of the location and the manner of telling. This is most notable in the second interview, where three of the conversationalists (including myself) went to the same school. The fourth person (Al) went to a different school, yet the memories of school life are shared ones, and the clichés of behaviours and recognisable school events facilitate a shared memory which also produces a temporally specific inclusive space and moment. As a 'memory map', the public and socio-cultural performance of the memory works to frame the private contents of what is produced in the social, temporal and cultural moment of performance. Even the first interviewee, Sara, uses the public event of socialising, 'go[ing] round to one of my friends houses' in order to offer an insight into what is actually a comment about her own (self perceived) social identity. By comparison with the two other interviews, however, where the public location is used to invite shared rememberings of either the technology or the *place* of that technology, Sara offers a much more private statement. This is also in contrast to Simon's comment that 'it would be an escape route' which offers Sara a chance to shift attention away from herself. Instead, her reply (to me) that 'yeah any social awkwardness overcome through the Game Gear', shifts the focus away from possible pleasures and uses of the technology in the *past*, and more onto her self-perceived social inadequacies of the *present*.

20 The image Sara provides of a child lost in whirl of 'conventional' femininity, where girls practice with beauty products, is not only one of humour, but one spoken by a retrospective adult looking

back. The fact that she 'didn't know what was going on', yet in her narrative can offer an insight precisely into what *was* going on, indicates an easy movement between the child and adult perspective on the event. She frames gaming both in opposition to what she perceives as conventions of femininity, and as a way to oppose or escape a big social gathering of her peers. Similarly, the tone of the comment is an invitation for her (the child) to be collectively objectified (and potentially laughed at), whilst maintaining her adult persona as a rational, objective and analytical being who can also laugh at her child-self. Sara often performed what I would consider an overtly 'feminine' role in her interviews. She laughed at herself, or presented herself as incompetent and unknowledgeable. She phrased statements as questions, requesting confirmation from her other (male) housemates. However, this is not to suggest that she was unknowledgeable, incompetent, or unsure. Nor is it to suggest that gender is the sole reason for this performance (which she continued into the all-female household later). Rather it is to suggest that on the one hand, her identity was storied depending on the contexts in which it was narrated, and to whom she was narrating. On the other hand, each narrative in its shifting complexities and constructions represented (perhaps inadequately) Sara's desires, motivations, opinions, relations and identity at that moment.

21 This is also apparent in the second conversation. Here, there is a much more serious agenda which is produced in part because of the distance claimed between adult-speaker and child-remembered. Bob's comment that 'there would always be one spoilt kid that had loads', is not just the envy of a child who does not own the device; it is also spoken as a retrospective adult. It is less about gaming, than about (amongst other things) unfair differences between children and his present-day perception of his own financially 'impaired' childhood. Bob considers himself firmly working class despite economic, geographic and professional elements highlighting the contrary. His narratives maintain a strong 'class' element, but it would be over simplistic to simply highlight this singular aspect as an indicator of his identity. Instead, 'class' as both and ideological and economic signifier is clearly filtered through, and enmeshed with, gender, geographical location, personal histories or narratives, and contextual factors shaping the arena into which he speaks. On the one hand, he enjoys the authoritative role this narrative affords, but he also identifies with the child who is envious of the coveted toy. His narrative is not a finite indicator of his performed identity, then, but instead reflects some of the complexities at stake in it which clearly continue to resonate into his present-day performance.

22 The final extract also moves between past and present, but in a very different way. Rather than the events of the past being narrated to an unfamiliar audience, they are in many ways re-enacted – a move facilitated by the fact that the places of the past are shared by the interviewees. The notion of *performance* as a bridge between places is more evident in this scenario where the familiarity of remembering and re-enacting is facilitated by the fact that all the people in the present were also there in the (shared) past. The two brothers, Grant and Cam, perform their relationship as timeless. They play off each other, leaving each remark as comment to be filled in or clarified by the other, rather than as an authoritative statement of a rational (male) adult-self. Performing the past is a nostalgic act which works both as a performance to be enjoyed, and as an inclusive invitation to share in the childishness of the performance as nostalgic adults. Grant's comment that 'you used to type in 'bang' and the TV would go 'pppuuugghshh' … you'd type in 'laser' and it'd go 'psshew'' is a sensory invitation towards nostalgia. He becomes emotively involved in a humorous way which also invites the other two along his inclusive 'map'. Here places and games are mythologised into nostalgic embodied performance which is emotively and sensorially captivating. Furthermore, the fact that they physically re-enact these social gaming scenarios suggests that, for them, the fantasy and pleasurable space of gaming in the past is an embodied, even sensory, one. These narratives are pleasurable, and it is the technology which generates and prompts these narratives. Indeed, what seems increasingly evident at this stage (and in a similar vein to Kuhn's discussion of early cinema going memories), is that whilst the technology may have been 'new', the ways of talking about it are not.

23 The final point concerns movement. Storying gaming memories is a kind of movement, because it is both performed and actively narrated. In terms of the impetus to speak and to narrate, it is also entails movement from imagination (or symbolic) to discourse (to narrative). Here, the impetus to speak is movement in terms of the move *to* act and *to* speak. It is a movement from the private to

the social, from the internal to external, and from fantasy imaginings to real episodes. The second movement I want to highlight relates to the construction of the fantasy past as real episode. This is the movement of narrative: in the construction of a chronological past the fantasy past becomes a real episode. In other words, the structures of narrative are utilised as a kind of vehicle to take the fantasy memory of Sara's lack of social skills, for example, and make them real episodes which can explain her current state of emotions. The structure of narrative is the vehicle which facilitates movement from the imaginary to the social. There is also therefore a movement from the present to the past, which is also a movement from the social to the imaginary (the 'reverse' of the movement above). The social environment of the living room, in which we are all talking about gaming, prompts and facilitates the move to the private, imaginary, and fantasised 'space' of Sara's past. Finally, there is the movement of the narrative itself: the flow of it and movement from episode to episode, or place to place. In terms of Kuhn's 'memory maps', then, if we think of the map as movement, rather than as pre-ordained routes into the past, narrating past memories of gaming can be theorised as much more than a social mode of narrative. Instead it can include fantasy and imaginary subjectivities as well as episodes and events which contribute to the present-day performance of social subjectivity which is the position from which the narrator speaks. Movement becomes three dimensional and multi-directional. It tells us not only about past gaming experience, but also about the construction of a gaming subjectivity the speaker is trying to construct.

Gameplay

24 There are a number of things which become apparent from the recordings of gameplay below. The first is that the game and the actions of the game intervene in the 'extra-diegetic' conversation, suggesting that some level of 'agency' or accountability for the technology needs to be made. The second is that performances of power relations (such as gender) continue to be negotiated during play. This is not a 'loss' of identity theorised in first wave new media theory through the complete immersion into the world of virtual reality (see Rheingold 1991: 346 and Mitchell 1995:12): instead gameplay is a continued social performance and negotiation of domestic relations. Thirdly, the movements of the gamers in terms of their active mediation of gameplay, 'stories' not only their relationship with the game, but with each other. Taken together, they suggest that gameplay as a domestic, quotidian activity is not removed or abstract from other activities which occur in the living room but is an intrinsic part of them:

Helen: are you enjoying watching?

Clare: Yeah. Maybe. No it's only frustrating when, it's like when you're sat in the passenger seat and someone's driving and you [shouts] Take his money! [points] and you kind of [shouts]oh for God's sake, Sara! Sara!

Chloe: [laughing] Sara's taking out her frustration

Clare: [pats Sara's arm] Sara you didn't get his money!

Sara: yeah but he's over the fence

Chloe: climb the fence!

Clare: [to Helen] so it's not

Sara: what for twenty dollars?

Clare: yeah! Pinch it! It's just when there is something to do you kind of want to get involved

Chloe: you might as well just give it back!

Sara: [laughs] (household 5)

25 To return first to the question of agency and technology: Clare interrupts herself responding to my question, and it is an interruption seemingly 'caused' by the events on screen. Assigning the game 'agency' is problematic, however, when it is Clare's narration of it which affords it such power. Indeed, while we could argue that the game causes an alteration in Clare's attention and narrative, she is also actively choosing to focus attention on the game for a multitude of reasons. This suggests that the game has an agency insofar as it is made to mean within Clare's performance. Further, the game is 'made to mean' in Clare's performance through the *narration* of it. Initially, Clare's self-interruption facilitates an intervention into the game, which in turn affects Sara's actions. Her interruption does a number of things which positions her as centre of attention and

the knowledgeable gamer. Not only does she demonstrate active knowledge about the game through directing Sara's gameplay, she also does it in a comedic and lively manner which adds to the tension and excitement of the game, further facilitating her involvement in it. Shouting instructions is a common act within all the households and there is clearly an issue about what constitutes social gaming when the people not clutching the consoles are directing gameplay.[8] In turn, Sara is also distancing herself from the game by reminding the others it isn't 'real' and shouldn't evoke that level of emotional response. The gender/power roles in this household are also replayed in this extract where Sara is always the worst gamer and Clare and Chloe compete in terms of comedic insertions rather than serious direction over gameplay. Yet these positions are not fixed. Sara's response: 'what for twenty dollars?' stakes a claim as a rational adult, creating distance between action and judgment. She validates her actions though recourse to her 'own' monetary values rather than, for example, the avatar's gaming requirements, not only reminding the others that this is a *game*, but also indicating her preferable 'level' of response. But Sara is also the one with the console. It is her actions which prompt Clare's commentary and intervention. In other words, neither, 'power', 'performances', 'nor agency', are linear or one-way. They are multilayered and constantly being re-negotiated.

26 The fact that the game impacts onto Clare's conversation suggests two further key elements: that she was watching the game while she was speaking to me, and that the action of the game and the excitement of action changes the focus of her speech. Clare gives the material ('real') impact of the game a discursive significance in the moment of self-interruption. When she interrupts herself and starts talking about the game, she positions the game within the discursive. Furthermore, the game is afforded a discursive position as the result *of* action – of gaming. It is also, importantly, the result of a more material power dynamic. The extract is taken during social gaming, where gamers sit facing the television set with the implicit promise of gaming. This means that there is already a materially powerful position for the technology as the focal point of the social setting. The technology and the game have power and this is the direct result of the relationship between their material position within the room and their discursive power as screen media. It is also a discursively powerful position despite the fact that it is a technology supposedly incapable of 'acting' without 'human' intervention. The discursive and material position of the technology as powerful predates and proceeds 'actual' gaming – it arcs beyond the moment of gaming. This suggests that the material and symbolic significance of the technology goes beyond the moment of gameplay: it is also the result of its physical positioning in the room. Social gaming has symbolic and discursive positions as the focal point of the room prior to, and beyond 'actual' gameplay.

27 This brings us onto a further point around the relations between the technology, the social, and performance. In the extract taken from Rob and Rach's gameplay, Rach offers not only an active and continuous narration of the game, but also a performance of her (gendered) role in the household:

Rob: oh you're all right. It's not deep. Oh yeah, you can swim in this one, I forgot

Rach: If I don't head butt things!

Rob: [laughs]

Rach: how do I get out?

Rob: err, probably square

Rach: [looks at controller] Great

[GTA: 'you're making this worse for yourself']

Rach: oh shit! Think I just took a police motorbike! [laughs] by accident. I didn't realise it was a policeman til I got in! oh shit! Hang on! Ohhh [laughs] I've got stuck! What's going on? Look! It's a bloody police motorbike! How did I do that? Whah. Whah. Oops. Lets get the hooker. Rah!

Helen: you just ran her over!

Rach: get off! Well you have to apparently! Oh no! she's still there! Hit! Hit! Hit! Gimme your money! She's got no money!

Helen: are you supposed to do that?

Rob: that's how you get money, by beating people up! Their money. They leave their money behind when you kill them

Rach: right. So. Where am I?

Rob: you don't actually kill them

Rach: coz they're only pixel people

Rob: coz the ambulance comes, and when the ambulance comes they bring them back to life (household 4)

28 The extract above also highlights that her negotiation of gender/power is *inclusive* of technology. Indeed, it is a performance filtered and narrated through mediation with the technology. What is also interesting about Rach's dialogue is the way she also negotiates social power by utilising the game. She narrates her gaming experience in order to encourage interaction with Rob, rather than focusing on progressing in the game. It is a performance of chaos, all the more apparent because she is adept at the game. Despite the fact that Rach has played GTA before and considers herself a competent and frequent gamer, her performance during gameplay positions her unequally in relation to it – her actions are 'accidents' and she doesn't know where she is or what she is doing. Her shouts and exclamations require urgent attention and the necessity of Rob's presence, as well as his interest. Positioning the game into the *social* means that emphasis and power is afforded the social rather than the technological. However, this is not to suggest that the technology and the social are separate entities: everyone in the room is complicit in creating and performing the social as inclusive of the technology. Rach shifts this balance, however, to suggest that gaming is more entertaining as a social pastime. She uses comedy and immediate action to make herself the funny and entertaining mediator of the game, even though she is claiming it is the game that has autonomy and she is doesn't know what she is doing. In this scenario, then, it is the social which is important, and which is produced in part through the technology, which has a social function. Rach seems far more concerned that the people in the room feel included than she is about progressing in the game. Indeed, her performance is highly entertaining, and is an entertainment everyone in the room is involved in. By comparison with Rob, who never asks direction, or expresses urgent or excited exclamations, this is a very different performance. Rach is also creating a socially *inclusive* space (as Sara and Clare do), inviting Rob to comment on her gaming, and to be involved in the game. As suggested, this is a different performance compared to Rob, and suggests that rather than reflecting their gaming *abilities*, gameplay reflects the social dynamics of their relationship. As Rach comments:

When I sit next to Rob here and he's gaming, I'm asking him questions. But when he's sat next to me and I'm gaming, he's telling me what to do. (household 4)

29 The point is not that the technology produces the social or vice-versa; it is that, for gamers, the two are already integral parts of each other. The technology is understood through the social, through the narration of it in and through social settings. In turn, the technology is part of the social through its materiality and through the way games are played in social settings both exist as fundamental parts of each other, and are complicit, 'operating' not as a binary opposition, but in a generative, creative practice and through narrative. This argument firmly positions technology as embedded in our culture: technology is both created *in* culture and is understood as meaningful *through* narrative. This is an argument supported by Caroline Bassett when she suggests that technology can be understood as a process of meditation through which meanings are made:

30 > Interaction between human and machine (the interface) can thus be conceived of not as a punctual process of exchange determined by the machine, but as a distended moment in which the experience of the different temporalities and spatial dynamics involved in computer use is taken up in the arc of narrative, *where sense is given to experience through its ordering as narrative*. (2007: 32)

31 There are clear similarities, then, between Bassett's conception of the way we understand our experience with technology through narrative, and Somers and Gibson's theories of ontological narrative as a way in which we story our experience to make it meaningful (1994: 58-9). The main difference is that while Somers and Gibson are talking about our social experience, Bassett is referring more specifically to the way we understand our technological experience. The point here is that the experiential/practical dimension of narrative, which is indicated through the juxtaposition of ontology and narrative for Somers and Gibson, is also extended through theories of practice. Gameplay as practice includes an experiential dimension: it is the experience of the relations with the technology which are forged through practice (gameplay) and made meaningful

through narrative. In thinking through gaming practice, it is possible to conceive the identity performances of gamers (above) as a kind of *narrative* of gaming.

32 The conception of narrative as lived practice is perhaps the furthest removed from theorisations of narrative as structural narratology or narrative as diegetic story. Indeed, its use here demonstrates the range of theoretical possibilities for ontological narrative far beyond oral, diegetic and structural narratives. Although it does perhaps stretch the concept to its limits, especially where it could be replaced with understandings of performance and performative subjectivity to explain how gamers actively perform gaming identities, I wanted to demonstrate how ontological narrative could be used to explain gaming practice. Indeed it is the dual attributes of an interpretative and an experiential dimension which makes ontological narrative attractive here. The interpretative or mediatory dimensions refer to the way the gamer mediates the game, as well as the relations with the other gamers, and with the material setting of gameplay, and interprets them through narrative. It allows an imagined dimension in the slippage between interpretation of gameplay and the performance of it, and is attractive because it figures narrative as the central means through which gamers understand the gaming culture in which they are living and performing. The experiential dimensions insist on longevity of experience for subjectivity, performance, and power, which positions the gamer within certain social power relations. It also allows for the generation of new relations through practice. Finally it allows for feelings of familiarity for the material place of gaming, where gaming is a quotidian occurrence and gamers feel both relaxed, and that they are being social, through gaming praxis.

33 The movements described in this article therefore revolve around movements into the past, and the movements of live gameplay. They outline primarily that social gaming consists of many movements; here they are discussed in terms of narratives into the past, physical gestures and involuntary cries and comments during gameplay. The movements are those of the social: they are movements within a social setting which are made possible through the technology, but are also towards the human. Indeed, this is the practice to which gamers refer when they discuss gaming: it is a particular familiar setting, with feelings of well being. It is a performance of gaming subjectivities and it is the storying of those relations which made gameplay possible. Furthermore, the generative movements of gaming practice, by which I mean the ebb and flow of gameplay and the way these are socially and technologically played out, are what forges and creates pleasurable gaming experiences for the gamers. Social gaming is a particular and pleasurable routine of *quotidian* gaming experience. It is not only constituted by a physical co-presence of gamers, it also includes an interactive and mediatory quality with the technology, with each other, and with the material place of gaming.

Conclusions

34 As I suggested at the start of this article, this project is the result not only of my own discomfort with videogame theory and its focus on the technology or the game, to detriment of how the games were being mediated and thought; it is also produced by the conversations, recordings and interviews with the gaming households. It was clear from the first interview, for example, that gamers found pleasure in gaming, and that they *wanted* to narrate it. It was not only the game they wanted to narrate, however; it was also their relationship to the game and the technology that they 'storied': it was their discursive, symbolic and material relationships which were narrated. They *wanted* to narrate their memories of gaming: they wanted to offer a chronological logic to their activities, but they also found the memories nostalgically pleasurable to recount. In other words, there was pleasure in the act of 'storying', in the familiarity of structures and conventions which lent themselves to their memories. These were 'memory maps' (Kuhn 2002: 16-18), and pleasure was located in the 'journey' or movement along the familiar nostalgic and fantasised routes as well as in the 'construction' of the memories. They *wanted* to narrate the logics behind owning a console, and these narratives contributed to the construction of themselves as competent, knowledgeable and rational gamers. In other words, these narratives were not only pleasurable, but they also served a socio-political purpose in the establishment of a (certain kind of) gamer identity and subjectivity. In turn, the specific 'gamer' identity was enmeshed in wider discourses of power, gender, class, and location. The narrative was much more than a storying of gamer identity, then, it was also a storying and performing of subjectivities, power relations, identity considerations and political and ideological views.

35

Ontological narrative is therefore not a closed or finite story. It is generative, and assumes the active and continuous creation of new narratives, new relations and new pleasures, as well as re-forming, continuing or negotiating older (more durable) narratives, relations and pleasures. An ontological narrative approach also includes the main theoretical concepts needed to for an investigation of the *mediation* of games by gamers. It includes a symbolic element (who imagines whom, the desire to narrate); a discursive element (socio-cultural power politics, household dynamics, identity signifiers); and a material element (locational and material specificity, the inclusion of the technology). For me, ontological narrative *is* movement, and it is movement predicated on the living through of material, social, symbolic and fantasy relations. Ontological narrative is the ebbs and flows of the story being narrated. It is the movement of that story through time as further relations are factored into it, generating shifts and changes in it. It is the movement towards a past event, and the fantasy narrative of a nostalgic past. It is the movement between desire and the narration of it, or pleasure and the fulfilment of it. It is the movements of the discourses of social gaming, and the flows of gamers' interactions with each others narratives.

36 Finally, because it is predicated on movement, ontological narrative is always much more than convergence. It implies a direction and a politics, which is conceived through the impetus to movement by the gamer. However, the motivations and desires of the gamer are not transparent, nor can they always be articulated. Thus while there are clearly convergences of bodies, media, content, narratives and performances; they maintain an unconscious and unknown element beyond what is interpreted by myself or other gamers. Although hardly representative of the gaming households, this article has instead attempted to demonstrate that by decentring the technology from the analytic framework much more can be suggested about the social and cultural context of gaming. To return to Morley's argument; as soon as the technology is decentred from an analysis of everyday gaming in the home, the gaming becomes only one of many influential factors contributing to the mediation of the technology by gamers. Although this does tend to downplay the 'technological' elements of gameplay in terms of offering an all-round indication of gaming culture, shifting the analytic frame theorises both gaming and narrative as lived practices. For interpretations of everyday gaming culture, *practice* as opposed to convergence, positions gaming within complex systems which retain imaginary, performative, and mediatory qualities. This potentially allows the game agency in that the game is a crucial element of gaming practice mediated by gamers through lived relations. Finally, practice includes an active and generative element, and the technology, as always-already inclusive to it, has potential to generate and forge new relations and new practices of gameplay. In offering alternative theoretical approaches to gaming, then, the technological elements have been sidelined, rather than negated.

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Notes

[1] Which Ien Ang argues is primarily about a politics of interpretation (1989: 105).

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[2] For the purposes of this article, videogames refer to those games mediated though the television set, and with a purpose-built console. I do not include computer games here.

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[3] For the purpose of this article, only five are discussed here.

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[4] An index of the housemates and households represented in the article can be found in the appendices at the end of the article.

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[5] I was originally interested in how gaming was or was not part of domestic leisure routines. I was interested in seeing whether gamers really did 'lose themselves' in the game or became so absorbed in it they forgot the world around them. It became increasingly apparent, however, that

'immersion' was entirely dependent on the social context of gaming, and that power dynamics (including gender) of each household shaped how gamers performed during gaming. It also became apparent that the power politics of each house continued beyond any game so that separating gaming from its context was unhelpful. Similarly, focusing on the game was equally unhelpful if gamers did not get to play them because of other forces shaping gameplay.

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[6] In terms of practice, this refers to Ien Ang 1989, but also Skeggs 1997; Walkerdine 1997, 2007; and Gray 1992. In relation to theory, it is Butler 1990, 1993, 2004, Ang 1996, and Morley 2000 I am referencing.

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[7] 'Helen' refers to me, the interviewer.

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[8] My view is that this is a vital element of social gaming and certainly constitutes gameplay.

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Appendix 1

Brief biography of the households discussed in the article.

Household 1: Sara (24, heterosexual, 'other' ethnicity*, middle class), Simon (25, heterosexual, white, middle class), Steve (22, homosexual, white, middle class) and Ben (25, homosexual, white, French, middle class). In the earlier stages of the interviews, Sara and Simon were partners, and when they split up, Sara moved to London with Clare, and Chloe. Simon moved in with Joe and Lorna (another couple). I knew Sara from university when a few of our English Literature courses overlapped, and I recognised Simon in passing (he had gone to the same university). I followed both Sara and Simon when they moved out of this house: Simon stayed in Brighton and Sara moved to London.

Household 2: 'Methleys 1 and 2': Nathan (28, heterosexual, white, middle class), Heung (31, heterosexual, Vietnamese), Duncan (28, heterosexual, white, working class), Peter (28. heterosexual, white, working class) and Al (28. heterosexual, white, middle class). This house has been the longest of the households I have interviewed. I started talking to them about gaming in 2003, asking them to do word association games and interviewing them. The house had changed

at the start of the second year of research – it became an all-male household. In the original house, Nathan and Heung were a couple. However, Heung and Nathan left in 2004 to return to Vietnam. Nathan was replaced by Bob (26, heterosexual, white, working class), and Peter left in 2005 to be replaced by Ricky (28, heterosexual, white, middle class). This house was located in Leeds. I knew Peter because he was the older brother of a class mate at secondary school. I knew Duncan and Peter from Durham (where I also grew up).

Household 3: These interviews are the results of Duncan's interviews with the Christie brothers, and my experimentation into how much my presence affected what was said. Duncan interviewed them three times in Durham and I recorded his views of the event afterwards. I found overall that although the interviews were fast paced, nostalgic and humorous, the questions I would have asked were not asked and some interesting points left unexplored. Duncan is represented above in household 2. Cam (32, heterosexual, white, working class) and Grant (34, heterosexual, white, working class) had known Duncan since they were children. Duncan volunteered to interview them when he was visiting his parents in Durham (Grant, Cam, Bob, Peter, and myself are all from Durham).

Household 4: Another house in Leeds and was inhabited by Rob (32, heterosexual, white, middle class) and Rach (as above). I followed Rach when she moved to Leeds from Manchester, and although Rob and Rach lived together, they were not in a relationship at the time of the interviews but got together in June 2007. At the time of the interviews, Rob was in a relationship with someone else. I also knew Rach from university, and we had travelled together following our graduation. We kept in touch and I interviewed her in her house in Manchester when she moved there, later following her to Leeds.

Household 5: This was the London all-female house which was created when Sara split up from Simon and moved in with Clare (26, heterosexual, white, middle class) and Chloe (27, heterosexual, white, middle class). One of the interviews has Ian (29, heterosexual, white, working class) visiting them, but the other two are of the three women on their own. Ian is also represented here because he contributed to one of the interviews but he was not a member of the household.

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