

Time invaders: conceptualizing performative game time

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Time Invaders – Conceptualizing performance game time

The ultimate phase of a MMORPG such as *World of Warcraft* or the more recent hybrid RPG-FPS *Destiny*, where the most committed players tend to find themselves before long, is often referred to as the ‘endgame’. This is a point where the levelling system tops out and the narrative has concluded. The endgame is thus the result of considerable experience with the game and its systems, a very large ensemble of both successful and infelicitous performances. This final stage still involves considerable activity — challenging the most difficult enemies in search of the rarest loot, competing with other players and so on. It is a twilight state of both accomplishment and anticipation. As an ‘end’, it is very different from the threatening Game Over screen that is always just moments away in many arcade or action games.

The differences between these two end states suggests that the notion of how games end, and the way this impacts on the experience of play, could be illuminating with regard to the problem of characterizing performances — because to end the game typically involves a summation or adjudication on the felicity of a particular and actualized performative multiplicity. Completing the game is, with regard to a given playthrough, the ultimate per ludic act.

A particularly important ramification of the cybernetic method presented in Chapter 8 is that the ‘magic circle’ becomes one digitalization among the (potentially) many that produce the structure of performance and the experience of play. It may be highly important and influential (as in the case of someone deeply involved in a game such that they lose track of the external world), or it may be relatively trivial (as in the case of someone distractedly playing a game on their phone while carrying on a conversation or some other activity). In either case, the magic circle can be conceptualized as a sense of totality — weak or strong — that is *generated by* the apparatuses of the game and the cultural expectations of players. The magic circle need not be posited as a primary ontological phenomenon that determines the playful status of what it ‘contains’, which leads to the asymptotic task of definitively pronouncing on the status of paradoxical phenomena that this book has highlighted through the aesthetics of infelicity.

The concepts of the endgame and the magic circle both refer to a certain kind of high-level digital distinction that is the ludic equivalent of Austin’s ‘total speech act’ in the ‘total speech situation’ — two notions that he leaves undeveloped the end of his lecture series. This raises the question of how it might be possible to think about the sense of totality (whether weak or strong) and, more generally, how to situate performances within the overall performative multiplicity of a given game. Where analyzing primary and secondary digitalization can help define particular performances, the problem of how to situate such performances in relation to one another raises additional problems, particularly in light of gaming’s complex temporalities.

This chapter will develop a method complementary to the cybernetic technique of Chapter 8. Called ‘chronotypology’, the method is derived from Agamben’s discussion of how playful signifiers

change their temporal modality ‘after the game’. To continue the argument developed so far in *Time Invaders*, this has to be done without establishing the ‘whole’ as a de facto unit of performance. Once developed, the method will then be applied to a number of examples. The most important of these test cases will be narrative — one of the more enduring problems in videogame scholarship — leading to a close reading of the final ‘gallery scene’ in the videogame *Life is Strange*. Taken together, the cybernetic and chronotypological approaches form a comprehensive comparative method for analyzing videogame performances.

Diachrony: Play and Temporality

The videogame concept of the ‘endgame’ is similar to the formulation ‘end of the game’, which appears as a pivotal concept in one of Agamben’s most sustained discussions of play (1993a). Here he stages play in dialectical relation to the sacred, drawing on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) and Émile Benveniste. According to Benveniste, there is an originary relation between play and the sacred.

The potency of the sacred act resides precisely in the conjunction of the *myth* that articulates history and the *ritual* that reproduces it. If we make a comparison between this schema and that of play, the difference appears fundamental: in play only the ritual survives and all that is preserved is the *form* of the sacred drama, in which each element is re-enacted time and again. But what has been forgotten or abolished is the myth, the meaningfully worded fabulation that endows the acts with their sense and their purpose. (quoted in Agamben 1993, 69-70)

Play thus is liable to preserve a set of formal rules (‘a topsy-turvy image of the sacred’). However, because it does not present a story or myth that connects with a meaningful history or tradition, it inscribes difference within repetition, resulting in a strong diachronic experience. For Agamben this is the import of ‘Playland’ in Collodi’s *Pinocchio*, where there is only the bedlam of an eternal holiday: play involves the ‘paralysis and destruction of the calendar’ (68). This can be compared with the sacred, which signifies synchrony or an articulation of continuity with the past through a ‘consubstantial unity of myth and ritual’. Play tends to produce signifiers of diachrony (turning structures into events), while ritual tends to foster signifiers of synchrony (events into structures).¹

In the Aranda culture of Central Australia, among the most synchronically-oriented cultures of his considerable acquaintance — for whom ‘even the relation between past and present... appeared in terms of synchrony’ (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 238) — Lévi-Strauss notes the presence of initiatory objects called *churinga*. These are ‘...stone or wooden objects, often engraved with symbolic signs, sometimes just pieces of wood or unworked pebbles. Whatever its appearance, each *churinga* represents the physical body of a definite ancestor and generation after generation, it is formally conferred on the living person believed to be this ancestor’s incarnation’ (238). By confirming the identity of living person and ancestor, the ritual creates a synchronic link between generations.

According to Lévi-Strauss this process concludes with a strange reversal of the *churinga*’s

own gesture within the ritualistic economy. If the *churinga* signifies the synchronic presence of the mythic past during the ritual (the ‘palpable proof that the ancestor and his descendent are a single flesh’), at the completion of this operation it reverses its valency, coming to signify a diachronic residue: ‘The role of the *churinga* would therefore be to offset the correlative impoverishment of the diachronic dimension. They are the past materially present and they provide the means of reconciling empirical individuation with mythical confusion’ (238). Even for the Aranda, who Lévi-Strauss reads as highly oriented to the production of synchronic signifiers,² an object appears which furnishes ‘tangible confirmation of the diachronic essence of diachrony at the very heart of synchrony’ (237).

Agamben departs from the eminent structuralist’s account by arguing the *churinga* does not represent an ‘offsetting’ of the tendency of the ritual to minimize diachrony. Rather, the ritual apparatus reveals a fundamental volatility in signification writ large: ‘contrary to what Lévi-Strauss maintains, there is no contradiction between the fact that the Aranda declare the *churinga* to be the body of the ancestor and the fact that the ancestor does not lose his own body when, at the moment of conception, he leaves the *churinga* for his new incarnation; quite simply, a single object is here invested with two opposing signifying functions, according to whether the ritual is or is not yet terminated’ (Agamben 1993, 79). The *churinga* is thus an ‘unstable signifier’ capable of transforming its function upon reaching a certain limit: in this case, the end of the ritual. For Agamben what is at issue is not a logical contradiction between diachrony and synchrony, but a synchrono-diachronic system.

Agamben, drawing on Benveniste’s arguments, compares the sacred *churinga* with the playful toy. In this way play and temporality are linked. The toy presents an analogous — but opposite — transformation when it leaves its own space:

...the toy, as a representation of a pure temporal level, is undoubtedly a signifier of absolute diachrony, of the prior transformation of a structure into an event. But here too this signifier, once freed, becomes unstable, and is invested with a contrary meaning; here too, *at the end of the game*, the toy turns around into its opposite and is presented as the synchronic residue which the game can no longer eliminate. For if the transformation were really complete, it would leave no traces, and the miniature would have to correspond with its model, just as, *at the ritual’s termination*, the *churinga* would have to vanish, corresponding to the body of the individual in whom the ancestor has been reincarnated. (Agamben 1993, 79-80)

The toy is like the *churinga* insofar as it too is an unstable signifier liable to transform its modality at the limit of a certain procedure. These two ‘embarrassing residues’ (80) attest as disturbing remainders to the contingency of their own operation, surviving as they do the very spatio-temporal *topoi* that they serve to open.

The failure of both limit cases — the *churinga* and the toy, ritual and play — to complete their respective gestures shows that neither diachrony nor synchrony can ultimately eliminate the other pole: ‘the pure event (absolute diachrony) and the pure structure (absolute synchrony) do not

exist' (70). Instead, the continuity of the system requires the production of a differential margin between diachrony and synchrony. This is not to say that pure play or pure structure cannot be represented or evoked — the former has been depicted in the form of infernal punishments that involve permanent movement and interminable duration (Playland, Ixion's wheel, Sisyphus' stone) whereas the latter is imagined through imagery of perfect, unchanging and blissful heavens (Agamben 1993). Similarly, because play and ritual both act on unstable signifiers, there are certain proximities, affinities and crossing-points between the two poles (such as funereal and initiatory games or the appearance of miniatures and toys in tombs).

Chronotypology

Agamben thus modifies Lévi-Strauss' analysis by arguing that play is the diachronic correlate of ritual's synchronic effects, and that these two processes form two particularly acute moments of a larger temporal system. However, in other work Lévi-Strauss himself does venture some explicit, if speculative, remarks regarding memory and technology that anticipate Agamben's contentions. He compares the operations of ritual objects such as the *churinga* to documentary archives in Occidental cultures. Such seemingly very different institutions, he suggests, serve a similar temporalizing function insofar as their loss would deprive the past of a signifier critical to its 'diachronic flavor'.

This argument parallels Benjamin's account of the decay of the aura (the aura as a 'unique duration' suffusing an original artwork). It also parallels Lévi-Strauss' dissatisfaction with theories of totemism that ascribe to a variety of practices a primitive denotative function. In this critique, totemism serves as a necessary precursor that designates the basic elements necessary for and is itself part of more complex and systematic institutional forms. For Lévi-Strauss, 'totemism' as an isolated phenomenon does not exist (Lévi-Strauss 1971), but is an artefact of an anthropological mode of inquiry itself bound by the diachronizing assumptions of linear historiography. He critiques the theoretical reduction to a single primary operation excised from its place in a 'a total system, which ethnologists in vain tried to pull to pieces in order to fashion them into distinct institutions' (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 218). Accordingly he objects to the contention of some nineteenth-century scholars that 'totemism was anterior to exogamy' because 'the former appeared to them simply denotative, whereas they divined the systematic nature of the latter' (231). There is however nothing necessary about this: 'totemism may either present or preclude the characteristics of a system... it is a grammar fated to degenerate into a lexicon' (232).

As such 'There is no need to invoke the exercise of vanished faculties or the employment of some supernumerary sensibility' (221) to explain the prodigious classificatory schemes evident in cultures unacquainted with what we understand as scientific method. Such capacities are still in evidence in contemporary urban life 'when we drive a car and assess the moment to pass or avoid a vehicle at a glance, by a slight turn of the wheels, a fluctuation in the normal speed of the engine or even the supposed intention of a look... the signs expressed carry with them their meaning' (222-223).

Thus for Lévi-Strauss what is at issue is not a primitive denotative set of practices (such as was assumed of totemism) that precede symbolic exchange and are subsequently lost in ‘hot’ or historically cumulative societies, but a cultural repertoire of procedures active across many levels.

The example of the motorist who ‘does not distinguish the moment of observation from that of interpretation’ is similar to Benjamin’s notion of tactile habituation and Wilden’s discussion of primary digitalization — although Lévi-Strauss’ explanation for this capacity (a ‘reciprocity of perspectives’, signs ‘carrying’ their meaning) is more strictly semiotic in its framework. His assessment of archives can also be linked with computers insofar as they are mnemonic systems of data archivization, manipulation and retrieval, especially in light of his somewhat whimsical speculation that ‘...the day may come when all the available documentation on Australian tribes is transferred to punched cards and with the help of a computer their entire techno-economic, social and religious structures can be shown to be like a vast group of transformations’ (89).

Unstable Signifiers and Temporality

One wonders if the great anthropologist ever got around to playing *Civilization*: dubiously useful as a scholarly resource, but certainly a felicitous for those wishing to play with a ‘vast group of transformations’. In the *bricoleur*-like adoption of the terms ‘diachrony’ and ‘synchrony’, then, I am less interested in Lévi-Strauss’ structural explanations of social phenomena than the way that these concepts might be used to account non-reductively for the muddle of videogame performance.

These speculations about ritual and toys can be recruited for the analysis of videogame temporality by connecting framing devices with Agamben’s ‘unstable signifiers’ — points of transformation between the production of synchrony and diachrony. Videogame performances act on these signifiers to change their temporal signification. Framing devices disseminate structures of performative judgement and thus facilitate performative transformations between synchronizing structure (ludological, tactile, narratological, semiotic, multiplayer, or any other that may be involved in a particular design) and the diachronic event and duration of play.³ A videogame is another apparatus for producing ‘differential margins’ between diachrony and synchrony. Where such margins once produced initiatory relations between entire generations or helped explain seasonal and cosmic phenomena, computers facilitate the production of increasingly compressed performative feedback loops and intensive fluxes of experience.

Some precise comparative definitions are possible at this point. *Diachrony* is produced by apparatuses that separate, disperse or distinguish performative multiplicities, making them more distal. *Synchrony* is produced by apparatuses that bring together, converge or center performances, making them proximal. Analysis of a videogame performance (or indeed any other element) in these terms will be termed ‘chronotypology’.⁴ The key unstable signifiers in gaming are those framing devices that have ludic significance: that sort between felicitous and infelicitous play. However, all signifiers in a videogame have the potential to produce diachronic or synchronic experience.

This approach adds temporal specificity to the performative theory developed in Chapter 8, which was oriented towards the analysis of how particular performances and framing devices arise (as illudic or perludic acts) by digitalization of the message-in-circuit or multiplicity of performances constituting a videogame. Chronotypology, by contrast, accounts for how performative multiplicities differ in comparative terms — how certain digital distinctions generate temporal experience. The approach allows the analytic location of illudic or perludic acts ‘within’ the game’s performative multiplicities. This is especially useful with regard to characterizing perludic acts. Because such performances enact a secondary digitalization, they are capable of language-like abstraction and semiotic versatility. A perludic act could be as simple as selecting a character at the beginning of a game, or as complex as completing a level, or indeed an entire game. All of these performances introduce a secondary digitalization into the game, but they are obviously performative multiples of very different ‘sizes’ or magnitudes, with very different ramifications for felicity judgements and styles of play.

Chronotypological analysis is thus useful for orienting and characterizing perludic acts within the performative multiplicities of a particular game. For example, any non-reversible event or performance will exercise a strong diachronic influence over a particular playthrough, dividing it into two distinct segments. A very simple example would be the beginning of *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*. Player character Naked Snake conducts a parachute drop and finds himself on a slightly elevated plateau above a forested area. All of his basic actions are available to him and players can run about on the plateau for as long as they please, but once he slides down from the plateau there is no way to return. The perludic act of exiting the plateau thus diachronizes two distinct performative ensembles. This can be distinguished from *Firewatch*, in which the player character can find themselves at a ‘Long Drop Down’. This digitalizes the space as players cannot directly return to the higher area. However, it does not diachronize the two areas as distinct performative multiplicities because the level design allows players to access the previous space in other ways.

A more extended example of diachrony is the Virmire mission in *Mass Effect*. During this mission difficulties arise and players must choose between the lives of crewmembers Kaidan Alenko and Ashley Williams. This is a binary decision – there is no way to save both characters. The Virmire mission has ramifications for the *Mass Effect* sequels because storylines and characters are carried over between the games. Even players who start fresh in *Mass Effect 3* are prompted to select one of these two characters to have survived the Virmire mission (Figure 9.1) during player character creation.

<Figure 9.1 approximately here>

Alenko and Williams represent two distinct performative multiplicities — distinct sets of dialogue options, plot points, ludic tactical options and skills, and so on. They thus diachronize all performances of the game series into one of two types.

Chronotypology can also facilitate the close analysis of performances by particular players. Say two hypothetical subjects, Players A and B both achieve the per ludic act of completing a particular game level. The level design includes a scripted cutscene which changes the rules of the game — perhaps the sun rises and visual conditions become more favorable. Neophyte Player A has trouble navigating the early part of the level, becoming lost and dying a few times before encountering the cutscene after forty minutes of play. She then completes the game level in twenty minutes more play. Player B, more experienced, fulfils the conditions that cue the scripted cutscene without any infelicitous performances in a relatively sprightly twenty minutes. However during the next section a certain lighting design element takes her fancy and she spends a lot of time admiring the scenery — she completes the level in forty minutes more play.

These performances of the game level differ in innumerable ways depending on the scale at which they are analyzed. In spite of this it is possible to rigorously characterize the cutscene's chronotype in terms of its diachronic and synchronic functions within the level design. This method means that the equivalent of a page reference in a book or a time code in film becomes possible in the study of videogames (with important ramifications for the study of narrative, a point expanded below). Player A's sixty-minute performance of the level is *diachronized* by the cutscene into a forty-minute and a twenty-minute performance; Player B's is vice-versa.

Conversely, the cutscene acts as a synchronic element that draws together both players' performances — and indeed acts in the same way for all possible performances of the level. The performative multiplicities on either 'side' of the diachronic event of the cutscene — conceived as multiplicities — can conceptually be composed of any number of illudic or per ludic acts, any of the vagaries of any particular player engaged in any particular session of play. Chronotypology can make subtle distinctions between A and B's very different styles of play. This analysis could be carried out at any scale and according to any set of criteria according to which performative features are of research interest: A's could be further diachronically segmented by the various times she died; B's could be synchronized by her behaviors around new framing devices or design elements that happened to attract her attention after the cutscene.

Farming Devices: Synchrony and Play In Videogames

A question arises at this point: if, for Agamben and Benveniste, play is associated with the production of diachrony, shouldn't we see only diachronically-oriented processes in videogames? Gaming's fascination with forms and figures of motion certainly attests to an orientation towards playful diachrony as the fertile ground for the production of anachronistic signifiers; towards times long ago or yet to come, spectacular sporting events, other worlds and outer spaces, apparatuses ancient or medieval (such as in fantasy) and postmodern (such as science fiction). Marketing rhetorics of technological change and progress seek to maximize the production of diachrony in gaming culture.

Benjamin's treatment of the shock experience and cinematic montage can be seen as a

particularly acute example of diachrony — the splitting apart or sudden digitalization of a mimetic field by a shattering event, a technique that reaches its apogee in action games for which felicitous play demands distracted habituation to rapidly changing fields of anterior motives. The action game seeks to flatten out temporality into a seemingly unalloyed ‘present’ which, as has been established, is in fact composed of a myriad of framing devices, forms of movement and montage effects generated by the apparatus. This seems to support Agamben’s association between play and the production of diachronic signifiers. If ‘even duration is subsumed to synchrony’ in the *churinga*, then in gaming even repetition is subsumed to diachrony.

At least, that’s how the gaming situation has always been sold. Belying the narrative of technological progress are constant repetitions that de Peuter and Dyer-Witherford (2009) term ‘studied unoriginality’ — the propensity of mainstream videogames towards sequels and remakes, as well as the use of serial aesthetics. Games have often remediated techniques that create powerful synchronic effects reminiscent of other media. Characterization, plot structures, thematics, the use of musical *leitmotif* and looping structures, cinematic sound staging and camera angles, popular voice actors, and many other game elements draw extensively on cinematic, literary and comic book tropes, techniques and formulae in order to create synchronizing effects of recognition.

Further, while many games present diachronic images of the past or future, just as many bring apparatuses from various eras into synchronic proximity — juxtaposing magical, religious and technological forms. Benjamin and Adorno both noted ‘false resurrections of the aura’ and ‘dream kitsch’ in their analyses of capitalism (Stoichita 1996). The auratic figures of *Final Fantasy* and other RPG series provide many equivalent examples of ‘timeless’ elements amidst gaming’s characteristic diachronic din. As such, the association between diachrony and play does not seem conclusive in the case of videogames — or, if Agamben’s theory is strictly construed, ‘play’ is only one component of what people do with videogames.

This qualified concept of play and diachrony is in fact is to be expected, as for Agamben the association between diachrony and play is subject to the observation that the pure event does not exist: there is, even in the most diachronic operations of play, always a synchronic remainder. A videogame, then, can be considered a diachrono-synchronic machine in its own right. This situates ludological and player-centric perspectives within a single temporal framework: a chronotypological approach can account for both the diachronic (a player-centric, embodied view of the muddle of gameplay) and synchronic (ludic, narrative and other structures) orientations of the many elements that constitute the complex weft and warp of a videogame’s temporal fabric. They are different points of view on the message-in-circuit that constitutes the game.

Framing devices are particularly important in terms of generating synchronic effects that draw together the many performances players undertake during a given game. A key example would be the *Half-Life 2* ‘visual dictionary’ explored in chapter 4, which acts as a way of communicating felicity-structures to players through serial aesthetics. Synchronizations — particularly in the form of the

figures of reversal and felicity-judgements that draw together a performance in a single ludic assessment at the end of the game — are as important as diachronic durations in constituting the middle of videogame play. Synchrony thus plays a powerful role in gaming and is operative at various levels.⁵ In particular, it gives a temporal quality to perludic acts, naming a point at which a certain set of performances come together to achieve a certain ludic effect. It thereby represents an ‘end’ to a given performance as the drawing together of certain elements, not as a totalizing ‘whole’.

In addition to analyzing the temporality of performances and unstable signifiers, chronotypology can also be applied to signifiers as they appear more generally in gaming. Newman’s question about what constitutes the ‘Donkey Kongness’ of *Donkey Kong* games (2009), for example, can be conceptualized as a set of synchronizing elements (performative types, framing devices, music, character designs and so on) operative across the series. In spite of the great variations in the hardware, software, art, audio and other elements that appear across such a broad set of games, they retain a synchronizing influence, and this accounts for their “Donkey Kongness”. This arguably finds an apogee in *Super Mario Maker*, which places myriad elements at the disposal of players, all of which are elegantly synchronized by the core jump mechanic of the series.

Synchronic effects can also be located in the curious repetitions and behavioral patterns that characterize videogaming as much as shocks, ebullient marketing and new graphical techniques. It is precisely because the temporal structures of gaming involve unique modulations of diachrony *and* synchrony that a distinctive cant can arise in order to discuss performances in specific games. Terms like ‘ticks’ (referring to the sound of a clock), ‘rounds’ (a certain time interval in which characters have a defined capacity to act), ‘dots’ (damage over time) and ‘dps’ (damage per second) all indicate the strange sectioning of time effected by performances and framing devices in games.

The venerable institution of the save game is perhaps the most obvious example of synchronization. Saving a game essentially establishes a point at which the performances conducted thus far are synchronized — marking a game state from which further performances can be undertaken (each of which will be diachronic with respect to one another). While this function may seem a simple expedient to allow players to leave off games that are too long to be completed in one sitting, there can be important performative ramifications to save-game regimes. Games that include a quicksave and quickload function, or a checkpointing system that automatically saves the game when players reach certain areas encourage a rather casual attitude to the particular performance. Some games, such as *Dark Souls* and in particular *Alien: Isolation*, make progress much more precarious (Conway 2012) and thereby give more emphasis to particular performances. The save function is not simply an auxiliary compensation for real-world limitations on play time, but a synchronizing process that, in its specificity, can have a powerful effect on a given performance and the experience of play.

Platform manufacturers also direct studios to legislate rewards for certain kinds of performance that are registered at a platform level — ‘achievement’ or ‘trophy’ systems which present criteria of performative felicity attached to a particular player’s online profile (Jakobsson 2009). Upon

completing certain challenges or milestones, players receive an emblem which signifies their felicitous performance of that particular multiplicity. These rewards can encourage players to attempt new synchronizations of their performances that would not necessarily arise in the native game context — playing according to rules set by the platform's reward system rather than the particular game. They also attempt to abstractly synchronize the performative multiplicity of a particular gaming career, evaluating the 'quality' of a player (albeit with a view to maintaining players' investment in particular platforms).

Playful Repetitions and Varieties of Synchrony

Between the poles of diachrony and synchrony is a spectrum of complex temporal experience. Most any gamer knows the sensation of a Game Over which has returned them to a prior game state. After such a setback, play can seem a grinding imposition rather than an exhilarating anterior motive. The performative multiplicity has lost something of its diachronic capacity to generate novelty, the various sub-tasks and accomplishments imposing themselves all at once in a synchronic haze that can feel more like work than play. There is still, however, a diachronic element to winding back the infelicitous performance: an interminable duration that stands between the player and a new part of the game. It is important, then, not to simply dub a performance or signifier as diachronic or synchronic, but to think about the way that these temporal structures are intertwined in each case.

'Grinding', 'farming' and 'spamming' are repetitive perludic acts that provide further examples of performances that operate in a highly synchronic register. These refer to a repetitive task that has little meaning in and of itself, aimed at some form of quantitative accumulation that will eventually lead to a qualitative shift. Grinding is to consistently execute a performance (such as continually making one type of item to practice a particular fabrication skill, or repeating one type of mission) that yields experience points or some other advancement criteria. Farming is the repeated exploitation of a resource, perhaps in the hope of gathering a certain threshold amount or to trigger an event that has a low probability of occurring (such as a 'rare drop' where defeating an opponent has a low chance of yielding a coveted item and is thus likely to require defeating that enemy many times in order to acquire the item in question). Spamming, related to the general term for junk email, is the constant repetition of a performance (such as using the same move over and over), perhaps because it is particularly efficient or perhaps because of panic or ignorance of more elegant play styles.

Although these activities may seem aberrant, mechanistic or otherwise against the 'spirit' of play, they are in fact codified by rule structures in many videogames. In order to access the most challenging areas and opponents of MMORPG games, there is often a structural requirement to attain higher character levels and abilities. The way to do this is by gathering items and equipment. As one *Wired* commentator opines, this involves 'Hours upon hours of mind-numbing grinding. To "level up" your character, you've got to gain experience, and that generally involves doing a few simple tasks — mostly "killing stuff" and "collecting stuff" — over and over again' (Thompson 2008, online). The

MMORPG promise of extreme diachrony — the escape from everyday drudgery into a completely different temporality of high adventure and fantasy — is belied. In the performance of farming, the rush of combat against fantastical beasts becomes a repetitive harvesting operation, an almost empty synchronization of time that bulks out the play experience — fossicking for a deeply buried seam of diachrony in dense synchronic performative strata.

Such performances are not without pleasures or attractions, however. Academic Liz Lawley writes, ‘... unlike many of my “serious” gamer friends, I *love* the levelling grind of *WoW*... I spend far too much of my personal and professional life strategizing, dealing with intellectually and emotionally challenging situations. I don’t want to replicate that stress in a game environment... instead, I want to relax, to clear my mind, to do something repetitive that provides visible (to me, not to you) and lasting evidence of my efforts...’ (Lawley 2006, online). The desire to find ‘lasting evidence’ in repetitive acts is evidence of the dynamism of temporal experience in games, and reinforces the point that synchrony is not to be construed as stasis or lack of movement. Just as diachrony is an active creation of a distinction between performative multiplicities, so synchrony is not stasis but actively makes performances more proximal. The production of synchrony may involve a lot of work.

Another structure particularly associated with MMORPGs in which such transformations are evident is the ‘instance’ — an area in the virtual world which possesses qualities of both uniqueness and repetition. In the shared world (itself divided up between various servers) are dungeons in which players can quest for experience, items and money. According to Blizzard’s official guide,

An instance is a personal copy of the dungeon for you and your party.

The only players in this instance will be yourself and members of your party — no one else can enter your dungeon instance. Instances allow you and a group of friends to have a more personal experience exploring, adventuring, or completing quests in your own private dungeon. (Blizzard Entertainment 2015)

Entering an instance thus inscribes another moment of temporal transformation within the performative multiplicity of the game. While the group is entering the same ‘space’ (at least in terms of level and encounter design), the instance diachronizes the group’s performance, hedging it off from the rest of the server and game world. Players may run through an instance many times, typically in order to coax a low-frequency drop from certain enemies.

Structurally, the instance is a time loop: the tasks to be performed have both been accomplished many times before and desperately require the attentions of intrepid adventurers. The instance itself, as well as its inhabitants, exist in a strange quasi-persistent state: they are neither alive nor dead, but ‘killable’. One such character is the Lovecraft-inspired monster that is the final enemy of the ‘Polaris’ dungeon in *The Secret World*. This character is faced whenever players enter the Polaris dungeon, after a certain period of time has elapsed after their last attempt.

<Figure 9.2 approximately here>

When a particularly important instance is introduced (a 'raid' dungeon), the most involved and organized guilds will compete to beat it as a world first, often posting video online to prove their claim. This moment of diachrony is similar to the setting of a new record in a sporting context. It will help establish certain effective patterns, approaches and tactics for subsequent groups, enabling them to better synchronize their performances towards a felicitous performance of the raid.

These examples show the complexity of the exchanges between synchrony and diachrony in extremely common game structures, as well as the way that performativity mediates the transformation of unstable signifiers. In the most demanding performances such as speedruns, felicitous play is contingent on reducing alternate (that is, diachronic) procedures and durations as much as possible into a single, flawless temporal sculpture. Just as this optimal synchronization is achieved, however, the performance flips its signification and becomes unique: separate from all other performances of the game, a diachronic marker that acts as a challenge to others.

The Game Over

The ultimate perludic act and synchronic effect in a videogame is the 'end of the game'. This end is operative as a kind of ludic 'horizon of expectation' (Jauss & Benzinger 1970): a set of anticipations about what signs are unstable and will, over the performance of the game, change their mode of signification. This characterizes what is often referred to as 'winning' or 'beating' the game as a perludic act. By exploring this element of synchrony it is possible to respond to and advance Austin's speculations at the end of *How To Do Things With Words* regarding the 'total speech act', and thereby conceptualize a 'Total Ludic Act': the *Game Over*.

The critical point to draw from Agamben's discussion is that there can be no complete synchronic intuition of the game's performative multiplicity; the pure structure, as such, does not exist: at any one time, the process of play involves a particular (and hence, diachronic) performance. As with absolute diachrony or synchrony, while the Game Over cannot be directly *experienced*, it can be *represented*. As they make their way through a game, players form a kind of mental model of the total set of performances that the game will involve.

At the beginning of the game, the Game Over is experienced as a relatively pure diachrony: the game's signs represent the duration of the immediate play experience and the promise of more play. The temporal margin here takes the form of anticipation about the game's intention span, storyline, characterization, serial aesthetics and any other systems that may be present. From this fresh point of view, the Game Over appears as a pure 'yet-to-be-played'.⁶ As play progresses and players habituate themselves to the title's particular performative multiplicity, expectations arise as to which signs are volatile framing devices and are thus liable, at the end of the game, to change their signification from highly diachronic ('yet-to-be-played') to a diachronic-synchronic balance ('can-be-played-with') or to highly synchronic ('always-will-be-played'). These can be identified with ludological elements, which signify the diachronic-synchronic balance of 'can-be-played-with' and

narratological elements, which begin in a diachronic ‘yet-to-be-played’ and come to signify an ‘always-will-be-played’.

Chronotypology thus provides a powerful vocabulary for thinking about a nonlinear or ergodic text such as a videogame as a ‘whole’, but this whole is conceptualized as the Game Over as a *process of synchronization*. This expresses the phrase, used in Chapter 4’s critique of Galloway’s notion of allegory, of games as an ‘allegory in a state of collapse’ with temporal precision. In this way it is possible to conceptualize the whole of a game while still honoring the requirement to avoid theoretically nominating that whole as a kind of unit in its own right. The Game Over is particularly significant for game criticism as it allows thinking all the heterogeneous components — whether diachronic and player-centric or synchronic and formalist — within one conceptual framework.

From a chronotypological point of view, the Game Over is in fact operative at various intensities at every moment of a videogame. Although in Chapter 8 it was argued that it would be unwise to theoretically prescribe certain per ludic acts (as opposed to utilizing the theory in the analysis of particular game performances), with regards to the Game Over there are three ‘levels’ of synchronization that may be useful to postulate as rough benchmarks. Some of these terms are drawn directly from existing game-related discourse. They help to show the versatility of chronotypology as a comparative approach to videogame performances capable of accounting for how experience is structured in videogames.

Fail State

The first level is the Game Over in its classic arcade sense, where the end of the game appears as a proximal performative concern — the possibility of a performance that pushes a critical metric or resource beyond an allowable digital threshold and thus ends the game infelicitously. This Fail State (which could of course be one of many) causes the game to end and reset to some allowable state, as well as synchronizing a particular performance (perhaps in the numerical judgement of a score). This type of Game Over, sometimes quite remote at the start of play (due to a tutorial level or other safe area in which players can become habituated without the threat of failure) can intensify as play progresses, critical resources are depleted, and certain performances become closed off. The iconic example would be the gnomic instructions of *Pong*: “Avoid missing ball for high score”.

This situation is taken to an extreme in hardcore genres and games such as *God Hand* or *Demon’s Souls*, in which terminal infelicity is an incessant pressure. In *Danmaku* — literally ‘bullet curtain’ (Bailey 2013, online) — games such as *Ikaruga* (Treasure, 2001), a hail of deadly ordinance emerges in established (synchronizing) patterns across the screen. The performances necessary for survival are extremely tightly interlinked and circumscribed. Margins for error are slim to nonexistent, overtaxing players’ intention spans. The *argot physique* of gaming is maximized: intuition and interaction asymptote towards a single flux. As in the speedrun, the temporality of performance is hammered out into almost pure spatialities — ‘pulsating, multi-hued latticeworks and arabesques’

(Bailey 2013, online) — that demand distracted habituation of a very high order. As the curtain of bullets move across the screen, players must not only guide their avatar with exacting precision through an urgent multitude of framing devices, but do so with the knowledge that certain paths may allow momentary felicity but lead to an inexorable dead end.

Players may also formulate their own Fail State conditions for a particular performance: cases in which infelicity is not terminal according to the rules of the game, but would cause the player to re-start the game or re-load a previous setting. Such specific and exacting performances are often recorded or streamed for an audience. In games in which score multipliers are based on continuous combos or linked performances, and as such optimal performance is demanded from the outset in order to be competitive, an early mistake may cause players to abandon a performance. A ‘permadeath’ run (Abraham 2009; Keogh 2015), for example, is one in which any death will cause the performance to be abandoned.

Endgame/The Game Teleonomy

The ‘Endgame’, which could also be referred to via the more technical term ‘Game Teleonomy’, designates the sense of a videogame in a holistic sense as a text or cultural artefact. Rather than a constant entropic potential or threat of the Game Over, this longer-term ‘end’ has more to do with a felt coherence or synchronic quality to a gaming text’s overall performative multiplicity. This may very well be a sense of overall narrative coherence (a point that will be expanded below), but many performances may have primarily ludic ramifications for the Game Teleonomy: choosing a race in *TES V: Skyrim* has a far-reaching synchronic effect on all subsequent performances.

A performance of a videogame through to the Endgame can be termed a ‘full playthrough’. This is the experience of the Game Over as ‘Total Ludic Act’, a sense of emergent cohesiveness and context that acts as a synchronizing anterior motive. The term ‘teleonomy’ (which Wilden (1968) explicitly deploys in favor of ‘teleology’) is important here as it emphasizes that the experience of overall cohesion to a game is variable and multifinal rather than necessarily linear — even though in many games there are identifiable linear or highly synchronic structures such as narratives and level progressions. Completing the game felicitously performs a transformation in which many of the game’s framing devices shift from signifying diachrony (the yet-to-be-played) to signifying synchrony (the Game Over).

As emphasized above, even though the Endgame is a synchronic expectation or horizon, it is in fact operative at every moment of play, helping to define the diachronic duration of the experience. This teleonomic sense is, for example, evoked by players who seek to sanction certain types of play or specific performances — complaining about spawn camping in FPS games, continuous early rushes in RTS games, the choosing of characters who are judged overpowered in fighting games, and so on. The argument that certain performances are against the spirit of the game in question relies on a certain notion of its teleology: how the performative multiplicity *feels*. These performances are

perfectly indifferent to the apparatus, but they violate players' sense of what the game is and should be as a felicitous whole.

This formulation of the Endgame can address both narrative-centered games such as *Final Fantasy VII* and 'sandbox' style games such as *Grand Theft Auto V* or *Minecraft*. The former titles feature non-reversible performances in terms of the advancement of a plot, whereas in the latter games (though they may have a central plot that can be completed this may be largely ignored or held in abeyance indefinitely) their Game Teleology is, primarily, the euporetic imperative to explore a vast ensemble of performances. These games effectively offer a capacious enough set of performances to give players the latitude to establish and pursue a large number of goals as per ludic acts (driving a taxi in *Grand Theft Auto*, buying a house in *TES V: Skyrim*) that are constituted by the game's repertoire of performances. In such cases, narrative synchronies are subordinated. They can often be ignored or delayed indefinitely. Conversely, such game worlds can often give the impression of being highly synchronic: frozen in time until the player character comes along to sort out whatever problems the local NPCs have managed to get themselves into.

Imagery invoking the Game Teleology is common in wider gaming culture and in marketing. In the classic arcade cabinets, these images take the form of a literal off-frame space. The cabinet is traditionally illuminated with an image that influences what it feels like to play with the game's performative multiplicity: even if the graphics of early arcade games were very simple, they still supplemented their abstract forms of movement with this lurid pulp images. The cabinet's imagery is, therefore, not simply an arbitrary fictional layer imposed on the abstract forms of gameplay, but a synchronizing imaginary: an affective visualization of the Game Teleonomy.

The synchronic potentials of imagery to encourage extrapolation and speculation are very important in game marketing. Demos and other promotional materials are often oriented to providing a similar sense of what the finished game will feel like. Typically, game demo performances at trade shows or distributed to players will be tightly circumscribed and utilize special builds in order to evoke a game that does not yet exist (Klepek 2015). As a result, the demo performance will only go to certain areas and undertake certain tasks — but these performances may not appear in the final game at all. The demo thus faces the difficult task of using a highly synchronized performance to create the diachronic feeling of a far more expansive world to explore and set of performances to enact.

These attempts to envisage the experience of play before the game is shipped can lead to thorny issues. If players eventually discover that the specifics of the Game Teleology intimated by the demo or other advertising material does not conform to the finished game (as was the case with games such as *Destiny*, *Bioshock: Infinite* and *Aliens: Colonial Marines*) they may feel that they were misled. From a consumer point of view a demo advertises a certain experience which was not vindicated by the finalized product, whereas from a developer and publisher point of view it may be necessary to cut game elements regardless of what the marketing department has been up to. An infamous example of this was the *Killzone 2* trailer shown at E3 2005. The trailer's graphics gave the

impression that they were running in real-time on the then-upcoming PS3 console, although it was subsequently revealed that the demo was in fact pre-rendered by the studio based on what they thought the machine could do. Similarly, *No Man's Sky* (Hello Games 2016) was marketed to create a headily euphoric sense of diachronic potential through a procedurally generated galaxy. However, the game's performative multiplicity gave rise to synchrony because there was only a small set of things to do in this immense space. The backlash in each case was intense, and serves as an index for both the importance and the perils of representing the Game Teleonomy in such a heterogeneous medium.

Trade publications and advertising images also try to envisage the Game Over when they cover games that are still in development through representative imagery. However, these are not simple captures of in-engine visuals but are edited to adjust lighting, smooth edges, add characters and so on. While touching up images is regular practice in advertising, games often sell themselves on the capacity of their engines to generate remarkable graphical experiences. Such images have colloquially come to be known as 'bullshots' (Plunkett 2012) because they give an erroneous impression of what the game will actually look and feel like in the diachronizing muddle of play. Similar issues arise in crowdfunding, where campaign backers are effectively helping to finance a game product on the basis of a certain expectation that creators construct of its overall Game Teleology.

These examples are all evidence that players begin forming a synchronizing notion of the Game Teleology even before a game is released. The most remarkable example of this was *P.T.* (Kojima Productions, 2014). Short for 'playable trailer', this was ostensibly a demo for the AAA game *Silent Hills*, but it was released in a grainy state that made it seem as if it was produced by a nonexistent indie called '7780s Studio'. The demo attracted considerable interest and once the puzzles were solved, the game's production quality improved considerably and credits revealed that Kojima, film director Guillermo del Toro and actor Norman Reedus were attached. The final twist was that Konami and Kojima subsequently parted ways, meaning that *Silent Hills* would never be developed. *P.T.* thus has the opposite temporal signification of the typical game demo, bullshot or trailer. Where the typical demo is a synchronic structure that can never really live up to the diachronic experiences of the game it foreshadows, *P.T.* actually offered genuinely diachronic possibilities for play — only to be forever frozen in time as the signifier of a possibility that will never come to pass.

The Gaming Situation

This expanded set of influences on the play experience leads to the third level at which the Game Over can be said to be operative. It is more strictly an 'after the game': the activity and cultures of videogaming itself, taken as a field of cultural production (Bourdieu 2003). This, in an efficient phrase coined by Eskelinen (2000), can be referred to as the Gaming Situation.

A proper analysis of this level is clearly the province of sociological and ethnographic methods, which are beyond the scope of this book's discussion of performativity. However, there are some aspects of the videogame-specific 'after the game' that can briefly be discussed here.

Retrogaming culture, for example, seeks to create a temporal margin that evokes and nurtures a nostalgic Gaming Situation. The figure of the ‘gamer’, the development of which Kirkpatrick (2015) has reconstructed through gaming magazines, exerts a very high-level and potent synchronizing effect over the mainstream industry as a presumptive ‘target market’ that motivates both publisher investment and design aesthetics. Games (often those made by independent designers or studios) that depart from this set of conventions or refuse to present the usual anterior motives are liable to be labelled as ‘non-games’, ‘walking sims’ or other derogatory labels.

The concepts of intertextuality and serial aesthetics explored in previous chapters are some examples of how the Gaming Situation and gamer culture can often exercise a synchronizing effect on the experience of playing individual games. Many forms of the wider gamer culture, including official trade publications and magazines as well as cultural texts such as chiptunes music, Let’s Play videos, streaming practices and webcomics, thrive on the web of pop-culture literacy and intertextuality that characterizes much of popular fan culture (Ndalianis 2004). Particularly influential performances and framing devices can enter the wider Gaming Situation, becoming important reference points for gaming as a culture and attitude. Aeris’ death in *Final Fantasy VII*, the tram-car bound introductions to *Half-Life* games, and the controller-port switching encounter with Psycho Mantis in *Metal Gear Solid* are all examples that have become indelible parts of the collective lexicon of gaming culture.

Videogame Narrative: A Test Case for Chronotypology

As a test case for chronotypology (and in particular, the concept of the Game Teleonomy) I will turn to the problem of narrative. This has been a contentious issue in the study of games (Murray 2005; Apperley & Jayemanne 2012), insofar as narratives are often seen as linear while games can have multiple outcomes. It is certainly true that many games do not possess a readily identifiable narrative (ie. *Tetris*), or that the stories are somewhat pro-forma pretexts to the more important action gameplay. However, there are numerous games for which narrative is clearly identifiable, generating what Costikyan (2013) identifies as ‘narrative uncertainty’. This is a very similar sense of anticipation concerning narrative events and sequences to that of a linear novel or film.

The rise of video sharing and networked publics has made it very easy to show the importance of narrative and narrative uncertainty to many players: ‘all-cutsscenes movies’ that edit together all the key cinematic sequences of particular games often have millions of views on YouTube. This indicates that videogames can generate significant narrative and spectatorial uses and gratifications. Popular channels such as “The Game Theorists” are devoted to exploring the ‘spatial’ (Jenkins 2004) and ‘indexical’ (Fernández-Vara 2011) storytelling that shape the environments of games such as *Dark Souls*, *Destiny* and *Five Nights at Freddy’s*. Narrative is an extremely important element in many videogames — and, as the creation of many different narrative forms in game fan culture shows, even non-narrative games tend to be comprised of highly ‘narrativizable’ elements.

Chronotypology can aid in the analysis of videogame narrative because it provides a

comparative method capable of moving past the binary of linear and non-linear form. From this point of view, narrative — barring modifications, glitches or other departures from the ‘orthodox’ game text — can be rigorously defined as *an apparatus that synchronizes all full performances of a game*. All performances of the *Mass Effect* series will task players with choosing the death of a crewmember. All performances of *Planescape: Torment* will begin with The Nameless One waking in the Sigil Mortuary. All performances of *Alien: Isolation* will involve Ripley making her way to the supercomputer at the center of Sevastopol space station. These narrative devices act as synchronizing ‘anchors’ across any performance of a given game. It is this temporal function that has the most similarities to the development of fragmented narrative form in film, television, and postmodern literature, albeit it is deployed in a different way.

Countable diachronic elements (such as multiple endings) are common in games and can be designated as *variable* narratives. Games such as *80 Days* introduce different characters and plot possibilities depending on which routes players take through the game. Some narrative-centred games explicitly signify when a variable choice has been made. *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games 2012) will alert players if their actions have a certain affect on the attitude of a particular NPC, thereby identifying a forking point in the narrative. Both *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games 2015) and *Life is Strange* make use of the butterfly motif to signal points at which a diachronic effect has split the narrative. *Life is Strange* offers a limited time-travel ability, enabling players to redo recent events and see how they might play out in light of different conversational threads or actions — essentially, making the save game mechanic part of the diegetic game world itself. The way that these diachronic choices play out in the longer term is still something that needs to be discovered through extended and repeated play: re-approaching the point of diachronic divergence in order to make a different choice.

Although narrative synchronizes all complete performances of a videogame, as noted above this is to be understood as a process that is only maximized at the Game Over. Story elements are highly *diachronic* from the point of view of an initial playthrough: players want to know how the game’s story unfolds. The death of the playable character Aeris at the hands of antagonist Sephiroth in *Final Fantasy VII*, told through a cutscene, is such an event. Generally, playable characters in JRPGs are knocked unconscious rather than killed in combat.⁷ To have a character in whom ludic effort and time was invested (levelling up, collecting equipment and so on) removed from play by narrative fiat proved shocking both on narrative and ludic levels. An unspoken agreement between designers and players seems to be broken.

Aeris’ murder seems to have left something of a lasting legacy even in the mercurial culture of gaming. As one player wrote:

Once the shock of witnessing Aeris’ sudden and unexpected death subsided, I immediately assumed she would return in one way or another. After all, this was fantasy, right? Sticking to the rules of fantasy, the dead maiden is always revived by the daring hero and we, the audience, will walk away with a smug smile on our faces. (Ambigore 1998, online).

The event is described by this player in terms of extreme diachrony — as a shock that violates an expected formal closure based in determinate generic tropes. The sense of betrayal is framed in explicitly temporal terms, set off against a determinate notion of the Endgame: ‘Alas, Aeris does not come back and this important promise is meaningless, not to mention a total waste of time’ (*ibid*, online).

This sense of an ‘important promise’ indicates the power of the narrative form within the game. Rumors circulated that it was possible, if the right actions were performed and conditions met, to resurrect Aeris. In fact the character’s death, combined with the game’s enigmatic closing sequence, turned *Final Fantasy VII* as a whole into something of an unstable signifier. An ‘incomplete game theory’⁸ arose holding that the game had shipped before the developers could implement Aeris’ revivification due to time pressures from producers and marketers. However, according to this theory, these time pressures also meant that the game launched before the game makers could remove all narrative and ludic evidence that it had originally been planned.

A related notion arose in fan discussions that the game’s commercial release had been bowdlerized. For these players, certain unstable signifiers and performances took on extremely powerful significance. This complexity is evident in the narrative form through which they sought to place these elements within the complex regimes of diachrony and synchrony at work in *Final Fantasy VII*:

When you get Aeris’s fourth limit break she has most likely already died. If you actually do what you need to do to get it before she dies you waste vast amounts of time (it took me three extra hours of getting her limit breaks up). The point is that if you get it before she dies, it doesn’t seem like you should have it yet. (RTSmith005, quoted in Cheshire 2004, online)

Such highly involved negotiation of tenses and persons is common in commentary on videogames, arising from the difficulties involved in characterizing a performative multiplicity. The assertion of performances feeling like ‘a waste of time’ in light of Aeris’ death is notable insofar as this sense of superfluity comes into relief against structures (narrative in the first case, ludic in the second) that might be projected to obtain at the end of the game: that is, the point at which diachronic unstable signifiers sustaining the events and duration of the particular playthrough will have changed their valence to signify synchrony. This is expressed with regard to *both* narrative and ludic elements.

The dismay shown in RTSmith005’s response to Aeris’ death indicates how the various apparatuses involved in a game dynamically build up expectations during the course of play: the sense players develop of *Final Fantasy VII*’s ‘off-frame space’ is one with strongly narrative characteristics. The incomplete game theory is evidence that narrative can have a high-level synchronic effect on the reception of a videogame. Furthermore, expectations about the development of narrative can spur speculation about ludic systems.

The game’s protagonist (and for the majority of the game, the avatar), Cloud Strife, can be usefully contrasted with Aeris in terms of how his plotline responds to the chronotopological demands

of the game. Cloud is one of gaming's numerous 'amnesiac protagonists': viewpoint characters who awaken in a strange world. This trope (which also appears as a key plot point in *Planescape: Torment*) has something of the reputation of a tired cliché in gaming, but the purpose it serves is to place the protagonist in a position of ignorance and wonder that resonates with players' diachronic sense of possibility: in this way, the character's aporia is mapped onto players' euphoria, and diachronizing setting, narrative and characterological elements can be introduced with equal justification across the avatar-player message-in-circuit. Both have the effect of giving a rationale for an exploratory attitude towards the game world. Cloud's complex chronotypology indicates the way that avatars in general serve as nodes for the balancing of diachronic and synchronic signification: they must bind performances together through characterological and narrative means, while also providing diachronic possibilities envisaged by the game design. This has led to the creation of strange character types, such as the 'silent protagonist' and the 'customizable avatar', that are endemic to gaming.

Although *Final Fantasy VII* is a venerable title, more recent phenomena also show that players still actively construct a sense of the Game Over through narrative form. The obscure narrative to *Dark Souls*' history was pieced together by fans in forums and online videos. The ending to *Mass Effect 3* caused a storm of online controversy. The main complaint was that the intricate decisions and outcomes that occurred across the three games in the series were not represented in the closing cinematic. Instead, the same simple fireside vignette was seen by all players. That is, the diachronic aspects of performances of the *Mass Effect* series — the specific details of which made each unique — were subordinated to a single anodyne cutscene. This ending was subsequently expanded in response to this player protest. Similarly, the online reception of the episodic *Life is Strange* involved players seeking to intuit and predict the game's future narrative and ludic structure: to extrapolate what the extant signifiers of the game would look like at the synchronizing moment of a Game Over.

Narrative, then, is one apparatus through which games engender diachronic and synchronic experiences from a performative multiplicity. This takes many intertextual forms. Many fighting games, such as the *Street Fighter* series, feature multiple narratives. Typically each character has a storyline that progresses as the player wins matches. A felicitous playthrough ends with the player's character winning the World Warrior Tournament. Therefore there are several endings to the game which are obviously mutually exclusive to some degree or another. 'Canonical' victors of each tournament are often only established with the release of a new game in the series, at which time all the other alternate endings become somewhat counterfactual. This results in a motley sort of storytelling, in which the caricatural design elements of the characters are often played up in picaresque, comical and *outré* scenarios: the hirsute and nomadic Blanka, for example, finds himself deposited in a zoo at his ending for *Capcom vs. SNK 2: Mark of the Millennium 2001* (Capcom, 2001). In the *Guilty Gear* series, where the participation of some characters in the game's tournaments concern existential questions and world-shattering events, for her part trainee chef Jam Kurodaberi

wants to win enough money to establish her own restaurant.

These sorts of exuberantly variable narratives, which revel in the inconsistency of branching plots and unevenness of tone stand in contrast to more conservative licensed properties that aim for fictional and stylistic consistency. Newman reports that the *Halo* novelizations are officially endorsed by the game's corporate owners, granting them the same source of legitimation as the games themselves. They take place in the game's off-frame space: 'the novelizations precede, move on from and connect the portions of the narrative presented in the games' (2009, 50). In this form of remediation, the Game Over is represented as being coterminous with a highly integrated group of media products. Surman (2007) argues that in the comparatively ramshackle *Street Fighter* constellation it is the highly distinctive special moves of the various characters that, across a heterogeneous set of contexts, are remediated over and above any particular narrative forms. In the live-action *Street Fighter: The Movie* (1994):

Importantly, the performance of special moves in the movie is central to the appeal of the film to fans of the videogame. These signature poses are reserved for the closing scenes of the movie, and function as 'deciders' in these final staged action sequences. Ryu's 'hadou-ken' fireball, Ken's 'shoryuken' dragon punch, Guile's 'flash kick', Blanka's 'electric attack', Vega's 'rolling slash' and Bison's irrepressible 'psycho crusher' all make noteworthy appearances, to assure that the iconicity of the videogame is rehearsed with due thoroughness. (Surman 2007)

Where the *Halo* franchise re-deploys narrative events from the games into action-oriented novels and comics, remediations of *Street Fighter* both celebrate and lampoon the salient features and spectacle of the characters' super moves. The former emphasizes the synchronization of a single narrative line; the latter facilitates multiple synchronic affects.

Narrating Gameplay

Techniques and practices that synchronize videogame performances are not confined to storylines. Players often narrate their performances, and this takes the form of several genres such as the FAQ, the walkthrough and the Let's Play. E-sports events such as professional *Starcraft* or *League of Legends* tournaments (Taylor 2012) often require the contribution of commentary teams (referred to as 'casters', while those who govern what is seen by audiences are 'observers') whose role is to help audiences understand the various performances they witness. Much like commentary in televised sports and athletics, e-sports commentators contextualize, clarify and critique the ongoing process of play — constructing a narrative that both characterizes past performances, contextualizes play as it occurs, and anticipates future possibilities. The casters' discourse thus acts to synchronize the elite performances of the players, conveying structures of performative judgement and evaluating felicity. Where a particular opening by one professional player may seem to an inexperienced audience member as a confusing muddle of separate performances or acts, the commentator identifies the

synchronic element as a build order (Chapter 6) and can thereby speculate on the diachronic possibilities that this opens up as play proceeds. Winn (2015) has argued that the design of MOBA games such as *League of Legends* is oriented from the ground up to be streamed and presented before large audiences: the narrative constructed by commentators to synchronize the performance of the elite players is also key to the success of the genre as a spectacular e-sport for mass consumption.

Another genre of videogame-generated narrative is the 'Let's Play' or 'LP', which developed on message boards but has expanded in style and format to currently include some of the most wildly popular videos on YouTube. In a Let's Play video, players will record a performance of the game for distribution and commentary by others, possibly through an online forum of some kind (LPs are often organized through forum threads). The host player may request input from others at certain points (naming characters, assigning stats, rehearsing in-jokes and so on), thereby synchronizing the group's contributions into a single performative style. LPs made by more popular and established players will generally be edited to eliminate infelicitous segments in which they are stuck or unable to proceed: celebrity YouTubers abhor an aporia. On the other hand, 'Long Plays' eschew slick editing and instead record an entire performance including grinding, farming and failures.

The LP could involve screenshots and bridging text, or a video recording of the performance with or without a commentary track. In this way an individual or community narratively synchronize their performance of a game. A notable example of this genre is a LP of a set of connected performances of *Slaves to Armok: God of Blood Chapter II: Dwarf Fortress* (Adams 2006-ongoing) called 'boatmurdered'. Each player completed a year of game-time and then passed the save file to another while constructing a narrative detailing the events that occurred during their performance (a 'succession style' LP). The LP synchronizes the performances of the multiple players and the fate of their shared city.

Game-related narratives can thus arise at various stages of play and reception. They can be produced by various groups who may have differing levels of cultural, legal and commercial legitimacy (Newman 2008). These value and status judgments flow on to their narrative productions (as 'canon' and apocrypha), but common to them all is their synchronizing approach to videogame performance.

'Sins Against Videogame Time': The Chronotypology of *Life is Strange*

The final example of chronotypological analysis is a gallery scene that will complete the arc threaded through *The Cabinet of Cornelis van der Geest*, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Oryx & Crake*. This scene appears in the episodic *Life is Strange*, a videogame which explores temporality through figures of reversal. Like other key game texts explored in this book, *LiS* articulates an auto-critique of gaming through an aesthetics of infelicity. This will also serve as an example of the capacity of chronotypology to think ludic and narrative elements together within the one framework.

The gallery scene in this case sees protagonist Max Caulfield tearing in half a selfie that she has taken with her analog instant camera. This figure of reversal frames her in front of a wall in her dorm room that she has covered with her own photographs — an intimate metapictorial gallery that she calls her ‘cocoon’. Her analog photography links her to specific spatial and temporal contexts: a polaroid’s photochemical processes cannot be manipulated with the same facility as digital images. The analog quality to her photography is reflected in the game’s art style, which almost has a painterly quality. It’s as if we see everything through Max’s ‘eye’: “If I’m not looking through a viewfinder, I’m looking through a window. Always looking.”

That eye is talented: Max is a student at a prestigious art school called Blackwell Academy in the fictional town of Arcadia Bay, Oregon. Her gallery selfie was to be her submission to the prestigious ‘Everyday Heroes’ competition, the reward for which is exhibition in San Francisco’s Zeitgeist Gallery. Her charismatic and accomplished teacher Mark Jefferson, who is fond of Hitchcock’s maxim that film is ‘little pieces of time’, has been urging her to enter a photograph. However, Max has confidence issues and is reluctant to enter her selfie for judgment. After a terrifying dream in which she witnesses a tornado destroying Arcadia Bay, a shaken Max heads to the bathroom where she finds and takes a photo of a striking blue butterfly. She then witnesses an altercation between a blue-haired girl and an unstable student which ends with the girl being shot.

It is at this moment of shock that she discovers that she has the power to rewind time, appearing back in Jefferson’s class. Forewarned, she is able to save the life of the girl in the bathroom, who she later recognizes as her childhood friend Chloe. The pair begin to explore Max’s powers (as she tells herself, “It’s time to be an everyday hero”), and the *Twin Peaks*-esque mysteries of the seemingly quiet town. Their investigations are propelled by the case of a missing student called Rachel Amber and a viral video of another student, Kate Marsh, who had been drugged against her will.

Max quickly finds that her rewind ability allows her to approach social and other situations with newfound confidence reminiscent of Hugo’s description of Enjolras: ‘he had already, in some previous existence, been through the revolutionary apocalypse’. If a situation goes awry, Max can simply rewind and try again. This capability only extends into the relatively recent past, however: if overused, Max starts to feel ill and blots reminiscent of photochemical overexposure blur the screen. The sleuthing she undertakes with this ability comes naturally — as many characters note, she is a very nosy person (Chloe’s mother Joyce jokingly calls her ‘Nancy Drew’). As is quite typical of adventure games, players can have her wander about blithely reading people’s email and other private documents. The flipside is that she is capable of gaining a more complete view of the context for people’s actions and behaviors, a tendency that her power accentuates.

The time span she is capable of rewinding appears in the game interface as a spiral. While the spiral is analog (reversed animations play out as Max rewinds), it is marked with dots which represent digital and diachronic potentials. Essentially, each spiral represents a ‘a little piece of time’ — a temporal eddy. The spiral designates a perludic act that Max can resynchronize again and again,

‘developing’ the performative multiplicity in what is truly her own time. Max’s power and the centrality of her gallery selfie write the figure of reversal and the framing device into the textual fabric of *LiS*, thus making it a fitting close to the gallery-scene series explored in *Time Invaders*.

Later in the game, Max discovers another temporal ability: the capacity to travel back even further in time through focusing on polaroid photographs. Where her rewind spiral is limited to the immediate past, her ability to enter an instant photograph is bounded in space: she cannot leave the photographed scene. It is also prone to the common time-travel trope of unintended consequences: she cannot predict how her adjustments of the past scene will diachronize the present when she returns through the polaroid. She isn’t even sure if the timelines she is traversing rearrange one world, or if each represents a completely separate reality.

Players are warned that certain performances have a diachronic effect that is beyond the scope of Max’s immediate rewind ability by the appearance of a butterfly motif and the message ‘This action will have consequences...’. Essentially, the butterfly icon indicates that a certain performance is an unstable signifier. Where the basic rewind is more like a snapshot with relatively simple outcomes (whether a conversation goes well, for example), the butterfly motif represents more sustained causal threads. The signifier in question was liable to remain unstable for quite some time for players who, if they were playing as each episode was released across 2015, would have to await future instalments. As in *PS:T* and *Dark Souls*, the save-game mechanic is incorporated into the diegetic world and the ludological structure of the game, informing Max’s experience of her world and dramatizing her difficulties negotiating between observation and action.

Like Balzac’s painters, Max and Chloe are inscribed with distinctive temporal significance⁹ and conflicting attitudes to memory and futurity: the former’s surname references Salinger, and the latter’s, the goddess Demeter. Max’s return to Arcadia Bay leaves her feeling guilty for having left Chloe, whose father William died in a car accident during her absence. Chloe has not moved on from this event as attested both by herself and by her mother Joyce: “Chloe chose to remain in the past.” These temporal motifs influence their characterization: Max is reserved, and Chloe urges her to make the most of both her artistic and temporal abilities. For her part, Chloe is overconfident to the point of being extremely prone to finding herself in lethal situations. The two friends are linked by a blue butterfly that evokes both the stasis of the cocoon and the potentialities of metamorphosis and Lorenz’s ‘butterfly effect’.

Tropes and imagery invoking temporal loops and figures of reversal recur as Max explores her old childhood town, including birds flocking in synchronized patterns; vortices; images and locales of the past; a junkyard hideout; time-travel sci-fi; theories of relativity; teen drama and small-town Americana clichés; concerns about surveillance. However, as Max uses her powers over the course of the episodes, increasingly diachronic and non-reversible phenomena start to appear: dead birds, beached whales, meteorological and climactic aberrations such as unseasonal snowfalls, untimely eclipses, double moons. These are all capped by the prophetic vision of the tornado: climate change

appears as the paradigmatic diachronic signifier. The episode titles also develop from synchronic to diachronic signifiers: from Episode 1 ('Chrysalis') to the proliferating possibility of Episode 3 ('Chaos Theory') and finally the binary of Episode 5 ('Polarized').

The game's most affecting signifiers of diachrony are the viral video of a drugged Kate Marsh, and the *memento mori* of a vanished Rachel Amber. Unlike Max's reversible vignettes, the pious Kate's exposure to a digital networked public is non-reversible. The strictly religious Kate, tormented by the video's distribution and her inability to remember the night in question, is driven to the roof of the school. Max can help her, but at a time when she has overtaxed her rewind power: the scene has a strong diachronic quality because players must navigate the outcomes of this conversation without the game mechanic which they had come to take for granted. Later in the game, Max and Chloe discover Rachel's decomposing body: preventing her death is outside the scope of Max's temporal powers, constituting another moment that is a sheerly diachronic moment contrasted with the game's endemic loops.

Polaroid Temporality

The increasing tendency to diachrony becomes the basis of *Life is Strange*'s aesthetics of infelicity: the more that Max tries to definitively resolve the temporal complex she has created, the more loose ends and unintended consequences crop up. Infelicity also obtains at the level of plot, as Max's attempts to uncover who was responsible for what happened to Kate and Rachel lead to a false conclusion, allowing the true culprit — Mark Jefferson — to kidnap her, killing Chloe in the process.

Jefferson turns out to be something of a Humbert Humbert crossed with a comic book villain: he is obsessed with photographing what he perceives as the moment of transition between innocence and experience. Max escapes her imprisonment by going back in time through the selfie she took in the game's opening scene, looping back to Jefferson's class with full knowledge of his misdeeds. She ensures that Jefferson is apprehended, preventing him from ever killing Chloe. She also gains the courage to enter her gallery scene selfie into the Everyday Heroes contest and wins a flight to San Francisco and a career as a feted photographer. Her 'selfie cocoon' has become the gallery scene of a true artist.

Through this gallery scene everything, it seems, is wrapped up in a nicely felicitous Game Over. However, the game keeps going. Hints of infelicity begin to mount. Max once again struggles with her social anxiety when mixing at the gallery. Another indication that something is wrong is the farcical nature of the gallery scene, which sours the triumphant exhibition by pastiching the art world's denizens as vainglorious and trivial — not really worth networking with in the first place. Finally, Max receives a call from Chloe, who says that the storm has indeed come to destroy Arcadia Bay before being abruptly cut off.

Max chooses to travel back in time through her Everyday Heroes photo in order to destroy it at the moment it was taken. Enacting this figure of reversal, she wagers, will ensure that she never

wins the competition and remains in Arcadia Bay to help save her friends and family: the loss of a career seems trivial by comparison. However, where previously her trips into the polaroid past have been to scenes bounded by a dreamy white light, now there is the angry blurs, streaks and mottles of badly developed photographs. “What am I doing to time?” she wonders as she tears apart the selfie.

The resulting timeline is overtly infelicitous at both narrative and ludic levels. Max is forced to re-navigate many scenarios she has performed felicitously (or at least, survived) in previous episodes. Reality itself seems to break down: surreal level designs present twisted rehearsals of past events and distorted versions of other characters. Finally, Max finds herself before the very storm with which the game opened, save that this Chloe is there as well. Chloe argues what they have long suspected, that the temporal anomalies and ultimately the storm arise from the initial rewinding of time to save her life. Max then faces a choice: sacrifice Chloe to save Arcadia Bay, or sacrifice the town to save Chloe.

Many players received this stark binary ending with sentiments similar to those of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy: a game which had tasked players with deciding the outcomes of so many plotlines and relationships failed, in the end, to play them out in a nuanced and spectacular game-ending cinematic. Here too, the ending was often judged as insufficiently diachronic. The game proper is a genuine performative multiplicity, but it ends in a mere forking path.

Another common player reaction is reminiscent of arguments that time spent improving Aeris’ abilities in *Final Fantasy VII* is a ‘waste’ from the point of view of the Game Over. *LiS* wraps back to a ‘before-the-game’: the moment of Max’s first rewind, a time before time became so crumpled. The polarized choice between Chloe or Arcadia Bay frames all the other choices and temporal complexes in the game, but is not meaningfully diachronized by any of them: ‘At its conclusion, *Life is Strange* leaves players with one of two possible outcomes, and in either case absolutely nothing from earlier in the season matters anymore’ (Sanskrit 2015). These frustrations once more show the complex interplay between ludic and narrative elements, reaffirming the ways in which players actively construct a sense of the Game Teleology in the muddle of play. These dynamics are particularly evident with regards to *LiS*, as players produced forum posts and videos outlining their theories of what would occur in forthcoming installments.

These conceptions of the ending of *LiS* as an excess or as wasteful can be analyzed in chronotypological terms. As noted, the game builds its aesthetics of infelicity across each episode as the core game mechanic — seemingly so oriented to synchrony — leads to narrative, thematic and ludic consequences that have increasingly aggravated diachronic qualities. However, it is not as if the felicitous ending does not exist, so much as that it is subordinated to the true Game Over. As noted above, Max seems to have resolved her time-hopping problems by travelling back through her gallery selfie, breaking out of her ‘cocoon’ with the ability to solve the town’s problems. Because she can act with the foreknowledge granted by her power’s figures of reversal, characters comment on how self-confident and capable she has become: a veritable Everyday Hero.

The abrupt re-introduction of the tornado plot amidst what seems to be the denouement of a

felicitous Game Over gives the subsequent gameplay a supplemental character: it seems like an ‘after-the-game’. This is reflected in a surreal breakdown of established game design codes and pretenses to realism. Ludic structures become unmoored and lose their synchronizing reliability. This aesthetics of infelicity coincides with a caustic dose of auto-critique: the dream-sequence is the most ‘videogamey’ part of *LiS*. Interspersed among the interpersonal themes, character-centric dialogue and measured pacing that form the main materials of the game are scenarios that seem included mainly in order to incorporate stock videogame mechanics: a fetch quest involving searching for bottles in a junkyard, stealth gameplay avoiding security guards in the academy pool, and door digicode puzzles.¹⁰ Max expresses her exasperation as she encounters belated — almost apologetic — versions of these mechanics in her nightmare: ‘Oh no, bottles... this might be hell’; ‘I’ll be so grateful if this is the last digicode’ and in an unused audio file ‘I’m going to make the designers pay for all these bullshit code puzzles’.¹¹

Near the end of her nightmare, Max emerges into a scene set in the town’s familiar diner, in which doppelgängers of most of the characters that she has met throughout the game are assembled.

<Figure 9.x approximately here>

The assembled characters comment critically on players’ decisions, upbraid Max for misusing her powers, mock her pretensions to heroism, or lambast her for missing opportunities to help them. Finally, she finds a version of herself sitting in a booth: ‘I’m you, dumbass. Or I’m one of many Maxes you’ve left behind... Thought you could control everybody and everything, huh? Twist time around your fingers? You only wanted to be popular. And once you got these amazing powers, your big plan was to trick people into thinking you give a rat’s ass... You’ve left a trail of death and suffering behind you.’

LiS’ gallery scene thus leads to a final episode that is overwhelmingly characterized by the aesthetics of infelicity. The neat synchronizing loops that players expect from conventional videogames are supplemented by the irreducible diachrony of the game’s final choice, and no amount of rearranging the past will afford a felicitous ending. Read in this way, *LiS* is an auto-critique and refusal of the aesthetics of felicity that are so dominant in mainstream game design and indeed in technoculture more broadly. The dismissive attitude to the typical structures mandated by game design (fetch quests and so on) combines with the title of the gallery scene — Everyday Heroes — in order to highlight how impoverished the temporal schemas of gaming are when they bear the ludic weight of achievability.

Although branching paths and satisfying endings are diachronic at the level of individual games, at the larger level of the gaming situation they are imparted with a retroactive equivalence through what Keogh (2015) terms gaming’s ‘hacker technicity’: the logics of a consumer culture in which potentiality is routinely subordinated to the expectation of its eventual actualization. The Game Over must deliver in shock or in spectacle; above all, it must not feel like wasted time. However these

design imperatives mean that videogames' diachronic potentials are provisional and to some degree equivalent, imparting a synchrony across the cultural field that *LiS* refuses with its indelibly diachronic 'after-the-game'.

Simultaneously, in the refusal encoded in its aesthetics of infelicity, *LiS* highlights the difficulty that mainstream videogames have in exploring the everyday: their temporal structure. The form's obsession with anterior motives, with conflict and warfare, with far futures or distant pasts — with heroism that is anything but everyday — means that euporetic moments of stillness and reflection (as noted in Chapter 5, these are featured in *LiS*) and everyday heroes are comparatively rare in a field of production that insists on new innervations. Games which evoke other modes of experience are liable to be derided as 'walking sims' and 'non-games'. *LiS* makes the most typical game mechanical sections seem supplementary and excessive and in this way acts as a provocation not only to the exploration of wider thematics in videogames (adolescence in a networked society, same-sex attraction, abuse of authority and so on) but also to a more sophisticated attitude to the diachronic and synchronic potentials — the chronotologies — of performance.

At the same time, the game's supplementary diachrony reflects an everyday characterized by multiple apparatuses and processes of innervation — from mass surveillance to anthropogenic climate change — that produce the complex couplings and decouplings of temporality that Boris Groys (2011) terms 'projects'. Chloe, as *memento mori* and strange performative attractor, insists on the reality of the ragged, threadbare time that has comprised the game, precisely because it has no bearing on the final scene: 'Wherever I end up after this... in whatever reality, all those moments between us were real, and they'll always be ours'. Max's infelicities (she just really isn't much good with her either her detective work or her 'power') belies the rhetoric of the avatar as a simple channel for player choice or empowerment. This final gallery scene leads not to virtuoso control but the aesthetics of infelicity: sins, to paraphrase Pynchon, against videogame time.

¹ As Agamben insists, is important to note that in Lévi-Strauss' usage, diachrony and synchrony do not imply dynamism and stasis respectively: rather they pertain to processes of temporal separation and convergence. Combined, these constitute a 'synchrono-diachronic system' (Lévi-Strauss, 236). These processes may be as 'dynamic' or 'static' in producing signifiers of synchrony as they are in diachrony.

² The institution of the *churinga* 'diminishes until it disappears altogether as one progresses northwards' (237) towards societies such as the Arbanna and Warramunga.

³ As has been stressed throughout, this does not imply simply the 'instantiation' of a rule set in a particular play situation but as Chun puts it, new ways of going astray.

⁴ This term is indebted to Bakhtin's literary-critical category 'chronotope' (1982).

⁵ 'Synchronous play' and 'asynchronous play', for example, are common terms in game design to refer to whether players act at the same time or in a staggered turn-based fashion.

⁶ Even here, however, diachrony is not absolute: players' experience with previous games in the genre or the particular hardware setup create synchronies at other levels.

⁷ This is not one entirely unprecedented in the genre of JRPGs but nonetheless fairly rare. The character Galuf dies as a storyline event in *Final Fantasy V*, for example, but even here his abilities as developed by the player are passed on to his granddaughter, who becomes a playable character — the time spent making Galuf more powerful is not lost. A commercially produced device that allowed manipulation of the game code (a

'Gameshark' for the Playstation) can 'resurrect' Aeris so that she can participate in battles, but in terms of the storyline sequences she remains dead.

⁸ An example can be found in a *FF VII* plot FAQ by falsehead (Cheshire 2004).

⁹ Agamben (1996) argues that the striking co-incident of playful and funerary phenomena in many cultures is due to both being unstable signifiers: initiates take the place of departed ancestors through ritual. *LiS* draws these themes together through the perennial American preoccupation with teenage years, and Chloe's own penchant for getting herself killed. Also important is the search for the dead Rachel Amber, who is represented by a ghostly doe, and the name Arcadia Bay, which evokes *memento mori* canvases entitled *Et in Arcadia ego* by Barbieri and Poussin.

¹⁰ *LiS* also caricatures another of gaming's too-easy design tropes in the firearm: use of guns in the game is never powerful or successful, and Chloe even manages to kill herself with a ricochet in one particularly infelicitous scene.

¹¹ Unused audio files for *Life is Strange* can be found at http://life-is-strange.wikia.com/wiki/Unused_Audios