Diana Melnic & Vlad Melnic

Shortcut to Posthumanism: Decentring Elements of the Gaming Experience

Abstract: The present paper is concerned with posthuman elements of digital games, as well as with their ability to create posthuman experiences for the player. First, we investigate the player of video games and her use of mechanic and software interfaces through the framework of the cyborg in order to draw attention to the fact that, in the act of gaming, the player is a hybrid of her real-world self, the programming of the machine and her virtual identities, with agency distributed between these components. Secondly, we analyse two representative titles, CD Projekt RED's *The Witcher 3* (2015) and 2K Games' *BioShock* (2007), with particular focus on the manner in which they directly problematize the posthuman or analogous themes in their storylines. Ultimately, we argue that, when purposefully designed, digital games offer a unique means to experience the posthuman, which cannot be reproduced in other media.

Keywords: Digital Games; Posthumanism; Cyborg; Interface; Avatar; Philosophical Game Design; Posthuman Narratives.

Diana Melnic, Vlad Melnic
Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
diana.melnic3@yahoo.com
vlad.melnic8@yahoo.com

From their inception in the early 1960s, digital games have fascinated audiences not merely through their ludic qualities or their evermore impressive audio-visual representations, but also through a number of intriguing questions regarding the nature of play and of the player. What is the ontology of the digital game and of the virtual game world? Who or what is the player for the duration of play? What is the relationship between the player's in-game and real-world identities? Briefly intersecting these and similar issues, the present paper aims to examine the posthuman features of digital games and of the experience of gameplay, respectively. To this end and considering the manifold interpretations of the term, we begin with a clarification regarding the manners of posthumanism that are applicable to the analysis of video games. Then, we propose that video games offer a posthuman experience in at least two ways, which are most effective when employed complementary. First, we focus on the nature of digital games as computer programs, accessed by the player with the help of a double interface and extending the latter beyond herself, into a new world, with the potential to experience new selves. Within this framework, we explore the

idea of the player as cyborg, but also that of the player-subjectivity as hybrid between the real-world player, her in-game identities and the programming of the machine itself. Secondly, we approach digital games from the perspective of their narrative or storytelling components in order to show that, in many cases, these directly explore posthuman themes, mirroring, at times, the very experience of play. Albeit this is often the case in science fiction titles, the phenomenon is not restricted to the latter, which we attempt to illustrate in our analysis of two representative titles, CD Projekt RED's *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and 2K Games' *BioShock* (2007). Ultimately, we propose that, when purposefully designed, digital games offer a unique means to experience the posthuman, which cannot be reproduced in other media.

If in 2009, Cary Wolfe had already signalled the multiple, often contradictory uses of the term "posthumanism," then contrasted especially against "transhumanism,"[1] in 2013, an article by Francesca Ferrando published in the journal *Existenz* referred to an additional three schools of thought, all circumscribed by the same umbrella term.[2] In what way(s), then, do we refer to digital games as posthuman? To begin with, a number of titles feature superheroes, mutants or characters with extraordinary powers, which, according to Ferrando, is a defining characteristic of "metahumanity."[3] Additionally, and this is especially the case with science fiction themed video games, "transhumanism"[4] is frequently called into question through various human enhancement applied to both the player character and their adversaries by means of biological or technological developments. The view of the player

herself as cyborg, interacting with a virtual world through machinic extensions and with the help of a specially-designed interface, also falls into the scope of transhumanism. Most importantly, however, digital games offer a posthuman experience in the sense that they displace the human self as the centre of discourse and of agency. If posthumanism approaches the human not "as an autonomous agent," but rather as "located within an extensive system of relations,"[5] digital games, while played, result in a player-subjectivity that belongs neither to the player, nor to the machine, but to a network of components. It is this aspect of the gaming experience that we intend to explore in what follows.

Playing video gaming relentlessly questions our understanding of ourselves as homogenous, well-defined individuals, stimulating us to acknowledge the process of (our) self-becoming, in the Deleuzian sense. To engage with a video game world is to be placed in an extensive system of relations that invites us to actively explore the possibility of inhabiting other places, other subjects and subjectivities, and other temporalities in an experience that narratively emphasizes the state of flux we currently find ourselves in. Through the interface, gameplay urges us to feel, think and behave beyond our real world selves, incorporating us not only in the possible world of a video game, which often occurs in numerous configurations at a given time, but also in the heteromorphic interconnectedness of the digital environment, when we are able to play online. By opening the individual's identity to other selves, gaming can be perceived as "the aesthetic object's liberation from the subject," perhaps even as the "posthuman aesthetic theory put into

practice."[6] What is suggested by Jonathan Boulter in the previous quote is not that certain video games are a way to transcend subjectivity itself, but that the experience of play frequently offers practical challenges to the possibility of a limited, static and singular subjectivity. Besides highlighting a posthumanist liberation of identity from melioristic ideals that may be traced back to Enlightenment thought, the individual player is often met with the idea of transhumanism, becoming a cyborg in a literal, disembodied or biologically enhanced sense. Consequently, in what follows, we will trace some of the ways in which the interface, the process of incorporation, and (self-)identity at play participate in the posthuman experience of gaming.

At a first glance, there is nothing special about a joystick, a monitor, a VR headset, a controller or a mouse and a keyboard. The interface initially seems to be made of nothing but peripherals. To a certain extent this is true, as they are meant to work as input/output for a certain terminal. Without a working console for the controller, a computer for the mouse and keyboard, the same computer for some VR sets or a smartphone for other VR devices, the latter are just empty bodies. However, the first uncanny quality about the boundary of the physical interface is its status of being shared, of demanding an implied participation between the terminal and the user, both of whom are required for the device to fulfill its purpose. When interacting with this "significantly ambiguous border," the human is relocated, redefined as "part of a cybernetic system of information circulation and management."[7] The most obvious ways in which this takes place within video games is through the prospect of

adapting the biological in a way that gives player characters transhuman possibilities. Some of the most illustrative examples in this regard are the S.P.E.C.I.A.L. system of the *Fallout* series, the biomodifications of the *Deus Ex* series, or the transformation possibilities (into vampires or ghosts, for instance) of the *Sims* series. It is important to note that, although intended for the player's use, these authentically cyborgian enhancements are limited by the game world, thereby offering a certain amount and type of freedom, while still maintaining their aspect of *individual customization.* In Boulter's words, game worlds "authorize my experience; I construct myself based on what is given to me."[8]

If without a user, the terminal idles and lacks a semiotic or digital process, without a terminal, there is no functionality. Therefore, besides being shared, this intermediary is also ambiguous, in that it is, like video games themselves, a system created out of the interaction between an artefact and a process. The latter is also part of the interface, whose rendering involves graphics, sounds and motion. Manufactured with the purpose of being used, the technical specifications and design of the peripherals serve to create, as well as demand, a type of interaction. In a sense, this interaction rightly evokes Hayles' posthuman experience, a dream version of the posthuman that "embraces the possibilities of information technology," that "recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of the human being, that understands human life is embedded in the material world,"[9] since they translate the dimension of code, which would be incomprehensible and impossible to work with for the individual player, into "a different reality, one of

spectacular scenography, enhanced abilities, and more or less eternal life."[10] Both aspects of video game interface foreground the individual, bearing their trace in an authentic Derridean way – as designed for something to come (in expectation of human interaction), as something that already took place (the avatar or display bearing the trace of individual customization), and as something mainly defined by others' play experiences. The feedback entertained between the player's avatar or player character and the individual is one of the most distinguishable features of video games when compared to other media.

When the player individual stops noticing both the process and the artefact(s) of representation, ceases to be consciously aware of them, and starts interacting with the game world instinctively, as if it the interface is an extension of their embodiment, a prosthesis, the human and technological are seamlessly fused. The latter case effectively illustrates the posthuman, in Hayles' sense, as a lack of a clear and definite boundary between the biological and technological. Another way to express this transpersonal state of extended embodiment is Mihaly Csikszentmyhalyi's concept of "flow," an experience wherein "concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted."[11] Perhaps the most gratifying aspect of this feedback loop is the occurrence of noticeable change in the game world following human interaction through the interface. The fact that prosthetic interaction brings about noteworthy modifications circumscribes a dimension of agency on behalf of

the player in the transaction between the game and her personal interpretation of it.

Following engagement with the interface, the phenomenon of incorporation further describes the posthuman nature of gaming. Outlined as "the subjective experience of inhabiting a virtual environment facilitated by the potential to act meaningfully within it while being present to others,"[12] incorporation adeptly integrates the concept of noetic engagement, commonly known within game studies as immersion, as well as the dimension of player representation as it appears to other agents currently present within the game world. Immersion, in its most straightforward acceptation, is a fusion between the role of spectator and participant, an invitation to access the fictional world not by means of suspending one's disbelief, but rather by entertaining a feedback loop between user and game world. Given an appropriate interface and a game world that is aesthetically or otherwise engaging for the user, an autotelic activity is created. Drawing on Hans Gadamer's idea of the human always leaving themselves behind at play, which essentially suggests that we are already posthuman while playing, Jonathan Boulter claims that "a third space opens in play, something between player and game."[13] In other words, the contemporary experience of video games generates an internal oscillation between moving away from the body, which grounds the experience of the self, and moving towards the game world, towards one's virtual alter ego, which is at once the same and other.

While sitting at a desk or on a couch, in a room, immersion creates the premise for the player to become cognitively and bodily committed to another world, which

transmutes the locus of her self in a suspended, third space, between real life and game world. Neuroscience sheds additional light on the phenomenon of immersion and its posthuman nature. Developed by Torben Grodal, the PECMA (Perception, Emotion, Cognition and Motor Activation) framework illustrates how media consumption and media interactions may resonate in the spectator. Not surprisingly, it was found that, although "movies are able to trigger the premotor and somatosensory cortex, for instance via mirror neurons, and thus can help viewers feel part of the action in a visceral way, (…) only interactive media trigger our motor cortex directly."[14] Unlike all other media, video games have the potential to engage the player by means of all the stages within the PECMA structure. In order for this degree of immersion to take place, however, it is necessary for the user to both gain intertextual knowledge of the world they are participating in, assimilating it to a certain degree, as well as to become familiar with the interface necessary to access it. A masterful example of immersion, in this regard, is offered by the first minutes of gameplay in Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (2011). The first four minutes and thirty-eight seconds of gameplay, more precisely, are atypical, slow-paced, and riddled with necessary information about the world of Skyrim. Except for the one on-screen tutorial sentence indicating how to look around, the player, at this point, an unnamed character who may have been caught in an Imperial ambush, becomes familiar with her context through dialogue, by looking around, and by paying attention to auditory stimuli. The staging of this scene is carefully performed in a manner than resembles a theatre play. It

becomes obvious that, alongside three other characters, the player's hands are bound and that they are headed for their execution in a horse-drawn cart, in the presence of an Imperial escort. Although two of the other characters can talk among themselves, the user and the third prisoner, Ulfric Stormcloak, the leader of the rebellion, cannot. Within the time span of just several minutes, we find out the most important details about the game world, while building a sense of solidarity with our fellow prisoners also headed for decapitation. Upon reaching the destination, as every other prisoner is called out by an Imperial soldier, their identities are confirmed by other agents of the game world. However, when the player's turn comes up, it seems that their presence there is unforeseen. They do not appear on the list of prisoners, which prompts the soldier to ask: "Who are you?" Thus, the character creation screen is introduced in a way that subtly emphasizes the player's need to create an avatar and identity for herself, but also the need to find a place in this conflict-torn, dragon-ridden, possible world. According to how the customization is performed, as well as the actions and tasks performed by the player, agents within the game will begin to display different reactions to their presence. By the time the introduction is complete, the player is deeply immersed, herself extended into the world of Skyrim and bound to her in-game avatar.

As such, certain digital games urge us to play beyond ourselves, which further participates in the creation of a posthuman experience. To this end, we will expand on the ways in which numerous titles require the user to constantly develop and encounter new subjectivities. This is readily

observable in the case of role-playing titles, which often require the creation of an avatar then confronted with situations that are otherwise highly unlikely or even impossible in real life. In a Lacanian framework, playing through an avatar certifies the flux state of the subject(ivity), as opposite to that of an immutable essence. According to Bob Rehak,

> appearing on screen in place of the player, the avatar does double duty as self and other, symbol and index. As self, its behavior is tied to the player (…): its literal motion, as well as its figurative triumphs and defeats, result from the player's actions. At the same time, avatars are unequivocally other. Both limited and freed by difference from the player, they can accomplish more than the player alone; they are supernatural ambassadors of agency.[15]

This evasive and slippery subject is, in fact, the posthuman self as defined by researchers such as Katherine Hayles or Cary Wolfe, an identity currently decentered by relations such as overlaying(s) with technology and the digital game world.[16] What is more, in addition to the avatar, the interplay can involve numerous other agents. For example, when a *World of Warcraft* raid takes place, the extension of the self into the digital is obviated in a distinct sense, as the player's choices are enacted through the interaction of a server, which may be located in France, and their home terminal. The player is also digitally present in the homes of numerous other people playing the same game, with an acceptable time delay of several fractions of a second. One way to look at this is that the player

is dispersed over a digital environment, present in multiple locations, at different times, sometimes in contrastingly different ways, depending on other interfaces. Her actions during gameplay reflect a distributed sense of agency and cognition, as they are determined by the rules and agents of the virtual world, forces which can either belong to AI, less complicated sequences of code, human beings themselves or any combination of these. Therefore, the player is posthuman while playing not only because she is decentered, but also because her thoughts and actions are distributed in Hayles' sense of posthuman agency.[17]

Nevertheless, when playing as a de-centered identity and making choices in the wake of a distributed process of thinking, does the player experience a dissolution of the self, a disembodiment akin to Hans Moravec's transhumanism?[18] Not in the slightest. Although, at a first glance, it may seem that the self is becoming more disembodied with the addition of prosthetics and the emphasis of cognition, the player is actually integrating limited parts of the virtual into herself. By means of incorporation, the more knowledge a player has of the game world she is traversing, the more she assimilates and internalizes the virtual environment. Since we are never able to perceive ourselves as we *happen*, our self-awareness is always in retrospect. While playing, this "instantiation," as Boulter refers to it,[19] is subject to several technological and digital influences, besides being framed as such by gameplay itself. Neuroscientific definitions of the self are, once more, of use. The self is perpetually instantiated by cognitive processes, since it emerges "when the brain is producing (…) the image of an organism

in the act of perceiving and responding to an object."[20] At least until we are able to observe ourselves living without a body, i.e. from within the network, the corporeal remains *the* fundamental, but not sole, frame of reference for the way we establish an identity. Thus, posthuman gameplay may be viewed as the propensity towards self-actualization against oneself, as well as through other agents and subjectivities, by using an ambiguous interface as a prosthesis, all the while incorporating various possible worlds wherein the individual is part of a network of cognition and action.

If, on the one hand, digital games as computer programs offer a posthuman experience by means of extending the subject beyond herself through a machinic interface, digital games viewed as narratives directly invoke the posthuman in deliberately-themed stories. Even though, to begin with, video games were appraised as solely pertaining to the sphere of entertainment and, therefore, as essentially a waste of time, an increasing number of scholars have argued, beginning with the late 1990s, that the new media is embedded with the potential to create meaningful stories, as well as experiences capable of altering the pre-existing knowledge and beliefs of players.[21] On the one hand, the educational potential of digital games has been demonstrated both theoretically and empirically.[22] In this regard, the latter were praised for their possible use in the classroom, especially due to their interactive elements, their simulation of learning situations, and their attractiveness for students of all ages, genders, ethnicities or educational status.[23] On the other hand, however, the new media can be used for the purpose of knowledge acquisition beyond the transfer of information or the development of certain practical skills. Indeed, digital games have been proposed as possible means to construct and to transmit not only knowledge in a limited sense, but also philosophical ideas.[24] The latter aspect, rather than the former, is of particular interest for the present paper.

In *Parables of the Posthuman*, Jonathan Boulter argues that "games are asking philosophically acute questions."[25] Similarly, in his MA thesis titled *Videogames of the Oppressed*,[26] Gonzalo Frasca supports that not only do digital games convey an ideology through the rules applicable in their respective virtual worlds, but they are also capable of provoking debate and critical thinking on behalf of players, especially through the use of simulation. This perspective is shared by Marcus Schulzke in the article "Moral Decision Making in Fallout," published in the journal *Game Studies*, where the latter rightly argues that "interactivity makes games an arena in which players can experiment with different ways of resolving moral problems."[27] As such, carefully designed games can engage players in complex moral dilemmas, not by teaching morality, but rather by "creating compelling simulations that force players to test their own values,"[28] thereby creating the opportunity for them to gain experience in the evaluation of moral problems and to safely test the consequences of their own actions.[29] In this respect, one of the essential tools uniquely pertaining to the new media is that of "interactivity," which, in relation to video games, can be briefly defined as the player's ability to effect changes in the game and the system's ability to respond to the player's input in a meaningful way.[30] This component of the

gaming experience is particularly relevant for a discussion on posthumanism because, as we will see in the following examples, it may be viewed as a new means to express "the existential relations of the Human with its surroundings."[31] In other words, the fact that digital games are capable of simulating complex, interactive worlds, often riddled with ethical dilemmas, makes it possible for the player to experience her encounter and relation with otherness in a new, meaningful way. Furthermore, as Scott Bukatman assessed in *Terminal Identity*, "whether 'cyberspace' is a real place or not, our experience of electronic space is a 'real' experience."[32] Indeed, when combined with the phenomenon of immersion or incorporation, interactivity participates in the construction of what Kelly Aliano refers to as "prosthetic memory," or memories that were created during gameplay, of events that did not occur in the real world, but that nevertheless have the ability to and, often, do influence the "real" self of the player.[33] Bearing this in mind, we now turn to a brief selection of two video games in order to illustrate the manner in which the new media may offer a posthuman experience through the player's participation in meaningful stories.

In video games, like in other media, posthuman narratives are most commonly featured in science fiction titles, perhaps because the genre itself assumes a "privileged phenomenological status," initiating, by nature, "a process of dislocation which resists the totalization of meaning."[34] Nevertheless, posthuman themes are tackled in several titles well outside of the SciFi sphere, and one of the most relevant examples in this regard is CD Projekt RED's *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), the third and

most recent instalment in a series inspired by the eponymous novels of Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski. At a first glance, *The Witcher 3* is a typical "AAA" role-playing video game, featuring Geralt of Rivia, a digital embodiment of heteronormativity and of Western hegemonic masculinity, as protagonist. The game's main storyline follows Geralt in his attempt to find and protect Ciri, who is a kind of daughter to him, and who is being chased by the Wild Hunt for her unusual powers. In the meantime, Geralt is unwillingly drawn into a number of political and military conflicts, while at the same time dealing with conflicts of a personal, often romantic manner. The setting is a geographical space similar to the Eastern Europe of the Middle Ages, while the story genre is fantasy, rather than science fiction. Even here, however, several aspects of a posthuman nature occur on a narrative level, in addition to the fact that the gaming experience itself may be seen as posthuman.

To begin with, it is notable that the game does not allow players to create their own avatars, but rather invites them to play as Geralt of Rivia, a pre-constructed, well-defined character. If, when playing with an avatar, the player may find it easier to extend a projection of herself into the game world, when playing with an existing character, who can only be customized in minor ways often related to appearance, the player is presented with an entirely different challenge, especially in a role-playing game.[35] Essentially, the player assumes another's perspective or even becomes another in the game world, a phenomenon that is accentuated in *The Witcher 3* by the fact that, at times, the player also embodies Ciri through essential moments of her

storyline. Furthermore, part of what makes the present title unique is the fact that the gameplay is designed in such a manner so as to make the player's decisions poignantly relevant. Indeed, almost all decisions made by the player impact the game world in some way. While some consequences are visible right away, which makes it possible for the player to return to a recent saved game and change her decisions, the effects of her most important choices are revealed at a much later time, which makes them almost irreversible. Overall, the game is immersive and highly interactive, and this allows the player to experience the relationship between self (as Geralt) and otherness, at a time of war and of crisis, where moral choices abound and are sometimes shockingly significant. The consequences of these choices range from something as trivial as Geralt's romantic partner to the political fate of the region and to the survival of several characters, including Ciri. As such, the idea of agency is brought to the fore all throughout the game's storyline, but significantly, it is unclear who is actually making these choices – the player, the programming of the game itself or the in-game protagonist, Geralt. The input of the player is undoubtedly part of each decision, but at any given time, the former can only choose between a limited number of options, which are pre-determined by the game's rules and programming. To make matters more complicated, several players stay true to the idea of "role-playing," and base their decisions, at least in part, on what they believe the character, Geralt, would do.[36] As Souvik Mukherjee describes it in *Videogames and Storytelling*, what occurs here is that choice becomes a "decentred phenomenon: it is not the prerogative of either the (human) player or the machinic algorithm."[37] Rather, the two or three separate entities "occur as supplements to the other," and, as Katherine Hayles observed regarding the implications of the posthuman, cognition and agency are distributed between them.[38]

Within this framework, the player experiences not only the relationship between self and otherness (between Geralt and the game world), but also the very perspective of the other. Indeed, otherness is strongly thematized in the game's various plotlines, especially as a conflict between human and non-human. This is most obvious in the case of the character Radovid, a political and military leader who, together with the Church of the Eternal Fire, attempts to hunt down and burn all non-human inhabitants of the region. Moreover, the hatred for mages, witchers and non-human races such as elves or dwarves is disseminated throughout villages and common folk, and is ever-present in most subplots and quests engaged by the player. As such, although the game's chronotope isolates it from contemporaneity, its storylines aptly reflect real-world issues such as anthropocentrism, speciesism and racism, while at the same time avoiding the direct teaching of one moral code or another. More importantly, Geralt himself is a witcher, which is to say that, during childhood, he was enhanced with superhuman powers by means of painful, quasi-scientific methods so that he may become able to fight off supernatural monsters threatening villages and cities. In the game world, Geralt *is* the other, which further intensifies, on a narrative level, the player's experience of a decentred self. Thus, even though the conflicts emerging in the storyline of *The*

Witcher 3 do not occur between humanity and the technological, machinic non-human, they are nevertheless analogous to the latter in their instantiation of the relationship between self and otherness, which the player can experience from an unfamiliar, twice-removed point of view.

A similar phenomenon occurs in 2K Games' *BioShock* (2007), a science fiction, first person shooter that directly thematizes trans- and posthumanism, and that became famous for its poignant critique of Ayn Rand's philosophy of "Objectivism." The setting of *BioShock* is the underwater city of Rapture, which was constructed in the 1940s by the magnate Andrew Ryan and populated by the latter with people whom he viewed as the "best examples" of humankind. The city was designed as a utopian embodiment of laissez-faire capitalism, where science, industry and art would flourish with minimal involvement from governments or other social agencies. As soon as its construction ended, however, a number of pressing issues began to take their toll. To begin with, construction workers who lost their jobs and were reduced to a life of miserable poverty were utterly ignored by the city's leadership, as per Ryan's philosophy, which demanded that each individual should find their own way to prosperity. Additionally, taking advantage of a loosely regulated market, a ruthless businessman Frank Fontaine began to develop a smuggling empire that would quickly destabilize Ryan's initial utopian goals. When scientist Brigid Tenenbaum then made the remarkable discovery of ADAM, a substance that behaved similarly to stem cells and that could manipulate DNA, cure diseases and enhance human beings, the population of the city quickly

became addicted and businessmen like Frank Fontaine further increased their fortunes through its manipulation and sale. In fact, the substance was so popular that conventional production became insufficient and young girls, dubbed Little Sisters, were abducted to be used in a productivity-enhancing procedure. When Andrew Ryan begins to suspect Fontaine of several crimes, a massive shootout ensues and the city falls into civil war, with supporters on either side. Fontaine fakes his death in the ensuing events and go into hiding, while Ryan takes over the former's empire and production of ADAM. Nevertheless, violence continues, with Fontaine's supporters beginning a guerrilla war against Ryan and the city's security, and the latter instituting a strict, totalitarian-like regime throughout the city in order to ensure "the survival of its ideals." An essential role in the on-going hostilities is played by "splicers," which are remnants of Rapture's human population and the result of ADAM use and addiction. Their bodies and minds are deformed beyond repair, and they are generally controlled by whoever is in possession of ADAM production. Together with "Big Daddies," genetically enhanced human beings specifically programmed to protect Little Sisters throughout the city, splicers thematize precisely the perils of transhumanism viewed as a continuation of unfettered Enlightenment virtues and, therefore, as a "classist and techno-centric movement,"[39] while at the same time epitomizing humanity's fear of the cyborg.

As chaos unfurls below, the player, embodying protagonist Jack Wynand, experiences a plane crash above the North Atlantic Ocean, becomes its sole survivor, and accidentally stumbles upon the entry

point to the underwater Rapture. Here, he begins to hear the voice of Atlas through radio, and the latter behaves as a kind of tutorial and guide for the player, with the promise to assist the player character in returning to the surface. Like *The Witcher 3*, *BioShock* is a game that places emphasis on player choice, while these choices ultimately lead to different possible endings. Indeed, even though the game was marketed as a first-person shooter for financial reasons, the intention of its producers was to develop a role-playing game, so that complex, often disturbing situations that require moral involvement on behalf of the player abound. Only a few minutes into the game, for instance, having no notion of the events taking place within Rapture, the player first encounters a Little Sister. Atlas urges that she be killed by the player, who can then harvest her ADAM, while Brigid Tenenbaum, whom the player is unfamiliar with at the time, begs that the player considers saving the girl's life. As with all digital games, of course, what is offered is only the illusion of choice, since the player's possible responses are pre-determined through game design. However, *BioShock* directly confronts the player with this fact towards the end of the game's storyline, when, after many trials, the protagonist, Jack, finally meets Andrew Ryan. Here, Jack discovers that he is, in fact, Ryan's child, purchased as an embryo by Fontaine Futuristics and "grown" by scientists through a combination of ADAM and mind control imprinting. When Fontaine goes into hiding, Jack is smuggled off Rapture and sent to the surface as a sleeper agent, designed to be activated by the phrase "Would you kindly." The latter, in fact, hijacked the plane he was on initially and purposefully crashed

it into the Atlantic. The voice that had accompanied him throughout the game belonged to Frank Fontaine, who worked under the alias of Atlas, and manipulated the protagonist in order to finally kill Andrew Ryan and take over the city. The same voice had constantly made use of the phrase "would you kindly" to direct the player in their mission. Using the same command, and repeatedly yelling "A man chooses, a slave obeys," Andrew Ryan forces the player to kill his own "father" with a golf club. The player, at this point fairly shocked, has no choice but to bludgeon Ryan to death, according to his programming. The moment is a shuddering one that raises multiple posthuman questions about the nature of identity, of agency, and of humanity's fear of technological and biological enhancement. Most importantly, it potently and violently brings to the fore the nature of the gaming experience itself. Why is it that the player instinctively listens to instructions given by a game tutorial and guide? What is hidden behind these apparently helpful commands? What remains of human agency in the context of gameplay? Has the player really made any choice thus far in this game, or in any other, for that matter?

Ultimately, the posthuman experience offered by both *The Witcher 3* and *BioShock*, and, indeed, by several other titles, results from an ideal interaction of form and content. As we have attempted to demonstrate above, digital games entail a posthuman experience, first and foremost, by means of their unique characteristics of interactivity and immersion. By nature, the new media requires the player to become a cyborg-like entity, making use of a double interface in order to extend beyond herself

into a different world. Here, she may experience a plurality of identities and selves, while at the same time becoming part of a player-subjectivity that consists not only of her real self, but also of the game's programming and of the in-game characters she engages. Agency is no longer centred in the self, but rather distributed across the latter components. Secondly, a number of digital games offer themselves as posthuman through poignant narratives that problematize the self and one's relation to otherness, which we have shown in the analysis of the two above-mentioned titles. This can readily take place in science fiction games that directly tie into trans- or posthuman themes, but also in any other genre capable of exploring in a meaningful manner the nature and the perspective of the other. It is through these two phenomena, we propose, that video games have the unique potential to create truly posthuman experiences for the player and, thus, to open the human to the posthuman.

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