

The Arcade As The Last Vestige of Nietzschean Society

For Videogame Theology Readers

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“...culture is a site of the secret, of seduction, of initiation, of a restrained and highly ritualized symbolic exchange. Nothing can be done about it. Too bad for the masses...”¹

-Jean Baudrillard

1 Introduction

Nietzsche always talks of the “free spirits” endearingly. Nietzsche believed the realization that “God is dead!” would usher in a new era where the “free spirits” of civilization could create values for themselves. However, it appears that “we firstlings and premature births of the new century” have failed; the news of God’s death may have caused unbelief to arise in Western civilization, but the same values and morality remains.² Either Nietzsche’s predictions were utterly wrong, or Nietzsche’s ideal society exists underneath the current of popular culture, lying right underneath the eyes of the herd.

The latter, in fact, is true, only its arousal has not called the scholars to its doorstep. Instead, it has quietly functioned in the same vein for little over fifty years, slowly constructing an entirely new form of society built around the creation of virtual worlds and entertainment. That is, the video game has provided a space for the revaluation of all values, specifically the video game arcade. In this environment, players of all ages wage a constant war against computer artificial intelligence or against each other in brutal symbolic struggles. Each person expresses their will to power, continually lusting to become the greatest, to beat all challengers, to have the highest score, to eliminate foes without batting an eye, and to dominate the Other - generally not an acceptable standard in common society. It is here that a new

¹Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995) 64. This quote was stolen from Alex Kierkegaard’s title in his article “Arcade Culture”, discussed herein; it was simply too fitting for the subject matter.

²GS 343

society with a new morality emerges out of the primordial ooze, with only one rule: “Only the skilled may live - the rest will die.”³

2 Definitions and Groundwork

2.1 What is a Game?

Given the relative obscurity of this culture, a basic explication of video games and the arcade is required for any further examination. A game, at its most basic, has no definitive definition; Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, states that one cannot see anything in common with various games, but similarities and relationships exist.⁴ However, for the sake of explanation, assume that a game is an activity wherein a particular arbitrary goal is set in advance, and this goal can only be achieved within a set of predefined rules. In chess, for example, two persons agree upon common rules of what the game board looks like, how the pieces are used, and what the goal of the game is. Furthermore, the obstacles created by these rules cannot be trivially overcome; they must present a challenge, for games foster the development of skill.⁵ The more complex a game’s rules are, the greater the barrier to entry and the greater the challenge. Chess presents a greater complexity because each different playing piece moves differently in its rules, whereas checkers only provides one type of playing piece and one type of movement. Thus, the greater the complexity of a game (referring to its rules), the greater its depth (the knowledge and time required to “learn the game), which further engenders greater skill. As well, all game discussed herein will be emergent, “where a game is specified as a small number of rules that combine and yield large numbers of game variations for which the players must design strategies to handle.”⁶

2.2 What is a Video Game?

Video games, however, present a different set of challenges than normal games. While, at base, they still operate under a set of arbitrary rules and challenges, they can also provide narrative and motivation through aesthetic means. Modern video games have evolved to the point where the rules of the game reflect the rules of the virtual world as well - for example, in any Mario game, such as *Super Mario Bros.*, jumping on top of the heads of enemies is

³Kierkegaard, “Arcade Culture,” Insomina, last modified July 7th, 2007, [http://insomnia.ac/commentary/arcade\(underscore\)culture](http://insomnia.ac/commentary/arcade(underscore)culture).

⁴Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), PI 66.

⁵Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Boston: MIT Press, 2005), 5.

⁶Juul, 5.

the main form of attack. However, this same rule also applies within the world of the game designer, as Mario jumps on top of enemies for his own survival. The player does not receive this information in the form of written text or voice acting; he/she merely learns the rules of the game through the fictional world.

In this sense, video games strike a contrast in conveyance with other games. Imagine that you do not know the rules of chess in any way. You, as a player, are presented with a chess board and all the relevant pieces required to play chess. How, in this situation, would you learn to play the game? Most likely, the rules are contained in an instruction booklet or passed down through word of mouth from persons who have played the game before. However, without such resources, no avenue presents itself for understanding the rules of chess as a specific game - in fact, it is more likely that an entirely new game would be created than two players with a chess board recreating chess.

The conveyance through a fictional world and narrative, as a result, gives the video game a certain intensity lacking in the traditional game model, as the rules are integrated into the logic and narrative (spoken, written, or conveyed through visuals) of a digital world. This does not mean the game requires a “story” that invests the player like a novel: rather, the game must simply motivate the player towards its arbitrary goals through whatever means the developer uses. The virtual world, in turn, allows for a more complex sets of rules than the traditional model, as they are based on the simulation of a new world with a new symbol system, rather than the extension of one’s semiotic perception.

2.3 What is an Arcade?

Furthermore, games can be categorized by the location from which they are played: home games and arcade games.⁷ Though this designation has all but vanished over the course of the late 1990s and 2000s, video games began in the arcade. Arcades were establishments that held a large number of computer, or “video” games. Many existed in stand-up cabinets that required certain monetary denominations to play. These cabinets held computing capabilities that allowed them to create complex (for the time) games that demanded skill. *SpaceWar!*, generally considered the first “video game”⁸, involved the concept of two enemy combatants dueling to the death in space using torpedoes.⁹ This early game design in 1961 eventually led to the creation of Pong and the boom of the video game market in the early 1970s. However,

⁷Although video games can be classified according to “genre”, games have become so amorphous in regards to content that limiting genre designators do not apply. In this work, certain genre will be mentioned and described, in general, within the context of a useful examination of video games.

⁸It ran on an actual computer, rather than hard-wired circuits like earlier electronic games.

⁹Rusel Demaria and Johnny L. Wilson, *High Score!: The Illustrated History of Electronic Games*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill/Osborne, 2004), 12-13.

as technology became cheaper to produce, the home video game systems, called “consoles” began to output identical visual designs and complexities - that, and their convenience and pricing, led to the eventual death of arcades in the American markets in the 2000s, although new arcade games from Japan are released on home consoles.¹⁰

3 Arcade Culture - The Japanese Game Center

3.1 ”Arcade” Principles of Economics

However, a place remains where the arcade still lives - Japan. Called “game centers”, these multi-floor buildings house multifarious forms of electronic entertainment. The arcade game, so called, has continued to develop in both graphics and difficulty - though not superior to the home console, they have taken a different route. Instead of the creation of increasingly realistic graphical powerhouses such as in the home, arcade games have increased the complexity and uniqueness of their rule-sets without sacrificing graphical fidelity. According to “Alex Kierkegaard”, a pseudonymous video game theorist/philosopher on the website *Insomnia*, the environment of the arcade allows for instantaneous comparison between games - if a game is bad, one only has to insert a token or two to discover its quality.¹¹ Subsequently, that game fails to attract an audience, causing a loss for the arcade owner and the death of the game. This is in contrast to the home market, which indulges its player with huge advertising campaigns to attract players with numerous features, visual design, or other extraneous elements of the game.¹²

Capitalistic forces, here, foster an environment of complex and unique games. Arcade operators want to make money from their players - they want the player to “die”, or lose the game. Players, on the other hand, want good value for their money - they do not want to “die”. The developers, in satisfying these two groups, use a unique design philosophy to satiate the needs of both groups by creating games that are not only challenging, but also compelling and worthwhile.¹³ In other words, the arcade fosters complex rule-sets that provide ever-increasing challenges to a specific audience of players - namely, those who reside in the “arcade culture”. As Kierkegaard states, “the developers...have to strike a compromise, and the only satisfying compromise that could be struck under the circumstances is: *Only the skilled may live – the rest will die.*”¹⁴ If one wishes to succeed in the game’s arbitrary

¹⁰American “arcade culture” still exists, albeit in emaciated form because of this development, but it is growing rapidly.

¹¹Kierkegaard, “Arcade Culture.”

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

challenge, one must earn victory.

3.2 The One Credit Rule

Perhaps no aspect of “arcade culture” more fully exemplifies this harsh philosophy than the “one-credit” rule. In Japanese game centers, it is an unwritten custom that a person will stop playing a game once they have either died or been defeated in their respective game. In the “shooter” game, for example, one controls a space ship, creature, person and is constantly assaulted by a barrage of bullets and enemies - the player must constantly avoid and dodge these bullets while returning fire. These games, however, also have scoring systems wherein the use of certain attacks, or killing enemies in a certain order, or dispatching foes in a particular way earns a higher score. A high score, posted on the machine, can only be achieved through completing the game without dying - such an endeavor is more easily said than done. Fighting games, as well, follow the “one-credit rule” in their design. In these games, two players, selecting their own unique player avatar (called a “character”), with his/her own unique set of attacks (many requiring complex joystick motions), compete to knock-out or kill the other player within a virtual street fight. If a player loses at these games, they simply leave without putting another credit into the machine. Even the most prestigious Japanese fighting game tournament, Tougeki’s Super Battle Opera, operates on single elimination rules - one loss, and the participant is eliminated.

Why arbitrarily limit one’s own playtime? It is not solely out of politeness, though Japanese culture does display this propensity. In fact, the one-credit rule creates skilled players. The first time one plays a game, a full understanding of the rules is beyond the grasp of the beginner. To play a fighting game against a master, for example, creates a scene akin to a massacre. However, this one experience of domination, to those with the right mindset, activates a drive to dominate and defeat that opponent - “I can beat him if I practice long enough!” Thus does the beginner continue to play at his game of choice, seeking local competition at his game center until he understands how to utilize the game rules to his own advantage. Eventually, the beginner becomes an expert through hard work, self-induced suffering and countless hours of play, until he finally obtains a rematch with the same person who defeated him so long ago. If he wins, his sacrifices will have come to fruition in a glorious moment of victory. That perpetual striving for excellence and conquest remains the essence of the arcade. As David Sirlin, a former American tournament player, says in his book *Playing to Win*, “The great thing about competitive, zero-sum games is that they offer an objective measure of your progress. When you walk the path of continuous self-improvement that a champion must walk, you have a guide. If you are able to win more

(that is, more consistently defeat highly skilled players), then you are improving. If not, then not.”¹⁵ The path of improvement does not end - it constantly progresses.

4 Homer’s Virtual Contest

The arcade environment, whether in Japan or America, displays the very characteristic Nietzsche describes in “Homer’s Contest.” Although the conquests, victories, and battles take place in a virtual environment, those in the arcade culture “...have a trait of cruelty, a tigerish lust to annihilate”.¹⁶ Instead of expressing the dominating instinct in popular culture, they manifest these instincts in video games instead. Modern culture, realizing the “death of God”, sought to retain the same moral code without the baggage of deities. Human society supposedly cast natural impulses for cruelty, violence, and into other pursuits, such as video games. Instead, they have created new subcultures which have reinvigorated them!

Why else would the beginner wish to become an expert? This is a form of envy Aristotle would approve, the *Eris* “...that, as jealousy, hatred, and envy, spurs men to activity; not to activity of fights of annihilation but to the activity of fights which are *contests*.”¹⁷ Every generation of Hellenes passed the torch of the contest to his descendants, who continued the contest in whatever field they excelled. The arcade “contest” expounds this same archetype.

However, the problem of ostracism does not hold sway in the arcade culture due to the complexity of the video game experience. Justin Wong, one of the most prolific fighting game professionals in the world, was number one in the fighting game *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* at Evolution, the longest running world-wide fighting game tournament. From 2002-2004, he was, literally, world champion; however, he placed fourth in 2005.¹⁸ Such development commonly occur in the arcade scene - fighting games, for example, are examined and broken down to their base mechanics over the course of years of competitive play. In time, the consensus arose that only certain character teams remained viable in tournament play within *Marvel vs. Capcom 2*. Famously, the best team at the time, MSP (Magneto, Storm, Psylocke) dominated tournament play. However, 2005’s victory came from a team no one ever expected, using exploits and mechanics no one had heretofore seen - Wong, as a result, was knocked out of the running for first place by Duc Do.¹⁹ Even with predetermined rule sets, arcade games display qualities of emergence, in that a few simple rules can cause an al-

¹⁵David Sirlin, *Playing to Win: Becoming the Champion* (Raleigh, NC: Lulu, 2006), 1.

¹⁶Friedrich Nietzsche, “Homer’s Contest,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books 1982),32

¹⁷Ibid, 35.

¹⁸Robert Painter, “Tournament Results: Evo,” last accessed November 22, 2011, <http://www.kuoppi.com/tournamentresults/evo/>.

¹⁹Ibid.

most incomprehensible number of different results.²⁰ Hence, the infinite variety within even a small set of rules means no person can know every possible result, even with years of play and practice - hence, the contest exists perennially. Arcade games, as a result, exemplify the Greek contest in a refined form.

One might state: Nietzsche did not necessarily approve of the Greeks and their lifestyle; he merely pointed to the perception of the Greek's lust for vengeance and victory versus that of Nietzsche's environment, that of late 19th century European moralism. Although this previous statement is true, Nietzsche obsessed over the idea of conflict, struggle, and warfare, much like the Greeks of antiquity. Heraclitus' idea of war as a cosmic fact inspired Nietzsche; according to Heraclitus, "War is the father of all and king of all; and some he has shown as gods, others men; some he has made slaves, others free."²¹ Heraclitus' world changes in a constant state of flux, a continual war between opposites. According to Heraclitus, "Homer was wrong when he said 'Would that Conflict might vanish from among gods and men!' For there would be no attunement without high and low notes nor any animals without male and female, both of which are opposites."²² Certainly, Nietzsche believed mankind persisted in a constant state of becoming, similar to Heraclitus' flux. In *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche sides with Heraclitus: "With the highest respect I except the name of Heraclitus, While the rest of the philosophic folk rejected the testimony of the sensible causes because they showed multiplicity and change, he rejected their testimony because they showed things as if they had permanence and unity."²³ The world of the arcade lives in the spirit of becoming, continually evolving through time.

5 Gaming Independence: The Realm of Free Spirits

5.1 Defining the "Scrub"

The spirit of becoming, in turn, reinforces a social Darwinist model of reality.²⁴ If only the strong survive and continue the contest in the arcade, then the culture that creates such values obtains only those individuals. Of course, the weaker element of the culture continue to exist, but their instrumental use augments the developing powers of the strong, those who

²⁰Juul, *Half-Real*, 5.

²¹Heraclitus, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, trans. Charles H. Kahn (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1979),67.

²²Ibid, 67.

²³TI, 2.

²⁴Of course, as EH III.1 states aptly, people of Nietzsche's time tried to categorize Nietzsche as a Darwinist. However, in this setting, I simply referring to the concept of "survival of the fittest", in that the strong survive and the weak shall die, physically or metaphorically.

self-overcome their own faults in understanding a game’s rules.

One can distinguish between two particular groups in the arcade culture - the player and the scrub. According to Sirlin, the word scrub denotes “...a player who is handicapped by self-imposed rules that the game knows nothing about. A scrub does not play to win.”²⁵ Certainly, a beginner will not know the rules and flow of a game instantaneously; with the right training and dedication, however, that person’s knowledge and skill increases exponentially. The scrub, on the other hand, has created mental roadblocks preventing his own victories. Seth Killian, a former tournament player and current Community Manager at Capcom²⁶, says “They play the game in a little world of make-believe where they all aspire to earn the respect of their fellow losers, and to play with ‘honor’.”²⁷ What counts as “honorable” or “cheap” is amorphous, existing only to support the mental roadblocks of the scrub.²⁸ This applies mostly to fighting games, though the same handicaps equally apply to the development of skill in any video game.

For example, *Street Fighter II* (and its many iterations) involves a rock-paper-scissors level of balance, in that attacks are beaten by blocking, but blocking is beaten by throw, and throws are beaten by attacks.²⁹ Now, a person learning the game discovers the balance of attacks quickly; if you train a person through certain actions, in a match, to block your attacks repeatedly, they will not expect a throw, and subsequently become vulnerable to throws. If the opponent decides **not** to counter this, one should do this repeatedly until the opponent begins to counter such attempts. However, the scrub calls throws “cheap” simply because they counter his own attack plan. He has, in effect, conflated the rules of human society with the rule of arcade culture - i.e, “playing to win.” This mindset is born of weakness rather than strength.³⁰ Anything within the rules of the game is fair - “The game knows no rules of honor or of cheapness. The game only knows winning and losing.”³¹

The scrubs represent the herd mentality, in that they believe in the absolute equality of all. Skill is not a factor - only what is “fair” in their mind should be allowed. Why else would society endeavor towards equality but this idea: “The overall degeneration of man down to what today appears to the socialist dolts and flatheads as their ‘man of the future’ - as their ideal - this degeneration and diminution of man into the perfect herd animal...is possible,

²⁵Sirlin, *Playing to Win*, 11.

²⁶A paragon of the arcade development scene - their success with the game *Street Fighter II* literally created the genre as it is played today.

²⁷Seth Killian, “Domination 101: On Cheapness,” Shoryuken.com, last modified January 5th, 2010 <http://shoryuken.com/forum/index.php?threads/on-cheapness.91151/>.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹This is also demonstrative of Sirlin’s card game *Yomi*, which attempts to encapsulate these ideas outside of a video game context.

³⁰A, 2.

³¹Sirlin, *Playing to Win*, 12.

there is no doubt of it.”³² This descent of man into the herd animal becomes apparent in the form of the scrub. Scrubs attempt to reduce the game and the culture to their set of rules, rather than the actual rules of the game. Instead of steering the opponent into “cheap” tactics that place the game at their advantage, they whine and complain instead. As Seth Killian state, however, “Cheap’ tactics kill with minimal effort. In this respect, theyre[sic] difficult to distinguish from just plain good tactics, which are aimed at making you efficient, effective winners.”³³ In other words, what the scrub calls “cheap” can be anything that causes the scrub to lose, an aesthetic judgement of right and wrong rather than good or bad.³⁴

Sirlin, furthermore, categorizes the mindset of the scrub - they believe that ignorantly mashing buttons when playing an arcade game presents the most “fun”.³⁵ Perhaps flailing haplessly at the mechanics of a video constitutes enjoyment, but these minds have conflated the narrative with the rules - the rules make the game, not the other way around! Sirlin makes this clear: “...any close examination will reveal that the experts are having a great deal of this fun on a higher level than the scrub can even imagine. Throwing together some circus act of a win isn’t nearly as satisfying as reading your opponent’s mind to such a degree that you can counter his every move, even his every counter.”³⁶ In the words of Nietzsche, “...only in intellectual beings do pleasure, pain, and will exist; the vast majority of organisms has nothing like it.”³⁷ They cannot even comprehend the thought of genuine competition and conflict, or using any means necessary to win, instead submitting to the hemlock without a fight. In Nietzsche’s words, “The poison from which the weaker nature perishes strengthens the strong man - and he does not call it poison.”³⁸

5.2 Fixing the “Scrub”

Certainly, to point out the flaws of the scrub remains a useful exercise in the arcade culture - however, it does not promote strength or growth for the actual players. All competitors wish to know the rules of the game, the best tactics, and the best strategies for conquest. Without a community of skilled players, such improvement cannot occur; any player must create a environment to test his own skills. If an “easy prey” is something contemptible for proud nature, then these free spirits need to create new free spirits, at least those with a mindset

³²BGE, 203

³³Killian, “On Cheapness”.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Sirlin, *Playing to Win*, 12.

³⁶Ibid, 12.

³⁷GS, 127.

³⁸GS, 19.

capable of comprehending this venture.³⁹ The beginner must always depend on the experts who know the rules of the game; thus, the free spirits ”...benefit and show benevolence toward those who already depend on us in some way...”⁴⁰ The members of the arcade culture need to increase their power, skill, and depth of play, and by improving the skill of the beginners, they can enhance their own powers.⁴¹

If others are trained to become experts, then a competition between equals can arise. Beginners must learn the value of a loss, to learn from mistakes and to emerge with new skills and truths - in other words, they must experience pain, for “Pain always asks for its cause, while pleasure is inclined to stop with itself and not look back.”⁴² Furthermore, the value of a loss, as well as the joy of victory, must infiltrate the mind of the beginner early, for the capacity for greater joy lies in suffering and pain. Much like in Heraclitus’ world of flux, to have the greatest amount of joy requires the greater amount of its opposite, pain and suffering.⁴³ If they cannot accept this wisdom, they will never reach that plateau that captures the beauty of arcade culture.

Returning to the earlier example, imagine playing a game against a player far superior to yourself. This person completely dominates you and knows your every move. The first response to such a situation is ”He was lucky! I am better than him!” The first expression of wisdom in the arcade, in contrast, lies in self-examination: what did “I” do wrong? The individual and his limitations, a process of self-overcoming, must continually recur in the individual. As much as the expert destroyed the player’s confidence, to display *ressentiment* only leads to self-destruction: “You may only have enemies whom you can hate, not enemies you despise. You must be proud of your enemy: then the successes of your enemy are your successes, too.”⁴⁴ The developing arcade player sees the greatness in his opponents actions, but he learns from his opponent, and furthermore learns the requirements and methods for defeating his opponent. It is common knowledge in the arcade culture that watching and facing players better than yourself will only improve one’s abilities. They must treat their arcade skills as life, “...continually shedding something that wants to die...being cruel and inexorable against anything that grows weak and old in us, and not just in us.”⁴⁵ To fix the scrub, in effect, is to shift his moral viewpoint, to place him/her beyond good and evil and beyond the petty morals of common society to participate in the contest.⁴⁶

³⁹GS, 13.

⁴⁰GS, 13.

⁴¹GS, 13.

⁴²GS, 13.

⁴³GS, 12.

⁴⁴Z, On War and Warriors.

⁴⁵GS, 26

⁴⁶This is the general objection of Alex Kierkegaard to those who want to make video games “art”, and

5.3 *Yomi*

Once a player gains a full understanding of the game's rules, the next stage of their development in skill establishes a vast pathos of distance.⁴⁷ Most Japanese players call this “yomi”, or reading the mind of the opponent.⁴⁸ It is not merely the ability to identify patterns in the opponent's game plan, nor is it simply the ability to react quickly to an opponent's actions and strategies. In some players, it manifests as a seemingly supernatural ability to uncannily know everything their opponent does in advance. Generally, it manifests as the “meta-game” of any arcade fighting game; once two player know exactly what moves are most effective in each situation, the only element of chance lies within the mind of the opponent. Because of the equivalent knowledge of both players through constant practice and obedience to the rules of the game, a “...distancethat other, more mysterious pathos could not have grown up eitherthe craving for an ever new widening of distances within the soul itself, the development of ever higher, rarer, more remote, further-stretching, more comprehensive states...”⁴⁹ In other words, yomi becomes a component of the self-overcoming of man.

If a competitive fighting game cannot support yomi, then the game does not work effectively in the Nietzschean sense of individuality. If, all other things being equal, each player cannot establish his/her own style or technique, then competition does not exist. As Nietzsche states in *Ecce Homo*, “To communicate a state, an inward tension of pathos, by means of signs, including the tempo of these signs - that is the meaning of every style...”⁵⁰ Sirlin notes the game of tic-tac-toe as an example - the yomi of the game is extremely limited, as a player is forced, for his own sake, to place the X or O in a particular spot to win.⁵¹ Even then, whoever goes first has an obvious advantage that cannot be removed through mere skill.

Yomi works in terms of layers. Returning to the game *Street Fighter II*, you and the opponent have four different options: attack, block, dodge, or throw.⁵² Imagine that you use an attack that does a massive amount of damage, but has a long recovery time which will allow your opponent to react with an attack or throw. Your opponent knows you have this attack, but you also know his inclination will be to block or dodge it entirely. Thinking

generally “meaningful” rather than “fun”. They impute meaning into the things because they do not know any better (TI, 18).

⁴⁷BGE, 257.

⁴⁸This is not a direct translation, though it is the best way to describe it in English.

⁴⁹BGE, 257.

⁵⁰EH III.4

⁵¹Sirlin, *Playing to Win*, 43.

⁵²There are variations in the way attacks are constituted in Street Fighter games - attacks are classified into normal, special, super, etc., each with varying numbers of hits and priority. For the purpose of this work, I am intentionally simplifying the process to show you how this works.

a step ahead, you decide to throw him instead, guessing that he will block. However, your opponent will also be thinking this in advance as well - thus, instead of blocking, he will instead try to dodge the throw. But suppose you understood this would occur, and instead have another, safer attack that does less damage. His dodge, instead, causes him to take a small amount of damage for his trouble. Thus, you did what you originally planned on doing - rather, a risk/reward calculation was made in choosing what attack to use. Now, imagine all of this happening within a split second. All of these “reads”, as they are called, happen in the blink of an eye. In chess, thinking three to four moves ahead is commonplace; in a fighting game, these nearly instantaneous reactions happen unconsciously at some level, not purely instinctual but not purely intellectual, either. Not even training will create a skill for yomi - some are naturally better than others. Such a skill, however, separates the strong from the weak. Anyone can learn the rules of a video game, but few learn enough to exhibit complete mastery over the game and other - yomi provides a measure of skill.

5.4 The Rise of the Individual

In addition, to know the mind of the opponent fosters the glory of dominance and the will to power, for “What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself.”⁵³ The learning process teaches the beginner and scrub alike the joy of victory and conquest over the other, and the struggle for continued dominance, even knowing that a permanent victory does not lie in the future. Victories remain a temporary joy, but they create a desire for new victories to recreate that feeling of hard work and dedication towards a particular goal: “The best thing about a great victory is that it takes the fear of defeat out of the victor. ‘Why not also be defeated once?’ he says to himself; ‘I’m rich enough for that now’.”⁵⁴ Every successful “read” in the yomi situation is akin to a victory in itself, and this craving for dominance and greatness manifests itself in the creation of the individual within arcade culture. However, some individuals, like in any competitive environment, set themselves apart from the society and establish themselves as “great”; even with some recognizing this pride as a negative attribute, their name is known throughout the community as the very definition of skill. These individuals represent the pinnacle of the arcade culture - the high score holder, the first place winner, the victor. The community tends to call these men “personalities” that offer color and brightness, but they do more than that: they create interest and hold their place because of their skill, not just their entertainment value. Other players watch and re-watch their matches and execution for any advantage that one can glean; in other words, what makes them so excellent at

⁵³A, 2.

⁵⁴GS, 163.

the game? Some persons possess greater skill than others from birth; univocally, they are innately superior. In this sense, arcade culture exemplifies the ideal of an aristocratic society, “a society that believes in the long ladder of an order of rank and difference in value between man and man...”⁵⁵ They are the very opposite of a scrub in that they create their own values.

As Nietzsche spoke of the overman, he will rarely appear in the course of normal human events. The characteristic of total independence, a perfect “value-creator”, so to speak, only occurs once in a long while. Only those who express their will to power can reach such a goal, as “Independence is for the very few; it is a privilege of the strong.”⁵⁶ Certain individuals of the arcade culture come close to this ideal, though they fail to reach “overman” status. Firstly, Daigo “The Beast” Umehara has dominated the fighting game scene for little over a decade. His nickname is warranted, for he displays an uncanny ability to read his opponent’s mind, performing moves that, in any other circumstance, would become completely unsafe, yet the attacks he means to hit always hit.⁵⁷ In that sense, he exemplifies the instinctual, merciless nature of a beast. However, his greatness and continual success come not just from his nearly psychic ability to read the opponent; his understanding of “footsies”, also known as the art of vying for positional advantage, and timing are nearly impeccable. In fact, his very reputation in America makes most matches against him a bloodbath. The assumption of his greatness overrides his actual abilities to the degree that many Americans, facing him for the first time, are utterly dominated.⁵⁸ Umehara does not even trash talk or express any hint of emotion, as his skills demonstrate his mastery of the game and the opponent.

What is interesting, on analysis, is that Umehara’s abilities do not solely derive from his knowledge of the game. Sirlin, in a short interview, states that Daigo, in his perspective, does not have the best reaction or dexterity in relation to other Japanese players; Tokido, known as “Murderface”, far outstrips him in that sense.⁵⁹ He does not always play intensely difficult execution characters in fighting games, either.⁶⁰ Even when Umehara dabbles in other fighting games where he has little to no knowledge of all the mechanics, he simply

⁵⁵BGE, 257

⁵⁶BGE 29.

⁵⁷For evidence of this, search for “Daigo vs. Sirlin” on YouTube, or go to this link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3mHP575Nok>.

⁵⁸This is less prominent in Japan, given that most Japanese players live within a subway ride from the arcade where Daigo plays - the level of skill, as a result, is relatively even in Japanese arcades.

⁵⁹“David Sirlin on Daigo Umehara,” YouTube, last accessed November 22, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3Bn6716ZRA>.

⁶⁰For future reference, most fighting games use a “combo system”, literally allowing the players to create sequences of attacks, called combos, that are inescapable except through mechanics in the game such as “combo breakers” or “burst”. In general, the quicker, more agile character tend to have longer combos and less damage, and slower character have slower moves, but cause more damage with each hit. Daigo plays characters that fall in between the two, the “all-around” type.

destroys opponents. Sirlin attributes this to the fact that his yomi allows him to recognize patterns and clues, even unconsciously, that allow him to react in the most advantageous way.⁶¹

For the American arcade scene, no one has quite reached “legendary” status like “The Beast”, but there are certainly players who have shown extraordinary, consistent skill in being “the best”. Justin Wong has been a top contender in fighting games for over a decade - while he does not display the psychic abilities of Umehara, his great ability lies in his extensive knowledge of the games he plays. Rather than simply play one game, he discovers the most effective tactics/characters to play in each game, learns just enough to be viable in the game, and uses instinct and yomi to fill any differentials. This method has caused his constant victories at Evolution, the premier American fighting game tournament, and nearly every tournament he has entered, though the development of the culture has caused many to arise that exceed his skill in specific games. No American has quite the success he has obtained in a whole genre of games.

David Sirlin, though semi-retired, has gained a reputation that remains simply due to his penchant for repeating the exact same tactic as often as necessary to win. It is not repetition for repetition’s sake; he learns the game’s rules in order to find what move is the easiest to use, while being the hardest to defend against. Sirlin, describing himself, notoriously lacks dexterity and technical skill in game - by having superior knowledge and good timing, he covers this fault.⁶² Sirlin, as a result, gained the nickname “Low Strong” due to one particular tournament where he repeated the move of the same name repeatedly to win. According to Sirlin, “I low stronged [sic] my little heart out. Probably over 90 percent of my moves were low strong, done at a very particular range, and with a particular pattern of timing that I dare not reveal...I had infinite patience to low strong forever...”⁶³ Because of the high priority of “low strong” in relation to any moves his opponent could perform, it became an impenetrable “brick wall” that frustrated his opponent into defeat. Best of all, the character he chose was not even his main character! He merely knew the game’s rules better than his opponent. Whether famous or infamous, Sirlin went into fighting game history with his technique of game mechanic exploitation.

In all these cases, the players do not merely “compete” - they are having “fun” in merely playing the game. When one’s soul is great, says Zarathustra, “then it becomes playful, and in your sublimity there is malice. I know you.”⁶⁴ One should not take the status of these “legends” as permanent, however; due to age or other life concerns, these players will, or

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Sirlin, *Playing to Win*, 53.

⁶³Ibid, 32.

⁶⁴Z, *On War and Warriors*.

already have, retired and gone into other pursuits. The whole of the arcade culture has, in a way, been a “detour of nature to get to six or seven great men...”, but future players will “get around them” at some point in the future.⁶⁵ Their continuing legacies pave the way for even greater individuals to struggle and conquer. These are the individuals that unlock “new truths” in the games, raising the level of themselves first, and later the community as it understands the techniques and methods they introduced. The growth of the FGC, or fighting game community, has grown exponentially; Evolution’s 2011 incarnation hosted 2,400 competitors and 2 millions viewers of live internet streaming of the event over the span of a single weekend.⁶⁶ Even the game developers cannot predict the future of their games and the balance between characters: new techniques always arise in the emergent design of fighting games. This would never occur without the advent of conflict and competition; rather, the community must take this as its motto: “...you arm yourself against any ultimate peace; you will the eternal recurrence of war and peace...”⁶⁷ Otherwise, this fascinating society cannot hope to achieve continual progress in the continual contest.

6 The Artificial Society

A problem strikes one vividly at the description of the arcade culture - this does not constitute a true grouping of free spirits. They are interacting with worlds created by themselves and the game designers, but that does not constitute real war, real enemies, real difference, real conquest! Rather, these are the facsimiles of a true “free spirit”, as they express the same characteristic only within the realm of fantasy. What limit is there to war? The great warriors of the arcade do not need to die; instead, they can continue their process of self-overcoming in the virtual realm without the messiness of the real conflict! In any game, a conflation can occur between the rules of the game and the rules of society - when, in Monopoly, your ruthless methods as a business tycoon cause another person to lose the game, the real rules of society interact and conflict with the “fake rules” of the game when they begin to throw objects at you. This interaction of contrary rules allows the creation of a virtual, artificial society based in conflict and strife, especially that of arcade culture.

⁶⁵BGE 126.

⁶⁶Tom Cannon, “Evo Championship Series 2011 Breaks Online Viewership Records,” on Shoryuken.com, accessed December 12th, 2011, <http://shoryuken.com/2011/08/04/evo-championship-series-2011-breaks-online-viewership-records/>.

⁶⁷GS, 285.

6.1 "Fanatics" and Their ilk

One could say that "virtual" society exists because of a particular psychological need. Human beings, ruled by their drives, must express those drives in some way. Our society, as that of old, needs to express its uncivilized drives, yet it suppresses them - mankind becomes internalized and outward discharge is inhibited.⁶⁸ As a result, subsets of society emerge where the will to power and the natural human drives can express themselves, albeit in emaciated form. One sees this phenomenon throughout the Western world, as crowds tend to gather around certain fads or popular entertainment, becoming consumers who place their faith in the meaning-making powers of consumerism.⁶⁹ For example, the current book fad, *Twilight*, does not merely arise out of nowhere - given its focus on chastity and vampires, it alludes to a certain ideology regarding the sex life of teenagers. Do the fans know this? Absolutely not! They simply "like" the product, unaware of what psychological needs it fulfills, specifically that of meaning and purpose.⁷⁰

Those who attack their fanaticism as "fleeting" or "useless" will inevitably find opposition to those that need a bulwark and a fortress against their own instincts. It makes one a part of a "group", but does that group actually exist? It exists in theory but not in practice; Western capitalism's focus on individuality has rendered next door neighbors as total strangers.⁷¹ Regarding these groups, Nietzsche says "Whoever does not improve how to lay his will into things, at least lays some meaning into them: that means, he has the faith that they already obey a will."⁷² The association with these "movements", rallying around entertainment products and abstractions, shows that "The trust in life is gone; life itself has become a problem."⁷³

6.2 The Life-Giving Value of Artifice

However, for these groups, the association of themselves around common symbols fails to fulfill their problems with life; they will continually bounce from one fad to the next as a result of consumer culture, which convinces them that continual consumption of products constitutes a source of meaning.⁷⁴ There is no will to self mastery in these persons of the herd morality. Even so, the philosophers and free spirits of the future cannot live in

⁶⁸GM, 16.

⁶⁹Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000, 229.

⁷⁰Katherine Turpin, *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006.

⁷¹Parks, *Big Questions*, 101.

⁷²TI, 18.

⁷³GS, P 3.

⁷⁴Turpin, *Branded*, 18.

a nihilism that leads to death; the philosophers have pulled back the veil, revealed the emptiness of existence, yet they have found an alternative. The recreation of a “divinely untroubled, divinely artificial art” like the Greeks is the solution to that nihilism.⁷⁵ According to Nietzsche, the Greeks realized this state of affairs and became superficial out of profundity - they knew how deep the rabbit hole goes, yet they simply chose to remain cheerful of spirit in a world of constant change and flux. One must embrace life, naming things as a new act of creation and valuation at the same time, becoming more than spectators.⁷⁶ In other words, it is the creation of and participation in an artificial life within a specific semiotic system.

To this end, arcade game become art, and the creation of arcade video games is the unintentional creation of an artificial society. Reams of concept art arise out of game development; any game in an arcade environment must be attractive to the players if it wants to succeed in Japan, whether appealing to some sexual fetish (such as the game *Muchi Muchi Pork*, a shooter involving fat, scantily clad women who kill pigs) or just an aesthetic appeal of “coolness” (effeminate males who wear leather) relative to that culture. By giving them what they want in terms of aesthetics, the arcade culture is the epitome of the “cult of the untrue”, allowing delusion and error about reality to impress itself upon the arcade-goer.⁷⁷ The aesthetics, in essence, are the “fish hook” by which a person is attracted to the game - the realm of appearance attracts them, but the mechanics and rules of the game and their implementation creates a desire to conquer such systems. The systems themselves tend to be completely different entities from the mere appearances.⁷⁸ If art redeems life, then art, here, leads to life in the form of games. Perhaps video games are simply a shallow form of entertainment at base, but they are, at the very least, art if one makes it art.⁷⁹ Nietzsche does not believe artists take their work far enough, that they must make life itself into artifice: “For usually in their case this delicate power stops where art ends and life begins; we, however, want to be poets of our lives, starting with the smallest and most commonplace details.”⁸⁰

⁷⁵GS, P 4.

⁷⁶GS 301

⁷⁷GS, 107.

⁷⁸Many developers in Japan do not operate along the model of focus groups or marketability. They make the game first under their own vision; Daisuke Ishiwatari, a concept artist at Arc System Works, was given the opportunity to direct an entire fighting game based on his own ideas, plot, story-line, mechanics, and music, a literal video game auteur. What arose out of that project was the *Guilty Gear* series, notably creating a new category of fighting games (the “airdash” fighting game) as well as crafting a fundamentally solid and balanced fighter in contrast to the more well-established companies like Capcom (*Street Fighter*, *Marvel vs. Capcom*). *Guilty Gear* became popular and is still played competitively today, and this was not made for “mass-market” tastes, nor for the arcade culture specifically (the first GG game, in fact, was a console release!); one could say that it molded tastes instead.

⁷⁹GS, 276.

⁸⁰GS, 299

What, then, of human society? The traditional formulation, with morals and social mores, is a problem. It is the “evil” men who take risks and transgress the normal social order that have done the most to advance humanity.⁸¹ Consciousness, in its unfinished state, engenders countless mistakes that will lead to the end of the human race.⁸² As such, consciousness, in its state of becoming, must be controlled. The importance of art lies in this: although even the senses do not represent a full development, the world of appearances is much more reliable than the convoluted and confused consciousness in its relative state of infancy. This allows the herd to live in the mediocrity of “real” society, while the true men/women of society can continue their process of self-overcoming in the virtual society; whether or not this was intentional is no matter at all! Furthermore, Zarathustra states “The true man wants two things: danger and play. Therefore he wants woman, as the most dangerous play thing. Man should be trained for war and woman for the recreation of war...”⁸³ If danger and play are constituent components of “true man”, then the artificial society expresses both equally.

6.3 The Simulacra is True - Video Game Virtual Society

How can such a society exist solely on the examination of appearance and the creation of artifice? Normal games are real - certainly, the rules are abstractions to a degree, but the actual play uses physical objects, or involves some material methodology. However, video games display elements of fiction and truth simultaneously - this poses a problem. According to Jesper Juul, writing about the title of his book *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, states:

In the title, *Half-Real* refers to the fact that video games are two different things at the same time: video games are real in that they consist of real rules with which players actually interact, and in that winning or losing a game is a real event. However, when winning a game by slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon but a fictional one. To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world.⁸⁴

If Nietzsche intends art as a solution to the problem of nihilism, the creation of art also allows a creation of a full model of reality, not necessarily metaphysical, but a reality nonetheless

⁸¹GS, 4.

⁸²GS, 11.

⁸³Z, “On Little Old and Young Women.”

⁸⁴Juul, *Half-Real*, 1.

that changes one's perception of the real. One could, in fact, call it a conflation of the true and the false, a paradoxical state of mind. Accepting *amor fati* works in the case of the real, but what if the real and the fictional are no longer distinguishable? If video games are art, in the Nietzschean sense, then they create the hyperreal, the generation by models of a real without origin or reality.⁸⁵ The arcade, as a place primarily created for business, exemplifies this concept. Where can I play arcade games? The arcade. Where can I learn how to become better? The arcade. At least in Japan, the arcade continue to thrive because of population demographics and the nearness of game centers to places of work and life. In America, however, the country's size makes arcade play nearly impossible, usually requiring drives of many hours to any actual location. As such, the American arcade has not thrived, though its community continues to gather around similar games. With the advent of online play and online leader-boards, the joy of competition can continue through the Internet. However, these are still closed channels, as the games are exclusive to particular video game consoles, limiting the players one can meet solely through online competition. The channels for the production of the arcade culture is the capitalist enterprise - game companies must always give "what the fans want", rather than what is best for the competitive struggle to continue.⁸⁶ Those who hold the means of production hold the power and create the models, the simulations, which people inhabit, in this case the video game arcade. How I perceive video games, in that sense, is controlled by the media, who declare to the individual what they need; they impose a model of needs, desires, and dislikes which craft what video game products are "good" and "bad".

Nietzsche gives mankind the knowledge to craft its own values in revaluation; Baudrillard exposes the meaningless of human experience which could, possibly, craft values. Nietzsche believes in the uniqueness of the overman, and Baudrillard dismisses any originality in any human context, especially the postmodern world. How can revaluing and new creation occur if cultures always build upon the previous cultures? Clearly, the arcade culture exhibits pure simulation; the wars and struggles of the arcade are pure simulations which refer to actual war and conflict in appearance, but not in reality. As Espen Aarseth states about games, "The simulation aspect is crucial: it is radically different alternative to narratives as a cognitive and communicative structure. Simulations are bottom up; they are complex systems based on logical rules."⁸⁷ The false war, based on computations and logical rules, overturns the real war, and the idea of war precedes that of actual war (for the experience of war has been reduced to nothing in modern Western culture) - in other words, the simulacrum of war

⁸⁵Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

⁸⁶Hence, the myriad complaints of hardcore arcade gamers about game companies - their release schedules never accord with the tournament schedules in either America or Japan.

⁸⁷Aarseth.

precedes the actual event of war.⁸⁸ Arcade culture conflates the false with the true with no differentiation.

However, the understanding of society as artifice does not bring any fear. If the world does not have value, great men can create it! Nature has already been value-less; this recent realization should not remain exclusive to nature, but also find application to mankind's artificial constructs and symbol systems. Human beings create a world which concerns human beings, and sign/symbol systems are used in the creation of that world.⁸⁹ It is, in Nietzsche's words, how mankind has always acted - mythologically.⁹⁰ If the artificial society creates a space wherein the natural drives of mankind can be expressed, it is better off than if they were internalized! Even a false symbol system does not constitute a direct objection to that construction of reality; for Nietzsche, "...The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating."⁹¹ Untruth is simply a condition of life, and the practical application of a sign system to such a reality determines its worth. Perhaps there is no scaffolding beneath it, but "Anyone who has looked deeply into the world may guess how much wisdom lies in the superficiality of men. The instinct that preserves them teaches them to be flighty, free, and false...let nobody doubt that whoever stands that much in need of the cult of surfaces must at some time have reached beneath them with disastrous results."⁹²

7 Conclusion

The arcade culture, thus, is the life of superficial and meaningless conflict, yet the participants within it give it life and meaning. If the goal of "revaluation of all values" is to be achieved, then this community of supreme self-examination works this evaluation out.⁹³ Its artificial nature brings no problem to bear on its continual functioning. The arcade culture creates a social space where "...someone accustomed to it wants to live nowhere else than in this bright, transparent, strongly electric air - in this masculine air. Anywhere else is not clean and airy enough for him...But in this severe and clear element he has his full strength; here he can fly!"⁹⁴ One can take the passion and desire the arcade scene has crafted over time. Their

⁸⁸To clarify, the majority of the population certainly knows *of* war in images, family members and the like, but does not interact with war in the same way that, for example, ancient cultures or even America in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s experienced war, and fear of it, as a pervasive construct of life that affected everyone.

⁸⁹GS, 301.

⁹⁰BGE, 21.

⁹¹BGE, 4.

⁹²BGE, 59.

⁹³EH, IV.1.

⁹⁴GS 293.

disgust over the state of modern video games that appeal to the player's vanity exemplifies the uniqueness of their own model - they will not let the mainstream determine the value of competition and contest. It is a place where will to power can express itself, where the instincts find their full-flowering and where the values of human civilization are revalued, if in digital form. It allays Nietzsche's concern for "the type of man that shall be *bred*, shall be willed, for being higher in value, worthier of life, more certain of a future," and these men are not developed by accident.⁹⁵ The arcade culture has its own semiotics and language exclusive to itself, where its individuals can continue the great contest for victory. In fact, its component have the ingredients for the creation of Nietzsche's preparatory human beings:

To this end we now need many preparatory brave human beings who surely cannot spring from nothingness any more than from the sand and slime of present-day civilization and urbanization: human being who know how to be silent, lonely, determined, and satisfied and steadfast in invisible activities; human being profoundly predisposed to look, in all things, for what must be overcome; human beings whose cheerfulness, patience, modesty, and contempt for great vanities is just as distinctive as their magnanimity in victory and patience with the small vanities of the defeated; human beings with a sharp and free judgement concerning all victors and the share of change in every victory and glory; human beings with their own festivals, their own working days, their own periods of mourning, accustomed to command with assurance and equally prepared, when called for, to obey - in each case, equally proud, equally serving their own cause; more endangered, more fruitful, happier human being!⁹⁶

⁹⁵A, 3.

⁹⁶GS, 283.

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