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Blade Runners: Speculations on
Narrative and Interactivity

The 1998 release of Westwood Studio's *Blade Runner* computer game offers a unique opportunity to speculate on a key element of new media forms: interactivity. There are two principal reasons for this: first, the game may be compared to the film -- or rather films -- on which it is based, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) as well as the "director's cut" released a decade later. Aside from the promise of a comparison between film and computer game for providing insight into the differences between narrative and interactive media forms, this exercise is particularly felicitous in the case of the *Blade Runner* films. Jean-François Lyotard's influential proposition in *The Postmodern Condition* (first published in 1979) regarding a dissolution of the legitimizing force of the great narratives of European modernity -- those of universal emancipation, enlightenment, and progress -- precipitated a wider questioning of the nature and function of narratives in the formation of social structures and individual identity.¹ *Blade Runner* has attracted considerable critical interest in this regard as a film that imagines (and images) a dystopian, postmodern near future in which history has emptied out into a

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jumble of cultural, linguistic, and architectural fragments, and in which individual identity is a tenuous proposition, never far removed from indeterminacy and illegitimacy.²

It is in this context of the widespread questioning of the forms and outcomes of the project and progress of Western modernity that the discourse has developed promoting the new media's superior modality of engagement with and between individuals in the guise of interactivity. Discussion of the benefits of interactivity over narrativity has tended to align itself with a paradigm shift toward a postmodern, posthuman situation in which pluralist social formations and multiple identity options succeed modernist ideals of national monocultural identity.³

This enthusiasm for interactivity leads me to my second principal reason for examining the Blade Runner game. It has received a mixed reception in the game-playing community that is indicative, I argue, of an internal tension in the game's adaptation of the film. This tension exists between its interactive and narrative elements. While it has won praise from many quarters (including picking up an Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences Award in the adventure game category), one hard-nosed game reviewer, Ron Dulin, has criticized the Blade Runner game for failing to live up to its promise to revolutionize the adventure game genre.⁴ It was promoted as "the first real-time adventure game" that had "a constantly changing plot" peopled with characters armed with sufficient artificial intelligence to make game play unpredictable and highly responsive to player interaction.⁵ These promises have not been fulfilled, according to Dulin, who argues quite correctly that the game is too "automated" in terms of navigation, the occurrence of key events, and the ability of the player to play with/in the interface.⁶

This criticism of the game as too automated is illuminating. It mobilizes what is the key binary opposition structuring both mainstream and critical discourses on computer-mediated interactivity: that between freedom and constraint. Interactivity is generally presumed to offer greater freedom to the media user, who is no longer simply a passive recipient of broadcast transmissions—no longer constrained by an inability to respond, alter, or otherwise interact directly with the media text. Conventional narrative, with its closed, linear, and predetermined form, is seen as the model instance of constraint against which the new media struggle.⁷

Yet the notion of automation does not only involve the opposition of freedom and constraint. It also refers to the process of regulated mechanical

(re)production, of blind machinic repetition, a process whose polar opposite is the human activity of crafting the handmade item. This polarity is fundamental to the analysis of the modern industrial age of mass reproduction, and it can be seen in the film's narrative and figural preoccupations with various forms of automatons, artificial organisms, and replicants. Indeed, *Blade Runner's* parable of the fate of late capitalist society revolves around the Nexus 6 replicants, "who" represent a terminally unstable machine/human amalgam—"more human than human" is the Tyrell Corporation's motto for the Nexus 6 cyborgs.

Automation, as a production method, does not allow for human intervention or interaction, except in the form of the controller, a veritable *deus ex machina* who prescribes the sequence of actions and who may intervene to halt or correct the course of events in exceptional circumstances. In automated factory production systems the name of the mechanism for this exterior control is the Programmable Logic Controller. As a product at the forefront of interactive gaming, the Blade Runner game attempts to minimize the influence of such prescription by transferring as much control as possible to the individual "interactor," who manufactures the course of events through his or her eye-hand interface with the screen. In its effort to reproduce the design, ambience, and thematic significance of the film, however, the game remains faithful to modes of narrativity and spectator positioning that are commonly associated with the broadcast forms of conventional modern media. Examples of these modes include the following:

1. The game is divided into "acts," which begin and end with connecting sequences that are "cut-scene" animations with no interactive element; the gamer can only watch these scene-setting transitions for clues about the progress of the game's plot.
2. A predesigned narrative chain of events is just waiting to begin regardless of the unfolding of other events in the game's diegesis. For example, some events that occur in the game, like the bombing of the Dermo Design laboratory on DNA Row in act 2, take place only when the player's third-person avatar, the blade runner Ray McCoy, enters the building.
3. The sets have limited scope for interactivity; for instance, McCoy has extremely limited options regarding both the clues he finds (he can collect and sort them in a viewable database but do nothing else with

them) and what he can do with his weapon (he cannot draw it out and fire at anyone or any object, nor can he threaten “figures” with it).

The Blade Runner game, then, can be thought of as caught in a contradictory position in its negotiation of the opposition between interactive liberty and narrative prescription, a position that opens up the possibility of a critique of this opposition. This opportunity is all the more advantageous for the correspondences that exist between the computer game’s intermediary position and the thematic trajectory of the film it has replicated. As Scott Bukatman has pointed out in his British Film Institute monograph, *Blade Runner* is a film in which “the more we see, the more our uncertainty grows.”⁸ It presents a world in which visibility is increased through various technological means (overhead audiovisual surveillance, the Voigt-Kampff test of minute facial reactions, the Esper photo analysis machine, the floating billboards, etc.) but in which the reliability of what is seen is correspondingly decreased: Who is really human? Is Zhora’s pet a real snake or an artificial one? Are Deckard’s photos real or simulated? This uncertainty parallels and magnifies the ambiguity and ethical ambivalence of the narrative’s epistemological project of determining who is human and who is not human and, therefore, who should be killed and who should survive at the film’s conclusion.

Every stage of the game’s replication of the film provides the chance to speculate on the validity of the putative opposition between mechanical repetition (narrative) and innovative creation (interactivity). To say that the game replicates the film is, of course, already speculative in the sense I have just described because the game is not intended to be an exact replica of the film in the literal sense of a precise reproduction. It is nevertheless a “replicant” in the Tyrell Corporation’s use of that term—a copy modeled on an original that is designed to be superior to that original by exceeding its capacities (“more human than human”). The game purports to be “more *Blade Runner* than *Blade Runner*” in that it not only provides the ambience, technologies, and scenarios of the film, but also, through interactive design, immerses the gamer inside the *Blade Runner* milieu with all of its epistemological traps and ethical doubts.

The film’s speculation about whether the blade runner who hunts the replicants is himself a replicant also plays a decisive part in the various narrative branches of the game’s multilinear story structure. In some of its

alternative trajectories the gamer’s avatar McCoy turns out to be a replicant and finds himself being hunted along with the replicants he was seeking to “retire.” Indeed, the interactor can influence this narrative turn of events through his or her initial behavior toward the replicants being investigated. The identity of the detective is a central issue of the film’s interrogation of the nature of humanity in an age of sophisticated technological reproduction and simulation. The game incorporates this speculation as an active element of game play by putting McCoy’s identity itself into play as a key variable in calculating how the game’s events unfold.⁹

In doing so the game thematizes what David Rokeby has described as the reflexive nature of interactive technology and technology more generally. For Rokeby, “a technology is interactive to the degree that it reflects the consequences of our actions or decisions back to us,” so that an interactive technology is a “mirror” of sorts.¹⁰ This mirror is not purely reflective in that it does not only give back a simple self-image to the human user. It also “refracts what it is given; what is returned is ourselves, transformed and processed.”¹¹ For Rokeby, a critical understanding of interactive technology should be sought via exploration of the dialectic between the reflective and refractive instances of the technological mirror, that is, between the mirroring of the user and the transformative impact of technological mediation that “provides us with a sense of the relation between this self and the experienced world.”¹² The *Blade Runner* game offers itself to just such a dialectical exploration through its structuring of game play so that the interactor may or may not be a nonhuman, replicant cyborg depending on their interactions with the game world.¹³

If the game is a mirror, then it provides the opportunity for speculation on the nature of the human/technology relationship and the potential of interactive media to deliver greater freedom and creativity to the individual subject. But as Jacques Derrida cautions, all speculation is a gamble because in its mirroring of other acts and interactions, speculative discourse arrives at a constitutive uncertainty as to its own identity vis-à-vis that on which it speculates.¹⁴ Given the risky nature of this venture, one that I would argue against Rokeby cannot be rendered completely secure by recourse to Hegelian dialectics, but that nevertheless is concerned crucially with the oppositional structure foundational to Hegelian philosophy— that of the self (the human subject) and the objective, nonhuman (technological) other—I offer these necessarily chancy speculations on the nature of interactivity,

borrowing from *Blade Runners* in the hope of profiting from the reflective venture.

To initiate this venture I first want to consider the rhetoric of computer mediated interactivity by recalling briefly the history of the development of computer interfaces. This will enable me to highlight the central role the figure of the child played in the influential discourse that promoted computer-mediated interactivity.

In his account of the progress of virtual reality technologies, Howard Rheingold describes the influential work done by Seymour Papert in the late 1960s and 1970s at the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory on making computers accessible to children.¹⁵ Through the person of Alan Kay, a student of Papert's, this orientation of interface development fed into the work done at Xerox's famous Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) in the 1970s. PARC assembled the research team responsible for inventing the basic components of the graphical user interface or GUI (mouse, icon-based interface). The PARC team used children to test whether their experimental interface designs were effective.

In his book *Mindstorms: Children, Computers and Powerful Ideas*, Papert states that two major themes have shaped his research agenda, namely "that children can learn to use computers in a masterful way, and that learning to use computers can change the way they learn everything else."¹⁶ Writing in 1980, Papert acknowledged the influence on his work of the theories of French psychologist Jean Piaget concerning children as "builders of their own intellectual structures."¹⁷ This notion informed Papert's own aspirations regarding the incorporation of computing in the education system:

In many schools today, the phrase "computer-aided instruction" means making the computer teach the child. One might say the *computer is being used to program* the child. In my vision, *the child programs the computer*, and, in doing so, both acquires a sense of mastery over a piece of the most modern and powerful technology and establishes an intimate contact with some of the deepest ideas from science, mathematics, and from the art of intellectual model building.¹⁸

Mastery over modern technology for the child, and, in time, for all humans is Papert's influential vision for computing. It is presumed achievable

through the transformation of computers from instrumental, noncommunicative adjuncts to established modes of learning to responsive, programmable, interactive model-building machines, the building blocks of tomorrow's "computational cultures."¹⁹ Beyond (or beneath) Papert's pragmatic focus on computing for children as a way of breaking the cyclic reproduction of the anticomputational educational and social milieu, the figure of the child symbolizes here the human potential for growth, improvement, and creative transformation.

One could immediately probe this vision, however, for its ironic dimension: the delivery of mastery to the children is also the murder of childhood per se, for mastery demands responsibility, maturity, and the exercise of calculative, "computational" reason. Viewed this way, Papert's project could be characterized in his own terms as the programming of mastery in children. In this regard, Lev Manovich argues in *The Language of New Media* that the reality of computer-mediated interactivity in contemporary culture responds to a fundamental "demand of modern mass society for standardization."²⁰ What is standardized in the GUI computer interface is an experience of interactivity drawn from a long history of efforts in Western culture and science to analogize interior mental processes. Manovich criticizes the notion that interactivity arrived with new media as a myth, arguing that

all classical, and even more so modern, art is "interactive" in a number of ways. Ellipses in literary narration, missing details of objects in visual art, and other representational "shortcuts" require the user to fill in missing information. Theater and painting also rely on techniques of staging and composition to orchestrate the viewer's attention over time, requiring her [sic] to focus on different parts of the display. With sculpture and architecture, the viewer has to move her whole body to experience the spatial structure.²¹

The design of interactivity in new media forms externalizes the interior, mental processes involved in experiencing and interpreting these traditional art forms in a process that inevitably commodifies mental processes in a computer-dominated mass-cultural milieu. In a move that amounts to a devastating riposte to Papert's ideal vision of the master child of computational culture, Manovich likens this commodification of thought to Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation:

Before we would look at an image and mentally follow our own private associations to other images. Now interactive computer media asks us instead to click on an image in order to go to another image. . . . In short, we are asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations. Put differently, in what can be read as an updated version of French philosopher Louis Althusser's concept of "interpellation," we are asked to mistake the structure of somebody else's mind for our own.²²

We are able to glimpse a crucial aspect of the promise of interactivity in Papert's vision of interactive computing's role in the progress of humankind. The figure of the child's mastery over technology evokes the sense of power that all people experience when they first successfully control the interface of a personal computer. The interactive interface provides a feeling of omnipotence to the first-time user through the seemingly magical translation of intention into action at a distance through the gestures of the hand holding a mouse, or by the voice activating the selection of a menu item or the touch of a finger transforming the entire contents of a screen. This feeling is quickly dimmed as one becomes habituated to the interface in much the same way as operating a television remote control, or even flicking a light switch no longer arouse any feelings of amazement or extraordinary potency in the modern home-dweller.

As is the case with these other devices, the miraculous element of computer use has receded into the background, as the personal computer has become a familiar part of everyday reality in the West. The wonder is liquidated in the banal routinization of the gestures of mouse click and keystroke. For Manovich, the banality of computing in mass culture yields a commodified, externalized, and preprogrammed perceptual and cognitive experience for the user, one in which genuine mastery is illusory. As Slavoj Žižek has argued in his insightful discussion of interactivity and virtual reality, "Virtualization of the Master," however, the insistence with which the user is enjoined by computer design(ers) to become the one who controls the operation as well as the outcome of the computer event has nevertheless undermined the conventional function of mastery today, irrespective of whether it is seen as illusory or genuine. The consequences of this are, in Žižek's view, "far more unpredictable and uncanny than . . . may appear."²³

Žižek mobilizes the eighteenth-century rationalist philosopher and maverick theologian Nicolas Malebranche's theory of Occasionalism in

order to elaborate this conventional function of the "Master."²⁴ Occasionalism attempted to solve the problem of the disjunction between the body and the soul in Cartesian philosophy. The two have no contact with each other, the one being material, the other immaterial. How then, asks Žižek after Malebranche, can their coordination be explained?:

Since the two causal networks (that of ideas in my mind and that of bodily interconnections) are totally independent, the only solution is that a third, true Substance (God) continuously coordinates and mediates between the two, sustaining the semblance of continuity: when I think about raising my hand and my hand effectively raises, my thought causes the raising of my hand not directly but only "occasionally"—upon noticing my thought directed at raising my hand, God sets in motion the other, material, causal chain which leads to my hand effectively being raised.²⁵

Žižek immediately proposes the similarity between Occasionalism and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity by suggesting we "replace 'God' with the big Other, the symbolic order."²⁶ Like the Occasionalist God, this big Other always interposes itself between the network of mental processes in the subject and the experience of external, material phenomena. The symbolic order, acquired in and through the acquisition of language by the "speaking subject," provides the means for representing and making sense of the external, meaningless "real" as the subject's "reality." Just as the God of Occasionalism is not visible to the ordinary perception of the world, the symbolic order imperceptibly provides the field in which the subject perceives both the outside world and its own identity vis-à-vis the outside.

Extending the parallel between Malebranche's God and the symbolic order, Žižek contrasts our "commonplace intuition" about the direct linkage between body and mind with the "far more insightful premise" informing the actions of the "ancient Aztec priest who organizes human sacrifices to ensure that the sun will rise again: the human sacrifice is here an appeal to God to sustain the coordination between the two series, the bodily necessity and the concatenation of symbolic events."²⁷

Malebranche's God (figuring Lacan's big Other) is like a Programmable Logic Controller that never malfunctions, or rather, "He" is like the technician who is always there to guarantee (invisibly) that normal operations

will in any event continue. Alluding to the central role of the “Name of the Father” as principal regulative instance in the symbolic realm acquired through language, Žižek calls Him “the Master.” In another text Žižek, following Lacan, characterizes the symbolic order as a “mechanism” of “senseless, idiotic automatism,” terms which immediately recall our earlier discussion of interactive liberty’s evil other, narrative prescription as automation.²⁸ We can say that in Lacanian terms narrative represents a key modality of the symbolic ordering of events and experiences which would produce meaning (normative, patriarchal, logocentric) through an operation which was itself meaningless and idiotic because mechanical and automatic.

The Master, then, is like an almost perfect computer operating system that almost never crashes. This minimal potential for the breakdown of the coordination of material processes and their symbolic, functional ordering signalled by “almost never” reflects a crucial element in the Lacanian theory of the constitution of the subject’s reality, whereby a “void” or “hole” is immanent in the reality produced by the symbolic. This ever-present “void,” a piece or remainder of the “real” in the subject’s reality retains the potential to destabilize the functioning of the big Other and reveal that our “social reality is nothing but a fragile, symbolic cobweb that can at any moment be torn aside by an intrusion of the real.”²⁹ Despite or, rather, because of this ever-present void, the Master ensures—from an unseen, unnoted background—the regular appearance of reality’s unfolding of events in predictable and meaningful sequences.³⁰ As such, the Master guarantees the experience and significance of reality.

According to Žižek, Virtual Reality technology enacts an occasionalist state of affairs in which the redundancy of the role of the Master in the ordinary course of events is both mirrored and made more explicit. As Žižek states:

When I raise my hand in order to push an object in the virtual space, this object effectively moves—my illusion, of course, is that it was the movement of my hand which directly caused the dislocation of the object, i.e., in my immersion, I overlook the intricate mechanism of computerized coordination, homologous to the role of God guaranteeing the coordination between the two series in occasionalism.³¹

While the ease with which the “intricate mechanism” of the Virtual Reality illusion is overlooked repeats the forgetting of the Master function in actual

reality, at the same time this very repetition becomes apparent to the subject aware of his or her immersion. Žižek’s more general point about computer interactivity is that its constant induction of the user into this contradictory position of both forgetting and being made aware of the function of the Master brings it to a certain crisis and threatens to undermine it. He locates the heart of this crisis in the incitement to mastery underlying the promotion and practice of computer-mediated interactivity. To illustrate this claim Žižek uses the “classic” contrast between narrative and interactive modes of cultural text. In a passage of direct relevance to our discussion of the *Blade Runner* game, he describes the “structural impasse of so-called ‘interactive storytelling’ in which, at every turn of the story, the reader is free to select his or her own version of the events. . . .”³² This situation produces, he argues,

a double discontent in the reader: (1) there is “too much freedom,” too much depends on me, instead of yielding to the pleasures of the narrative, I am bombarded with decisions to be made; (2) my naive faith in diegetic reality is disturbed, i.e., to the horror of the official ideology of interactive story-telling, I read a story in order to learn what “really” happened to the hero (did he “really” win over the coveted lady, etc.), not in order to decide about the outcome.³³

The “official ideology” of interactive storytelling promotes a vision of a reader become teller. It reflects at the level of narrative textual engagement what we have been describing as the incitement to mastery made explicit in Papert’s promotion of a new mode of child interaction with the computer. Raymond Bellour, in “The Double Helix,” characterizes interactivity in a similar fashion to Žižek as “throwing the spectator out of his allotted seat and bringing him [sic] in as an actor, producer, and coproducer of a potentiality.”³⁴ This forcible enlisting of the hitherto deemed “passive” spectator is also linked by Bellour to a passage beyond the traditional mode of image reception in Western culture, a mode that “from Brunelleschi to video, as the last panoptic eye, has concentrated the power to make images around a god who has become more and more absent but always has remained invisibly fruitful.”³⁵

Interactivity’s promotion of the user as master, then, threatens to depose this god who, like the disappearing god of Malebranche, is less and less necessary in the Cartesian rationalist universe, almost redundant in the humanist cosmos of European modernity in which “man” becomes subject

of history and agent of representation. This god's invisible fruitfulness is challenged by interactivity's violation of a "rule" implicit in narrative form, a rule which is crucial, argues Žižek, to the role that narrative plays in constructing and affirming our sense of reality and all that is consequent on that sense, the sense we make of things. How does Žižek formulate this rule? "Master's main role," he says, "is to *state the obvious*."³⁶ When we follow a story, we know it has a determined ending. Why then, would we watch a story that we've already seen? We know what will happen, but we are frequently surprised, or anxious, or happy all over again. It is, says Žižek, "as if, at another level, we were not quite sure that the inevitable would happen again. . . ."³⁷ The Master's function is to close this temporal gap between what should and what will happen. In doing so the Master guarantees one more time the normal sequential order of things, their logical connection and continuity, and thus the apparent inevitability of spatiotemporal reality as it is perceived, lived, and remembered.

The concerted effort of the "official ideology" of interactivity—to promote mastery over the computer, to achieve computational liberation from servitude in traditional forms of cultural production, to become active users rather than passive spectators—undermines the Master. Žižek concludes his discussion in "Virtualization of the Master" by warning of the "unpredictable and uncanny" consequences of this.³⁸ In *The Plague of Fantasies* Žižek discusses cyberspace and the rhetoric of liberation surrounding online forms of communication and community in a similar vein. He claims that "the decline of the function of the Master in contemporary Western societies exposes the subject to radical ambiguity in the face of his desire."³⁹ The subject faces, that is, the void of the real (the meaningless externality that is mediated via the symbolic order in the construction of a meaningful reality) in this suspension of symbolic mastery, whose main function "is to tell the subject what he wants—the need for the Master arises in answer to the subject's confusion, insofar as he does *not* know what he wants."⁴⁰ Here Žižek delivers a critique of the ideology of "cyber-liberation" by positing the essential role the symbolic order plays as a constraint against which the subject can struggle to achieve its desires and exercise its freedom. By insisting that the subject choose everything, invent him- or herself from a total availability of possibilities, communicate and interact with anyone or anything at all, cyber-liberation suspends the operation of the (symbolic) Master with unexpected results:

The vision of cyberspace opening up a future of unending possibilities of limitless change, of new multiple sex organs, and so on, conceals its exact opposite: an unheard-of imposition of radical closure. This, then, is the Real awaiting us, and all endeavours to symbolise this Real, from utopian (the New Age or "deconstructionist" celebrations of the liberating potentials of cyberspace) to the blackest dystopian ones (the prospect of the total control by a God-like computerized network . . .) are just that: so many attempts to avoid the true "end of history," the paradox of an infinity far more suffocating than any actual confinement.⁴¹

While I would concur with Žižek's critique of a total cyber-liberation from the Master, I would like to return to the *Blade Runner* game here in order to speculate on the "uncanny" nature of its partial destabilization of the Master. As outlined earlier, key aspects of the game indicate the incomplete nature of its fulfilment of the "official ideology" of interactivity. For instance, while the player can control the narrative sequence and alter the outcome of the game's story through the game play, there are certain crucial sequences in the game in which "cut-scene animations" take place like movie segments during which the player can only sit back and watch. These sequences are key transitional phases in the game's overall structure into acts and they correspond with new scenes being loaded onto the computer's RAM from disk. These transitional sequences are a necessary convention in adventure and role-play games (such as the *Tomb Raider* series, *Metal Gear Solid*, and the *Resident Evil* series), which stage their action in a number of different fictive spaces.

Narrative structure in the form of scene setting motivated by at least perfunctory causal explanation—and commonly by a more substantial investment in classical narrative features such as character development, relationships with supporting cast, and provision of backstory—is then a somewhat inescapable fact of the genre of the interactive adventure game. The *Blade Runner* game is no exception to this. Transitions between acts involve interactions with other characters that both advance the game's scenario and reveal other information about McCoy's character and his past or present associations with other characters. These sequences vary according to the order in which the gamer has discovered things and accomplished tasks, but also according to the nature of the strategy she or he has adopted vis-à-vis the replicants, namely, whether to play as a "sympathizer" or as a straight "repedetective" intent on retiring all the replicants McCoy comes across. This

basic strategic decision has a number of alternatives that are combinations or complications of the simple choice between two absolute positions. In a way that exemplifies the standardization of computer-mediated interactivity described by Manovich, the *Blade Runner* game provides a range of narrativizations of the game experience that are flexible but drawn from a set of pre-designed alternatives.

The *Blade Runner* game, like all adventure games, is not a pure interactive experience. As such, it does not effect the complete suspension of the Master function, the consequences of which Žižek theorizes. It constrains the gamer by provision of a structure of options for playing the game that delimits his or her goals, strategies, and tactics for achieving those goals. Nevertheless, it has in common with other adventure games and indeed with new media forms in general that it forces the interactor to make a choice at every stage. In doing so, it enacts the incitement to interactive mastery even within this hybrid form still overshadowed by the narrative automaton.

The gamer's relation to the McCoy character-avatar mirrors this hybridity of narrative and interactivity. Game settings allow you to have a limited degree of control over his verbal interactions with other characters—the user can select from a menu of responses and topics of inquiry—or McCoy can be set to respond automatically in one of three registers: polite, neutral, or surly.⁴² As I stated earlier in this essay, the player can alter McCoy's identity between human and replicant from game to game by regulating his behavior toward the other characters. One is limited, however, to the white male "envelope" of the stereotypical noir detective.⁴³

McCoy is an uncanny double of the game player. Like all doubles, he both resembles and differs from the original he duplicates. Familiar but strange, he is seen in third-person view, but he is the gamer's double. In many respects the game is about the problem of "determining" who McCoy is—the problem being, above all, a problem of deciding whether "to determine" means "to find out once and for all" or "to make or create" (as in "self-determination"). But this is an uncanny project that rebounds on the gamer in the era of interactivity when everything must be decided by the subject-master for whom it is no longer possible to "state the obvious" about something so fundamental as, say, one's own identity.

That this most obvious something cannot be readily asserted recalls the familiar psychoanalytic and philosophical scenario of the subject's strange-

ness to itself, a scenario thematized in the *Blade Runner* film through the affinity posited between replicant and human as objects of manipulation, artifice and prostheticized experience. In this regard, the relation of McCoy to the gamer who plays through him corresponds also to the relation of the game to the film. The game is an uncanny double of the film, familiar yet strange. It is like the film in that, as Scott Bukatman has shown, the film provides a sustained encounter with "the metropolitan world" but "under-determines the lessons of that encounter, it effectively undermines interpretative certitudes."⁴⁴ The *Blade Runner* game works in this thematic terrain as well, but its strangeness lies in its extension of this process across media forms from cinematic narrative to interactive computer game. The uncertain spectator is now the unconvinced interactor—both master and automaton of the game's progress and prerogatives. It is in the play that exists between these putatively fixed poles (mastery of the *Blade Runner* universe versus a reiterated entrapment within it) that at one level the gamer plays when inside the compelling recreation of the extraordinary diegesis of the *Blade Runner* film. This play with and between narrative and interactivity is ostensibly a double or nothing bet but the dividend may be neither. To put it another way, the uncanny outcome of the promise of interactivity to arrive at the one who is both subject and master of the computational culture may be the advent of one who is neither—an advent that would also be the return of something familiar.

Notes

- 1 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1979]).
- 2 See Scott Bukatman's discussion of *Blade Runner* in *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 130–37, for an insightful and exemplary instance of this type of reading of the film. He describes the film's representation of the passage of urban space into the "nonspace realm" of cyberspace—that of networks of electronic and digital imaging and communications. History is affected in this collapse of the space of modern urban social forms and events. *Blade Runner* also "enacts first the fission of the subject and then the beginnings of its reconstitution as a terminal subject" (136).
- 3 Examples of this kind of discourse about the promise of "net subjectivity" and new forms of "e-communities" abound in online cyberspace discussion lists, chat rooms and e-journals. For more critically sophisticated and rigorous meditations on this computer-generated paradigm shift in consciousness and social organization, see Sherry Turkle,

- Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), and Allucquere Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).
- 4 Ron Dulin, "Blade Runner," in the online e-zine, *Gamespot*, Adventure Gamespot Review page, accessed 11/7/98, www.gamespot.com/adventure/bladerun/review.html. Other reviewers raise questions about whether the game has revolutionized adventure gaming, but these questions center mostly on the quality of the graphics and the existence of what a film theorist would describe as "continuity errors" in the game's scenes as play unfolds. See, for instance, Martin Cirulis, "Blade Runner," in *Gamecenter* e-zine, Reviews: Adventure and RPG page, accessed 11/7/98, www.gamecenter.com/Reviews/Item/0,6,1295,00.html, and Jeff James, "Blade Runner," *Online Gaming Review* e-zine, Reviews page, accessed 11/7/98, www.ogr.com/reviews/blade_runner.html.
 - 5 See "Westwood Studios Unveils Blade Runner: Real-Time 3-D Adventure Game Based on the Cult Classic Motion Picture," accessed 12/7/98, Westwood Studios Web site, www.westwood.com.
 - 6 Dulin, *ibid.*
 - 7 This conventional understanding of the function of narrative texts in a modern Western cultural framework draws on a 1970s theoretical model of the spectator as passive recipient of ideological impressions conditioned by the normative social milieu and the specific presentational and textual systems informing the consumption of stories within this milieu. In recent years in film studies there have been major critiques of this model of spectatorship arising out of the diverse fields of feminist film theory, the theorization of early film spectatorship, critical and poststructuralist theory, and also in cognitive film theory. While this questioning of the "passive spectator" is undeniably significant in the context of this discussion, my concern is to examine critically a key element of the dominant discourse promoting the development of computer interactivity, namely, the incitement to mastery over the media form and against what may now be seen as the "straw man" of the passive spectator. What is at stake in this struggle against passivity, and the terms in which the struggle is legitimated can best be understood by exploring how this problematic notion of the spectator functions in the discourses promoting interactivity. This exploration will in a roundabout way (via a critique of interactivity as liberty) make connections with some major trends in the rethinking of spectatorship in film and media theory since the 1970s.
 - 8 Scott Bukatman, *Blade Runner* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 11.
 - 9 See Christine Cain, *Official Strategy Guide: Blade Runner* (Indianapolis: Westwood, 1998) which maps out the gamer's options for navigating and influencing the alternative trajectories that ensue from choices made in act 1. On pages 150–51 these options are presented in summary form as a "decision tree" which is essentially a flowchart diagram of the game's narrative branches as they bifurcate from key gamer decisions in the early acts.
 - 10 David Rokeby, "Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media," in *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, ed. Simon Penny (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 133–58, quotation from 133.
 - 11 *Ibid.*
 - 12 *Ibid.*
 - 13 Dulin describes this feature of the responsive structure of the storylines to the gamer's decisions as a "strange sort of anti-Calvanist fatalism that can send the mind reeling if pondered too long" (Dulin, "Blade Runner").
 - 14 See Samuel Weber's insightful discussion in *Institution and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) of Derrida's complex exploration of speculation and the specular in "To Speculate – On Freud," from *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) (1980). In "The Debts of Deconstruction and Other, Related Assumptions," Weber gives an account of Derrida's deconstruction of the assumed stability of the grounds on which one theory/analysis/description assumes a position from which to analyse, delineate, and criticize another theory/analysis/description in order to speculate on its own propositions and demarcate its particularities. Weber cites a question posed by Derrida that indicates the dangers of this speculative, reflective process: "What happens when acts or performances (discourse or writing, analysis or description, etc.) form part of the objects they designate? When they can give themselves as example of that of which they speak or write? There is certainly no gain in self-reflexive transparency, on the contrary. An accounting is no longer possible, an account can longer be rendered, nor a simple report or compte rendu be given. And the borders of the whole are neither closed nor open. Then what is divided?" (Derrida cited in Weber, *Institution and Interpretation*, 107).
 - 15 Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Reality* (New York: Summit Books, 1992), 85.
 - 16 Seymour Papert, *Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 8.
 - 17 *Ibid.*
 - 18 *Ibid.*, 5. Papert's italics.
 - 19 *Ibid.*
 - 20 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 60.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, 56.
 - 22 *Ibid.*, 61.
 - 23 Slavoj Žižek, "Virtualization of the Master," *Lusitania* 8, special issue: *Being On Line: Net Subjectivity*, ed. Alan Sondheim (1997): 178–88; quotation from 187. This essay is something of a crystallization of Žižek's more dispersed and extensive meditations on the subject of virtual reality and computer interactivity in *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997).
 - 24 In *The Plague of Fantasies* (78–80), Žižek recounts that Malebranche was posthumously excommunicated for his "overorthodox" anamorphosis of Roman Catholic theological precepts. For instance, he argued in his *Recherches de la vérité* (1674–75) for an extreme formulation of the doctrine of the fortunate fall: "It is not true that if Christ had not come to earth to deliver humanity, everyone would have been lost—quite the contrary, nobody would be lost; that is, every human being had to fall so that Christ could come and deliver some of them" (79).
 - 25 Žižek, "Virtualization of the Master," 182.
 - 26 *Ibid.*
 - 27 *Ibid.*

- 28 See Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 31.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 30 Žižek argues that this “void” or “hole” or “blot” within reality is paradoxically what supports the symbolic ordering of reality as well as what threatens to undermine it. The symbolic effort of interpreting reality stems from the challenge of the real to interpretation and symbolization. See Žižek, “A Black Hole in Reality,” in *Looking Awry*, 8–20.
- 31 Žižek, “Virtualization of the Master,” 183.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 185. Žižek has himself produced a substantial meditation on the *Blade Runner* films in the context of a psychoanalytic reading of the philosophy of subjectivity from the Cartesian cogito to the postmodern crisis of subjectivity in his *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). See the essay “I or He or It (the Thing) Which Thinks,” in which the theme of a replicant subjectivity acts as a framing device for a detailed critique of this philosophy.
- 33 Žižek, “Virtualization of the Master,” 185–86. Žižek appends a note to this about how “cinema executives obsessed with testing new films through special previews and then frantically re-shooting new endings, etc.” fall prey to the “homologous illusion” that audiences want to control the outcome of films that they see (188 n. 6). He adds that “the utter adaptability to the whims of the public as a rule ends up in failure — what the public wants is a Master capable of imposing his version on it [the film’s outcome], not a pliable servant” (*ibid.*).
- 34 Raymond Bellour, “The Double Helix,” in *Electronic Culture*, ed. Timothy Druckrey (New York: Aperture, 1996), 173–99; quotation from 185.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Žižek, “Virtualization of the Master,” 186.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 39 Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 153.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*, 154. It is by no means clear what Žižek is referring to here by his allusion to “‘deconstructionist’ celebrations of the liberating potentials of cyberspace.” The more rigorous theorists to engage explicitly with Derrida’s work in addressing new media technology—including Samuel Weber, Avital Ronell, and Bernard Stiegler (not to mention Derrida himself)—could in no way be construed as producing celebratory accounts of computing or the Internet. Žižek seems to be using the term *deconstructionist* here to refer to a more vague and partial, if possibly more widespread, interpretation of Derrida’s concept that mistakes it as a synonym for pure relativism and unrestricted polysemy.
- 42 This feature recalls, in a further ironic twist to the human (free) versus machine (automated) problematic we are discussing here, the cyborg Terminator’s response options in regard to a query by someone standing outside his hideout in *The Terminator* (1984): it chooses “Fuck You, Asshole,” one extreme of a paradigm of replies ranging from the polite to the very rude.
- 43 As such, the *Blade Runner* game falls short in regard to one of the most theorized (and publicized) aspects of new media interactions in modes such as Multi-User Domains and

Internet Relay Chat, namely, the ability of people to experiment with different identities in conversations with other “netizens,” particularly via the adoption of different gender roles. This potential to reinvent one’s identity even at the “biological” level of gender would represent the most far-reaching horizon of the promise of individual liberation associated with computer-mediated interactivity, the horizon at which Žižek aims his critique of cyber-liberation.

- 44 Bukatman, *Blade Runner*, 8. In doing so, *Blade Runner* is like all good science fiction argues Bukatman.

Andrew McNamara and Peter Krapp

Introduction

An intense experience must be “forgotten,” “censored,” and reduced to a very cool state before it can be “learned” or assimilated.

—Marshall McLuhan, “Media Hot and Cold”

The question of the medium is today almost totally subsumed within discussions of the mass media.¹ In this context, the medium is always regarded as plural and as a ubiquitous feature of everyday life in the industrialized world. The fact that the mass media constitute such a ubiquitous presence in contemporary life means the issue of *medium*, or *media*, is often thought to arise as a special issue with the advent of mass media. Yet the very issue of the medium became a central concern of modernist art practice almost a century and a half ago. The original impetus of this collection of essays was to reopen this long history of exploration and engagement. To that end, many of the essays collected here scrutinize the role of the medium in fields as diverse as modernist and contemporary art practice, the avant-garde tradition, photography, cinema, and architecture as well as in the more familiar contemporary guises of electronic media, television, and computer games.

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The aim of this collection, therefore, is to explore what considerations such a diverse and long-standing commitment to media brought to our understanding of this pivotal issue. This diversity of approaches uncovers how familiar reflections of the medium remain: many of the essays in this collection touch on a continuing debate that oscillates between values of freedom and constraint. The medium is too often assumed to be a transparent phenomenon that simply transmits meaning from one place to another without delaying or transforming the intended meaning. In political discourse, transparency is an important issue because it goes together with accountability as a central tenet of democratic practice. Is it merely perverse, then, to stress “opacity” as an equally fundamental feature in examining the role of media? This collection of essays suggests not. The issue may be reworked to ask, Can one equate a democratic impetus with the inverse of transparency? Of particular interest here is the way *the visual*—in its many guises—constitutes a core feature of our media image of the world.

This collection asks, What is the status of the visual in these screen presentations? Is the mediated view of the world wholly dependent on specific ideas of what constitutes the visual—that is, the visual as direct and sensuously immediate? And what happens to the question of aura when the concept of media, of the medium, is extended and proliferates? The focus of these questions arose from a series of weekly seminars presented by Samuel Weber at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia, while a QUT Visiting Fellow in July–August 1998. This fellowship was organized by Rod Wissler, director of the Centre for Innovation in the Arts, with the assistance of Andrew McNamara and Toni Ross. The seminars explored approaches to these questions from Plato and Aristotle to the contemporary media scene, and the series rounded off with a weekend symposium, “Medium Cool,” August 22–23, 1998, from which the majority of these essays derive. The symposium sought to explore the theme of the *medium* to coincide with the focus of Weber’s series of seminars at QUT. Of the essays presented in this special issue, those of Keith Broadfoot, Patrick Crogan, Catherine Liu, Rosemary Hawker, John Macarthur, and Lisa Trahair accord more or less with the papers presented at the QUT symposium. Others have changed or shifted substantially in that long interlude. The essays were not intended to engage directly with Weber’s work on the theme of medium, but even with the addition of contributions from European and U.S. scholars, a surprising number of the texts in this collection did find

impetus in Weber's explorations. Thus what was once an implicit engagement with Weber's ideas, particularly, *mass mediaura*, was developed into an explicit focus in drawing together a number of essays by scholars who engage directly with Weber's themes in regard to media.

In "Abstraction and Aura," Keith Broadfoot takes Weber's study and elaboration of Walter Benjamin's ideas about aura as a basis for developing an alternative understanding of modernist art practice—one that shifts the trajectory from a presumption that modern art is the natural consequence of a shift from cultic understandings of art to an ever greater emphasis on exhibition value. If, as Weber argues, aura is the name for an "undepictable *de-piction* of distancing and separation," what is it to speak of painting and aura? Looking at the work of Jackson Pollock, Frank Stella, and Jasper Johns, Broadfoot presents an argument for rethinking the history of modernist painting in terms of how painting successively performs this undepictable *de-piction* of distancing and separation.

The focus of Andrew McNamara's essay is on how the scrutiny of the medium becomes central to the avant-garde's claim to maintain a radically critical regard to the generally accepted postulates of "visuality." In developing the notion of "medium-specificity," Clement Greenberg asks us to grasp art as "opaque." In response, Thierry de Duve suggests that Greenberg means that such identity is grasped in love and confrontation. McNamara ponders why art may be risked in the avant-garde venture, but not judgment (at least, as far as the critics are concerned): in love and confrontation, judgment is preferable on the side of love alone.

In "Bright Shadows': Art, Aboriginality, and Aura," Rex Butler explores Samuel Weber's analysis of Walter Benjamin in Weber's essay, "Mass Mediauras, or: Art, Aura and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin" in order to understand how contemporary Aboriginal art, despite increasingly adopting the look and techniques of tourist-driven kitsch, remains profoundly auratic. It then goes on to explore the way in which the auratic work retains its mystery precisely because of the fact that it is made for us, that we are "put into the picture."

Catherine Liu traces an approach to photography as understood in terms of the family album in "Getting to the Photo Finish: Photography, Autobiography, Modernity." As a genre, the family album provokes reflection on the question of modernity, which Liu pinpoints in the intersection of photography and (or as) autobiography. Between the art photograph and the

snap shot, subtle differences engage the discourses not only of technology and aesthetics, but of history and politics as well. Liu demonstrates this meticulously in reading pictures by Alfred Stieglitz, August Sander, and Liu's immigrant father. By the same token, the speed of photography can not only expose what is invisible to the naked eye, but make visible what the rapid progress of technology tends to suppress as mere dreck—the eradication of which lies at the very heart of photography, as Gerhard Richter's use of the blur shows.

Rosemary Hawker brings a consideration of "idiom," as proposed by Jacques Derrida ("Passe Partout," *The Truth in Painting*) as well as Samuel Weber's discussion of medium theatricality to a discussion of Gerhard Richter's "photopaintings" in her essay "The Idiom in Photography As the Truth in Painting." Richter promises, in his photopaintings, to paint a photograph, as opposed to painting photographically. He does this through the use of visual traits that are idiomatic to the medium of photography, namely, photographic blur and lack of focus. What is idiomatic is what can be observed but not translated. In citing photography in painting, Richter marks out this difference for our scrutiny. For him, the idiom in photography is the truth in painting only insofar as both betray their persistence and mutability.

In "Art in the 'Post-Medium' Era: Aesthetics and Conceptualism in the Art of Jeff Wall," Toni Ross responds to the negative forecasts of the fate of aesthetics within postmodernity offered by Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek. Both see the progressive commodification of culture as diminishing art's sublimating potential: that is, its ability to produce sensory signs of another order in excess of ordinary symbolic and economic exchanges. Jameson therefore judges those currently advocating a return to aesthetics as both misguided and intent on negating the critical and conceptualist legacy of post-sixties art. Examining the interplay of aesthetics and conceptualism in a work by Jeff Wall, Ross argues that his work evades a common opposition between aesthetics and conceptualism, thus maintaining a sublimating capacity for art.

Lisa Trahair takes up Weber's rereading of Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology," in order to examine the role of technology in Buster Keaton's films. In so doing, she attempts to avoid the narrowly instrumental reading of Keaton's work that is common in other commentaries. Exploring the connotations of Weber's retranslating of the Heideggerian

term, *Gestell*, as “emplacement,” Trahair questions the privilege of art as the special arena for reflection on technology and reads Keaton’s comedic treatment of technology, causality, and instrumentalism as offering an alternative to the type of technological worldview Heidegger criticized.

In “Unforgiven: *Fausse Reconnaissance*,” Peter Krapp demonstrates how certain conventions of mass media, specifically the treatment of violence and weather, offer access to what is made forgotten in the unforgiving medium of film. His reading of a Clint Eastwood movie throws into relief the disturbances of cultural memory between fiction, or a past that never was, and the instant replay of “breaking news,” or an immediate present that will never have been immediate nor present.

Georg Stanitzek asks, in “Fama/Chain of Muses: Two Classical Problems of Literary Studies with ‘the Media,’” why some cultural critics still harbor a certain philological resentment against “the media” and “media culture,” even though—or perhaps because—the competence of media studies clearly evolved from within their ranks. His question is not simply what happens to literature in the age of television, but how two discourses about the mass media can be traced back to two ancient positions: rumor and the chain of muses. Exploiting the current between their polarity, he proceeds to switch the TV on and off with Ovid and Plato.

Wolfgang Ernst’s essay, “Between Real Time and Memory on Demand: Reflections on/of Television,” excavates the early history of television in order to put on our screens how it programs today’s and tomorrow’s channels and contents. Advocating media archaeology as a nonhermeneutic approach, Ernst digs deep to restore a sense of the medium and its true capacity. He seeks to liberate media studies from a traditional fixation on programs as content, and to begin deciphering media and their effects as functions of programming in the sense of computer science.

Patrick Crogan analyzes the theme of interactivity, in his essay “Blade Runners: Speculations on Narrative and Interactivity,” by comparing the Blade Runner computer adventure game with the classic postmodern film on which it is based. He critically examines a common assumption in discourses on new media that equates interactivity with liberation from the bonds of narrative. In critically exploring this presumption, Crogan investigates similar claims regarding interactivity made in regard to the Blade Runner game as well as in terms of a postmodern, posthuman interface.

Georg Christoph Tholen delineates how the ceaseless shifting of meta-

phors complicates the work of media studies in his essay “Media Metaphorology: Irritations in the Epistemic Field of Media Studies.” Taking up Samuel Weber’s concern with “taking place,” he demonstrates that the way we situate media, how we pose and ponder the question about the location of the medium, necessarily transforms the relation between concepts and metaphors of media. Once all media become digitalized and subsumed in the notion of a purported “universal medium”—the personal computer—the postdramatic mediality of the medium is performed by ghostly interfaces and surfaces.

John Macarthur considers the role of the visual image in architecture by examining instances of contemporary architecture that include a program of applied imagery. Looking at the interplay of architecture and the visual art, Macarthur surprises the reader by developing some key insights about the nature of the architectural medium. He argues that architects such as Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron use images as the material for an architectural work in the same manner that another architect might select glass or steel. At stake in such architectural work are both the techniques for working with images at the level of their materiality and the intermediary space of the visual. Furthermore, Macarthur contrasts the general phenomenology implied by “visual cultures” with the material and historical variability that has been envisaged in art and architecture.

Two contributions appear from Samuel Weber. One is an interview that deals with many principal themes in Weber’s work, particularly his focus on media and the medium. The other develops some of the same concerns in a meditation on the events of September 11, including its media fallout, which Weber reads as part and parcel of the terrorist attacks. He explores their interaction by showing how spectacle is intrinsic to both the “War against Terrorism” and the acts of terrorism. For Weber, this confluence in a highly ambivalent media spectacle marks a truly significant aspect of “9/11.”

Although arguably “in the jumbo jet, media are more densely connected than in most places,” they remain divided into two areas of competence. Computers, radar, diode displays, radio beacons, nonpublic channels are at the disposal of a necessarily interactive crew, while passengers are restricted to audio tape, film, and airline “cuisine”—one-way consumption, with the notable exception of the in-flight telephone.² To different degrees, then, one may opt to be partially disconnected from the experience of flight by canned media, or one may attempt to brave the tasks of navigation and service with

multiple connections. This amassing of all media in one place can deliver any message—even the final message that is the bomb. Yet to passengers and crew, and by extension to all of us living in media society, the direction our sensurround takes us is not always evident.

Attention to such contexts allows for an inquiry into “the media” as a quest to circumscribe a discourse without author: a discourse that no longer advertises its desire, following different and diffuse rules of sending and receiving. Beyond communicating one-to-one, one-to-many, or even many-to-one, the logic of the media transforms the context of observation into a network of “many-to-many.” In this way, technical media become suspect precisely because they have, or because they are, power—and because their power is ubiquitous and inescapable. To gain perspective on them, to interpret them, one cannot simply travel or relocate, run away or hide. There is no source, no center, no origin to the network that ceaselessly circulates, reproduces, and amplifies information. Thus to seek understanding, to halt and interpret, to read and communicate competently may become possible only if the observation of media structures, and media effects, is organized by a heightened attention to one’s own situation in observing, in the sense that one remains suspicious of suspicions.³ Media studies would momentarily suspend the sensurround: and it is this mode of interruption that gives rise to the insights of media studies, to a medium’s readability, citability, to the stutter of paraphrases. In exploring “what it means to be *situated* in and by a world organized by ‘the media,’” Weber suggests “nothing more or less than acknowledging what has probably always obtained: that we only take place, from time to time, between places rather than in them, in the instant of an intervening interval.”⁴

Notes

- 1 The quotation by Marshall McLuhan that opens this introduction is from McLuhan, “Media Hot and Cold,” in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 32.
- 2 Friedrich Kittler’s remarks regarding the airline industry can be found in the first translation of his preface to *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). This version appeared in *October* 41 (1987): 101–18, and was reprinted in Friedrich Kittler, *Literature Media Information Systems*, ed. John Johnston (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1997), 28–49; quotation from 32. Inexplicably, however, this paragraph is missing from the translation of the entire book (2).
- 3 Samuel M. Weber, “Fellowship,” *Grosz/Jung/Grosz*, ed. Günter Bose and Erich Brink-

mann (Berlin: Brinkmann and Bose, 1980), 159–72. See also Weber's introduction to his influential 1973 German edition of Schreber's memoirs, translated in Daniel Paul Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), vii–liv, which in turn has had a profound influence on media studies in general and scholars such as Kittler in particular.

- 4 Samuel M. Weber, "‘Between a Human Life and a Word’: Benjamin's Excitable Gestures," in *Mediatized Drama, Dramatized Media*, ed. Eckart Voigts-Virchow (Trier: WVT, 2000), 15–30; quotation from 30.

Patrick Crogan

Blade Runners: Speculations on
Narrative and Interactivity

The 1998 release of Westwood Studio's *Blade Runner* computer game offers a unique opportunity to speculate on a key element of new media forms: interactivity. There are two principal reasons for this: first, the game may be compared to the film—or rather films—on which it is based, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) as well as the “director's cut” released a decade later. Aside from the promise of a comparison between film and computer game for providing insight into the differences between narrative and interactive media forms, this exercise is particularly felicitous in the case of the *Blade Runner* films. Jean-François Lyotard's influential proposition in *The Postmodern Condition* (first published in 1979) regarding a dissolution of the legitimizing force of the great narratives of European modernity—those of universal emancipation, enlightenment, and progress—precipitated a wider questioning of the nature and function of narratives in the formation of social structures and individual identity.¹ *Blade Runner* has attracted considerable critical interest in this regard as a film that imagines (and images) a dystopian, postmodern near future in which history has emptied out into a

jumble of cultural, linguistic, and architectural fragments, and in which individual identity is a tenuous proposition, never far removed from indeterminacy and illegitimacy.²

It is in this context of the widespread questioning of the forms and outcomes of the project and progress of Western modernity that the discourse has developed promoting the new media's superior modality of engagement with and between individuals in the guise of interactivity. Discussion of the benefits of interactivity over narrativity has tended to align itself with a paradigm shift toward a postmodern, posthuman situation in which pluralist social formations and multiple identity options succeed modernist ideals of national monocultural identity.³

This enthusiasm for interactivity leads me to my second principal reason for examining the *Blade Runner* game. It has received a mixed reception in the game-playing community that is indicative, I argue, of an internal tension in the game's adaptation of the film. This tension exists between its interactive and narrative elements. While it has won praise from many quarters (including picking up an Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences Award in the adventure game category), one hard-nosed game reviewer, Ron Dulin, has criticized the *Blade Runner* game for failing to live up to its promise to revolutionize the adventure game genre.⁴ It was promoted as "the first real-time adventure game" that had "a constantly changing plot" peopled with characters armed with sufficient artificial intelligence to make game play unpredictable and highly responsive to player interaction.⁵ These promises have not been fulfilled, according to Dulin, who argues quite correctly that the game is too "automated" in terms of navigation, the occurrence of key events, and the ability of the player to play with/in the interface.⁶

This criticism of the game as too automated is illuminating. It mobilizes what is the key binary opposition structuring both mainstream and critical discourses on computer-mediated interactivity: that between freedom and constraint. Interactivity is generally presumed to offer greater freedom to the media user, who is no longer simply a passive recipient of broadcast transmissions—no longer constrained by an inability to respond, alter, or otherwise interact directly with the media text. Conventional narrative, with its closed, linear, and predetermined form, is seen as the model instance of constraint against which the new media struggle.⁷

Yet the notion of automation does not only involve the opposition of freedom and constraint. It also refers to the process of regulated mechanical

(re)production, of blind machinic repetition, a process whose polar opposite is the human activity of crafting the handmade item. This polarity is fundamental to the analysis of the modern industrial age of mass reproduction, and it can be seen in the film's narrative and figural preoccupations with various forms of automatons, artificial organisms, and replicants. Indeed, *Blade Runner's* parable of the fate of late capitalist society revolves around the Nexus 6 replicants, "who" represent a terminally unstable machine/human amalgam—"more human than human" is the Tyrell Corporation's motto for the Nexus 6 cyborgs.

Automation, as a production method, does not allow for human intervention or interaction, except in the form of the controller, a veritable *deus ex machina* who prescribes the sequence of actions and who may intervene to halt or correct the course of events in exceptional circumstances. In automated factory production systems the name of the mechanism for this exterior control is the Programmable Logic Controller. As a product at the forefront of interactive gaming, the *Blade Runner* game attempts to minimize the influence of such prescription by transferring as much control as possible to the individual "interactor," who manufactures the course of events through his or her eye-hand interface with the screen. In its effort to reproduce the design, ambience, and thematic significance of the film, however, the game remains faithful to modes of narrativity and spectator positioning that are commonly associated with the broadcast forms of conventional modern media. Examples of these modes include the following:

1. The game is divided into "acts," which begin and end with connecting sequences that are "cut-scene" animations with no interactive element; the gamer can only watch these scene-setting transitions for clues about the progress of the game's plot.
2. A predesigned narrative chain of events is just waiting to begin regardless of the unfolding of other events in the game's diegesis. For example, some events that occur in the game, like the bombing of the Dermo Design laboratory on DNA Row in act 2, take place only when the player's third-person avatar, the blade runner Ray McCoy, enters the building.
3. The sets have limited scope for interactivity; for instance, McCoy has extremely limited options regarding both the clues he finds (he can collect and sort them in a viewable database but do nothing else with

them) and what he can do with his weapon (he cannot draw it out and fire at anyone or any object, nor can he threaten “figures” with it).

The *Blade Runner* game, then, can be thought of as caught in a contradictory position in its negotiation of the opposition between interactive liberty and narrative prescription, a position that opens up the possibility of a critique of this opposition. This opportunity is all the more advantageous for the correspondences that exist between the computer game’s intermediary position and the thematic trajectory of the film it has replicated. As Scott Bukatman has pointed out in his British Film Institute monograph, *Blade Runner* is a film in which “the more we see, the more our uncertainty grows.”⁸ It presents a world in which visibility is increased through various technological means (overhead audiovisual surveillance, the Voigt-Kampff test of minute facial reactions, the Esper photo analysis machine, the floating billboards, etc.) but in which the reliability of what is seen is correspondingly decreased: Who is really human? Is Zhora’s pet a real snake or an artificial one? Are Deckard’s photos real or simulated? This uncertainty parallels and magnifies the ambiguity and ethical ambivalence of the narrative’s epistemological project of determining who is human and who is not human and, therefore, who should be killed and who should survive at the film’s conclusion.

Every stage of the game’s replication of the film provides the chance to speculate on the validity of the putative opposition between mechanical repetition (narrative) and innovative creation (interactivity). To say that the game replicates the film is, of course, already speculative in the sense I have just described because the game is not intended to be an exact replica of the film in the literal sense of a precise reproduction. It is nevertheless a “replicant” in the Tyrell Corporation’s use of that term—a copy modeled on an original that is designed to be superior to that original by exceeding its capacities (“more human than human”). The game purports to be “more *Blade Runner* than *Blade Runner*” in that it not only provides the ambience, technologies, and scenarios of the film, but also, through interactive design, immerses the gamer inside the *Blade Runner* milieu with all of its epistemological traps and ethical doubts.

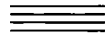
The film’s speculation about whether the blade runner who hunts the replicants is himself a replicant also plays a decisive part in the various narrative branches of the game’s multilinear story structure. In some of its

alternative trajectories the gamer's avatar McCoy turns out to be a replicant and finds himself being hunted along with the replicants he was seeking to "retire." Indeed, the interactor can influence this narrative turn of events through his or her initial behavior toward the replicants being investigated. The identity of the detective is a central issue of the film's interrogation of the nature of humanity in an age of sophisticated technological reproduction and simulation. The game incorporates this speculation as an active element of game play by putting McCoy's identity itself into play as a key variable in calculating how the game's events unfold.⁹

In doing so the game thematizes what David Rokeby has described as the reflexive nature of interactive technology and technology more generally. For Rokeby, "a technology is interactive to the degree that it reflects the consequences of our actions or decisions back to us," so that an interactive technology is a "mirror" of sorts.¹⁰ This mirror is not purely reflective in that it does not only give back a simple self-image to the human user. It also "*refracts* what it is given; what is returned is ourselves, transformed and processed."¹¹ For Rokeby, a critical understanding of interactive technology should be sought via exploration of the dialectic between the reflective and refractive instances of the technological mirror, that is, between the mirroring of the user and the transformative impact of technological mediation that "provides us with a sense of the relation between this self and the experienced world."¹² The *Blade Runner* game offers itself to just such a dialectical exploration through its structuring of game play so that the interactor may or may not be a nonhuman, replicant cyborg depending on their interactions with the game world.¹³

If the game is a mirror, then it provides the opportunity for speculation on the nature of the human/technology relationship and the potential of interactive media to deliver greater freedom and creativity to the individual subject. But as Jacques Derrida cautions, all speculation is a gamble because in its mirroring of other acts and interactions, speculative discourse arrives at a constitutive uncertainty as to its own identity vis-à-vis that on which it speculates.¹⁴ Given the risky nature of this venture, one that I would argue against Rokeby cannot be rendered completely secure by recourse to Hegelian dialectics, but that nevertheless is concerned crucially with the oppositional structure foundational to Hegelian philosophy—that of the self (the human subject) and the objective, nonhuman (technological) other—I offer these necessarily chancy speculations on the nature of interactivity,

borrowing from *Blade Runners* in the hope of profiting from the reflective venture.



To initiate this venture I first want to consider the rhetoric of computer mediated interactivity by recalling briefly the history of the development of computer interfaces. This will enable me to highlight the central role the figure of the child played in the influential discourse that promoted computer-mediated interactivity.

In his account of the progress of virtual reality technologies, Howard Rheingold describes the influential work done by Seymour Papert in the late 1960s and 1970s at the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory on making computers accessible to children.¹⁵ Through the person of Alan Kay, a student of Papert's, this orientation of interface development fed into the work done at Xerox's famous Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) in the 1970s. PARC assembled the research team responsible for inventing the basic components of the graphical user interface or GUI (mouse, icon-based interface). The PARC team used children to test whether their experimental interface designs were effective.

In his book *Mindstorms: Children, Computers and Powerful Ideas*, Papert states that two major themes have shaped his research agenda, namely "that children can learn to use computers in a masterful way, and that learning to use computers can change the way they learn everything else."¹⁶ Writing in 1980, Papert acknowledged the influence on his work of the theories of French psychologist Jean Piaget concerning children as "builders of their own intellectual structures."¹⁷ This notion informed Papert's own aspirations regarding the incorporation of computing in the education system:

In many schools today, the phrase "computer-aided instruction" means making the computer teach the child. One might say the *computer is being used to program* the child. In my vision, *the child programs the computer*, and, in doing so, both acquires a sense of mastery over a piece of the most modern and powerful technology and establishes an intimate contact with some of the deepest ideas from science, mathematics, and from the art of intellectual model building.¹⁸

Mastery over modern technology for the child, and, in time, for all humans is Papert's influential vision for computing. It is presumed achievable

through the transformation of computers from instrumental, noncommunicative adjuncts to established modes of learning to responsive, programmable, interactive model-building machines, the building blocks of tomorrow's "computational cultures."¹⁹ Beyond (or beneath) Papert's pragmatic focus on computing for children as a way of breaking the cyclic reproduction of the anticomputational educational and social milieu, the figure of the child symbolizes here the human potential for growth, improvement, and creative transformation.

One could immediately probe this vision, however, for its ironic dimension: the delivery of mastery to the children is also the murder of childhood per se, for mastery demands responsibility, maturity, and the exercise of calculative, "computational" reason. Viewed this way, Papert's project could be characterized in his own terms as the programming of mastery in children. In this regard, Lev Manovich argues in *The Language of New Media* that the reality of computer-mediated interactivity in contemporary culture responds to a fundamental "demand of modern mass society for standardization."²⁰ What is standardized in the GUI computer interface is an experience of interactivity drawn from a long history of efforts in Western culture and science to analogize interior mental processes. Manovich criticizes the notion that interactivity arrived with new media as a myth, arguing that

all classical, and even more so modern, art is "interactive" in a number of ways. Ellipses in literary narration, missing details of objects in visual art, and other representational "shortcuts" require the user to fill in missing information. Theater and painting also rely on techniques of staging and composition to orchestrate the viewer's attention over time, requiring her [sic] to focus on different parts of the display. With sculpture and architecture, the viewer has to move her whole body to experience the spatial structure.²¹

The design of interactivity in new media forms externalizes the interior, mental processes involved in experiencing and interpreting these traditional art forms in a process that inevitably commodifies mental processes in a computer-dominated mass-cultural milieu. In a move that amounts to a devastating riposte to Papert's ideal vision of the master child of computational culture, Manovich likens this commodification of thought to Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation:

Before we would look at an image and mentally follow our own private associations to other images. Now interactive computer media asks us instead to click on an image in order to go to another image. . . . In short, we are asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations. Put differently, in what can be read as an updated version of French philosopher Louis Althusser's concept of "interpellation," we are asked to mistake the structure of somebody else's mind for our own.²²

We are able to glimpse a crucial aspect of the promise of interactivity in Papert's vision of interactive computing's role in the progress of humankind. The figure of the child's mastery over technology evokes the sense of power that all people experience when they first successfully control the interface of a personal computer. The interactive interface provides a feeling of omnipotence to the first-time user through the seemingly magical translation of intention into action at a distance through the gestures of the hand holding a mouse, or by the voice activating the selection of a menu item or the touch of a finger transforming the entire contents of a screen. This feeling is quickly dimmed as one becomes habituated to the interface in much the same way as operating a television remote control, or even flicking a light switch no longer arouse any feelings of amazement or extraordinary potency in the modern home-dweller.

As is the case with these other devices, the miraculous element of computer use has receded into the background, as the personal computer has become a familiar part of everyday reality in the West. The wonder is liquidated in the banal routinization of the gestures of mouse click and keystroke. For Manovich, the banality of computing in mass culture yields a commodified, externalized, and preprogrammed perceptual and cognitive experience for the user, one in which genuine mastery is illusory. As Slavoj Žižek has argued in his insightful discussion of interactivity and virtual reality, "Virtualization of the Master," however, the insistence with which the user is enjoined by computer design(ers) to become the one who controls the operation as well as the outcome of the computer event has nevertheless undermined the conventional function of mastery today, irrespective of whether it is seen as illusory or genuine. The consequences of this are, in Žižek's view, "far more unpredictable and uncanny than . . . may appear."²³

Žižek mobilizes the eighteenth-century rationalist philosopher and maverick theologian Nicolas Malebranche's theory of Occasionalism in

order to elaborate this conventional function of the “Master.”²⁴ Occasionalism attempted to solve the problem of the disjunction between the body and the soul in Cartesian philosophy. The two have no contact with each other, the one being material, the other immaterial. How then, asks Žižek after Malebranche, can their coordination be explained?:

Since the two causal networks (that of ideas in my mind and that of bodily interconnections) are totally independent, the only solution is that a third, true Substance (God) continuously coordinates and mediates between the two, sustaining the semblance of continuity: when I think about raising my hand and my hand effectively raises, my thought causes the raising of my hand not directly but only “occasionally” — upon noticing my thought directed at raising my hand, God sets in motion the other, material, causal chain which leads to my hand effectively being raised.²⁵

Žižek immediately proposes the similarity between Occasionalism and Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity by suggesting we “replace ‘God’ with the big Other, the symbolic order.”²⁶ Like the Occasionalist God, this big Other always interposes itself between the network of mental processes in the subject and the experience of external, material phenomena. The symbolic order, acquired in and through the acquisition of language by the “speaking subject,” provides the means for representing and making sense of the external, meaningless “real” as the subject’s “reality.” Just as the God of Occasionalism is not visible to the ordinary perception of the world, the symbolic order imperceptibly provides the field in which the subject perceives both the outside world and its own identity vis-à-vis the outside.

Extending the parallel between Malebranche’s God and the symbolic order, Žižek contrasts our “commonplace intuition” about the direct linkage between body and mind with the “far more insightful premise” informing the actions of the “ancient Aztec priest who organizes human sacrifices to ensure that the sun will rise again: the human sacrifice is here an appeal to God to sustain the coordination between the two series, the bodily necessity and the concatenation of symbolic events.”²⁷

Malebranche’s God (figuring Lacan’s big Other) is like a Programmable Logic Controller that never malfunctions, or rather, “He” is like the technician who is always there to guarantee (invisibly) that normal operations

will in any event continue. Alluding to the central role of the “Name of the Father” as principal regulative instance in the symbolic realm acquired through language, Žižek calls Him “the Master.” In another text Žižek, following Lacan, characterizes the symbolic order as a “mechanism” of “senseless, idiotic automatism,” terms which immediately recall our earlier discussion of interactive liberty’s evil other, narrative prescription as automation.²⁸ We can say that in Lacanian terms narrative represents a key modality of the symbolic ordering of events and experiences which would produce meaning (normative, patriarchal, logocentric) through an operation which was itself meaningless and idiotic because mechanical and automatic.

The Master, then, is like an almost perfect computer operating system that almost never crashes. This minimal potential for the breakdown of the coordination of material processes and their symbolic, functional ordering signalled by “almost never” reflects a crucial element in the Lacanian theory of the constitution of the subject’s reality, whereby a “void” or “hole” is immanent in the reality produced by the symbolic. This ever-present “void,” a piece or remainder of the “real” in the subject’s reality retains the potential to destabilize the functioning of the big Other and reveal that our “social reality is nothing but a fragile, symbolic cobweb that can at any moment be torn aside by an intrusion of the real.”²⁹ Despite or, rather, because of this ever-present void, the Master ensures—from an unseen, unnoted background—the regular appearance of reality’s unfolding of events in predictable and meaningful sequences.³⁰ As such, the Master guarantees the experience and significance of reality.

According to Žižek, Virtual Reality technology enacts an occasionalist state of affairs in which the redundancy of the role of the Master in the ordinary course of events is both mirrored and made more explicit. As Žižek states:

When I raise my hand in order to push an object in the virtual space, this object effectively moves—my illusion, of course, is that it was the movement of my hand which directly caused the dislocation of the object, i.e., in my immersion, I overlook the intricate mechanism of computerized coordination, homologous to the role of God guaranteeing the coordination between the two series in occasionalism.³¹

While the ease with which the “intricate mechanism” of the Virtual Reality illusion is overlooked repeats the forgetting of the Master function in actual

reality, at the same time this very repetition becomes apparent to the subject aware of his or her immersion. Žižek's more general point about computer interactivity is that its constant induction of the user into this contradictory position of both forgetting and being made aware of the function of the Master brings it to a certain crisis and threatens to undermine it. He locates the heart of this crisis in the incitement to mastery underlying the promotion and practice of computer-mediated interactivity. To illustrate this claim Žižek uses the "classic" contrast between narrative and interactive modes of cultural text. In a passage of direct relevance to our discussion of the Blade Runner game, he describes the "structural impasse of so-called 'interactive storytelling' in which, at every turn of the story, the reader is free to select his or her own version of the events. . . ." ³² This situation produces, he argues,

a double discontent in the reader: (1) there is "too much freedom," too much depends on me, instead of yielding to the pleasures of the narrative, I am bombarded with decisions to be made; (2) my naive faith in diegetic reality is disturbed, i.e., to the horror of the official ideology of interactive story-telling, I read a story in order to learn what "really" happened to the hero (did he "really" win over the coveted lady, etc.), not in order to decide about the outcome. ³³

The "official ideology" of interactive storytelling promotes a vision of a reader become teller. It reflects at the level of narrative textual engagement what we have been describing as the incitement to mastery made explicit in Papert's promotion of a new mode of child interaction with the computer. Raymond Bellour, in "The Double Helix," characterizes interactivity in a similar fashion to Žižek as "throwing the spectator out of his allotted seat and bringing him [sic] in as an actor, producer, and coproducer of a potentiality." ³⁴ This forcible enlisting of the hitherto deemed "passive" spectator is also linked by Bellour to a passage beyond the traditional mode of image reception in Western culture, a mode that "from Brunelleschi to video, as the last panoptic eye, has concentrated the power to make images around a god who has become more and more absent but always has remained invisibly fruitful." ³⁵

Interactivity's promotion of the user as master, then, threatens to depose this god who, like the disappearing god of Malebranche, is less and less necessary in the Cartesian rationalist universe, almost redundant in the humanist cosmos of European modernity in which "man" becomes subject

of history and agent of representation. This god's invisible fruitfulness is challenged by interactivity's violation of a "rule" implicit in narrative form, a rule which is crucial, argues Žižek, to the role that narrative plays in constructing and affirming our sense of reality and all that is consequent on that sense, the sense we make of things. How does Žižek formulate this rule? "Master's main role," he says, "is to *state the obvious*."³⁶ When we follow a story, we know it has a determined ending. Why then, would we watch a story that we've already seen? We know what will happen, but we are frequently surprised, or anxious, or happy all over again. It is, says Žižek, "as if, at another level, we were not quite sure that the inevitable would happen again. . . ."³⁷ The Master's function is to close this temporal gap between what should and what will happen. In doing so the Master guarantees one more time the normal sequential order of things, their logical connection and continuity, and thus the apparent inevitability of spatiotemporal reality as it is perceived, lived, and remembered.

The concerted effort of the "official ideology" of interactivity—to promote mastery over the computer, to achieve computational liberation from servitude in traditional forms of cultural production, to become active users rather than passive spectators—undermines the Master. Žižek concludes his discussion in "Virtualization of the Master" by warning of the "unpredictable and uncanny" consequences of this.³⁸ In *The Plague of Fantasies* Žižek discusses cyberspace and the rhetoric of liberation surrounding online forms of communication and community in a similar vein. He claims that "the decline of the function of the Master in contemporary Western societies exposes the subject to radical ambiguity in the face of his desire."³⁹ The subject faces, that is, the void of the real (the meaningless externality that is mediated via the symbolic order in the construction of a meaningful reality) in this suspension of symbolic mastery, whose main function "is to tell the subject what he wants—the need for the Master arises in answer to the subject's confusion, insofar as he does *not* know what he wants."⁴⁰ Here Žižek delivers a critique of the ideology of "cyber-liberation" by positing the essential role the symbolic order plays as a constraint against which the subject can struggle to achieve its desires and exercise its freedom. By insisting that the subject choose everything, invent him- or herself from a total availability of possibilities, communicate and interact with anyone or anything at all, cyber-liberation suspends the operation of the (symbolic) Master with unexpected results:

The vision of cyberspace opening up a future of unending possibilities of limitless change, of new multiple sex organs, and so on, conceals its exact opposite: an unheard-of imposition of radical closure. This, then, is the Real awaiting us, and all endeavours to symbolise this Real, from utopian (the New Age or “deconstructionist” celebrations of the liberating potentials of cyberspace) to the blackest dystopian ones (the prospect of the total control by a God-like computerized network . . .) are just that: so many attempts to avoid the true “end of history,” the paradox of an infinity far more suffocating than any actual confinement.⁴¹

While I would concur with Žižek’s critique of a total cyber-liberation from the Master, I would like to return to the *Blade Runner* game here in order to speculate on the “uncanny” nature of its partial destabilization of the Master. As outlined earlier, key aspects of the game indicate the incomplete nature of its fulfilment of the “official ideology” of interactivity. For instance, while the player can control the narrative sequence and alter the outcome of the game’s story through the game play, there are certain crucial sequences in the game in which “cut-scene animations” take place like movie segments during which the player can only sit back and watch. These sequences are key transitional phases in the game’s overall structure into acts and they correspond with new scenes being loaded onto the computer’s RAM from disk. These transitional sequences are a necessary convention in adventure and role-play games (such as the *Tomb Raider* series, *Metal Gear Solid*, and the *Resident Evil* series), which stage their action in a number of different fictive spaces.

Narrative structure in the form of scene setting motivated by at least perfunctory causal explanation—and commonly by a more substantial investment in classical narrative features such as character development, relationships with supporting cast, and provision of backstory—is then a somewhat inescapable fact of the genre of the interactive adventure game. The *Blade Runner* game is no exception to this. Transitions between acts involve interactions with other characters that both advance the game’s scenario and reveal other information about McCoy’s character and his past or present associations with other characters. These sequences vary according to the order in which the gamer has discovered things and accomplished tasks, but also according to the nature of the strategy she or he has adopted vis-à-vis the replicants, namely, whether to play as a “sympathizer” or as a straight “repedetective” intent on retiring all the replicants McCoy comes across. This

basic strategic decision has a number of alternatives that are combinations or complications of the simple choice between two absolute positions. In a way that exemplifies the standardization of computer-mediated interactivity described by Manovich, the *Blade Runner* game provides a range of narrativizations of the game experience that are flexible but drawn from a set of predesigned alternatives.

The *Blade Runner* game, like all adventure games, is not a pure interactive experience. As such, it does not effect the complete suspension of the Master function, the consequences of which Žižek theorizes. It constrains the gamer by provision of a structure of options for playing the game that delimits his or her goals, strategies, and tactics for achieving those goals. Nevertheless, it has in common with other adventure games and indeed with new media forms in general that it forces the interactor to make a choice at every stage. In doing so, it enacts the incitement to interactive mastery even within this hybrid form still overshadowed by the narrative automaton.

The gamer's relation to the McCoy character-avatar mirrors this hybridity of narrative and interactivity. Game settings allow you to have a limited degree of control over his verbal interactions with other characters—the user can select from a menu of responses and topics of inquiry—or McCoy can be set to respond automatically in one of three registers: polite, neutral, or surly.⁴² As I stated earlier in this essay, the player can alter McCoy's identity between human and replicant from game to game by regulating his behavior toward the other characters. One is limited, however, to the white male “envelope” of the stereotypical noir detective.⁴³

McCoy is an uncanny double of the game player. Like all doubles, he both resembles and differs from the original he duplicates. Familiar but strange, he is seen in third-person view, but he is the gamer's double. In many respects the game is about the problem of “determining” who McCoy is—the problem being, above all, a problem of deciding whether “to determine” means “to find out once and for all” or “to make or create” (as in “self-determination”). But this is an uncanny project that rebounds on the gamer in the era of interactivity when everything must be decided by the subject-master for whom it is no longer possible to “state the obvious” about something so fundamental as, say, one's own identity.

That this most obvious something cannot be readily asserted recalls the familiar psychoanalytic and philosophical scenario of the subject's strange-

ness to itself, a scenario thematized in the *Blade Runner* film through the affinity posited between replicant and human as objects of manipulation, artifice and prostheticized experience. In this regard, the relation of McCoy to the gamer who plays through him corresponds also to the relation of the game to the film. The game is an uncanny double of the film, familiar yet strange. It is like the film in that, as Scott Bukatman has shown, the film provides a sustained encounter with “the metropolitan world” but “underdetermines the lessons of that encounter, it effectively undermines interpretative certitudes.”⁴⁴ The *Blade Runner* game works in this thematic terrain as well, but its strangeness lies in its extension of this process across media forms from cinematic narrative to interactive computer game. The uncertain spectator is now the unconvinced interactor—both master and automaton of the game’s progress and prerogatives. It is in the play that exists between these putatively fixed poles (mastery of the *Blade Runner* universe versus a reiterated entrapment within it) that at one level the gamer plays when inside the compelling recreation of the extraordinary diegesis of the *Blade Runner* film. This play with and between narrative and interactivity is ostensibly a double or nothing bet but the dividend may be neither. To put it another way, the uncanny outcome of the promise of interactivity to arrive at the one who is both subject and master of the computational culture may be the advent of one who is neither—an advent that would also be the return of something familiar.

Notes

- 1 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1979]).
- 2 See Scott Bukatman’s discussion of *Blade Runner* in *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 130–37, for an insightful and exemplary instance of this type of reading of the film. He describes the film’s representation of the passage of urban space into the “nonspace realm” of cyberspace—that of networks of electronic and digital imaging and communications. History is affected in this collapse of the space of modern urban social forms and events. *Blade Runner* also “enacts first the fission of the subject and then the beginnings of its reconstitution as a terminal subject” (136).
- 3 Examples of this kind of discourse about the promise of “net subjectivity” and new forms of “e-communities” abound in online cyberspace discussion lists, chat rooms, and e-journals. For more critically sophisticated and rigorous meditations on this computer-generated paradigm shift in consciousness and social organization, see Sherry Turkle,

Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), and Allucquere Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

- 4 Ron Dulin, "Blade Runner," in the online e-zine, *Gamespot*, Adventure Gamespot Review page, accessed 11/7/98, www.gamespot.com/adventure/bladerun/review.html. Other reviewers raise questions about whether the game has revolutionized adventure gaming, but these questions center mostly on the quality of the graphics and the existence of what a film theorist would describe as "continuity errors" in the game's scenes as play unfolds. See, for instance, Martin Cirulis, "Blade Runner," in *Gamecenter* e-zine, Reviews: Adventure and RPG page, accessed 11/7/98, www.gamecenter.com/Reviews/Item/0,6,1295,00.html, and Jeff James, "Blade Runner," *Online Gaming Review* e-zine, Reviews page, accessed 11/7/98, www.ogr.com/reviews/blade_runner.html.
- 5 See "Westwood Studios Unveils Blade Runner: Real-Time 3-D Adventure Game Based on the Cult Classic Motion Picture," accessed 12/7/98, Westwood Studios Web site, www.westwood.com.
- 6 Dulin, *ibid.*
- 7 This conventional understanding of the function of narrative texts in a modern Western cultural framework draws on a 1970s theoretical model of the spectator as passive recipient of ideological impressions conditioned by the normative social milieu and the specific presentational and textual systems informing the consumption of stories within this milieu. In recent years in film studies there have been major critiques of this model of spectatorship arising out of the diverse fields of feminist film theory, the theorization of early film spectatorship, critical and poststructuralist theory, and also in cognitive film theory. While this questioning of the "passive spectator" is undeniably significant in the context of this discussion, my concern is to examine critically a key element of the dominant discourse promoting the development of computer interactivity, namely, the incitement to mastery over the media form and against what may now be seen as the "straw man" of the passive spectator. What is at stake in this struggle against passivity, and the terms in which the struggle is legitimated can best be understood by exploring how this problematic notion of the spectator functions in the discourses promoting interactivity. This exploration will in a roundabout way (via a critique of interactivity as liberty) make connections with some major trends in the rethinking of spectatorship in film and media theory since the 1970s.
- 8 Scott Bukatman, *Blade Runner* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 11.
- 9 See Christine Cain, *Official Strategy Guide: Blade Runner* (Indianapolis: Westwood, 1998) which maps out the gamer's options for navigating and influencing the alternative trajectories that ensue from choices made in act 1. On pages 150–51 these options are presented in summary form as a "decision tree" which is essentially a flowchart diagram of the game's narrative branches as they bifurcate from key gamer decisions in the early acts.
- 10 David Rokeby, "Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media," in *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, ed. Simon Penny (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 133–58, quotation from 133.
- 11 *Ibid.*

- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Dulin describes this feature of the responsive structure of the storylines to the gamer's decisions as a "strange sort of anti-Calvanist fatalism that can send the mind reeling if pondered too long" (Dulin, "Blade Runner").
- 14 See Samuel Weber's insightful discussion in *Institution and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) of Derrida's complex exploration of speculation and the specular in "To Speculate—On Freud," from *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987 [1980]). In "The Debts of Deconstruction and Other, Related Assumptions," Weber gives an account of Derrida's deconstruction of the assumed stability of the grounds on which one theory/analysis/description assumes a position from which to analyse, delineate, and criticize another theory/analysis/description in order to speculate on its own propositions and demarcate its particularities. Weber cites a question posed by Derrida that indicates the dangers of this speculative, reflective process: "What happens when acts or performances (discourse or writing, analysis or description, etc.) form part of the objects they designate? When they can give themselves as example of that of which they speak or write? There is certainly no gain in self-reflexive transparency, on the contrary. An accounting is no longer possible, an account can no longer be rendered, nor a simple report or compte rendu be given. And the borders of the whole are neither closed nor open. Their trait is divided" (Derrida cited in Weber, *Institution and Interpretation*, 107).
- 15 Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Reality* (New York: Summit Books, 1992), 85.
- 16 Seymour Papert, *Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 8.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., 5. Papert's italics.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 60.
- 21 Ibid., 56.
- 22 Ibid., 61.
- 23 Slavoj Žižek, "Virtualization of the Master," *Lusitania 8*, special issue: *Being On Line: Net Subjectivity*, ed. Alan Sondheim (1997): 178–88; quotation from 187. This essay is something of a crystallization of Žižek's more dispersed and extensive meditations on the subject of virtual reality and computer interactivity in *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997).
- 24 In *The Plague of Fantasies* (78–80), Žižek recounts that Malebranche was posthumously excommunicated for his "overorthodox" anamorphosis of Roman Catholic theological precepts. For instance, he argued in his *Recherches de la vérité* (1674–75) for an extreme formulation of the doctrine of the fortunate fall: "It is not true that if Christ had not come to earth to deliver humanity, everyone would have been lost—quite the contrary, *nobody* would be lost; that is, *every* human being had to fall so that Christ could come and deliver *some* of them" (79).
- 25 Žižek, "Virtualization of the Master," 182.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.

- 28 See Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 31.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 30 Žižek argues that this “void” or “hole” or “blot” within reality is paradoxically what supports the symbolic ordering of reality as well as what threatens to undermine it. The symbolic effort of interpreting reality stems from the challenge of the real to interpretation and symbolization. See Žižek, “A Black Hole in Reality,” in *Looking Awry*, 8–20.
- 31 Žižek, “Virtualization of the Master,” 183.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 185. Žižek has himself produced a substantial meditation on the *Blade Runner* films in the context of a psychoanalytic reading of the philosophy of subjectivity from the Cartesian cogito to the postmodern crisis of subjectivity in his *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). See the essay “I or He or It (the Thing) Which Thinks,” in which the theme of a replicant subjectivity acts as a framing device for a detailed critique of this philosophy.
- 33 Žižek, “Virtualization of the Master,” 185–86. Žižek appends a note to this about how “cinema executives obsessed with testing new films through special previews and then frantically re-shooting new endings, etc.” fall prey to the “homologous illusion” that audiences want to control the outcome of films that they see (188 n. 6). He adds that “the utter adaptability to the whims of the public as a rule ends up in failure—what the public wants is a Master capable of *imposing* his version on it [the film’s outcome], not a pliable servant” (*ibid.*).
- 34 Raymond Bellour, “The Double Helix,” in *Electronic Culture*, ed. Timothy Druckrey (New York: Aperture, 1996), 173–99; quotation from 185.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Žižek, “Virtualization of the Master,” 186.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 39 Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 153.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*, 154. It is by no means clear what Žižek is referring to here by his allusion to “‘deconstructionist’ celebrations of the liberating potentials of cyberspace.” The more rigorous theorists to engage explicitly with Derrida’s work in addressing new media technology—including Samuel Weber, Avital Ronell, and Bernard Stiegler (not to mention Derrida himself)—could in no way be construed as producing celebratory accounts of computing or the Internet. Žižek seems to be using the term *deconstructionist* here to refer to a more vague and partial, if possibly more widespread, interpretation of Derrida’s concept that mistakes it as a synonym for pure relativism and unrestricted polysemy.
- 42 This feature recalls, in a further ironic twist to the human (free) versus machine (automated) problematic we are discussing here, the cyborg Terminator’s response options in regard to a query by someone standing outside his hideout in *The Terminator* (1984): it chooses “Fuck You, Asshole,” one extreme of a paradigm of replies ranging from the polite to the very rude.
- 43 As such, the *Blade Runner* game falls short in regard to one of the most theorized (and publicized) aspects of new media interactions in modes such as Multi-User Domains and

Internet Relay Chat, namely, the ability of people to experiment with different identities in conversations with other "netizens," particularly via the adoption of different gender roles. This potential to reinvent one's identity even at the "biological" level of gender would represent the most far-reaching horizon of the promise of individual liberation associated with computer mediated interactivity, the horizon at which Žižek aims his critique of cyber-liberation.

- 44 Bukatman, *Blade Runner*, 8. In doing so, *Blade Runner* is like all good science fiction, argues Bukatman.

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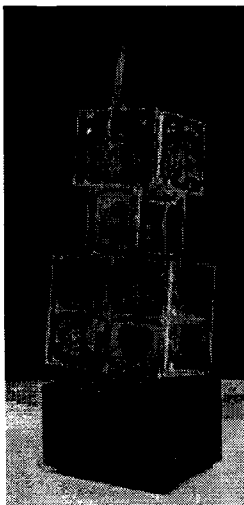
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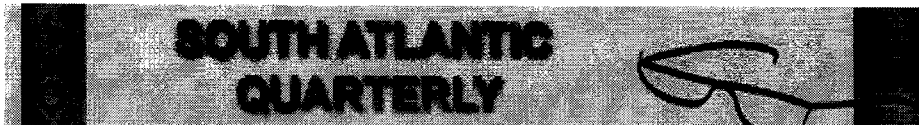
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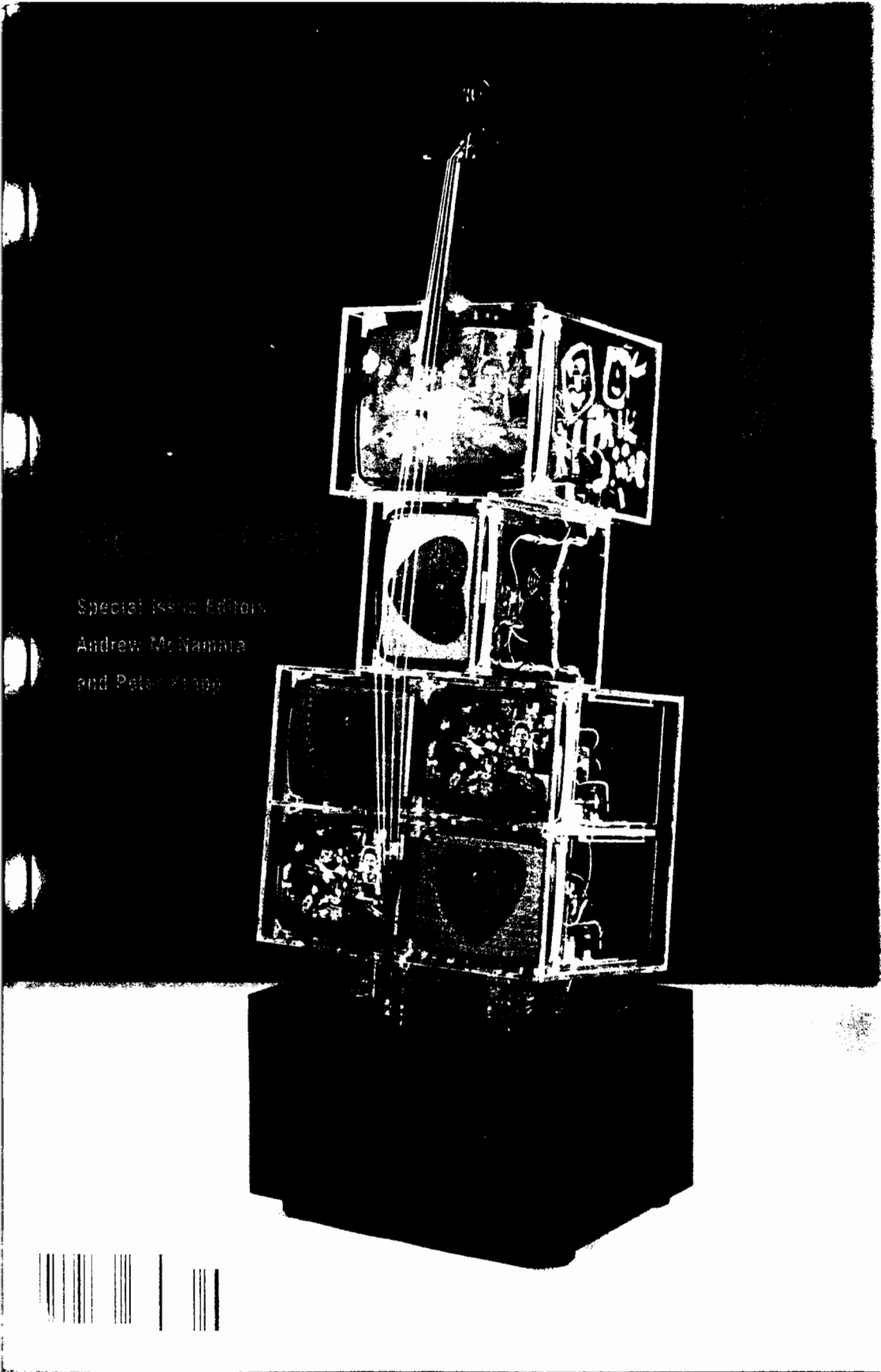
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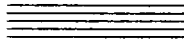
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