A hermeneutic literature review exploring the intersection of video gaming and psychotherapy

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Attestation of authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work, and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which, to a substantial extent, has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Fraser Munro
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I wish to thank my patients' for generously allowing me to enter into their world of video gaming.

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Abstract

The majority of literature on video gaming in relation to psychological therapies revolves around video game addiction (Kuss, 2015), violence (jagodzinski, 2006), prosocial behaviour (Passmore & Holder, 2014), gender (Todd, 2012), and the incorporation into mental health care (Ceranoglu, 2010). However, video game play can also be viewed from a psychotherapeutic perspective as a transitional space (Winnicott, 1953) that is utilised to mediate internal and external reality. Internal representations of important people, and events from the client's life may be expressed through their video game characters (avatars) appearance and in game actions (Mittlböck, 2015). Through the process of a hermeneutic literature review the intersection between psychotherapy and video game play was further explored. From this a number of themes emerged, such as: the impulse to critique and contradict, the avatar as a subversion of the death drive, imagination as a way of transcending the gap between the virtual and non-virtual, the collective as a counter to the curating of minds, the reality of collective dreaming, the perverse as the authentic expression of the personality and the mask as an escape from the oppression of everyday life.

Chapter One Introduction

Key terms

Throughout this study I will refer often to the avatar and three types of video games. I would like to give a brief definition of each before moving forward. The avatar can be understood as the player's onscreen character, through which they interact with the game. The avatar can be human or non-human, highly customizable or predetermined in nature. The video games that inform this study are a reflection of the playing style that patients have related in my work with them; they are the first-person shooter (FPS), role-playing game (RPG) and the Massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). The FPS game is action based and often involves sword or guns. In the FPS the player experiences the game through the eyes of their avatar. The RPG is often a grand adventure within a detailed world, in which the avatar has elaborate and complex powers which continue to develop as the game advances. The MMORPG is a form of RPG that is played simultaneously online by hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people (Barr, 2011).

Background

More than ten years ago I went through a phase of playing video games. My gaming activity generally commenced late in the evening after I had taken care of the needs of my children and settled them into bed. With some time to myself I would relax by playing my son's car racing video game. I vividly remember the pixelated landscape through which my car raced. The mountainous backdrops of the track appeared to abruptly readjust position as the car moved along the course. The inability of the games graphics to keep up with the unfolding scene created a split between the car and the surroundings. But of course my ability as a beginner driver meant this split often quickly collapsed when I crashed. Then, for a brief moment, the car and surroundings were in static unison until the pause was inevitably interrupted by the game's capacity to start again. In restarting, the sudden shock of crashing, and the resulting damage to my car, magically disappeared. I was revitalized and, once again, could enter back into the race. I remember the circuitous nature of the track to be reassuring. Each time I finished a lap I was also beginning a new lap and that meant the possibility of

developing greater understanding and knowledge, which would hopefully lead to smoother driving and faster lap times.

The current study

My current interest in video gaming was reignited through my clinical work with patients who referred to their game playing during sessions. While I have drawn on my experience of working with these patients, I have changed the details of their video game play to safeguard their anonymity. My interpretations and reflections on my patients' video game play are also my own and in no way represent the personal thoughts or experience of my patients'. Throughout this study I have imagined that the psychotherapy patient is also a video game player and, conversely, that the video game player is currently in psychotherapy. I was initially struck by how animated my patients' became when they talked about their relationship with video gaming. I quickly gained the impression that the video game world provided a safe space in which various emotions could be openly expressed. The interactions that my patients' had with their avatar and other onscreen characters appeared to have the emotional, intellectual and sensational qualities that my patients' also experienced outside of the game world. The characters and experiences within the game world appeared to provide a mirror and a model of what seemed deeply fundamental to my patients' sense of self and the world around them. Video gaming appeared to be both a place of playful fantasy and a congruent psychological reality.

From this I began to feel that the virtual environment was also an important factor in thinking about my patients' patterns of relationship to oneself and others. This awareness was an indication that I believed the gaming world could constructively contribute to the therapeutic dialogue; as if my patients' video gaming was a valuable source of psychological information. However, I soon realized that this relationship was not entirely one sided. As my patients' spent more time in psychotherapy it became clear that their relationship with video gaming was changing. This shift resulted, for example, in a move from playing FPS games, which involve large amounts of death and destruction, to playing more tranquil games, such as a city builder, which involve construction and community building. Over time patients might return to playing FPS games, but the manner in which they now played the FPS had changed, to become more collaborative and less combative. This evolution in playing style and attitude fascinated me. I felt there must be a link between this shift and my patients'

journey in psychotherapy. It is this perceived intersection of video game play and psychotherapy that drives my dissertation question.

Preliminary literature review

In my preliminary literature review I struggled to find texts that directly addressed the ways video gaming may intersect with clinical practice. Rather I found a range of literature that dealt with a particular aspect of video gaming, such as: addiction, violence, prosocial behaviour, gender, and video games incorporated into mental health care. For example, Kuss (2015) discussed video game addiction in terms of the "immediate gratification" (p.101) for players arising from the combination of social interaction, the anonymity of MMORPGs, and the satisfying aspects of game play. To maintain this positive state, while avoiding the problems of the non-virtual world, players often began to play excessively. Similarly jagodzinski (2006) states that the ability of the avatar to be continuously resurrected creates a compulsion in the player to endlessly repeat the ego affirming action of continuing battle. In relation to video game violence, Khoo (2012) discusses the impact on the players social functioning such as, increased aggression, reduced empathy and impaired social interaction. Conversely some literature points to the potential prosocial influence of video game play. For example, Khoo (2012) indicates that video games can develop knowledge and social skills in the player. Passmore and Holder (2014) echo this by suggesting that prosocial video games reduce "aggressive or antisocial behaviour" (p.202). They also show how playing violent video games cooperatively can increase generosity, and build connection between players. In terms of gender identity Todd (2012) claims that gender moves fluidly within video games, leaving players to experiment with gender identities different from those assigned at birth. This blurring of gender identity within video games has the potential, according to Todd (2012), to both disrupt, and reinforce the existing values of the non-virtual world.

Video games in mental health care

According to Ceranoglu (2010) the use of video games in the mental health care of youth is steadily increasing. Reviewing available literature, Ceranoglu (2010) found that the use of video games in psychotherapy increased self-awareness, impulse control, attendance to therapy and engagement in the therapeutic process. Ceranoglu (2010) suggests that the interactions players have in the game world may provide insight into the "intrapsychic

conflicts" (p.143) they experience in the non-virtual world. This awareness may support the player and therapist to begin a conversation that acknowledges this conflict. The configuration of the therapist and player sitting side by side during game play may make this process of discovery easier, because the player feels less confronted by the direct gaze of the therapist (Ceranoglu, 2010). The ability of the therapist to provide support and guidance for players as they encounter challenging moments within video game play may also help the player to regulate emotions that were previously overwhelming (Ceranoglu, 2010).While this may contribute to engagement in the therapeutic process, Ceranoglu (2010) also acknowledges that the captivating graphics and sound of video games may distract the player and therapist from socially interacting.

Video gaming and psychoanalytic theory

While I did not initially find literature by psychotherapists who were thinking about the relationship between clinical work and video gaming, I did find a small number of articles in which writers were using psychoanalytic theory to think about video gaming. While this was one step removed, it was inspiring to see the two spheres of activity mentioned on the same page. I was excited by Shaw's (2010) use of Winnicott's concept of the transitional object as a metaphor for video game play. Winnicott (1953) believed that the internal subjective experience of the individual and the objective external world were mediated through an 'intermediate area of experience' (p.90). In relationship to the infant this intermediate area provides an uncontested space to come to terms with newly emerging realities. The infant's transitional object, whether blanket, teddy bear or other found object helps to reduce anxiety and facilitates the transition to a self which is separate to the mother or breast. While Winnicott (1953) suggests that the transitional object may be symbolic of the breast or the mother, he is clear to point out that it primarily functions as an object in itself, which represents the infant's progression through time. This process of coming to terms with external and internal reality is never completed. For the adult then, the intermediate space is provided by the experience of the arts and religion, which provide an experience of being immersed in the moment, the roots of which reside in early childhood play (Winnicott, 1953). I wondered, if video gaming is a form of play, could we position it in Winnicott's intermediate space? If so, video gaming may be seen as a symbolic representation of the players' relationship to significant objects in their internal and external world. An example of

this symbolic representation may be the players video game avatar. The avatar is a figure that allows the player to experiment with issues of identity, such as gender, race, class and human or non-human form. The ability of the avatar to "live, die, and live again" (Rehak, 2003, p. 107) also brings the player into relationship with life and death and the consequent cycles of fragility and omnipotence. Mittlböck (2015) describes how the player projects onto the avatar qualities of previously internalized figures, perceptions of self and world views. However, as the avatar engages with the game, this representation begins to shift causing frustration to the player. The player must therefore immerse in the game while also holding the ability to reflect on the changing nature of the avatar. In doing so, the new representation can be reintegrated back into the psyche of the player. Mittlböck (2015) believes this process of engagement, reflection and interpretation in video game play parallels the process of psychotherapy; which implies that both activities share a capacity to increase differentiation in the player and patient.

Context and relevance to psychotherapy practice

If we follow Mittlböck and Shaw, it would appear that video games and psychotherapy may intersect in psychologically and theoretically meaningful ways. If we look at statistical data we can also see that virtual environments have become increasingly relevant to a large section of society. For example, New Zealand's population ranks amongst the highest in the world for Internet connectivity (Todd, 2012). Kowert and Oldmeadow (2015) suggest that a considerable percentage of this online activity is dedicated to playing games. The Pew Research Centre (2008) claims that up to 97% of American teens aged 12-17 years have played some form of video game. These figures suggest that video gaming is a mainstream activity that meets a wide range of individual and group needs for social contact, excitement, avoidance, comfort and personal safety (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015). With the average age of video gamers being 34 years old (ESRB, 2016), it is likely as an adult psychotherapist that I will encounter patients who have played video games. Dini (2012) suggests that video game play – which is one of the many virtual realities that people simultaneously inhabit in their daily life – has a significant impact on personal development and an emerging sense of self. As a psychotherapist it therefore seems increasingly important to consider how the patient's virtual world of video gaming and their non-virtual world intersect and mutually influence each other.

The aim of this study is to begin a dialogue between psychotherapy and video gaming. I am beginning with the hope that each field may illuminate the other in a manner that is collaborative, rather than confrontational. I say this because my preliminary perception of video gaming literature is that it speaks largely to addiction and violence. My casual conversations in the early stages of this study met with slightly reactive responses towards video gaming as a potentially harmful and antisocial activity. If the psychotherapist holds this perception of video gaming their ability to enter a state of "reverie" (Bion, 1962, p. 36) when the patient shares their experience of playing video games may be limited. I imagine if this function is impaired we may contribute to an environment that restricts the patient's emerging "capacity for dreaming one's experience" (Ogden, 2004, p. 1357).

In the next chapter I will outline the methodology, method, and process that I will use to explore the intersection between psychotherapy and video gaming.

Chapter Two Methodology, Method, and Process

Methodology

In undertaking this qualitative literature review I will be guided by a hermeneutic methodology. This stance is interpretive in nature and informed by the work of the 20th century philosophers Heidegger and Gadamer (Smythe & Spence, 2012). In gaining a basic understanding of hermeneutic philosophy I believe this theoretical position, while primarily focused on the relationship between reader and text, is also helpful in thinking about the relationship between the therapist and patient, and the video game player and the video game. Kinsella (2006) affirms this assumption by stating that hermeneutic thought underpins, parallels and directly informs qualitative research – which is concerned primarily with interpretation and understanding.

Unlike traditional hermeneutics, which believed that interpretation would ultimately led to understanding, Heidegger reversed this sequence and claimed that understanding precedes interpretation (Grondin, 1994). The art of interpretation then elaborates and reveals more fully what was already understood. In clarifying our understanding our position becomes transparent and we are consequently more able to appreciate the autonomy and difference of the text. Smythe and Spence (2012) state that Heidegger described three aspects of our ready-made understanding. They are "fore-having", "fore-sight", and "fore-conception" (p.16). Each of these three fore-understandings affects the way in which the literature is encountered. Fore-having can be demonstrated in my belief that a patient's video game play is significant to his or her therapy. Fore-sight brings a predetermined understanding of where literature may originate. For example almost unconsciously I associate video gaming exclusively within the popular culture and scientific research industry of America. Fore-conception is the idea that what will be found in the literature has already been determined in some way. The researcher has chosen a direction and associations and links have been made prematurely. Smythe and Spence (2012) believe that fore-conception is inevitable, yet the most dangerous understanding. In a psychoanalytic context Bion (1967) appears to speak directly to this concern when he states that the therapist should approach the session with no memory, or desire.

Jardine (as cited in Kinsella, 2006) suggests that in the hermeneutic process we are looking to "recollect the contours and textures of the life we are already living" (p.2.1). This is not a process of control or objectification of the other. Rather, we are challenged to continually test our prejudices by reflecting on and understanding our past. Gadamer (1993) refers to this process as "transposing ourselves" (p.305). In transposing ourselves we neither fully empathise with the other, nor do we command the other to obey our standards. In achieving this balance Gadamer (1993) believes we are able to elevate ourselves above the particularity of self and other. By stepping back, while remaining in contact, we expand our horizon and are consequently able to see more clearly what is most nearest to us. The horizon of the interpreter is in a constant state of play with the horizon of the text or other. Out of this bilateral (Nielsen, 2013) relationship, and fusion of horizons emerges a new understanding that is not reducible to either the interpreter or text (Kinsella, 2006). This intersubjective (Orange, 2011) space between interpreter and text/other can be applied to the therapeutic dyad, in which the mutual back and forward of conversation modifies the presuppositions of both therapist and patient. In video game play the programmed code that produces a pixelated horizon is fixed in a manner similar to type on a page (Gadamer, 1993). However, as the player interacts with the game environment, the code begins to express itself in a way that simultaneously changes the games horizon, while also challenging the fore-understanding of the player.

Gadamer's description of moving between the detail of the close-up view to the overall expanse of an elevated horizon is central to hermeneutic understanding and can be articulated as the hermeneutic circle. For Heidegger and Gadamer, all knowledge and understanding exist within a circularity of interpretation – meaning that interpretation relies on other interpretations to create understanding (Kinsella, 2006). As interpreters of texts it is therefore important that we enter the circle in the right way. For Gadamer (1993) this means we must be aware that our prejudice is what allows initial understanding. This initial understanding gives us a sense of the whole in which the text stands. As we move closer and study parts of the text our understanding of the whole is constantly revised (Grondin, 2016). To be able to oscillate between the parts and the whole there must be an ability to play without a goal in mind (Schott, 2016). Gadamer (1993) states that while our ability to play may be "tied to the make-believe goals of the game" (p.108), we in fact need not achieve them; rather the point of playing is to play "oneself out" (Ibid p.108), in doing so something

may present itself. In thinking about psychotherapy we can imagine that the goal may be to relieve the patient of their symptom. Through the process of interpretation the symptom may dissolve, revealing an underlying core of fantasy (Žižek, 1989). To play oneself out as a patient in psychotherapy may imply going beyond fantasy. However, as Zizek (1989) suggests, the existential terror of the symbolic void beyond fantasy is overwhelming. I wonder if this fear generates a withdrawal? In a circular hermeneutic process we return to the symptom, but never arrive back at the initial position. In that way our ability to identify with the symptom changes over time. We can see a similar pattern repeated in video game play, in which the goal of the game may be to complete various levels or missions. Yet to successfully progress, there is a requirement that the player enter a state of immersion in the present moment (Stephenson-Mittlböck, 2012) The player must then oscillate between immersion in present moment game play, while also being able to reflect on the overall strategic position in the game.

Central to the relationship between interpreter and text, patient and therapist, and video game player and video game, is attunement. Crowther, Smythe, and Spence (2014) claim there are few rules to follow in undertaking a hermeneutic literature review, rather there is a way to be "attuned philosophically" (p.158). As a novice reviewer it is difficult to grasp the practice of attunement. To be attuned one "must live the experience, drawing on who one is and is becoming" (Smythe, Ironside, Sims, Swenson, & Spence, 2008, p. 1391).This requires using ones intuition, remaining open to surprises, to question, and keep open the possibilities that arise from questioning, in effect it is taking a "leap into the space of thinking" (Smythe & Spence, 2012, p. 17). In extending the space exploration metaphor I feel that to float and explore one must feel there is a secure base to explore from. I believe the supervisory relationship goes some way to providing this psychic tether. The supervisor provides another thinking mind that is able to assist in the processing of thoughts that may be difficult to metabolise (Bion, 1962). The supervisory relationship may provide something similar to the video game overview map – a two dimensional map located in the corner of the screen that gives a live overview of the terrain and indication of the position of allies and enemies (Valiaho, 2014). This map provides the information to formulate contingency actions while simultaneously generating relief from the anxiety of the unknown. My experience of being a beginner at playing the video game Grand Theft Auto (Rockstar Games, 2017) resulted in huge frustration as I attempted to navigate and engage with the

open world environment of the sprawling city in which the game is set. With no idea of how to start playing missions, I drove aimlessly around the city. It was not until I found an online step-by-step guide that I began to immerse more fully into the narrative flow of gameplay. Up until that point I had been misattuned to the game. The supervisor provides an attuned, immersive, birds eye view that is also guiding without being overly restrictive.

A key aspect of the supervisory relationship is that for my thinking to develop there must be resonance between us; which would be an indication of trustworthiness (Smythe et al., 2008). Once again, like attunement, resonance is an unquantifiable experience, but one that is clearly felt between people. If my thinking provokes further thought and dialogue when I speak to my supervisor or peers then I can trust that thinking which, in turn, means I can immerse more fully in the to and fro of the hermeneutic process.

Method

The hermeneutic literature review method allows the interweaving of what, at first glance, may seem like disparate fields. Whilst primarily focused on texts, the review also encompasses my thoughts and experiences of video gaming and psychotherapy. To this I bring myself as a beginning therapist, still grappling with my learning and 'ownership' of theory. I am also a 'novice' or 'newbie' gamer. While I have played video games in the past I believe my current position in relation to video gaming is more one of an outsider looking into another world.

Literature search

My dissertation question seeks to understand the relationship between the patient's video gaming and their psychotherapy. This question clearly defines two search parameters, which are psychotherapy and video gaming. Because I am being trained to only work with adults and older teenagers, and my interest in this question stems from my work with adult patients', I also felt it was appropriate to include adult in my search criteria. The three search fields that I ended up using were:

videogame* OR gaming OR gamer* OR MMORPG OR RPG
adult*
psychotherap* OR therap* OR psychoanalys*

Adding the Boolean operator (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010, p. 136) "OR" meant that the search could be expanded while staying within the area of interest. To increase the possibility of picking up more results the keywords were reduced to their root, and then an asterisk was added to the end. For example adding an asterisk to the word "therap*" meant that both therapy and therapist would be returned in the database search. The MMORPG and RPG were included because these role-playing games have a degree of interactivity with other players. The players often have investment in their onscreen character, or avatar, and this is the type of game that my patients' play.

My initial searching was within the AUT library, and AUT psychotherapy/psychology databases, which include: PEP, Psyc INFO, Scopus, Medline, Cinahl, and Proquest.
In using the keywords above, the six databases returned 676 citations. From these I found two journal articles that had some resonance with my question. A large number of results were dismissed because of exclusion criteria such as: addiction, mental health, physical rehabilitation, violence, and video game play within therapy sessions. With such a small number of articles I also extended my search using the Google, and Google Scholar search engines. Ultimately the bulk of literature that I found came from "reference tracking" (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010, p. 138). This is a process whereby the reference lists of articles are scanned to identify other potentially relevant literature. This feels like leap frogging on the literature searches previous authors have undertaken, with the added benefit that it is highly relevant to the field of enquiry. This form of tracking tends to be historical in nature, in that the literature cites previously published material. This tracking can be reversed and move forward in time by using citation analysis in the databases and search engines outlined above. In doing this I was able to identify more contemporary literature. My experience of citation tracking or "snowballing" (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014, p. 281) had an almost addictive and compulsive quality to it. I believe this was due to the fact that I was unable to find any literature that spoke directly to my dissertation question. While there were a number of writers that addressed video gaming within a psychoanalytic framework, I found no writing that directly addressed dealing with the symbolic content of the patients' video game play in the therapy hour. As a result, my anxiety increased. Believing there must be something out there that would reassure my thinking and shore up my tentative fore-understandings I was tempted to expand my search to areas that were not so closely related to

my discipline. In the process of thinking alongside my supervisor I became aware that I had more than enough literature to review.

Immersing in the text

I prioritized a more thorough reading of 24 articles, following which I created a hierarchy of the most thought provoking. From this ordering I created four folders. The number one folder contained 7 of the most relevant articles. This ordering and creation of hierarchy was not without its stress. How was I to begin identifying relevant themes within the literature while not forcing my own pre conceptions onto the text? In hindsight I can see this is impossible, but I had not as yet experienced my fore-understandings being transcended in relationship to the text. All I could do was respond to the text in an open and spontaneous manner. I went through the seven articles in detail. I highlighted sections of writing that grabbed my attention. These sections were within my intellectual grasp, but at the same time they extended my thinking. It was as if the idea of the text was slightly ahead of me, leading me forward, encouraging me to inhabit a territory that was at the periphery of my understanding. In doing this, my relationship to the text was neither complacent nor confused; rather I was curious and engaged.

Re-entering the hermeneutic circle

After a break of over six months I came back to these same articles, and re-read them. In this second reading I noted that the original highlighted passages still resonated with me, but also other lines were emerging from the text. In entering the hermeneutic circle for a second time I recognized that my perception and thinking had shifted slightly. This was a pivotal experience that moved hermeneutic theory from a foreign abstract concept into the realm of felt experience. I then created individual mind maps of the seven articles, from which I extracted the core themes or ideas from the literature. I then created one mind map of the main themes. This mapping function enabled me to visually make links between the various themes, which added a depth and cohesiveness to seemingly disparate ideas.

Finding my voice

In writing the data section, which follows, I felt as if I was representing the thoughts and findings of other writers'. While I had made choices throughout my process as to what I

would present in my data section I felt the authors I had reviewed were very much at the forefront of my writing. It was not until I started to write my discussion section that I was encouraged to find my own voice, effectively reversing my position from the data section, and bringing my own interpretations, personality and opinions to the forefront. The challenge of bringing myself forward sent my mind into a defensive fog. For some time I had no idea what my supervisor was asking of me. I would go away and one month later come back with another draft, only to be told my ideas were all there, but I was quietly tucking them away in the background. While I had a partial fear that my supervisor was asking me to rewrite my whole discussion section, the real anxiety lay in feeling that I, a beginning psychotherapist with a limited grasp of theory, was brazenly thinking of placing published academics secondary to my own thinking. I now realize the writers included in the data section had guided me so far and, like a child learning to ride a bicycle, I would need to re-enter the hermeneutic circle pedaling on my own. In response I created a new discussion section document, which I called 'mashup' – a term borrowed from music, in which a new track is created from multiple sources. I cut and pasted my own interpretations and opinions to the beginning of each section, and then spontaneously expanded on them.

Consideration of other methods

In arriving at the hermeneutic method for this study, other approaches such as heuristic research were considered. Whilst this literature review is informed by my personal experience of being a psychotherapist and novice game player, it did not arise out of a personal experience of being 'in' therapy. This "indwelling" (Kenny, 2012, p. 9), or self exploration in heuristic research is fundamental to deeply understanding the human experience being studied. My personal interest however was in bringing a theoretical interpretation to the literature more than a personal one. Moustakas (1990) also suggests the heuristic researcher must have undergone the experience being investigated, or one that is comparable, in a "vital, intense, and full way" (p.14). As outlined at the beginning of this study I have a limited relationship to video gaming, and do not consider it a vital part of my life.

Conversely the potential for a thematic analysis was ruled out early in the study, as very little literature was found that directly addressed the intersection between psychotherapy and video gaming. This would have limited the potential for saturation (Guest, Bunce, &

Johnson, 2006) to have been reached. Additionally I was interested in bringing a personal interpretation and interweaving of my experience into the review, which is not as well supported by the thematic method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I also believed it was important to maintain and work with the sense of "continuity and contradiction" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 97) between, and in, the individual pieces of data.

Chapter Three Data

Video games, language and the magic circle

Freud (1961a) observed his grandson's perplexing habit of throwing his small toys into recessed areas such as corners and under beds. Accompanying this action the young child made a sound which Freud and the boy's mother believed was consistent with the German word "*fort*" (p.9), or gone. Freud was convinced this activity was a game when he witnessed the child throwing a wooden reel – tethered by a piece of string – over the side of his curtained cot. The boy would then retrieve the reel, and on its reappearance joyfully pronounce "da" (p.9), or there. Freud (1961a) perceived that the fort/da game was an indication that the boy had redirected his instinctual impulses of protest when his mother left. He had instead enacted symbolically the mother's departure with the objects available to him. In doing this he mastered the disagreeable feelings of being abandoned while also simulating the potential joy of being reunited.

Douglas (2011) makes a tentative link between Freud's grandson's wooden reel game and contemporary video gaming. He does this in two ways: firstly by acknowledging the string and reels similarity to early versions of the gaming controllers connection to the console. Secondly, both the fort/da game and video gaming require a degree of skill to send an avatar or cotton reel into unknown territory within which may reside life-threatening forces. Douglas (2011) claims that the return of the virtual avatar or reel creates a sense of mastery over death; which means in particular for video games that the player confronts death without experiencing the loss that accompanies death in the non virtual world. For Douglas (2011) the fort/da games relationship to death is characterized by it's mourning of what is absent, and its engagement with the unknown; it is therefore an example of the way in which humans are prepared for a life that is virtual and filled with "floating signifiers and signs" (p.95), that are removed from their non-virtual referents. Douglas (2011) suggests that the death drives desire to extract the substance from things is an attempt to minimise displeasure and master absence; two objectives that he believes are fundamental to the template and imperative of video games.

According to Douglas (2011) language therefore becomes an "extension of the magic circle" (p.96) when it attempts to remove the substance from referents and master abstract

concepts. Huizinga (2009) describes the magic circle as a temporary, isolated and cordoned space of play, within which special rules function to maintain order. While this image of the magic circle gives the impression of a hermetically sealed space, Huizinga (2009) reminds us that the experience of play retains "it's magic beyond the duration of the individual game" (p.12). Bogost (2006) suggests that game play within the magic circle opens and partially merges with the material world; which for Bogost opens up the possibility of challenging stereotypes that play spaces are separate, artificial and have clearly delineated interiors and exteriors. Rather, Bogost (2006) claims there is a gap in the magic circle through which the players experience, ideas and subjectivity can freely move between the game environment and the non game environment, in this mutually reciprocal process the "residue of this interaction infects both spheres" (p.136), resulting in what Bogost (2006) calls "simulation fever" (p.136). This is the unease experienced by the player as he/she attempts to reconcile the video games partial representation of the real world with their own subjective experience of that representation.

Navigating merger and separateness

While the game narrative of FPS and RPGs demand that avatars constantly navigate hostile environments populated with life threatening antagonists, it is ultimately the relationship between the player and their avatar that is of primary importance (Rehak, 2003). Rehak (2003) warns that we must not conflate the onscreen subjectivity of the avatar with that of the player. At the same time, Rehak (2003) complicates the distinction of player and avatar by suggesting that for the player to fully immerse in the game the distinction between the two must become blurred. To make sense of this contradiction Rehak turns to Lacan's (2002) writing on the child's experience of the mirror stage. Between six and eighteen months the child encounters and becomes engrossed with its own reflection. This development of the ego precedes the social determining factors of language, and the objectifying relationship to the other. The infants sense of unitary cohesion and power perceived through the reflection sets the ego off in a "fictional direction" (Lacan, 2002, p. 95) that will leave the individual forever split and discordant with the very image that enabled a sense of self recognition in the first place. The subject's alienation from itself results in the pursuit throughout life of unattainable objects that will fill this void and provide a projective ideal. Yet as Rehak (2003) claims, the search for a similarity must be thwarted or overlooked

if the desired object is to remain idealized. In this theory we have the oscillatory origins of the player and avatar relationship, at once both moving towards and moving away from each other (Rehak, 2003). How does the player navigate this tension in relationship to the avatar? Rehak (2003) answers by suggesting it is the avatars ability to endlessly repeat the life cycle, to die and be reborn anew with the press of a controller button or power switch and the prerogative of the player to restore previous avatar states, can all remediate a sense of wholeness and repair to the inevitable psychic and digital rupture between player and avatar. For Rehak (2003) this cycle of death and rebirth seduces the player into a "vicious circle of ego-confirmation" (p.107). Sandifer (2009) takes issue with Rehak's assertion that video gaming is ordered around a cycle of resurrection that continually confirms the players ego. Sandifer (2009) instead suggests that video games are ordered "around the repetition of death" (para 56). For Sandifer (2009) it is death in the end that ultimately wins out, even when the avatar temporarily remerges to disrupt that death. The fantasy of video gaming then is not ego confirmation as Rehak claims, but rather the pursuit of the "perfect run" (Sandifer, 2009 para 58), which the player hopes will restore the illusion of unity that existed before the avatar's death.

Avatar and the uncanny valley

The "uncanny difference" (Rehak, 2003, p. 107) between the players sense of reality and what is represented onscreen through the avatar, enables the player to idealize the avatar while simultaneously rejecting it as inferior. Aarsde (2014) believes that the uncanny is essential for the player to fully enter into the fictional world of video game play or, in Huizinga's (2009) terms, enter the magic circle. Freud (1919) believed the uncanny was frightening because of its unfamiliarity; at the same time he also suggested that the uncanny was also familiar to us in some way, but had become alienated through repression. Freud (1919) claimed that what is most uncanny is "when an inanimate object – a picture or a doll – comes to life" (p.246). Stern (1985), on the other hand, appears to imply that the inanimate object is not uncanny for the infant when it is animated by the mother. Once the mother has invested the object with the vitality and rhythms of a person, the infant is able to play independently with the object while it maintains the "afterglow of personification" (p.122). Stern (1985) believes the object momentarily becomes a "self-regulating other" (p.123) which contributes to the infant's developing sense of self.

Aarsde (2014) argues that limiting the photo realism of avatars maintains the uncanny valley, thereby allowing the player to maintain the separation between reality and fiction. Secure in the awareness that they inhabit a fictional world the player is able to perform acts they would otherwise not contemplate in reality. In recognizing that we are in a game, we are able to overcome the social and cultural constraints of the real world; in speaking for himself Zizek (2006) believes he is then able to "articulate the perverse core of my personality" (p.32). Zizek (2006) then questions whether this expression of the forbidden makes the virtual persona "more real than reality" (p.32). Filiciak (2003) appears to agree with Zizek when he says that the virtual self is more congruent with our authentic sense of self, compared to the persona we present to society.

The new monstrous

Perhaps we can link Zizek's (2006) idea of the perverse core of the personality with Antonpoulou's (2015) idea of the avatar being an expression of the "new monstrous" (p.1) in the digital age. Antonpoulou connects the monstrous with Bakhtin's (1984) writing on the carnival in which he wrote that "The grotesque body [...] is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world" (p.317). In Bakhtin's description we can perhaps see the developmental progression that the avatar goes through as the player matures within the game space. The grotesque body is therefore able to escape the limiting effects of a classical unitary surface which means it has the ability to forge and manipulate its connections with a wider world. This monstrous body reflects a world which is fragmented, non linear and disproportionate – a world within which the coherency of our classifications and assigned roles begin to break down (Antonopoulou, 2015) Bakhtin (1984) believed that the medieval carnival facilitated the expression of the internal world; through the action of play, people were able to escape the oppression of everyday life, in doing so they entered a utopian realm that gave expression to their deepest fear – death. Antonpoulou (2015) suggests this expression was made possible through the use of the mask, which transformed the human body and suspended all conventions of social hierarchy, momentarily allowing its citizens freedom and equality. The masked body is communal, relational, expansive and unlimited, unlike the unmasked body, which is reticent and self absorbed. As the physical body extends into the digital realm it manifests a hybrid

identity that breaks down the divisions between "organism and machine, animal and human, nature and culture" (Antonopoulou, 2015, p. 3). Antonpoulou (2015) equates this hybridity to Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) theory that the world is a "swarm of machines" (p.3), that are interconnected in their task of self assembly and identity construction; while also stressing that the use of machine does not equate with artificiality but rather is a way to move beyond the polarity of the natural and the artificial.

Therapist and patient as virtual bodies

Palmeri (2008) merges the polarities of the natural and the artificial by suggesting that the virtual does not reside in cyberspace, but is instead concretely grounded in our subjectivity, as a congruent reality that is freely expressed with others through both bodily and electronic forms of communication. Palmeri (2008) suggests the value of this awareness is in reminding the therapist that in exploring the unconscious of the patients we must be mindful of their position as a separate virtual other.

In referring to our perceptual experience of the visual field, Noe (2004) claims that it is entirely virtual. Noe (2004) explains this by suggesting that while we have the sense of seeing a detailed scene before us, we are in fact not able to see all the detail in the scene; the "detail is present not as *represented*, but as *accessible*" (p.215 italics in original). Noe (2004) gives the example of looking at a tomato, that when viewed the facing side is present to us while the far side is also present virtually, enabling us to perceive the spherical nature of the tomato. This means that the qualities of any perceptual experience are available to us as "possibilities, as potentialities, but not as completed givens" (p.217) Noe's idea of not taking our perceptual experience as a given links nicely with Palmeri's (2008) psychoanalytic thinking that we should remember that the patient's experience is separate and never fully knowable from where we are positioned.

What I have been attempting to identify and describe above is the way in which the therapist and patient can virtually construct and project meaning onto one another. This virtual phenomenon appears consistent with Freud's concept of transference. Freud (1963) believed that transferences are "facsimiles of the tendencies and phantasies which are aroused during the process of the analysis". These facsimiles "replace some earlier person by the person of the physician" (p.138). Douglas (2011) acknowledges that some people may consider Freud's description of transference nonsense, but suggests that the process of

transference allows an externalization of the patient's internal virtual world. In doing this the therapist becomes a "surrogate body – an avatar of sorts" (p.102) onto which the patient can project past experience with important others. According to Douglas (2011) the therapist has the ability to metamorphose in response to whatever anxiety the patient may present, in effect they become a "blank" (p.103) that is both present and absent.

If we follow the line of thought Douglas proposes, then we could acknowledge the possibility that the therapist, through their counter transference also creates a virtual image of the patient. For example, as a student of psychotherapy within a university training programme I am required to record patient sessions to video and audio for supervision purposes, and to ensure patient and therapist safety. Upon the session ending the recording is processed through digital algorithms that introduce degrading artefacts to the image and sound. In response to this degradation supervisors often strain forward toward the screen in an attempt to extract meaning from the digital image and sound before them. Valiaho (2014) describes a similar straining towards the virtual environment in the hope of perceiving more information in FPS games, where the beginning player may move the body towards the left or right audio field in the hope of identifying the position of the approaching enemy. Each successive and separate viewing of my patient generates sense impressions that infer meaning forward to the next session. Similar to the video gamer who quits his game and returns to the 'real world', I move from the virtual representation of my patient in supervision back to the physical body of my patient the following week. I perceive this physicality to be real, as opposed to virtual when, in the first seconds of meeting, I ask my patient if the temperature of the room is comfortable and suggest I could open the window if they need fresh air. Ihde (2001) partially affirms this belief when he questions our experience of virtual space by asking 'where does one feel the wind? Or the vertigo in the stomach?" He answers by saying we give "primacy to the embodied experience" (p.4).

The virtual triangle

Using Malan's (1979) triangle we could now imagine a virtual triangle, in which the therapist, patient, and other – which we could designate as the avatar in this case – all perceive and relate within a virtual environment. Like the avatar, the therapist becomes a polymorphous entity upon which the patient can project their desire and past important objects. For example, in the transference sexuality may become fluid and ambiguous as the

therapist has the potential to be inscribed with both phallus and uterus. From this perspective, the subjects on the points of the triangle become simulations in relation to one another. For Bogost (2006) "Simulation is the gap between the rule based representation of a source system and a user's subjectivity" (p.107). For the therapy patient we can imagine the ruled based representation being perceived as the way in which they understand therapy in relation to the therapeutic frame. The gap for the patient is perhaps how they subjectively experience the therapist in relation to that frame. For Gerson (2009) these gaps, particularly for traumatized patients' "signify the enduring presence of an absence" (p.1344). This idea of a gap changes the image of the hermetically sealed triangle that neatly contains all of the therapy within it. What if we look instead to Deleuze and Guattari (1983) and imagine the flow of desire transcending the boundaries of the triangle? As they suggest the "Oedipal wad does not absorb these flows" (p.67), rather we could visualize the pressure oozing outwards beyond the therapist, patient and avatar. Must we then ask where do these flows flow? Perhaps the flow connects with other desiring machines (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983). In thinking about the avatar we could now see it as separate from the patient and therapist. The avatar would no longer be seen solely as a representative of the patient's past or present, a dream figure, or physical extension, but instead could be imagined as an autonomous object that facilitates a process and mediates the "relations of production" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 46). Pias (2011) seems to echo Deleuze and Guattari when he says that technology is a "force or a character that organizes relationships, producing something new and unexpected within a strategic dispositive" (p.180).

Imagination and the body

In both cases of the patient with their therapist, and video player with their avatar we see the possibility that the other, whether a "here body" or an "image body" (Ihde, 2001, p. 6) may be constructed through a process of the imagination. Doyle (2009) references the work of Spinoza to suggest that the imagination is not necessarily a result of cognitive processes alone, and summarizes her reading by claiming that the imagination is "rooted in the body, or to put it slightly differently, the body has a mind of its own" (p.135). Is this what Freud (1962) implied when he wrote, "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego" (p.16)? Lennon (2004) claims the outline of this bodily ego is shaped and comes into existence through the investment of affect (Lennon p.115), which appears to imply that the body and the mind are

simultaneously giving rise to our sense of self. Lennon (2004) refers to Merleau-Ponty's writing on phantom limbs as a way of making a distinction between the body image and the biological body; suggesting that the subject may retain a particular body image and the concordant qualities associated with that image, even when that particular limb is biologically absent. Would it be possible to reverse Doyle's reading of Spinoza mentioned above and imagine a mind with a body of its own? In doing this one could perceive of the avatar as a phantom limb that while having never existed biologically, is perceived through the investment of affect to belong to the contours of the body? Perhaps this possibility may exist if we believe in Massumi's (2002) description of imagination as the synchronous arrival of thought and sensation (p.134).

Imagination and fantasy

Murray and Maher (2011) claim that the imagination is closely linked with fantasy; a mental activity in which we test out different scenarios for being in the world before we act them out in play. Fantasy, according to Murray and Maher (2011), has particular status in the popular and academic fields of mythology and also in the "disciplines of Analytical and Depth Psychology" (p.3). Huizinga (2009) suggested that through the incorporation of fantasy into play we are generating our own myths. For Murray and Maher (2011), this myth making capacity of play and fantasy is embedded within a deep archetypal layer of the human unconscious. This thinking is influenced by the work of Jung (1989) who believed that beneath the personal unconscious there was a deeper layer, which he called the collective unconscious; this layer storing the images and dispositions of all humanity throughout time.

Murray and Maher (2011) believe the archetypal character of the Hero is one of the most recognizable actors within videogames. The Hero as described by Campbell (1993) is often portrayed as being on a journey, the passage of which can be broken down into three stages: departure, initiation, and return. The first stage of departure may present the Hero in their everyday environment where they face the challenges of ordinary life. Perhaps yearning to escape, or pursue adventure the Hero is called to action, a call that may initially be resisted until circumstances prevail to force him or her on their way. Once underway the Hero may receive assistance from a higher force that guides and teaches the Hero as they traverse into the supernatural world beyond the everyday. On the path of the adventure the Hero will be initiated through the challenges posed by the positive and negative aspects of both the

maternal and the feminine figures. If the Hero figure masters these challenges they will then be faced with the task of transitioning back to their original world where the acquisition of new knowledge can be applied.

The conquests of the Hero are not all positive however, as Murray and Maher (2011) acknowledge. The Hero may encounter another popular archetypal figure of videogames – the Shadow. In Jung's (1959) theory the Shadow figure represents a "moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality" which means to become conscious of it "involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real" (p.8). Murray and Maher (2011) claim that the shadow is consciously repressed, so as to deny the unconscious the opportunity to express its lustful appetites; which suggests that during game play the individual may engage with parts of oneself that would normally be off limits. Jung (1967) believed that the capacity to make "darkness conscious" (p.266) was the path to enlightenment.

In wondering about the success of the Grand Theft Auto (GTA) (Rockstar Games, 2017) series of games Murray and Maher (2011) suggest it is the menacing, wild, and harsh personas of the characters, combined with their lower class origins, that position them as outsiders to mainstream society. This deliberately "scurrilous" (Murray & Maher, 2011, p. 6) behaviour taps directly into our unconscious fantasy, of which scurrility, or transgression is an integral part. Therefore according to Murray and Maher (2011), depending on the player's degree of immersion with their avatar and other characters in GTA, they come into direct contact with the shadow, or in the case of deep immersion may even "become the shadow" (p.7). Murray and Maher (2011) claim that while we tolerate clinical depictions of long range killing in mainstream media, bourgeois society is most offended by the brutish violence depicted in video games like GTA because it is a mirror to its own unacknowledged destructive capacities, or shadow aspects.

Avatar as an extension of the patient

Another way we could conceptualize the avatar could be as both a psychic and physical extension of the patient. We can witness the physical impact of the avatar in Valiaho's (2014) description of Robbie Cooper's art video which documents the faces of young people playing video games. In Cooper's (2009) work the children writhe, grimace, laugh and cry as the onscreen images impact on the bodies' interior. As I outlined above, this

affect according to Lennon (2004) shapes our bodily ego, giving a sense of an embodied form, even when the form is not physically present, as evidenced by the example of the phantom limb. The phantom limb could perhaps be seen as a spectral presence that inhabits the psychic landscape of both the patient's internal and external world. In thinking about the avatar as a ghost like presence Lacan's theory of the lamella seems relevant here. Lacan (2004) imagined the lamella as those parts of the membranes of the foetus that are flung off as the new born emerges. Here we can imagine those parts of the player that are projected outward into the virtual world of video games. Lacan (2004) goes on to say that the lamella is one dimensional, has unlimited movement and cannot be divided or killed. This description seems congruent with the video game avatar that appears as surface, has the ability to travel through space and time, and ultimately can die and be reborn. For Lacan (2004) the lamella is an organ that does not exist, but is none the less present in the body as the libido. Zizek (2007) claims "this blind, indestructible insistence of the libido is what Freud called the 'death drive'." (p.62). The death drive is characterized by a compulsion to repeat past traumatic experiences, and when directed outward is destructive in nature (Freud, 1961a). The function of the death drive according to De Masi (2015) is the dissolution of the organism and the movement towards a state of nirvana. It seems that while the video game player's compulsion to repeat is satisfied, due to the avatars capacity to be reborn, there is never a sense of nirvana being reached. Rather according to Zizek (2007) the subject is haunted by the undead nature of the lamella.

De Masi (2015) wonders if the psychic retreat towards a state of nirvana is in fact a "regression towards a narcissistic foetal like condition" (p.455), in which the patient gains pleasure from creating ones own objects. De Masi (2015) suggests that the origins of this psychic withdrawal originate in early childhood, during which time the child experiences their parents as indifferent to their emotional world. This emotional alienation allowed the child to become distant from reality, and psychically retreat into alternate realities. For De Masi (2015) this regression drains emotional life, reduces intuitive imagination and restricts mental development. This restriction of psychic energy resonates with Lacan's (2004) description of the lamella which he imagines attaching to our face while we sleep, and suffocating us to death. This is a stark contrast to Bakhtin's (1984) carnival mask, which he believed liberated the individual from social convention, and permitted expression of the grotesque.

Avatar as dream narrative

A further way to think of the avatar may be as a character within a dream narrative. Parker (2007) claims that "cyberspace stands in relation to "reality" as a kind of dream-space" (p.71). For Parker (2007) this seems to imply that as the patient develops a narrative, or "text" (p.72) within the dream-space of cyberspace or, in our particular case, video gaming, we are able to interpret these texts within the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis; this is not an archaeological interpretation that attempts to mine deeply unconscious material. Rather the meaning comes from interpreting the way language constructs the relationships between particular objects and subjects. Parker (2007) suggests that the very objects that the neurotic attempts to defend against are expressed through these various forms of representation. It is therefore the mechanisms that are used to conceal a feared object that is of importance.

If we perceive video gaming as a dream text, Parker (2007) claims we throw into question the distinction between reality and the "text as a fantasmatic frame" (p.72). Parker (2007) believes the Lacanian concept of the gaze may provide a way of differentiating between the virtual world, and the non-virtual world. Evans (1996) claims that Lacan theorised that the gaze does not originate from the subject, but rather comes from the other. Waking consciousness, or reality, is characterised by being in the gaze of the other. In the dream state according to Lacan (2004) the subject may be captivated by their changing form but, having changed for no one, they are merely attached to this alternative representation. It is only upon waking that the subject, coming under the gaze of others, truly becomes somebody. In video gaming it would appear that the player sees the avatar, but the avatar does not see the player. This would perhaps affirm something of the dream like quality of video game play.

Avatar as a transitional object

Mittlböck (2015) applies the concept of transference to the player's relationship with their avatar; suggesting that the player transfers internalized self concepts, former important objects and representations of the world onto the "virtually personalized representation" (p.46). From this, Mittlböck (2015) hypothesises that the avatar has the potential to "become a transitional object" (p.46). The theory of the transitional object was developed by Winnicott

(1971), who said that the infant at some point begins to incorporate external not me objects into their individual patterns of behaviour. The significance of these objects is not primarily their materiality, as in being a teddy bear, blanket or fist. Rather Winnicott (1971) stresses it is the fact they inhabit an intermediate space "between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (p.3) The intermediate space is a buffer zone that allows the individual to keep the reality of their internal and external worlds separate, yet connected. Stephenson-Mittlböck (2012) describes this intermediate space as a "training place" (p.235) in which the infant is learning to develop primary symbols through the use of transitional objects, or transitional phenomena. At the same time, the infant is developing stable internal objects of their primary caregivers and other external interacting objects. This in-between zone creates a space for the infant to gradually come to terms with the conflict they experience between their internal world and the external reality. Winnicott (1971) believed the emergence of the transitional object is directly influenced by the attitude of the observer, and recommended that the transitional phenomena, and the associated intermediate space were safeguarded by not being challenged. According to Stephenson-Mittlböck (2012) there are two important features that contribute to the facilitation and development of the intermediate area and the transitional objects that inhabit it; they are the psychosocial moratorium and immersion.

The psychosocial moratorium

Stephenson-Mittlböck's use of the term psychosocial moratorium is based on an idea developed by Erik Erikson. Erikson (1968) believed the final stage of adolescence was characterized by a prolonged period of experimentation, during which the young adult through "free role experimentation" (p.156) would find a defined niche that seemed readymade for him or her. Erikson (1968) stressed that the young adult must be fully seen for all they are becoming, not merely for what they have achieved to date in the eyes of society. This recognition provides support for the ego on many levels including: defending against the pressure of genital and bodily impulses, the resolution of personal aptitude in relation to work opportunities, and the reintegration of childhood identifications in line with some section of society at large. According to Erikson (1968) the psychosocial moratorium of the young adult is characterized by both a deep commitment to particular activities and beliefs and, at the same time, a postponement of adult commitments. While the playfulness of this period is deliberately provocative, it is also permitted selectively by society.

Stephenson-Mittlböck (2012) argues that the psychosocial moratorium is an integral component of the intermediate space which generates a playful parallel world that sits outside of the expectations of life's everyday rules. In relation to digital role-playing games (DRPG), Stephenson-Mittlböck (2012) suggests this moratorium space can be related to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow. For flow to exist the individual must feel they have the appropriate capacity and skills to deal with the challenges before them; if skill and challenge are comparable the individual is less likely to feel overwhelmed or bored. There must also be a sense of "clear proximal goals" (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2014, p. 240), and the provision of regular feedback on ones progress. If these conditions exist the individual may enter a state characterized by: intense concentration, merging of body and mind, reduction in self awareness as a social actor, shift in experience of time, self assured action and an enjoyment of process over outcome (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2014).

Immersion

Stephenson-Mittlböck (2012) states that the players ability to immerse in the video game – which is initially triggered by the game world – contributes to the construction of the intermediate space. While Ermi and Mäyrä (2011) acknowledge that immersion is a "many-faceted phenomenon" (p.100) that is as individual and varied as the different types of games and their players, they do identify three types of immersion. They are "*sensory immersion"*, which refers to the enveloping capacity of high quality images and sound, which command the player's attention, and in doing so blocks out the external world. Another is "*challenge-based Immersion"* which, similar to flow, is most powerful when challenges and abilities are balanced. The ability to become engrossed with the narrative, to feel empathy for the characters and identify with the world of the game can be described as "*imaginative immersion*" (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2011, pp. 101-102 Italics in original). While challenge based immersion can be a major part of video games, Ermi and Mäyrä (2011) suggest that in well designed games all three aspects of immersion blend seamlessly together, creating an all encompassing experience. Valiaho (2014) implies that immersion is the action of becoming physically and emotionally entwined within the game world. Through this interweaving we animate the onscreen images which produces a perception of the images as both alive and real. While this is happening Valiaho (2014) suggests we are simultaneously investing the "images with the power to animate us and to become part of the intimate material of our

subjective realities" (p.115). This subjective reality may be observed externally in the bodily movements, sounds, and expressions of the player's body (Galloway, 2006). For Galloway (2006) "video games are actions" (p.2) that only come into existence when enacted; meaning that the "inorganic machine" of the software and hardware and the "organic machine" (p.2) of the player, must both act in unison if the game is to be played. In this Galloway (2006) is suggesting that through software coding games can act autonomously in various ways such as sending messages between different parts of software, communicating across networked devices and initiating game developments such as an increase in avatar powers – or "power-ups" (p.4). Valiaho refers to the writing of Pias (2011) who takes this idea of mutual enactment further by suggesting that when the player immerses into the game they become a "peripheral device and thus the possibility condition of a computer game" (p.173). Stephenson-Mittlböck (2012) believes that one of the developmental challenges of immersing into the intermediate area of digital role playing games is being able to move between immersion and reflection. The ability to hold the tension between immersion and reflection and oscillate between the two is for Stephenson-Mittlböck (2012) first of all a "competence of the psyche" (p.243), a capacity which is developed from infancy onward.

Ash (2013) uses the term "captivation" (p.41) to describes the immersive state of concentration players must maintain if they are to deal with the continuous demands of game play, while also maintaining flow. In focusing on a military RPG Ash (2013) states that while there are many factors that contribute to captivation he believes the complexity of the maps that designate the playing environment "act as forms of tertiary memory" (p.41). The multiplicity of potential points of random engagement with other enemy players can create a high degree of contingency in the player, who must attend to every minute detail in an effort to avoid being killed (Ash, 2013). Valiaho (2014) suggests that the contingency of RPGs reflects the neuroscietific perspective of the individual's experience of the world, in which one must constantly interact with the dangers and challenges of a chaotic environment. Valiaho (2014) implies the ability to creatively adapt to contingency is supported by the brains plasticity which allows it to not only interact with the world around it but simultaneously rebuild itself in the process. The brain's primary job then, according to Valiaho (2014) is to "anticipate the future by simulating what will occur next" (p.128), a capacity that RPGs exploit through the constant fluctuation of potential danger.

Similarly Hymer (2004) believes that psychotherapy patients' may enter states of immersion or flow "during moments of free association or reverie" (p.29). Mitchell and Black (1995) describe free association as a semi conscious state situated between a trance and full consciousness which may be characterized by a deep relaxation that supports the patient to express their internal thoughts and feelings without censor. Freud (1913) believed the one injunction patients must follow is to say whatever comes to mind, even if they are averse to it. He advised they imagine being travellers on a train, simply describing the view as they moved through the landscape. Hymer (2004) believes the therapist may also enter states of flow if they follow their intuition in a manner that is spontaneous and not overly attached to any particular facet of the patients' narrative, in effect maintaining what Freud (1912) described as "evenly-suspended attention" (p.111). Similar to what Stephenson-Mittlböck suggests in relation to video gaming, Hymer (2004) claims that the patient's well being and development of an authentic sense of self comes about when they are able to oscillate between deeply immersing in their experience, then returning to an elevated state of self awareness.

Intermediate space

While the intermediate space is often associated as a place of learning for the infant, Stephenson-Mittlböck (2012) suggests that psychotherapy and RPGs can also be potential environments for the formation of intermediate areas. In thinking about psychotherapy as an intermediate area Stephenson-Mittlböck justifies this by drawing on Winnicott's (1971) definition of psychotherapy, which he described as taking place in the overlap of "*two play areas, that of the patient and that of the therapist*" (p.54, italics in original). For the therapist and patient to play Winnicott (1971) believed the patient must firstly be in a dedicated setting which allowed the personality to meander with little need to maintain a coherent state, which he described as "formlessness" (p.55). Winnicott (1971) also suggested that the therapist must accept the products of the patient's free association without feeling the need to "see order in chaos" (p.56). If this playful state is maintained Stephenson-Mittlböck (2012) believes there is a possibility for a psychosocial moratorium to develop in which the usual social conventions of polite and positive behaviour may be temporarily put aside, allowing the patient to express a range of emotions which may be perceived as unacceptable in the outside world. Stephenson-Mittlböck (2012) goes on to suggest that the therapist therefore

becomes a transference object – or transitional object – upon which past meaningful interactions from early life can be projected.

Stephenson-Mittlböck again returns to Winnicott to make links between RPGs and the intermediate area. Winnicott (1971) saw cultural experience as a continuing development of the ability to play. The infant's early relationship to transitional objects within the intermediate area is extended outward at later stages of development into the "*potential space* between the individual and the environment" (p.100 italics original).
Stephenson-Mittlböck (2012) argues that the inhabitants of game spaces are a dense conglomerate of symbols that signify various archetypal qualities such as the innocent, hero, or villain. These character types may also be augmented by bodily powers that can transport the avatar through time and space, defend against attack and afford special powers. If the games structure lets the player take on these traits, it may allow the player to express or experiment with a part of their personality that has otherwise being denied or hidden; in this exchange the games characters and actions can be manipulated in ways that create "meaningful symbols" (Stephenson-Mittlböck, 2012, p. 239) for the player.

Constructive chaos

Mittlböck (2015) claims that immersing into game play connects the player with divergent aspects of their personality. Internalized representations of self and others may be challenged and restructured, which can lead to personal growth, while at the same time there is a possibility of the player's psyche being overwhelmed when they are unable to surrender to the inevitable chaos of gameplay. Mittlböck (2015) links the potential chaos of video game play to Anna Freud's writing on artistic creativity and the patient's experience of psychoanalysis. Anna Freud (2010) suggested that the artist and patient are both faced with accepting "chaos as a temporary stage" (xiii) as they move away from the familiar, and plunge towards the frightening unknown. Mittlböck (2015) suggests that the more unfamiliar the player experiences their virtual other in mind, in this case the avatar or therapist, the more they will enter into a state of chaos. Mittliblock (2015) then asks what does the individual require to enter into this state of "no-differentiation" (p.48) and answers by suggesting we need to enter into a trusting relationship with the actor who represents "our virtual other in mind" (p.49). In relationship with the therapist the patient may project through transference a past important figure onto the therapist. If the therapist is able to hold this projection while

also providing a space for the patient to experience the "irritating" (Mittlböck, 2015, p. 50) discrepancy between the projected object and the therapist, there may be a gradual change to the structure of the patient's internal object.

Mittlböck (2015) acknowledges that video games may not have the committed working alliance of the therapeutic relationship, but suggests that the diverse qualities of video games makes them an excellent relational space for "playing out old scenes" (p.50). Mittlböck (2015) suggests the landscape and challenges of video games can be read as metaphors for the internal emotional world of the player, for example, scaling the mountain top may symbolize a movement from sorrow to joy. Mittlböck (2013) believes that the constitution of video games is metaphoric which allows the symbols to bypass the conscious mind and connect directly with the unconscious mind. Because the games metaphors – which are conveyed through the narrative, are so exaggerated Mittlböck (2013) claims the player does not project onto the external transference object (avatar), but rather is able to identify it within oneself, a capacity that may then contribute to the development of reflective functioning. Modell (2005) supports this idea by suggesting that "metaphor functions unconsciously as a pattern detector" (p.555) which helps us to understand past emotional memory in the context of current experience. Mittlböck (2015) goes on to suggest that RPGs promote a sense of agency in the player, implying that they must actively construct the reality of the game as they proceed, along the way building confidence and courage which, in turn, enables the player to immerse more deeply while also managing increased amounts of chaos. To avoid being overwhelmed by chaos, Mittlböck (2015) claims the player must also have the discipline and strength to reduce immersion and reflect on the increasing irritation, then take appropriate action to alleviate it.

Movement, perception, and vitality

In describing the beginning of a FPS war game Valiaho (2014) identifies that the first thing the player/avatar must do is move outward into the virtual environment. The changing stimulus of the game environment elicits further bodily movements and shifts in perceptions, as the player's eyes and hands work in unison to respond to the surroundings, identifying objects that may provide shelter and safety, over areas that may expose and threaten. For Valiaho (2014) this interaction between the player and the environment is reflective of the way contemporary cognitive neuroscience and philosophy conceptualize the "nature of

vision" (p.121) In this view perception cannot be separated from doing. As Noe (2004) claims the perceiver is not a "brain-photoreceptor system" (p.20) taking multiple static images, but is rather an integrated being that freely navigates space in which it may be exposed to a varied and constant flow of information. This information far exceeds the data available to a static retina which, for Noe (2004), means it would be a mistake to believe that what is visually recorded by the retina is the only data available to the individual.
Valiaho (2014) links Noe's writing with the theories of Gibson who developed an ecological theory of perception. Gibson (2015) imagined the observer moving around, towards and away from an interesting object, the whole time collecting a ceaseless flow of information that revealed the object as constantly changing in structure, while also exposing the links between what is hidden and what is revealed. For Gibson (2015), this process is localized in the muscular system, which means, "we must perceive in order to move, but we must also move in order to perceive" (p.213). Valiaho (2014) expands on this by suggesting that the visual images of video games become embedded in our "mind-brains as motor performances" (p.122) which create contingent simulations of future movement. These contingencies can be attributed to the constant need to survive within the game space. Valiaho (2014) relates the player's embodiment of this instinctive rhythm of survival to Stern's concept of dynamic forms of vitality. Stern (2010) describes dynamic forms of vitality as "psychological, subjective phenomena that emerge from the encounter with dynamic events" (p.7). Stern (2010) defines dynamic forms of vitality with words such as "accelerating", "fading", "pulsing", "fleeting" (p.7), and states that these words describe an experience of force in motion. According to Stern (2010) they do not belong to any particular emotional, cognitive, sensational, or goal orientated act, instead they are flowing forms of energy that express form rather than content. This constant movement in the body, or virtual movement in the mind is intrinsic to our experience of vitality, which both animates the individual and provides, according to Stern (2010) "a primary sense of aliveness' (p.9). Stern (2010) believes dynamic forms of vitality are embedded within our memories, which contribute to the different narratives we construct about our lives; thus for Stern, the investigation of dynamic forms of vitality in the practise of psychotherapy may afford access to past unconscious experience.

Valiaho (2014) relates Stern's idea of aliveness to FPS games which he claims engender vitality through the construction of rhythmic and pulsing arcs of play, such as

moments of intense battle which may be followed by brief periods of rest and safety. Valiaho (2014) goes on to claim that vitality is sustained by the players fluctuating levels of animation or arousal. Stern (2010) believes that arousal is the "fundamental force" for all bodily and mental activity" (p.59) and suggests that this force originates from systems embedded primarily within more primitive parts of the brain which are themselves responsible for regulating the basic physiological functioning of the body and mind. While these lower levels of brain function are in constant interaction with higher areas – that deal with cognition, emotion and perception – there is a capacity for external inputs to bypass conscious awareness and impact directly on the arousal systems in the brainstem. Stern (2010) uses the example of an individual seeing a bear in the woods, upon which they instinctively respond by taking flight, only later being able to acknowledge that they saw the bear. Valiaho (2014) believes that the uncertainty and danger of FPS games works to deliberately engage the player's primitive response to threat, in doing so they maintain arousal and perhaps more importantly immersion which leads to extended periods of play. For Valiaho (2014) the images of video games frame players "as basically affective and aroused beings who are constantly reacting to shifting, contingent screen events" (p.124). This framing is reflective of a move within the studies of mental illness and human behaviour, from the "speaking to the cerebral subject" (Valiaho, 2014, p. 125) This position, which perceives of the brain as central to the perception of selfhood, is characterized by LeDoux's (2002) assertion that the essence of the self is quite simply a reflection of "patterns of interconnectivity between neurons in your brain" (p.2) For LeDoux (2002) this does not negate the mental, emotional, or spiritual dimension of life, but rather demonstrates how these aspects of everyday life are realized.

Biopolitics

Valiaho (2014) believes this shift from "selfhood" to "brainhood" (p.126) is a result of the biopolitical organization of contemporary society, in which the human being becomes a biological entity that is primarily seen as a brain manifesting within a material world that functions according to the rationales of the current scientific and political ideologies. Valiaho (2014) gives an example of the biological merging of individual and environment when he describes the players repetitive, unconscious and manic pressing of the firing button on the

video game controller, an action that he believes illustrates the way in which the player can become an automaton in relation to the game.

Foucault's idea of biopolitics was based on the observation of the split that occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in Europe between "two models of sovereignty" (Wright, 2013, p. 26). During this time there was a shift from the absolute power of the king and queen, who had the power to seize the body, and "take life or let live" (Foucault, 1978, p. 136), towards a politics of the body characterized by two distinct, yet related, poles of development. The first developed during the eighteenth century which Foucault (1978) described as the "anatomo-politics of the human body" (p.139). This development consisted of the body being perceived and treated as a machine that could be optimized, extorted and disciplined for work and economic productivity. The second development which followed, Foucault (2003) called the "biopolitics" of the human race" (p.243) which endeavoured to take control of the body through biological process such as birth control, mortality, health, life expectancy, and sexuality.

It is this manipulation of the body that for Wright (2013) results in "health and the health sciences" (p.26) holding the central ideological position of biopolitical discourse. Wright (2013) believes that biopolitics function is to produce productive human beings, and that health is one way of measuring this productivity. In the 21st century Wright (2013) argues that the expanding role of health, which is often linked to measures of happiness, has infiltrated into our very sense of self; this colonizing of our self hood is entwined with neoliberalism, which Wright describes as a system that distributes justice and freedom through the free market. Foucault (2008) described the neoliberal exercise of power as taking "on the task of continuously and effectively taking charge of individuals and their well-being, health, and work, their way of being, behaving, and even dying" (p62). Foucault, according to Wright (2013), conceived of the neoliberal subject as conditioned by the theory of human capital, meaning that the individual was positioned at the central point in a network of inputs and outputs, that overall functioned to increase productivity of the population. Referring to health care and hygiene, Foucault (2008) commented that they become "elements which may or may not improve human capital" (p.230).

Wright (2013), who throughout his essay critiques happiness studies, appears critical of the close link between neoliberalism, notions of happiness and health, suggesting that this admixture "prioritizes suspiciously liberal western values of democracy" (p.24). He does

however see a partial solution to this problem in the form of psychoanalysis, which he suggests historically, addressed unhappiness. Wright (2013) begins with Freud (1966) who in his early writing with Breuer suggested to a patient that the aim of therapy was one of "transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness" (p.351). Freud (1961b) states in his later writing that while humans naturally seek happiness we are constitutionally not equipped to experience it, due to the constant threat of suffering we experience in relation to our bodies, environment and relationships; it is therefore much easier according to Freud for us to experience unhappiness.

Wright (2013) suggests that Lacan's formulation of the "radical singularity of unconscious desire" (p.30) provides an ethical defence against the neoliberal vision of the subject as eminently governable, and responsive to external conditioning. For Lacan (1992) this desire is "always in the second degree, desire of desire" (p.14), which for Wright (2013) means desire always orientates around virtual objects which represent the hopeful reparation of an earlier developmental loss. Wright (2013) poses the question of how the therapist may ethically deal with the difference between the patient's instinctive urge to pursue happiness, and the symbolic structure of that desire. Wright answers by claiming the analyst must work with the patient's idealized version of happiness – because this desire reveals the unconscious questioning that lies beneath the patient's symptom – while also being clear that as therapist one will never be able to meet that demand. Wright (2013) suggests the expression of unconscious desire is achieved through the patient's free association, a process that eventually leads away from the impossible demand for happiness, towards "the 'real' of one's extremely idiosyncratic mode of enjoyment" (p.34)

Neuropower and the mini-map

While Valiaho (2014) sees aspects of both anatomo-politics and biopolitics in the contemporary administration of humans, he believes that the biopolitics of the 21st century exerts its influence through a "neuropower that is not immediately disciplinary or regulatory" (p.130), but rather seeks to understand and regulate the way the brain maintains emotional and cognitive equilibrium as the individual engages with the world via its imaginative, moral, and emotional processes. Neidich (2010) believes this new form of sovereignty directly focuses on areas of the brain's frontal cortex that are responsible for organizing memories into a coherent narrative which, in turn, allows the person to enact particular behaviours to

achieve future goals. In doing this Neidich (2010) implies that neuropower leverages the plasticity of the brain and, in doing so, curates a "homogenous people both in the present and future" (p.539). Valiaho (2014) imagines that video games also curate the mind and develop the brain of the player through the continual embodied adjustments that must be made in response to the onscreen action. Valiaho (2014) believes an example of the curating of minds in FPS video games is the small two-dimensional mini-map that occupies a corner of the screen. The mini-map gives a third person overview of the playing field, and in particular scenarios reveals enemy positions in relation to the player. For Valiaho (2014) the mini-map facilitates a "cognitive interface" (p.131) that brings together perceptive capacities that seek to enact physically upon others and the environment, while also engaging spatial visualisation tendencies to locate and track bodies outside of immediate awareness.

Chapter Four Discussion

The impulse to critique and contradict

Each time I have re-entered the hermeneutic circle my interpretation of the texts has shifted. What I noticed as I approached the discussion section of this paper was my impulse to critique and contradict a number of writer's theories on the player's relationship to the avatar. This reflects a desire to complicate the reading of the avatar/player relationship; in doing so I have felt compelled to move away from seeing the avatar as primarily a blank screen, upon which the player projects their drives, fantasies, and unconscious desires. Rather I have become fascinated by the possibility of the avatar as a figure that possesses a personal subjectivity, which is expressed in the space where the virtual and non-virtual meet.

It appears that while the avatar has the capacity to incorporate the projections of the player's internal world, it also has its own characteristics and capacities which are not determined by the player. The player may identify with the scurrilous or heroic nature of the avatar, but it is not solely an expression of the player's psyche. The idea that the avatar could merely facilitate the externalization of conscious and unconscious processes within the player reinforces a narcissistic belief that all matter, whether organic or non-organic is somehow in service of the human subject. Pias (2011) appears to challenge the privileging of the human position by suggesting that when the player immerses in video game play they become a peripheral device to the game. This is not just the player expressing himself or herself through the game, but also the game, or avatar expressing itself through the player. This appears to complicate how we think about the avatar in psychotherapy. It perhaps signals a move from thinking primarily about the subjectivity of the player, to also thinking about the subjectivity and agency of the avatar.

I notice some excitement in myself when I think of Pias's idea of the player as a peripheral device to the game. The function and identity of the avatar in this theory complicates and challenges thinking around the avatar and player relationship. My enthusiasm for this theory seems consistent with my earlier statement that I was feeling critical and challenging towards the texts I was reading. Where does my desire for a more radical reading of the avatar originate? While I am aware of aspects of my own personality that are confrontational and contradictory, I believe this cannot be the sole reason for my

antagonistic attitude. I am starting to consider that I am having a countertransference response to the avatar through the literature I am reading. While countertransference is generally described as the emotional response the therapist has to the patient, I wonder if it can also be applied to the characters within a text. If I follow this thinking it implies that my desire to subvert the texts that I am reading can in part be attributed to the subversive character of the avatar which refuses to be defined in one particular way.

The avatar as a subversion of the death drive

The behavior of Freud's grandson in the Fort Da game (see video games, language, and the magic circle, p. 21) can be interpreted as an expression of the anxiety experienced when confronted with the void left behind in the mother's absence. I contend that the child's object throwing can also be seen as a probing, and filling of space. In this way the reel and toys are objects that fill a void. Could we then see this game not as an expression of mastering death, but rather as an expression of life expanding beyond the perimeters of the physical body? Instead of an activity that mourns the absence of the maternal as Douglas (2011) claims, we have a ritual that projects the object outwards. The toy and reel in this scenario are being used as phallic appendages that colonize and conquer space. This thinking is informed by my own experience as a boy shooting rabbits and possums. I remember the animal appeared enlarged in the telescopic sight, the rifle was heavy in my hands, and my fathers voice was quiet, reminding me to breathe slowly, and gently squeeze the trigger. The crack of the bullet; followed by the imperceptible gap of the projectile hitting the target. Then the physical and mental act of stepping out the distance to the dead animal, in the process the image collapsing between the virtual body in the telescopic sight and the non-virtual body of the rabbit. I also remember the anticipation and reservation of seeing up close the life I had taken. The lifeless body concretely symbolizing how dramatically I had exceeded my physical capacities through the facilitating technology of the rifle.

It would appear that the video game player is able to kill in the same manner I did as a boy hunting, but it seems they are not able to physically collapse the gap between the virtual and non-virtual world. This implies that the video game player is in a perpetual cycle of moving towards death, while never fully encountering it. As a psychotherapist I could interpret the patient's relationship to death in the video game world and then think about what this may express of their psychodynamics. For example, does the patient attempt to keep the

avatar alive for as long as possible with the hope of prolonging the temporal sense of unity that exists before the avatar is killed (see navigating merger and separateness, p. 22). This may suggest the player can be seen as investing in the life of the avatar in the attempt to create a unified sense of self. From this perspective, I would perceive the avatar as a co-creation or autonomous object, rather than as an extension of the player. In this way the patient is not engaging with a self-object. Rather they are being challenged to psychically emerge which may be an indication of the death instinct serving the life instinct. This seems to contradict De Masi's (2015) assertion that the death drive creates narcissistic external self-objects, which result in the subject psychically retreating towards a narcissistic state; a position Rehak (2003) affirms when he suggests that the player attempts to bolster their ego, and thwart the possibility of finding unity by killing the avatar. From this position, the avatar is a sacrificial object that expresses the player's early life experience of intersubjective indifference.

If the player and avatar confront death within the video game, it appears they do this with little risk. While they may strive for a state of nirvana, there can never be a complete dissolution of the self due to the endless cycle of death and rebirth. This is a stark contrast to psychotherapy in which the patient's non-virtual body can only die once. I believe this knowledge must impact on the therapist's feelings towards the patient's video game play in which death is escaped so frequently and cheaply. I imagine one possible response from the therapist is to feel resentful towards the video game space, due to the feeling they shoulder the burden of death's insistent presence. This, slightly indignant, response from the therapist may also be due to the fact they feel morally superior, believing they inhabit the real world. But this stance appears to be challenged by Palmeri (2008) who claims that our subjectivity is entirely virtual in nature.

Imagination as a way of transcending the gap between the virtual and non-virtual

Immersion in video gaming and psychotherapy is primarily contingent on the use of the imagination to identify with the scenes being constructed in front of the player and patient (see immersion p. 33). These scenes come into perceptual awareness through the primary force of movement (see movement, perception and vitality p.37). In this idea I am linking Noe's (2004) idea of visual perception being intimately connected to movement and applying it to visual images in the mind, with the belief that greater perception in the patient may

require both movement and flow in the visual narrative. In video gaming for the player to perceive the game world the avatar must move. In psychotherapy we can imagine that, for the patient to develop greater perception, we must also move through their narrative. For example, the therapist may make a link between a patient's current relationship patterns and an earlier relationship from childhood. Perception in this case is not naturally flowing but rather the patient must make cognitive jumps between the chunks of information that have been butted together. Gibson (2015) states that movement reveals the changing structure of objects, and correspondingly our relationship to that object, as we perceive it changing. Gibson (2015) also claims that in movement we gain insight into the links between what is visible and what is concealed. This theory seems interesting in terms of how the virtual objects of psychotherapy are approached. We could ask from what perspective does the therapist perceive the patient's current object of choice? If a patient communicates a particular experience, the therapist constructs it in his or her mind from a particular viewpoint. Is this viewpoint static or flowing? Psychotherapy also has an interest in revealing links between what is present and what is hidden. The theory of perception put forward in this paper, which is contingent on movement, therefore seems relevant to psychotherapy. With this theory in mind we could think of moving through the patient's narratives as if they were visual fields; approaching objects from various viewpoints or at the very least, being aware of the patient's patterns of movement in relationship to these objects.

In video gaming perceptual flow requires bodily movement. These movements are recorded in the mind as motor performances which can be used for future survival (see movement, perception and vitality p. 37). If the psychotherapy patient is also taking in a constant stream of virtual information, in what way is this information embedded as "motor performances" (Valiaho, 2014, p. 122) in the patient, and how is it utilized in preparation for possible future survival? These motor performances according to Valiaho (2014), are associated with dynamic forms of vitality. This vitality expresses the flow of energy. Working with a patient we could track the intensity of this flow of energy. For example, in speaking about a particular object does the patient's energy surge or recede? This tracking of forces would bring attention to the present moment and provide insight into the patient's patterns of arousal, while also accessing past unconscious experience as Stern (2010) suggests. In doing this we may understand the ways in which patients' develop contingency actions to minimize threat and increase pleasure.

For example, consider a player who goes hiking in the game world, then the following day comes to therapy and recounts the arduous experience of walking through a dense forest for an extended period of time, when to their surprise they came upon a clearing, in which there was a beautiful pool of deep clear water. The patient appears moved as they remember the peaceful experience of standing next to the water, and suggests, that even now the memory of that moment is very calming. How is this story comprehended by the therapist? One response may be to wonder if the patient is going for walks in their non-virtual world. Conversely we may treat the walk like a 'real' walk. Another stance may be to remain curious to the patient's experience 'as if' they were walking within the game. A further possibility is to imagine the avatar as separate but connected. In this the patient could be going for a walk with a companion. These potential responses suggest that the way in which the therapist conceptualizes the player and avatar relationship within the video game will directly affect the manner in which the video game relationship dynamics are explored. This stance, in turn, will inform how the therapist then interprets the patient's interactions in the non-virtual world. What am I proposing is that via the imagination, multiple possibilities emerge in the therapy room, allowing new opportunities for exploration.

The collective as a counter to the curating of minds

Tracking the patient's flow of energy has characteristics of psychologically mapping territory (see neuropower and the mini-map, p. 41). The therapist's intuitive and interpretive capacities may give the perception of being able to see what is not immediately visible to the patient. The ability of the therapist to immerse, while also holding an overview of the past, present, and the possible future could provide a cognitive function that expands the capacity of the patient's mind. This expansion of cognitive power is similar to the mini-map in video games, thus supporting the brains function of predicting the future. The mini-map does this by giving the player an indication of what lies ahead and by indicating the position of potential threats currently outside of the player's sensory perception. The mini-map becomes an all seeing eye that while hovering above, also simultaneously interfaces with the brain of the player, extending their perception through space and time. Like the mini-map, the therapist may also provide a containing function that charts territory and sets boundaries. The primary purpose of the mini-map for the video game player is to offer a competitive advantage over the enemy, by predicting future action. For the patient the mapping ability of

the therapist may provide reassurance that an alternative future is possible; knowing this the patient may then be able to immerse more fully in the present. In both video gaming and psychotherapy the map provides a brain enhancement that could be visualized simultaneously as appendage, network and integrated download.

For Valiaho (2014) the mini-map is one example of how video games are curating minds and turning players into automatons that ultimately support contemporary capitalism. From this perspective the subversive qualities of the avatar and video game are undermining and controlling the player's ability to be authentic. If psychotherapy also manipulates the mind through analyzing, predicting, and mapping, does it do so in a way that also reinforces current political, technical, and social ideologies? If psychotherapy does perpetuate a neoliberal agenda, one objective may be to increase the productivity of the patient. The patient could therefore be seen as an independent unit of human capital that, while connected to others, is primarily responsible for itself in the market place. This appears consistent with the configuration of psychotherapy, in which the lone patient enters into a financial relationship with the therapist. While the patient's external relationships may enter the therapeutic space in virtual form, it is unlikely they will appear in their non-virtual bodies. This does not necessarily mean that psychotherapy is complicit in the neoliberal imperative, as Wright (2013) acknowledges our radical singularity is a defense against being manipulated by external actors. Meaning our desire is not for external objects - such as those offered in the marketplace - but instead is for desire itself. But is there not also the possibility that everything, including desire can be subsumed into capitalism? It would seem the video game industry has achieved this by developing an environment where the player's desire to confront death can be experienced without consequence. This suggests that even a radical singularity may be eminently governable.

While psychotherapy and video games have subversive qualities that can liberate and express authentic aspects of the personality, they also have the capacities to undermine the power and freedom of the individual. In thinking about video games I wonder if the interaction of multiple players within the game world could provide a way of countering the manipulation of individuals? I can imagine that the swarm of machine bodies within video games could have a degree of self-regulation, fluidity, and interconnection, while at the same time each player may also maintain their individuality. At its most ideal, this would not be the collective as a herd but rather a radical multiplicity that generates dynamic forms of

vitality that subvert, or challenge the games capacity to govern and condition. If being part of a collective potentially increases freedom, while also maintaining a sense of individuality, would there be an incentive to think about how this structure may be applied to psychotherapy?

The reality of collective dreaming

If we conceptualize the avatar and video gaming as a dream text (see avatar as dream narrative, p. 31) we could interpret the images and action within the patient's video gaming in a similar way, we might interpret their dream narratives in therapy. This suggests that the avatar could be an expression of the patient's unconscious and, from a more Jungian perspective, also an expression of the collective unconscious (Jung, 1989). We could therefore view the video game as an expression of unconscious desire within the player, which is allowed expression when an altered state of consciousness is achieved through immersing in the video game. I believe, however, we would be mistaken to think that the video game was now merely a representation of the player's unconscious. I imagine that when the player's avatar engages another avatar in a multiplayer video game, that there is also a non-virtual body like their own, watching them being watched. If we follow this line of thought, we could imagine in MMORPGs there is not just one dream text, but potentially thousands of dream texts simultaneously emerging and coalescing. If each player is seen within the game, the collective of dream texts would appear to meet Lacan's (2004) criteria for reality, which complicates how we comprehend the subjectivity of the player within the game world. As a psychotherapist I am challenged to think beyond the neat conceptualization of the singular subjectivity of one player and their avatar in a fantasy world. Instead I am confronted with the possibility of incorporating an overwhelming network of subjectivities that inhabit a world that appears to function as both a reality and fantasy space. The collective in this configuration suggests that the player and their avatar are already in relationship with the external world. This directly challenges the idea of the avatar as a transitional object (see avatar as a transitional object, p. 31) that provides a bridge for the player between internal and external reality. There is no need for a bridging mechanism for the player if the avatar and game world can simultaneously provide both. Perhaps instead it is psychotherapy that needs some form of transitional theory if it is to navigate the gap between the virtual and non-virtual worlds.

The perverse as the authentic expression of the personality

One way in which the avatar is able to be viewed simultaneously as an extension of the player, and also as a autonomous object is because the uncanny difference (see avatar and the uncanny valley, p. 23), enables the player to merge with the avatar and also separate from it. I understand the player's experience of the avatar being uncanny in the way patients' describe modifying their avatar to resemble aspects of their personality and appearance while also being aware of the marked differences between themselves and the avatar. Freud (1919) suggested our experience of something being uncanny is the result of it having been repressed within us. If the player experiences the avatar as uncanny then we could theorize that whatever they are identifying with in the avatar may represent an aspect of their personality that has been repressed. If we follow Zizek (2006) we might imagine this repressed aspect to be the perverse core of the personality. This perverse part of the player can be given expression within the game space because it is perceived as existing outside of the real world. In working with a patient in psychotherapy who is also a video game player, we could, from Zizek's perspective, see their virtual self in the video game world as being more authentic than their public persona. This seems to contradict the feedback and opinions I have received from peers and tutors throughout this dissertation, who seem to roughly concur that video gaming is an addictive escape from reality. But what if video gaming is a movement towards a more authentic reality that is unable to be attained in the non-virtual world? In this movement the player is attempting to integrate and express the perverse aspects of the personality. While we can argue the merits of video gaming as a space to develop a mature psychic structure, the impulse to seek balance is to be respected. Therefore, if psychotherapy is concerned with developing a life that is authentic, one objective of psychotherapy may be to think about how the public self may be more aligned with the virtual self of video games.

The mask as escape from the oppression of everyday life

The carnival and, more particularly, the mask can also be seen as mediums that facilitate an expression of the individual's internal world that is not normally allowed (see the new monstrous, p.24). If the carnival mask liberates and the avatar permits the expression of the perverse core, what does psychotherapy allow? One permission or encouragement from

the therapist may be to free associate; to allow all thoughts to emerge without censor. In the carnival this freedom from censor requires the mask and other bodies who are also expressing the grotesque aspects of their personality. As Bakhtin (1984) writes, these are bodies that are becoming. They are multiplying and communal. In contrast, psychotherapy hones in on the individually self-absorbed body. The therapist wears a mask of professionalism while encouraging the patient to remove the mask of the public persona in an attempt to escape the oppression of everyday life. This seems the reverse of the carnival in which the subject wears the mask to escape the oppression of everyday life. The therapist, perhaps for ethical reasons, does not wear the grotesque mask; they are also in a position of power over the patient and have a particular social status, unlike the carnival in which hierarchy is temporarily suspended. The therapist's position must also be maintained and the identities of the therapist and patient must not merge or transform as they may do in the carnival or video game. In thinking about these differences I begin to wonder if the theoretical and clinical frame within which the psychotherapist is held somehow limits their capacity to enter into the collective swarm of machines which, in video gaming and the carnival, support the individual's ability to express an authentic part of their personality. The swarm has a cooperative ability to self assemble and construct identity; it breaks down distinctions between the natural and artificial which may challenge our notions about the individual and their relationship to the world around them. The swarm may also challenge the authority and power of the psychotherapist if they chose to immerse in a communal and multiplying network of bodies. We could also question in what ways could the therapeutic frame respond to the fluidity of the swarm; especially considering that in psychotherapy training emphasis is placed on the importance of maintaining a strong therapeutic frame.

To varying degrees the carnival, video games and psychotherapy all facilitate an escape from the conventions of everyday life and in doing so, they provide a space to express what is often denied expression. At the same time they are temporary and liminal spaces which each individual must eventually leave and return to the harsh realities of their work and relationships. But what happens when the individual returns to the external world? As a psychotherapist, is it enough to hope that elements flow back into the everyday through the gaps in the magic circles of psychotherapy and play? If we think of the avatar we can imagine that this flow may have a subversive quality in which it challenges the social conventions that enforced the prohibition of expression in the first place. The flow would also challenge the

idea of psychotherapy and video gaming as moratorium spaces that are somehow separate to the everyday world. We would then be left with the complex task of holding the two simultaneously.

Chapter Five Conclusion

The study has revealed new meanings for me in relation to video gaming and psychotherapy. As explored in the discussion section, this has multiple implications for my practice, and potentially for my colleagues. Perhaps, the key findings for me have been firstly, the idea that the imagination may allow us to move fluidly between the virtual and non-virtual worlds. This idea has challenged how I may instinctively polarise and separate particular experiences of my patients. Secondly, that video games are a space in which players can express authentic parts of their personality while remaining part of a collective. This awareness has left me with the unexpected question of how psychotherapy may incorporate certain aspects of video gaming into its theoretical and clinical framework.

Limitations

Though revealing, the study has a number of limitations that need to be considered. The gaming activities that have primarily informed this study are FPS, RPGs and MMORPGs. This narrow focus is a reflection of the playing preferences of my patients and obviously does not reflect the wide range of video game genres that are available to players. Further, as indicated in my introduction, I have limited experience playing video games and currently do not consider myself a video game player. This means my interpretation of the player's experience is based primarily on observation, and the anecdotes of other writers. This may be a limitation in terms of identifying and comprehending the nuances of playing video games. From this perspective, the results of the study cannot be seen to be generalizable and, indeed, this is not the intention of the method. Rather, the aspiration has been to shed some new light on the topic, and to hopefully introduce new questions.

I must also acknowledge that as a fifty-year-old New Zealand European male, I come to this literature review with a particular social, cultural, class and gender perspective. Obviously, if someone with a different ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation was to look at the intersection of video gaming and psychotherapy they may come to different conclusions. In relationship to technology I feel I grew up in an environment that was transitioning from analogue to digital technology. The digital realm was a necessary developmental step I had to make in early adulthood. While not necessarily a limitation, I perceive this differently from

people who were born into a pre-existing digital world. Hence, the results can be seen as a product of reading through a specific social, cultural, gendered and aged 'lens' that produces a unique vision of the literature. I am also aware that my journey with this literature is incomplete. At each re-engagement with it, I find myself on another hermeneutic cycle, and even now I see more possibilities emerging. From this perspective, what is presented here is incomplete, and time restrictions prevent a further engagement with the material. Yet, again, this is consistent with the method, and acknowledges that there are no real 'answers' that emerge. Rather I am left with a number of questions and postulations.

Further questions

If we parallel my personal experience with the development of psychotherapy, we could imagine that psychotherapy has also had to grapple with the transition from an analogue to digital world. We could then ask how well has it made this developmental step? Could we say that psychotherapy has reached maturity in relation to digital culture and virtual environments? In relation to the specific area of video gaming, the limited literature I discovered that deals with the intersection of video gaming and psychotherapy may suggest that psychotherapy is developmentally still in its infancy. I do believe however that Freud prepared us to engage with the virtual world of video gaming when he developed the concept of transference (see therapist and patient as virtual bodies, page 25). A number of theorists in this review have looked at video gaming through a psychoanalytic lens. If psychotherapy is to move towards a mature relationship with video gaming, perhaps it needs to re-read psychoanalytic texts through the lens of video gaming. I believe, in part this study, has pushed me to do just that.

Final thoughts

Each time I have entered the hermeneutic circle the text has challenged me to find my own voice in relationship to psychotherapy. The world of video gaming has made me think about psychotherapy's ability to facilitate a life that is healthy and fulfilling. Video gaming has also generated questions around the collective as an entity that is liberating for individuals. I recognize that authenticity and the collective are two themes that have been with me throughout my adult life. This would suggest that the tentative questions I have raised in this study are both a reflection of the texts and an expansion of my fore-

understandings (Smythe & Spence, 2012). In staying open to the subversive potential of the avatar, and being willing to follow my supervisors repeated advice that I needed to once again re-enter the hermeneutic circle, I have come full circle only to arrive back in a very different place to where I started.

While I have reached the deadline of my dissertation, I believe my thinking on the intersection of video gaming and psychotherapy has only just begun. The discussion presented within this dissertation largely raises questions, while offering very little in the way of answers. I therefore invite you to join me in another hermeneutic round, with this text as but part of an ongoing, larger cycle.

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