

PHANTASMAGORIA



Your Attitude In Gamespace

Constantijn Smit

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Foreword

I despise computer games. But I love playing. Time and time again I am lured into the promised land of garish colours and grand adventures of video games to play. Time and time again I finish at best mildly disappointed. The popular spectacular society blinds me with fantastic shows, games, movies and similar attractions. It often seems to be a very complex and rich world to dwell in, but eventually it turns out to be empty, void and simplistic.

In my personal work I try to achieve the exact opposite. The artworks I try to make, although based on similar themes and forms, are often not spectacular and seem simplistic, however I hope the attentive viewer will find it complex and rich. Maybe just enough to come away inspired instead of tired. What exactly makes the difference seeing these two forms of 'world'-creation?

For this thesis I have tried to explore this issue by focusing on the videogame. Not only given my personal (extensive) experience with gaming in the past three decades. But also because it seems to be the most contemporary and most perfected form of spectacle that is taking the world by storm and has a lot of elements of contemporary society in itself that trigger many an artist. Agonistic play, structural coding, rules, escapism, simulacra, spectacle, medialization, etcetera.

Besides this, the videogame approach offers an "easy" and familiar access point to complex issues for the average reader.

The goal of this research is not to have an airtight discourse on theoretical proven ideas for philosophers or sociologists to tear apart. The purpose of this thesis is to illuminate my artist's point of view on contemporary reality and to start thinking in possibilities instead of given certainties. In the coming years as I develop my professional career, I hope this thesis can also function as a inspirational text or starting point containing various ideas and issues to pursue further.

The methodology of the thesis is therefore not scientific in essence. As you will see, a scientific approach is almost diametrically opposed to what I try to reach. The method of my research does use several "scientific" and philosophical texts, but besides these sources I also tried to get inspiration and ideas from other references like films, poetry, TV-series and of course games.

"Damn it Jim, I'm a player, not a scientist."

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Introduction

Interactive digital environments, in particular videogames, can be seen as a model for contemporary society. It is, however, a flawed model. The singular focus on quantifiable outcome and the tendency to turn everything in a signifier with a meaning and a (quantifiable) goal stifles individual freedom and the possibility to escape from such a system. Especially since those in power, the industrial-entertainment complex, and the mind-numbing media it controls dominate the meaning of the signifiers. In this essay I'll investigate if it is possible to retain a sense of personal freedom within such a system, not by a revolutionary overthrow of the current system but by continuous transversal re-creation of subjectivity. I'll start my investigation with the following research question:

Can you achieve a lucid escape from the dominant system by making decisions regarding your personal attitude?

The focus on decisions about your attitude is arrived at through a number of related theories. The setting of the issues is located in Gamespace. Gamespace is a concept introduced by McKenzie Wark in his book *Gamer Theory* (2007)¹. In society as Gamespace everything is a means to an end, and that end is to win. I'll further explain gamespace in chapter one of this thesis. As Gamespace is a theory on society based on the digital computer (game) I'll pose that in such models there is an intrinsic flaw, based on the theory of Kurt Friedrich Gödel. He poses that it is impossible for any consistent system to prove all its statements, especially statements that refer to themselves. Such self-referential statements are indeed sorely missing in games and maybe also gamespace. From this point of view one quickly arrives at the writings of Félix Guattari. Although far removed from the high mathematics of Gödel, he describes a theory where (historical) self-reflection and the resulting self-creation is a central process for maintaining your free subjectivity within the current environment and social relations. However Guattari does not focus on individual subjectivity as much as I do in this thesis, his focus is on the production of subjectivity in a larger context (specifically the mental ecology, the social ecology and the environmental ecology). The theory is still valid though; a more personal gamespace approach can only clarify Guattari's theory and perhaps add to it. Furthermore Guattari also includes role for ethical and aesthetical behaviour to define yourself 'independently'. Ethical, because the subjects micro-politics can have extensive consequences for its environment, aesthetical because the subject is very much in a visual and fictional relationship with his own attitude to define himself. In short such behaviour can be

¹ The complete book can be found on the internet at <http://www.futureofthebook.org/gametheory/>

grouped under the concept of 'attitude'. In chapter two I will discuss the ideas of Guattari in more detail.

Given the subjective ethical micro-politics of Guattari in a post-Fordist age and the strong utilitarian tendencies of Gamespace I think it is worthwhile to also discuss some ethical frameworks in this thesis. The current utilitarian domination can and should be accompanied with different modes of ethical justification. There can also be moral justification of your actions on the basis of your personal principles (deontology) or on virtues (virtue ethics).

Given the complexities of this framework and the heavy theoretical aspect, I try to analyse some recent world-events through the lens of the described framework in the fourth chapter. Not only to illustrate but also to escape from a too personal approach that would otherwise not escape my personal here and now.

Finally I reflect on the whole construct of interlinked theories in a more aesthetic and art-oriented light and the cultivation of a personal attitude in the final chapter.

It may be clear that eventually this thesis won't be about videogames at all. The model of the videogame only illustrates what can be achieved in our human society. Since it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the current reality from all the possible virtualities, the videogame should not be seen as a mere model of reality to experiment in. Instead of approaching it as an escape from reality it should be seen as an engagement in reality.

I On Gamespace

1

It is safe to say that you, the reader, are probably as bored as I am. Not because you are reading this essay, but in a more general everyday kind of way. This boredom itself is not a big issue, on the contrary it would actually be a great benefit if we we're able to confront it and appreciate it. What started my research for this essay is that we are not capable of confronting our own boredom or able to relief ourselves from it satisfactory. In a vicious circle this dual movement of negation and incapacity is the result of and also leads to a culture of entertainment and utility. Just ask around randomly among your friends when was the last time they allowed themselves to sit around staring out of the window. In my experience they will answer with a mixture of disbelief and pride that they have never done this since childhood. They love to work, and if they don't work they 'play' or are being played.

2

Now I am treading on dangerous ground by introducing the concept of playing as opposed to working. The definition of play is difficult to give and many writers with greater minds than mine have tried (and often failed) to give a satisfactory definition. See for example the work of Huizinga or Callois for a thorough study of the concept of play. For this essay I'd like to stress a distinction of two different kinds of play as described (among others) by the aforementioned gentlemen. There is agonistic play, from the ancient Greek word 'agon' meaning battle, contest or rivalry. A type of play focused on the goal of winning. And there is free play. Not playing to win but just playing for the sake of playing. Nowadays mainly familiar to us as child's play but in many cultures (like the Japanese) it is also linked to a concept of appreciating things as they are. The former kind of play seems to be dominant in our culture. We play to win. You might even say that the distinction made between work and play in the first paragraph is null and void. There is no difference between work and play anymore. There is one continuous game that each of us is playing. We need to get out on top at our workplace. We need to have the most friends on MySpace. We need to maximize profits. In short we need to win. Watering down this bold statement we can safely say that we need to have a *goal* for all our actions, we need to *do* something useful.

3

One of the more interesting forms of spectacle we have gained access to in the last century is that of the video game. The video game seems to be the sign o' the times of our current cultures idea of entertainment. It manages to be distracting while still giving us a goal to strife for. It is 'interactive' and gives us the feeling that we are doing more than passive watching. The videogame combines the two ways with which we are used to 'forget' the underlying bore-

dom: distraction and agonistic play. We try to forget ourselves in our frantic pursuit of goals or we find some mindless distraction. Small wonder that home improvement, pimpin' cars, fitness, sports etcetera is so popular. They give us the excuse to keep working and winning on our surroundings and ourselves in our 'free' time. And if we don't want to work, we don't want to think: many holiday destination are packed with interchangeable attractions like casino's, zoo's, amusement parks and shops that are not really the reason you went there but as long as we can tick off the time it's ok. Ultimately the video game is the talented offspring of these two tendencies. In the digital video game you can win and be empty-minded in one entertaining time-consuming sweep. An even more important typical characteristic of the videogame is the fact that it is digital. How can the structure or methodology of a game-environment be so important? The digital game boils everything down to a simple division of zeroes and ones. There is no space for ambiguity. There is also no difference but either zero or one. Everything is ripped of its distinctive qualities in a video game. Every action, subject or object is a series of numbers. Everything beyond that is mere aesthetics, aesthetics in service of the code.

4

All of these goal-oriented, interactive, distracting digital video game mechanics are of interest. Even though the video game seems a pretty advanced form of entertainment it still leaves a distinct taste of wasted time and boredom in my mouth after completing a game. Precisely because the game is just mere distraction. Although it seems to have great capability to create alternative worlds, it's singular focus on mind-numbing distraction through goal oriented playing does not relieve me of these similar mechanics I experience in daily live. There is no true escapism here, only empty (or even worse, simulated) distraction. The cause of my eventually experienced (but not reflected on) boredom could also be the result of the fact that the game is digital. The digital is the great equalizer making all ambiguity impossible. If everything is just mere binary code, the indifferent computer forces its indifference on me, the gamer. It simply does not matter one bit (no pun intended) if I win or lose in this virtual world. It has no real impact on the game-world, if I reset the game everything is back where it started. If I die, I can simply restore (hopefully I've saved the game). Time itself is just as meaningless as space in the virtual game world. Does this indifference seep into my nature as a gamer as well? Or even worse, does the digitalization of our society force this indifference on everything? Perhaps it does. This is Gamespace. A concept created by McKenzie Wark (2007). The gamespace is a topo-logical (a logical topos) space that is basically atopian. Where in the past there was a tendency toward utopian/dystopian thinking, through the heterotopian thinking of the post-modern we might now have arrived at the atopia, the topos without boundaries, or no topos to speak of at all. Gamespace is a virtual space not defined by its boundaries, lines or networks, its internal divisions define Gamespace. Everything can be reduced

and absorbed in binary code and made equivalent to everything else. Everything can be approached from the allegory of the digital video game where goals and code are the ruling principles. Everything else is purely aesthetic or excess.

5

The gamespace model wouldn't be such a grim look on the world if it was capable of overcoming one inherent weakness of digitally coded systems. This weakness can best be addressed through the mathematical statements of Gödel, gamespace is after all a mathematical landscape. Following Gödel we learn that any consistent system contains propositions that cannot be proved. This means that a digital computer (which is a consistent coded system) is not capable of proving all its propositions, some things we apparently need to believe on faith alone. To be more precise it cannot prove self-referential statements that are true. In normal language you could compare it with the paradox of Epimenides; Epimenides was from Crete and proclaimed that all people from Crete are liars. Think that one through. Such paradoxes can also be stated in any other consistent system but it cannot be proven. Gödel proved this point by creating a number theory that could make statements on number theory itself, but these statements were impossible to prove.

This simple heart of his theory does indicate a weakness of every consistent coded system. No matter how complex the coding, it cannot prove all true statements. So what does this mean for Gamespace? You could say that Gamespace is not ideal to understand or even deal with self-referentiality and the paradoxes that result from this. Many consistent systems suffer from this problem.

This incompatibility of self-referentiality would explain why playing for the sake of playing is not a viable option within gamespace. To make such a form of playing interesting (instead of even more boring as most of these alternative games turn out) it would need the capability of self-referentiality and ideally self-contemplation. There would be no goal; you would be playing with the game itself.

It is important to stress that this self-referential playing is not a form of hacking or writing your own software. As a gamer in Gamespace I don't want to and also are not capable of breaking the game or the rules. Self-referential playing takes place within the game and is also about the game.

6

It is no small wonder that given this shortcoming of Gamespace there is little room for self-contemplation (for example through boredom) or non-goal oriented non-action. Although Gamespace does not have a will of its own you might say that it strives to banish these elements that it cannot deal with. Quite successfully too, most people don't care they are being played, how could they if they are not capable of self-reference within this system? This fits a consum-

er society perfectly if we are for example to believe the writings of Marcuse (1969).

Given our current situation what can you do to escape this restricting system? In the next chapter I shall try approach this problem with the ideas of Félix Guattari.

II On Ethico-Aesthetics

1

It is difficult to describe the theories of Félix Guattari in the limited space of this essay. However his writings seem to be so fitting for my topic, that I think it is necessary to try to shed some light on them.

Henk Oosterling has written a perspective on the theory of Guattari in his essay “‘Ontwerpt verworpenen der aarde, ...!’ Guattari’s ethico-esthetisch paradigma” (1998), in one sentence he gives an interesting summary:

“...Individuen dienen zich meer bewust te worden (zelfreflectie/opheffen vreemding) van hun creatieve en inventieve kwaliteiten (esthetisch) en zich de technologische productiemiddelen (nieuwe media) weer toe te eigenen (postmediale resingularisering) en eigen te maken (autopoësis) om kleinschalige communicatiepraktijken te ontwikkelen vanuit een basisdemocratische instelling (ethisch-politiek) waardoor de destructieve effecten voor milieu worden opgeheven (ecosofie).”

To translate in my own words: individuals need to become aware of their own creative and inventive qualities (self-reflection/remove estrangement), to repossess (post-medial resingularization) technological means of production (new media) and make it their own (auto-poësis) to develop small scale practices of communication from a basic democratic standpoint (ethic-political) which remove the destructive effects on the environment (ecosophy).

2

Allow me to explain it shortly, bearing in mind that such a personal summary probably won’t do justice to the whole theory and skip over important subjects worth investigating more thorough. It does however shed some light on my personal understanding of Guattari and how it influences the ideas in this thesis.

According to Guattari the subject derives his subjectivity from a shifting dynamic ‘paradigma’ or relational discursive ‘structures’. In normal words you might say that we are all continuously defined and changed by our history, society, people we interact with etc. You, the subject, are a temporary and changing enclosure of all these powers working upon you (and within you). These structures are not a fixed construct or stable system or a hidden layer in society. They are a transversal all-pervasive network. Often described as rhizomatic, a rhizome is biological term for an underground root that spreads in a network like manner, it’s resulting plant pops up above ground here and there.

1 Oosterling, Henk & Thissen, Siebe (red.) ‘Chaos ex machina: Het ecosofisch werk van Félix Guattari op de kaart gezet’, 1998, pp.125

Shifting expressions of power develop the subjective. He or she is not defined statically; he creates him or herself continually by creating a historical and cultural connection and consistent personal story through historical self-reflection. The subject is thrown in an existing 'structure'. You, the subject, does not need to be aware of this already defined structure that defines you. The artificial, or one might even say the fictional historicity or discourse that creates the subject only comes into view when it is already shifting to another standpoint. The other possible outcomes of subjectivity are brought to light when the old one is fading. The subject gains freedom and movement by being able to create his own historical fiction. It is therefore necessary for the subject to take a self-reflective stance towards himself. Only then can he possibly detect the fading power structures and perhaps even extrapolate the new structure that defines him. A certain recoding of your own history and as a result of this another decoding of the subject. A loop that can be repeated infinitely. This self-reflection as a movement between the outside power and inside knowledge allows a subjectivity to be re-created. The currently created reality for the subject is just an actuality of equally real and valid virtuality (also referring to virtue). A reality that remains open for numerous lines of escape.

The capability of infinite repetition of such a process of subject creation, creates a modern variant of ritualistic meaning giving, where repetition of acts and symbols create identity or belonging. A personal re-creation of identity through re-interpretation of your historically 'defined' structures can be seen as a micro-political 'infinite return' of Nietzsche.

Not only because the shifting creation of a subject is based on fictional history can we see Guattari's theory as concerned with aesthetics. In our current culture where metaphysical ideas and truths have scattered and disappeared, to be replaced by a global capitalist over-specialization, truth and value are just one of many parallel equally valued truths. In a double movement the military-entertainment industry defeats ultimate constructs of truth and value and makes everything negotiable and based on exchange value, while at the same time this removal of boundaries between constructs flattens the diversity. The lack of higher truths creates hollow referents. The only referent is how much someone is willing to pay for it. The superficial qualities of our flat screen society also flatten the creational differences of subjects. Yes, our language is increasingly aestheticized in images but these aesthetics are powered by the ruling discourse of the moment. But the removal of definitive truths, and the emphasis on exchange value, should also make the subject realize that all truths exists based on related announcements working together and against each other. In this shifting structure paradox, dissensus and heterogeneity can live alongside each other without problem. And it is precisely here, in this space that the individual can find his or her freedom. If all value is relative, and aesthetics are ruled by the structure or discourse of the moment, then you as a subject are equally capable of creation your own aesthetic and equally valued

discourse.

Guattari stresses self-reflection on your aesthetic micro-politics (your everyday life) as a way to create a different discourse. Currently these individual aesthetics are still ruled by the discipline of common taste. Normalized by the powerful alienated masses. At this individual level the resingularization of the subject should break free through personal aesthetics by recoding your own fictional history. To create a lifestyle that is not superficial, a-political and hyper-individual but instead manifold, micro-political and dividual.

Guattari sees a role in this process for the new media, as these increasingly make individual communication mass communication. Individuals have through the Internet for example a means to express themselves and sidestep normalizing media like TV. Heterogeneity and collective dissensus is the new way of life in the collective re-singularization.

Guattari does not envision a sublime new revolution or utopian truth. In these times of atopian Gamespace this would be wholly inadequate. Focus remains on dynamic rizhomatic development of continually resingularizing subjects. The creation of subjectivity through continuous experimentation. Subjectivity must be understood in a general way. The bottom-up approach of subjectivity, or molecular lifestyles (small groups of different thought), also affects the social relations and even the environment as a whole. Environment can be understood in the most general sense of the world, not only nature, but also politics, technology, etcetera. In a continuous circular movement these ecologies as Guattari calls them, i.e. micro/mental, meso/social and macro/environment, influence each other. This means that the individual must understand that he or she is defined by its environment but also that the environment is defined by subjectivity on a micro level. Such a process of rhizomatic growth of many micro-political subjectivities (even possibly contradicting each other) leads to what Guattari calls heterogenesis. Basically the creation of differences that can exist alongside each other.

3

The above theory is almost a blueprint for the ideas set forth in this thesis (although developed independently). As Gamespace is the current empowered model working on the subject, the same techniques could apply to make the subject free to create his own subjectivity within this system. A focus on self-reflection moving between this power and the knowledge within oneself to create a separate lifestyle influencing and being influenced by your fellows. Gamespace seems especially perfected for this looping process. A given history is not coded, the code is the history. There basically is only a loop. Games can be reset and started over. Gamespace might not be, but the general drive to decode the variables and win is still there. The decoding might as well be

done, perhaps different every time, based on your own personal ethical and aesthetic lifestyle. The literally melting of reality and virtuality make the current model ideal for continuously subjective experimentation. Perhaps starting in such trivial, but equally real, environments as videogames but quickly leaping out into the current actualized reality. Such heterogeneous 'stylistic' behavior inevitably contains dissensus and paradox. Exactly that which is sorely missed in the current (virtual) reality as put forth in the previous chapter.

4

I'd like to add a small comment on the exact 'content' on the ethics of your ethico-aesthetic behavior as envisioned by Guattari (and me). Ethics is part of his theory because it is an action-oriented theory. Since the theory promotes heterogeneous and value-pluralism it seems unnecessary to delve into which ethical ground is best suited to base your aesthetic behavior on. It is completely relative to your situation and self-reflection.

However, we've seen that the digital Gamespace is very goal oriented. The numerical, and thus quantifiable, end justifies the means. This is a very utilitarian approach to ethics, where all actions are judged based on their quantifiable outcome. Actions are good if they produce the greatest benefit. This benefit must be measurable according to Jeremy Bentham, one of the founding fathers of utilitarianism. If you include benefit that is not measurable you become vulnerable for vague justifications 'like it is right, because it is beautiful' which can be wholly subjective and defeat the purpose of an ethical framework.

Although among the utilitarianists there are proponents of making the concept of 'benefit' a bit more loose (John Stuart Mill) and less based on quantifiability, the last two hundred years of utilitarianism has developed in a Benthamite direction. No small wonder given the industrial revolution and the subsequent growth of companies and their focus on profit (or in other words: quantifiable benefit). Although this has brought the western world in a flurry of production I think the time is right for different ethical frameworks, not to replace, but to work alongside the utilitarian one. Such value 'pluralism' can easily be supported by the heterogeneous micro-political society Guattari described.

The individual is in many cases not able to calculate the greatest benefit of his actions, either because the consequences are not clear or in everyday life there simply is no time for continuous weighing of the pros and cons of an action. Luckily for us there are alternatives! For example a Neo-Kantian framework for your actions. Neo-Kantians do not restrict themselves on Kant's categorical imperative of 'Do unto others as you would do unto yourself' (or the current 'Fear thy neighbor as you would fear yourself') or 'always treat a human as an end and not a means'. But instead propose that all individuals should define their own guiding principles. Not the end justifies the action, but the underlying principle for that action. In philosophy Neo-Kantianism is a deontological ethics, as opposed to the consequentialism of utilitarianism. Another option is (Aristotelian) virtue ethics. Here the subject justifies his ac-

tions based on virtues of his or her character instead of on the end result of an action or underlying individual principles of an action. The focus is not on a particular action but on the creation of a virtuous character.

Both alternative approaches seem to suit an ethico-aesthetic lifestyle in Gamespace. Instead of making your avatar jump through hoops because this maximizes your total points (a quantifiable end), you can decide to measure the hoop (maybe because one of your guiding principles is a devotion to Pi), or just ignore the hoop because your avatar is a square and doesn't want anything to do with hoops based on his squareness. Maybe this is a silly example that has nothing to do with moral dilemmas, but nevertheless it illustrates that a different ethical framework (understood in the broadest sense of the word: a philosophy of doing) opens up a wealth of possibilities that would normally not be available if one follows the strict system of the game (or Gamespace). A deontologist Neo-Kantian approach also illustrates certain playfulness in shifting guiding principles, since your dynamic subjectivity allows for a pluralist set of principles. The continuous re-creation of your character also adds leeway to the virtues of your character; since your subject is not fixed your virtues can evolve as well.

Stressing self-reflection and ethical principles/virtues quickly reminds us of a strict Calvinistic way of life, almost the exact opposite of what I try to illustrate. The underlying principles or virtues should not lead to universal and strict rules that bear down upon the individual. Self-reflection and a shifting set of your personal code should be open and playful, a kernel to base your everyday behavior on and allowing you to shift stances without losing yourself. The advantage of personal ethics that allow for justification of action besides utility is that reasonable behaviour encompasses much more than just useful behaviour. It is suddenly all right to simply contemplate, experiment and fail just because it can be good in itself just for your subjectivity.

In my own personal experience I have experimented with such behavior in World of Warcraft, the leading MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) of today. Instead of running as fast as you can from one quest to another (almost all Non-Player Characters asking you to kill some animals) and trying to level up your character, I decide to give my character a pacifist and vegetarian guiding principle. This resulted in me only killing if attacked and only doing quests that I could justify. Ok, it took me ten hours to reach level 8 (normally possible in about twenty minutes), but I did open up a whole new range of interaction (mostly widespread panic) with my fellow gamers, who suddenly were confronted with their own relentless running and killing and were having a hard time justifying this to my character (while role-playing of course).

If such a silly thing can have such upsetting consequences within one small part of a game, what could it achieve in real Gamespace especially if everyone would base their behavior on ethico-aesthetic dynamic principles or virtues?

Gamespace would most likely become a more varied and heterogeneous place that does support paradox and the possibility of lucid escape to or even actualizing many different virtualities instead of being confined to the current military-entertainment complex.

III Praxis

1

Allow me to illustrate the ideas I put forth up till now by analyzing some recent events in the world. I won't pretend that I can find solutions for any issue, but a change of viewpoint can be refreshing, both for the discussed issues and this thesis itself.

At the time of writing this thesis there was a lot of media coverage on the suspected fraudulent actions of the Goldman Sachs bank in the United States of America¹. Goldman Sachs was being accused of selling 'shitty' (in their own words²) mortgage products to clients like ABN AMRO and then taking out an insurance policy against these products, so that in case these products would default (for example homeowners cannot pay they mortgage payments anymore), Goldman Sachs would earn money on this defaulting. Goldman Sachs seems to have done everything in their power to create a 'shitty' product based on highly dubious mortgages. We all know the housing market indeed collapsed and Goldman Sachs made a nice profit on these products, probably contributing to a deepening of the financial crisis as a side effect.

In the subsequent hearings done by the US Senate to investigate the possible fraud done by Goldman Sachs there were some revealing conversations. Not only on the fraud itself but also on the mental ecology of the key 'players' at Goldman Sachs: Daniel Sparks, Fabrice 'Fabulous Fab' Tourre, Joshua Birnbaum and Michael Swenson, or as they are also called: 'The masters of the universe'.

2

Indeed, it seems as if I am talking about a team of superheroes. The reference to 'He-man, master of the universe' is a revealing sign. These men seem to be perfect examples of the Hero. A type of player that pushes the game to the edge while staying within the rules of the game. Comparing with videogames like MMORPG's, most of the time these players form a tight circle of 'elite' like-minded peers. They don't play the game to enjoy themselves, they play to get everything, all the points, all the quests, all the credits, even when they have more than enough of all of these already. It is not the kudos themselves that is the goal, it is the feeling of being completely in control, of being better than all the other 'stupid' players, of, indeed, mastering the universe (however small that universe in some cases is).

In the case of Goldman Sachs, the heroes have become completely in control

1 See for an overview on Goldman Sachs the NY Times: http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/business/companies/goldman_sachs_group_inc/index.html?scp=1-spot&sq=goldman%20sachs&st=cse

2 As heard on the hearing by the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations on April 27

of their game of financial market-economics. So much so that it seems that the rules for the company in general completely coincide with their own moral compass. After proudly proclaiming that Goldman Sachs' mission is to always first and foremost have the benefit of the client in mind, the Goldman Sachs 'masters' are questioned how they can fit that mission with their misleading behavior in practice. Daniel Sparks in this case did not seem to understand that there was a conflict of ethics here. It seemed to me that mister Sparks thought that if the statement of the mission and a code of conduct itself is the proof that you are morally correct your everyday conduct is completely free to do what it can within the rules stated by the market/the game. The market expects a written 'Code of conduct', so there is a written 'Code of conduct'. There is no rule to disclose to your clients the position you yourself have taken toward a product, thus Goldman Sachs did not disclose their personal stance against the product they were selling. In the space of the financial-market game Goldman Sachs is morally justified. Addressing a personal moral code or virtues does not make any sense for someone like the hero-player. A personal moral code is part of a wholly different game.

3

The hero-player's subjectivity (mental ecology and social ecology) has been completely defined by the environment they are in (environmental ecology), however what is missing is that the hero-players fail to feedback their personal politics into the macro environment. Or perhaps the fit between these ecologies is so good, that the system atrophies in one way of working. What are needed are not so much extra-regulations from outside to correct the game, but instead it would be better to include more aberrant personal characteristics from players within the game into the market game. Goldman Sachs should create a more dynamic self-referential business model. A bottom-up feedback loop that can make the static market game a more dynamic system. For example by introducing more diverse characters, or in Goldman Sachs' case include women on the executive level. It might be harder to remain a club of competitive '*He*-men' when there are also less competitive but more multi-tasking women on board. Or use the diverse backgrounds of your employees and add it into the mix. Most companies I personally worked for had physicists, therapists, translators, spacecraft-engineers, artists, shopkeepers etc. working as simple administrative employees. Imagine the transversal dynamic and creative potential of a multinational like Goldman Sachs if they allowed a bottom up ('bottom' as in personal characteristics, not (only) as in lowest work level) stream of self-reflective subjectivication.

I do realize that it is not possible or even preferable to change the type of game completely for a company like Goldman Sachs. As Chris Crawford explained in his Dragon Speech in 1992: a player that is at the top of the ladder of the game does not want to start at the bottom of a new type of game. But it

is possible to add to the game, to broaden it with diverse attitude. Examples of such business practices already exist, for example at Google where employees are stimulated to work a set amount of time per week on their own project, unrelated to the current businesses of Google. Eventually some ideas fail and some ideas are brought back into the macro-environment of Google but as a result of this, the environment changed. Molecular revolution and failures as a basis for a dynamic transversal system, even in business.

4

Another example out of real-life gamespace, again taking place in the USA is the BP-oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, threatening the natural environment in the Gulf and the coast of Louisiana and Mississippi. Here there also surfaced some interesting facts in the media³. The controlling agency Mineral Management Service (MMS) that is supposed to police the oil companies were rather cozy with the oil companies' executives. To the point where sex orgies and pot parties were part of the MMS and oil companies meetings. Also during the George W. Bush administration it was no secret that there was a high degree of entanglement between the oil industry and government officials (Condoleezza Rice having an Chevron oil tanker named after her is a striking example). Resulting in a very powerful oil company lobby and very little regulations or restrictions on these oil companies. This in turn resulted in the avoidable disaster of the BP-oil spill.

A very practical example where the social ecology (for example the drugged-out sex orgies) can certainly have big environmental ecological consequences. Superficial hyper-individuality is difficult to match with environmentalism.

In terms of gamespace you could say that there are too few games in this situation. The problem here seems to originate in the fact that all players belong to the same game. The controlling organizations, the government officials, and the oil companies' executives are all in the same oil industry game. Each player can profit on a de-regulated quick-profit oil industry that does not take long-term and/or high-cost safety measures. Pushing this concept to the extreme you might even say that the culture of the USA is based on one type of game: the American Dream. Almost every USA-citizen is made to believe that by working hard you can achieve fabulous wealth and success. This might be a good motivation to allow for a very de-regulated and all-powerful top layer of society (i.e. company executives, government officials, celebrities), because one day you might be one of them. Anyone who tries to stop this system is a quitter and a loser, since apparently they don't believe they will make it to the top. A diversification of games, besides a goal oriented American Dream, in such a culture might lead to a more nuanced approach to the top-level play-

³ See for an overview of articles on the BP Oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico the NY Times: http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/o/oil_spills/gulf_of_mexico_2010/index.html?scp=1-spot&sq=BP%20oil%20spill&st=cse

ers. Each subjectivity can create it's own top, not necessarily goal-oriented but broader in it's ethics/politics/aesthetics motivation. There would be no top but plateau, or might you even say, a thousand plateaus?

5

By giving these short examples I hope to have clarified, perhaps sometimes by simplification, some of the complex ideas of the previous chapter. At the same time I think it is important to illustrate that these ideas are easily applicable beyond my personal theoretical here and now. However in the next chapter I'll try to loop my argumentation back to a more personal situation, i.e. that of the role of the artist in this gamespace.

IV Synthesis

1

In the previous chapters I've talked about society as a utilitarian Gamespace incapable of dealing with self-reflecting statements and paradox. Precisely this flaw facilitates a freedom for the individual to continually re-create his own subject, in accordance with Guattari's writings, through self-reflection and resingularization of new media. Not only can new media be a tool as a mass individual communication protocol (Internet) as well as an ideal playground to test out other possible virtualities. Your shifting micro-politics can be based on different ethical frameworks alongside each other.

So where does this (intentionally) loose collection of theories thrown together lead to? Why do I write all this down? And what has it got to do with (an unstable media approach of) art?

2

First of all, I believe that this playful approach of subject re-creation can be useful for everyone in the practice of everyday life. Perhaps most people are unconsciously already applying a certain amount of 'bricolage' to their own lives. I use the term 'bricolage' as a pointer toward ideas of Michel de Certeau in his book 'The practice of everyday life' (1988). He sees the consumption of products and services as a practice defined by the individual and not the dominant economic order. This dominant order tells us what to use, but not how to use it. Individuals will mix 'n match, copy-paste their practices on products. Consumption as an active creative process of use. One example of such individual mode of consumption I saw on TV recently. An elderly woman had received a CD-rack for some reason. However she only put one CD in the rack, even though it could hold many more. According to the woman this made it a lot easier to dust the CD-rack off. Although the producer of the CD-rack had clearly intended it to be used as a way to store as many CD's in as little space as possible, the woman used a different criterium, namely the ease to remove dust, resulting in an almost abstract sculpture of a cd-rack, two meters high, with one CD in the middle. A small example of subjective consumption. However with the growth of an all-pervasive gamespace it is important that people are more conscious about their self re-creational capabilities. Perhaps this will happen automatically once everyone is fully saturated with the superficial plasticity of our society. I doubt such a 'revolutionary' insight is coming soon. The times of revolutions are long gone, as discussed in the previous chapters the way forward is through heterogenesis, a bottom up molecular 'revolution'. Change will need to happen in a more scattered and rhizomatic way. Loosely bound by the 'new' media. A society that is 'Rick-rolled' instead of Revolutionarized. In such a society how can any change be instigated? As per definition of the nature of ethico-aesthetics it defies centrally organized thought or action.

3

I think that it is the role of the artist to convey the possibilities of playful aesthetic creation as an individual way of life. Not in the way as the Situationists tried to upset society or as hackers try to change societies rules. The artist is not a wise revealer of mystical truths. He might be, and he might not. I understand his role more as an exemplar of possibilities. Also it is not so much the artwork itself that can function as an example, this is just a trail of the artist himself. His lifestyle should be the example. As Baudelaire said in his essay 'The painter of modern life':

*'This man..., ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert - has an aim loftier than that of a mere flâneur, an aim more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance...He makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history.'*¹

According to Baudelaire the artist/poet is a person that does not despise the present. He is someone who tries to see the poetry in history and the given societal structure. The artist does not escape reality, he acknowledges reality and sees its possible alternatives. The artist invents himself within this reality. He tries to heroize (perhaps ironically) his present. In contrast with the flâneur, who can be understood as a person perennially watching (perhaps voyeuristically) and moving with the flow of the present without really partaking in it, the artist can be seen as a player. One level beyond the mere flâneur. The player engages reality, although not being completely part of it. It is just a series of games (imposed or self-imposed) after all.

4

The auto-poësis as declared by Baudelaire might be a little heavy-handed. Looking for a universal truth in a time when these seemed to disappear. His aesthetic decisions are based on a form of aesthetic nihilism. The auto-poësis as understood in this thesis is more playful and transversally shifting, fitting the rapid times and means currently at our disposal. However the basic attitude of Baudelaire of self re-creation to set you apart from an overbearing subject devouring mass is still valid. I believe it is self re-creational behavior that makes good artists. It is their attitude that sets them apart. Foucault defines the concept of attitude as follows:

*"A voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task."*²

1 Baudelaire, Charles, 'The painter of modern life and other essays', 2008, pp. 12

2 Foucault, Michel, 'What is Enlightenment ?' in Rabinow (P.), ed., The Foucault Reader, 1984, pp. 32-50

In our day and age it might be useful to take this self-creational approach a step further. Where the above artists stuck to their creation, in Gamespace it is obvious that the entertainment complex immediately absorbs such original characters or vacuums. That in itself is not a bad thing; gamespace has been recoded by this new decoding of subjectivity. But staying true to Guattari it might be useful to shift to a new actualized virtuality when this happens. Dynamic and looping re-creation is of the essence to keep moving freely and rhizomatic through the levels of gamespace. Every time the subjectivity nears completion it is absorbed into society, changing society in the process but also forcing the subject to start anew in a recreation of his subjectivity influenced by this new society.

The process of free playing is thus more important than the result. The process of the artist his lifestyle, or attitude, is more important than the work. This type of approach also absorbs the possibility of failure as a valid outcome besides success. Possibility takes precedence over (quantifiable) result.

The continuously playful experimentation of lifestyle is perhaps the main paradox that the artist should strive for. Where the everyday person can rest easily in a conscious self-reflected lifestyle, the artist's attitude is a continually self-reflecting ever-changing lifestyle. As such the attitude of an artist is paradoxically quite stable, he just needs to be consistently inconsistent. Just like his artworks should always be the same: original. In terms of Gamespace the artist needs to remain the error in the code.

5

In the spirit of this thesis let us shift from a philosophical/artistic approach of this thesis to a more business administration approach and analyze the aforementioned ideas through a classic strength/weakness analysis.

The strengths are of course those qualities mentioned in the previous parts. The ethico-aesthetic approach does not lean on an old revolutionary momentum, leaders or theories. It is a meta-theory that can be applied in a shifting environment. It actually ensures a shifting environment. It is individually based and therefore very pluralistic. Ethico-aesthetic behavior can have many forms. It can be based on different types of ethics, most notably a possibility of enjoying things or judging things not on their effect, but also on their quality as 'ding an sich'. It does not 'break' the system or resort to illegal means. It ensures individual freedom within a dominant system. It makes optimal use of the web-based media of the moment (or vice versa). And not in the least it can be a lot of fun to act transversally creative. In short a highly flexible individual system of creative development still capable of mass effect.

The weaknesses of this ethico-aesthetic approach are closely tied to its

strengths. One can also see the approach as an amorphous blob of strung together ideas for a ragtag mob. It is difficult to ensure that the continuous transversal shifting of levels, ethics and aesthetics does not degrade in a superficial post-modern image-driven lifestyle (like in the past two decades). The lack of a sublime goal or viewpoint can lead to becoming bogged down in the nitty-gritty everydayness. There is no way to ensure that your underlying principles are sound or even present. Although I do believe that in the long run such empty post-modernism is distinguishable from principle-grounded ethico-aesthetic play. It is like the difference between a commercial of McDonalds and a video of Andy Warhol eating a hamburger (watch it on YouTube). Although it is difficult to exactly pinpoint this difference for each case, I think the emphasis on non-utilitarian motivation, personal principles instead of higher goals and the focus on playful process as opposed to greatest effect should be quickly identifiable.

Another weakness is that it is a theory that is too much 'meta-'. The lack of concrete common elements and the focus on individual re-creational possibilities can make ethico-aesthetic behavior hard to identify for others. Are people already behaving in such a way or not? On the other hand, is it really important to be able to identify ethico-aesthetic play? Is it not actually a strength that it is not clear if something is 'mere' play or not? Paradoxically the essence of ethico-aesthetic play is not to be identified, labeled and boxed (even though this in itself can be a label, as all artists know).

Finally there is a risk of becoming detached from everyday life. Although the lucid escape as set out to be the aim of this whole exercise might be reached, it might be reached by cutting oneself off from every level, group or school of thought. It is important to remain plural and not be too individual. There is an emphasis on announcement and co-operation instead of simply cutting (yourself off) and pasting. You might conclude that a rephrasing of the hypothesis is necessary. The aim is not lucid escape. Escape is impossible, escape is related to detachment, not being part of, losing yourself in. The aim of your ethico-aesthetic attitude should instead be lucid engagement.

Conclusion

I started this thesis by posing the problem that in our current society the possibility of free play seemed to have disappeared. The society modeled on the atopian agonistic playing arena of the video game absorbs all heterogeneous areas of expertise and expression. It forces most aesthetic expressions in a utilitarian mold created by the superficially aesthetized military-entertainment complex. How can one retain a sense of freedom within such an overpowering structure? More specifically is it possible to achieve a form of lucid escape from this structure?

I argued that given the gamespace model, there are some weak points in the way society is structured. Beginning from a far-out area to analyze this problem, namely mathematics, I stated that such a digital game model was the type of consistent model that Gödel was talking about in his statement that any consistent model is not able to prove all true statements, especially self-referential paradoxes. Such self-referentiality also fitted in with the theoretical framework of Guattari, which stated that subjectivity is a continuous dynamic process of self re-creation through ethico-aesthetic micro-politics. Personal freedom can be maintained by a rhizomatic actualizing of different virtualities. To give this highly abstract philosophy some ground I also introduced the possibility to address different ethical frameworks for the basis of your actions, for example personal guiding principles based on neo-Kantian ethics or using virtue ethics to develop a (dynamic) virtuous character. So by stating my own dynamic but binding principles and realizing that I can create or re-create my own fictional history through self-reference and self-contemplation there seems to be a *modus operandus*, or better yet, an attitude to tackle the seemingly all-pervasive gamespace. One should try to play, experiment, and fail transversally. Engage in the different levels and divide your experiences with other players. The emphasis lies on the process instead of on the goal. This process however takes place within society! It does not break the system or transcends it. The possibility of escape did not exist to begin with, given the atopian character of gamespace. The trick to retain a way of freedom or free play is to engage and not to escape. Engage the game, the players and yourself in the stated self-referential (for artists even paradoxical) way. Artists can play a role as an example in this process. Art and the artist should remain the error in the code of gamespace, a reminder that some things are presented in gamespace but are not re-presentational of gamespace.

To answer the research question:

Can you achieve a lucid escape from the dominant system by making decisions regarding your personal attitude?

No.

It is not possible to escape the system. However it is possible to remain free

within the dominant system despite its overpowering all-absorbing structure. Not by escaping, but by engaging.

Of course it would be nice to give concrete examples of which attitude you need to have, a short tutorial on attitude (re-)creation. I think that this would be precisely against the spirit of the idea. By creating a guidebook I immediately become absorbed into gamespace through a manual. Since an important aspect is self-reflection and dynamic fictionalization I refuse to hand out pointers. I could explain my own personal guidelines and attitude. The process of this thesis and the writing of it has in a way been a dynamic fictionalization of my own historical structures. This would explain the perhaps limited angle of the videogame, the focus on non-consequential ethics, the important status of artistic practice within this model. You might say that my personal model is the meta-model I described in this thesis. That can also mean that the meta-model is too specific to apply anywhere else or that my personal model is too general to be really of decisive influence on my day-to-day practice. I'm saying too much or I'm saying nothing. I've deceived you into reading a too complex diary, or I'm deluding myself in some highbrow babbling. Or perhaps I keep looping from becoming more and more precise in my ethico-aesthetical attitude, to realizing that this has been absorbed into gamespace as well, and then recoiling to a more general structure to recode myself again.... and again... and again.

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