Every Game is an Island

Endings and Extremities in Video Games

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The paragraph *Authoritative Video Games* in Chapter 1 is a revised version of Fassone 2015; *Bodily pleasures. Game over as spectacular device in* Dead Space 2 in Chapter 2 is a translated and revised version of Fassone 2012; the section on immersion in Chapter 3 is a complete reworking of Fassone 2009; the section on serialization in Chapter 4 is a revised version of Fassone 2014. I thank the editors and publishers of these works for allowing me to use them.

Introduction

A book about extremities

Ryu's closure

Video game players often cherish fond memories of the games they have played. When asked, they have vivid recollections of a final boss who refused to hit the ground, an apparently unsolvable puzzle, an epic battle against a friend. Often players will recall reaching the final level and beating the game, an exhilarating moment that most will identify as the peak of their playing activity. In my case, this happened with *Street Fighter II*, a favorite video game whose characters, iconic caricatures of martial arts fighters, rugged US Marines, and confusing genetic experiments, have become staples in contemporary video game culture. While most people played *Street Fighter II* in an arcade, I happened to play the MS-DOS version of the game, an underwhelming adaptation developed by U.S. Gold in 1992. Despite the impossibly slow pace of the game, I managed to defeat all of the computerized opponents of the game as Ryu, a dark-haired Japanese martial artist. Finishing a game can be a bewildering, paradoxical experience. On the one hand, the digital antagonist that players struggle with for hours is now conquered; on the other hand, the pleasure of playing is gone, the *terra incognita* of gameplay has been discovered. For video game players, chasing closure inevitably means destroying the world of the game, as "their joyful pursuit of that end means the death of their pleasure" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 258). Despite this poetic paradox, my experience with the slightly broken version of *Street Fighter II* I played as a ten-year-old was one of closure. After winning the final challenge, I was presented with a short non-interactive sequence hinting at the destiny of Ryu. I saw the young karateka walk away from the award ceremony towards the dusk, a closed caption reading "Ceremony means nothing to him. The fight is everything." The game provided me with a pragmatic and a dramatic closure at the same time: there were no more fighters

to defeat, and my hero was walking into the sunset, an ending trope that resonates with genre stereotypes of both the samurai and the western film. In my case, Ryu's final sequence truly made "stasis or the absence of further continuation, the most probable succeeding event" (Herrnstein Smith 1968: 34).

Although the last round of the fight against M. Bison—*Street Fighter II*'s final boss—and the short celebration of victory that follows stand as iconic closure in the minds of most players, this is not the only ending they encountered during their play. They lost a few matches before defeating M. Bison and were presented with a static rendition of Ryu as a defeated fighter; they crossed the border between agency and spectatorship several times while watching cutscenes between fights; they accessed configuration menus to adjust settings or pushed the pause button to mentally devise an effective strategy before deploying it. They encountered a number of endings, borders, and extremities. While *beating* (or *finishing*, a dualism that in itself calls for analysis) a game may constitute a memorable moment of closure, it happens within the frame of an inherently fragmented experience, one that in most cases contains a vast number of endings. This book is about endings, extremities, boundaries, and thresholds found in video games. The dramatic ones—for example Ryu's remarkable closure—and the more trivial ones, such as the pause function, or the border crossing of the frame of configuration found in most games.

Every game is an island and no game is an island

Every game is defined by its borders, its endings, and its extremities. Often, playing a video game feels like pushing against those borders. Training for frame-perfect execution in *Street Fighter II*, or bumping into an invisible wall in *Far Cry 2* require players to engage with the finiteness of the video game, its nature of contained simulation, an island surrounded by cliffs and rocks, whose jagged borders are the object of this work. Every game is an island, because, as I will claim throughout this book, every game cannot be but closed and finite. Even games claiming to be *open world* and offering players utmost freedom are framed by the limitations of their digital nature. On the peculiar island that is *Prison Architect*, for example, an open-ended game that requires players to build and run a prison, the player cannot decide to build a cinema for the inmates. The option is just not there, it falls outside of the contained simulative space offered by the game code. This sort of liminal experience, this constant engaging with the game's finiteness, its endings, and its extremities, is what characterizes video

game play for me, and what I am interested in describing in this book. In this sense, this book's inquiry on the characteristics of endings and extremities is also a probe used to discuss a more general theory of video games emerging from their nature of closed, insular, artifacts.

On the other hand, no game is an island. Every video game is a piece of audiovisual media existing within a wider ecosystem of (digital) media. Video games constantly engage with this external space. Sports games, often released in annual installments, constitute long series within which repetition and innovation stand in a delicate balance. Expert players are able to tell, and exploit, the minute modifications implemented in every new version of their favorite game. More generally, video games are often grouped by genres, on the basis of their mechanics (platform game, survival game, beat 'em up, etc.), or because of thematic consistency (horror, sci-fi, etc.). Every video game belongs somewhere within genres, series, and canons, and although this affiliation often shifts due to historical, social and technological contexts (*Street Fighter II* is a fighting game, *and* an installment of the *Street Fighter* series, *and* a "classic" game, *and* a game released by Capcom, etc.), no game can be considered a standalone vacuum-sealed entity. Furthermore, due to the nature of digital media, every game can be modified, integrated, amended, and revised at the level of code. In other words, while during gameplay a video game is indeed an island whose endings and extremities can be explored by the player, as a media artifact, a video game is more of a "puzzle piece" (Juul 2008) in the mosaic of contemporary digital media.

Moreover, video games often entertain a complex relation with other media forms. In this book I will often use cinema as a reference in describing the ways in which video games employ certain rhetorical strategies. I believe this is a fruitful comparison to draw in this specific context for two reasons. The first, although rather banal, should be stated: I have a background in film studies and film history, and I approached video game studies through the work of scholars that had made a similar leap before me. This means that my approach to audiovisual media is inevitably shaped by my interest in the ways in which cinema visually defined the twentieth century and influenced the modes of signification of newer media. There is a second reason for my interest in using some of the tools of film studies to discuss games. Namely, that games themselves often allude to other media, cinema being the most obvious, in the way they present narrative worlds, use montage techniques, and refer to known genres. This, of course, does not imply that the medium of the video game derives from cinema (if anything, just like cinema, it might derive from a longer tradition of

spectacular media), but rather that, in some cases, the theoretical and critical tools devised by film theory may prove useful in the analysis of video games. Furthermore, the specific topic of this research—the discussion of endings and extremities—has been tackled in the past by scholars working in the field of film studies (and, as I will discuss later, literary studies also), whose works will form a relevant theoretical corpus for my book.

Against currentness

This book uses a series of case studies to discuss the forms and implications of endings and extremities in video games. Every game I will analyse was chosen on the basis of its relevance to the topic at hand, and for being either an example of a general tendency or a unique, exceptional case. What I purposely tried to avoid is discussing a game because of its currentness or its supposed innovative qualities. In an interview published after the release of *GoldenEye 007*, the 2010 remake of the game published by Rare in 1997, Activision executive Julian Widdows (Q&A Julian Widdows, Executive Producer, Activision Blizzard 2010) claims: "I don't tend to go back to games that are 13 years old. It's an evolutionary medium and we keep building on the successes of previous games." Technological teleology seems to be the driving force of the video game industry. There is no reason to revisit an older game, since newer ones are inherently better; an evolutionary rhetoric that can be observed in the promotional and critical texts surrounding video games, and that is certainly synergic with the discourse of perpetual obsolescence found in the larger technological sector. Game studies usually do not shun this form of currentness; in fact, they sometimes embrace it. It is hard to judge if this is because of a voluntary adherence to the industry's discourse, or because being current and analysing the newest games grants more visibility to published papers and articles. The examples found in this book are, for the most part, old games or games that have long fallen out of the promotion cycle. This choice does not derive merely from the fact that *these* games rather than others better support my argumentation and make for clearer examples; it is also, and maybe especially, because I am convinced that there is no tenable theory that can do away with history. As I will explain in more detail later, while this is not a history book, nor a book on the history of a specific genre or type of games, it is a book that acknowledges the history of the medium by refusing to crush it with a rhetoric of constant currentness and permanent evolution. In this book, games are analysed as artifacts that bear some historical weight, and may

be interrogated through the lens of history. This is not a book about how far the game industry has come, nor does it wish to offer any speculation or prophecy about what is to come. This is a book that analyses the endings, boundaries, and extremities found in video games produced in the last fifty years or so.

To a degree, the same holds true for theory. Since its inception in the mid-1990s, the discipline[1] of game studies has produced a vast body of theoretical, critical, and historical contributions. While some of these texts and methods have been disproved or rejected, as it is common in any research field, others seem to have just been surpassed without much thought, often in favor of more current approaches. Every discipline relies, at least partly, on trends and buzz words, since their adoption often grants easier access to research funds and makes publication and dissemination of results easier. Nevertheless, consistently with my previous claim on the history of games, in this book I will also use video game theory historically. Of course, this does not mean that this book will not acknowledge and discuss some of the more recent contributions to the field, but rather that it will attempt to establish a connection between what is current and what used to be in game studies, with the intent of tying in some of the threads explored by those who have studied video games in the last twenty years.

Structure of the book

Three levels and some wordplay

This book is divided into four chapters. In the first, I offer my understanding of what a video game is, and present a methodology through which I propose to discuss the endings and extremities found in this peculiar media form. I will describe video games as *computer-mediated games* and as *designed procedural experiences*. In the three subsequent chapters I look at these extreme areas from different perspectives that I will call game ↔ game, game ↔ metagame, and game ↔ games. Chapter 2 describes how endings and extremities are scripted into what I will call the diegesis of the game, the area in which the fictional world of the game is represented and where "proper" gameplay happens. In this chapter I will discuss medium-specific devices such as the game over and the pause function. Chapter 3 describes the borders and thresholds separating gameplay from what I will call the metagame: the area where various configurative operations take place, and where the player interacts with the game at a higher

level by manipulating its settings. This chapter will describe and discuss the form and function of different interface materials. Finally, Chapter 4 analyses the relations between a game and other games. Concepts such as modularity and serialization will help me describe the ways in which a video game interacts with the wider environment of digital games and digital media in general.

Each chapter follows a path that moves from closedness to openness. In other words, each chapter begins with those instances in which endings and extremities are present and visible, and moves towards the analysis of cases in which they are masked, amended, or bypassed. In order to help the reader navigate this structure, I have subdivided each chapter through the use of single words that correspond to the general theme of each subdivision. Some of these words are used commonly in game studies. Notions such as immersion and modularity have a long history in digital media studies, and I will revisit them through the historical lens that I described earlier. Other words such as ephemerality or holism may seem less intuitively related to games, but will guide my reasoning and, hopefully, offer a novel insight on some of the features of the medium.

The following table sums up the structure of chapters 2, 3, and 4 of the book, and offers a synoptic aid for readers interested in specific topics.

	Chapter 2	**Chapter 3**	**Chapter 4**
	Game ↔ Game	**Game ↔ Metagame**	**Game ↔ Games**
CLOSEDNESS	Closure	Fragmentation	Uniqueness
↓	Caesura	Metagaming	Ephemerality
	Endlessness	Immersion	Modularity
OPENNESS	Openness	Holism	Serialization

Notes

1 For simplicity's sake I am describing game studies as a discipline. It should be noted that, due to the relative novelty of game studies, its status as a proper discipline within the humanities is a matter of debate. Deterding (2014), characterizes game studies as an "interdiscipline," in which several methods and approaches may converge.

1

Two Non-definitive Definitions

What is a video game?

Doing away with definitions

The analysis of extreme areas and boundaries is not a new topic in video game studies. More specifically, the contested notion of "magic circle" sparked a long-standing debate in the field, whose effects can still be seen at work today in many theoretical works discussing video games. In their foundational treatise on game design, Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 95) claim that all playful activities are separated from everyday life[1] by "the boundaries established by the act of play." In other words, playing means entering a physical, mental, and communicative space removed from reality and designed to generate and host play. The two scholars call this fictional space the "magic circle," borrowing the definition from Huizinga (1955), whose book *Homo Ludens* acted as a veritable blueprint for game and play studies in the twentieth century. As noted by many commentators (Ehrmann 1968, Schrank 2014), Huizinga analyses play from the standpoint of a scholar very much in tune with a distinctly modern ethos, and characterizes it as radically separated from—even opposed to—productive activities such as work. It comes as no surprise that for the Dutch historian, play resides within a specially carved niche, a magic circle that protects it from the trivialities of ordinary life. The inherently post-modern sensibility of contemporary game studies led to a rich and fruitful debate (see for example Malaby 2007, Consalvo 2009b, Stenros 2012, and Zimmerman 2012) on the idea of play as a bounded, separated activity found in Huizinga[2] and rehashed by Salen and Zimmerman. While the extent and results of the debate cannot be discussed in this book, it should be noted that one of the recurring traits of this conversation is the insistence on the exceptionality of play. One of the reasons for the theoretical impasse in defining the boundaries of play is that play itself is very hard to define. While several attempts at tracing an ontology of play have been made (Suits 1978, Gray 2009,

Eberle 2014), it might be true—as noted by Brian Sutton-Smith (1997: 1), one of the most influential scholars in the field—that "we all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness." As for games, the mental or material objects through which play is formalized, a variety of definitions (Juul 2005) and even meta-definitions (Arjoranta 2014) have been proposed, tested, and discussed, often with the result of discovering that outliers and exceptional cases surpassed the norm.

For these reasons, despite being concerned with definitions, this chapter of the book will not offer a unifying definition of play, games, or even video games. This is not the goal of this book and, in all fairness, it is hard to see the point of such a grand endeavor. This chapter, instead, will build two operative, historically situated, inherently provisional definitions of video games that will allow me to single out the type of media objects I am interested in discussing, their characteristics, and some of the reasons why a research around endings and extremities could be well-suited to address the nature and design of these objects. However, before this, I should offer an explanation of why my research on video games will be based on what I have defined as two non-definitive definitions.

Video games change through time

The main reason for the difficulty of defining video games in a stable and unequivocal manner is that, like every technological artifact, they change through time. While this may sound rather intuitive, the notion of video games being historical entities, subjected to what Paul Ricoeur (2004) describes as "the work of history," often seems to escape scholars, players, designers and, more generally, the wider community of people invested in the medium. What Raiford Guins (2014: 4) calls "the mutable taxonomic phases video games pass through," namely, the modifications, adaptations, and shifts occurring in the five decades in which video games have been part of the shared landscape of audiovisual media, are often unaccounted for in studies dealing with the ontology or taxonomy of the medium. While we may agree on the fact that *Spacewar!*, *Zork*, Nintendo's Game & Watch handheld consoles, *Streets of Rage*, and Jason Rohrer's experimental game *Cordial Minuet* can all be described as video games, we should ask ourselves whether it is really fruitful to discard historical perspective in favor of the reassurances of taxonomy. This, of course, does not imply that all video game research should deal primarily with the history of the medium—this

book, for example, is certainly not a history book—but rather that, if we are to define the object of our attention, we should be aware of its history and, more generally, of its relation with the wider history of media, even when this means trading stable definitions for more provisional ones. Discussing the lineage and features of adventure games, Espen Aarseth (1997: 97), one of the founding figures of video game studies, asks "does the novel start with Cervantes, Sterne, or the ancient Greeks? What was the first poem? Who wrote the first sonnet? The first detective novel?" A similar question might be asked about video games. Is *Tennis for Two* the first video game? Or does the fact that Higinbotham's clever contraption is actually a modified oscilloscope make it unsuitable for such a title? Is it *video* enough? Is it *game* enough? Whereas, again with Aarseth (1997: 97), "most of these questions have no clear answer," discussing and analysing games means engaging in a practice that acknowledges the existence of such questions, and recognizes taxonomic indeterminacy as a function of (media) history. For this reason, the two definitions of video game that I will offer later in the chapter are tied respectively to the history of computing and the history of game design, and the video games that will be analysed in this book will be consistently presented in the light of the media environment that produced them and the history that led to their design and release.

A second reason for the taxonomical indeterminacy of video games is that in most cases, when we want to discuss them we may really be thinking about wildly different things. For example, a software engineer may characterize video games as a specific type of software; a player as a subset in the larger category of games (in which they may include sports, tabletop games, party games, etc.); a patron of the arcades in the 1970s and 1980s as an electronic relative of a pinball machine; an executive in a large studio as another form of big budget entertainment, akin to blockbuster movies; an independent game designer as an artistic form of expression. Video games are all of this and possibly more. And, as media history teaches, they are destined to become something else as the pressures and tensions imposed on them by designers, producers, critics, scholars, and, more importantly, players, mold them into new forms. Reducing this multiplicity of definitions to a single duality is a hard task, but what might be said is that video games are always, "ontologically both objects and experiences" (Sicart 2009: 29–30). A video game is a specific material construct, a designed piece of software, and, at the same time, when played, an actualized play experience, an ever-evolving dialogue between a player and a machine. These enigmatic pieces of code, existing somewhere between the technological and the playful, can be described as a

subset of games, a specific category of the broader class of ludic objects and, at the same time, as self-contained, designed audiovisual objects, whose functioning relies on a set of computer-executed protocols that, when experienced by the player, present them with an array of audiovisual information. In this sense, video games are both video *games* and *video* games, meaning that they are at the same time designed audiovisual media objects, and peculiar instances of play.

What I mean by "video game"

As I have said, in a discussion about video games, we may find ourselves caught in a conundrum of definitions. It is hard to characterize video games as a single entity both because they change through time, and because different subjects may characterize them as a multiplicity of things, a state of indeterminacy generated by their inherently ambiguous nature of digital objects and playful experiences. For this reason, instead of asking what a video game is, I will answer to the more manageable question of what I mean by "video game." Or, more precisely, what kinds of objects I am picturing in my mind when I write about video games in this specific context.

I will offer two theoretical definitions of video games in the second part of the chapter, so, for the moment, let me answer two more trivial questions. What kinds of video games is this book about? And, in turn, what parts of those video games am I interested in? In the first case, the answer is straightforward: for the most part I will discuss single-player video games or single-player versions of video games that can also be played with other human players. Although I will occasionally point to online multiplayer games or MOBAs[3] with the intent of drawing a comparison, single-player video games will be the main focus of this book. The reason for this choice will be explained in full throughout the book, but for the moment it might suffice to say that analysing or discussing multiplayer-focused games in a rigorous fashion requires using methods derived from the social sciences such as in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and tools of ethnographic and social research in general. This is mainly due to the fact that the communities of players interacting with multiplayer games are usually more interesting than the design of the games itself. The so-called "meta," namely the set of emergent strategies, practices, assumptions, and beliefs produced and shared by a community of players of a game like *Dota 2* greatly surpasses the formal properties of the game in complexity and interest.[4] On the other hand, an analysis of endings and extremities in games that relies on the methods and tools

of the humanities may benefit from narrowing its field of action to include games in which the dialogue between the human player and the machinic counterpart is more direct and traceable. Later in the chapter I will discuss the notion of "model player," a semiotic construction that, I contend, is a useful tool for discussing single-player video games.

As an addendum to the previous point, I should note that this book will provide a discussion and a critique of endings and extremities that I will later characterize as procedural, or, in simpler terms, based for the most part in their design and in their ability to generate or sustain certain forms of play. As Giddings (2014: 91) points out: "The analysis of video games as a computer-based medium demands the description of a very special category of non-humans, software entities and agents depicted as individual characters, as collectives, or as aspects of the virtual environment itself, but all acting with a certain degree of autonomy." This book will discuss this peculiar class of digital objects with the intent of analysing how they relate to notions such as ending, extremity, and boundary. Despite the attention devoted to design elements and formal properties of video games, this book is not only about the mechanical interaction of these objects, nor is it a description of the causal relationships between a player's actions and the reactions of the system of the game. Rather, this book is about how what I will call *designed procedural experiences* can be imbued with their designer's ideas, politics and rhetoric, and how they can then provide players with a range of play experiences. In other words, I am interested in how games and players communicate and, specifically, in how border-zones, endings, closures, and extremities seem to act as those areas in which game-player communication happens. Moreover, I will confront the ways in which video games and video game design elicit other forms of communication, exceeding the tight feedback loop between a game and its player. This book conceives video games as media in the most basic sense of the term: objects whose purpose is "to store and to expedite information" (McLuhan 1994: 158), and argues that this peculiar process of communication-through-play happens more significantly and visibly when the borders of play are reached.

The exceptionality of video games

Digital exceptionalism

Video games are both games and pieces of digital audiovisual media. They project designed worlds for the player to inhabit, and they generate and sustain

play through game mechanics. This irreducible duality will form the backbone of this book and shape most of the theoretical assumptions and analytical tools I will use to discuss endings and extremities in games. As for video games being digital media, and belonging to the wider ecosystem of digital media, I will often refer to Bogost's (2006, 2007) notion of "procedurality" to discuss the ways in which they carry and produce meaning, and to Galloway's (2006) research on diegetic and non-diegetic space in video games to compare the ways in which film and video games deal with narrative. Both these theoretical stances will be addressed later in the book. On the other hand, the idea that video games are also games in the broader sense, which will inevitably shape my understanding of the medium, is in need of a radical, but essential, revision. I will call my understanding of video games-as-games "digital exceptionalism." What I mean by this is that video games are an exceptional subset of games, since—because of their nature of digital objects—their rules must be stored, upheld, and executed by a computer. When playing a video game, we are always playing with and against a digital machine, an entity whose peculiar characteristics make it a unique sort of playful companion. A video game offers its player a world to inhabit or, in more minimalist cases, a series of rules and properties to interact with, but it is at the same time a piece of software in charge of executing certain procedures that ensure the consistency of that world or rule set. To quote Triclot (2011: 33, my translation), "the machine is in charge of respecting the rules, making the necessary calculations, and, at the same time, ensuring some form of objectivity or neutrality of the playfield. . . . The world of the game is embodied in the logic of the machine," or, in a more radical formulation, a "game program is thus not only a set of instructions, a kind of law code for the world of the particular game, that I have the duty to follow when I am in the company of computers, but at the same time also a police agent that precisely monitors my actions" (Pias 2011: 179).

Video games are exceptional because they require players to entrust their play to a non-human digital entity, whose role is to handle game progress by storing, upholding, executing, and enforcing its rules. In this sense, the exceptionality of video games when compared to analog games is both quantitative and material. It is quantitative, because given the encyclopedic capacity of digital media (Murray 1997), the number of rules and procedures that can be executed by a video game greatly exceeds that of any analog game.[5] While Conway's experimental *Game of Life*, or even the simple *Frogger*, may be theoretically reproduced using pen and paper and manually implementing