

Games and Power Structures
By Alessandro Valente

Alessandro.Valente@student.uva.nl

Studentnumber: 0359084

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Supervisor: Jan Simons

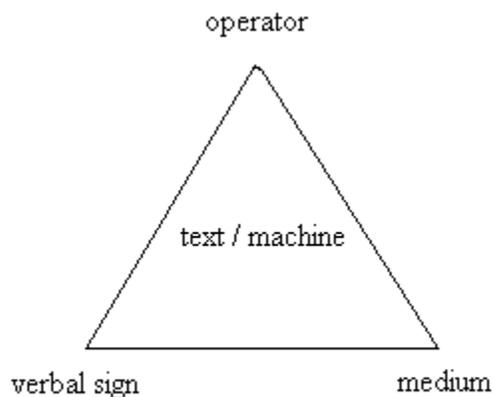
Introduction

The aim of this essay is to explore a particular way to classify commercial computerized games (just 'games' from now on). This taxonomy will be based on the type of power relationship between the player of a game and the virtual environment he or she explores, reconfigures and/or negotiates. The theoretic framework of this essay is based on Aarseth's *Cybertext, Perspectives on ergodic literature*, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of the Prison* and Deleuze's article '*Society of Control*'. Aarseth's work introduces a cybernetic perspective on literature that shows how videogames can be seen as belonging to the literary form 'cybertext'. 'Cybertext' according to Aarseth is a type of textual object that belongs with 'ordinary literature' and 'hypertext' equally to the realm of literary objects and deserves to be studied 'on its own terms'. Aarseth also describes in this work how within the textual machinery of a game there exists a particular relationship between the user and the structuring elements of the text. This relationship somehow controls or at least motivates the actions of a player traversing through the game text.

The works of Foucault and Deleuze describe together three different types of society each characterized by their own power structure, that influences the actions and behaviors of the individuals within these societies. Through a case study of three different games I will explore if a general understanding of the three described power structures by Deleuze and Foucault can give some insight in how the structuring elements of these games influence the motivations/actions of a player that negotiates and explores the game text. I say 'general understanding' because this essay will not show an in-depth analysis of the used works of Foucault and Deleuze and the current academic debates that surrounds them. The focus here is to explore how and if its general concepts can help shed light on the structuring elements Aarseth perceived as controlling and motivating a player's actions and behavior.

Cybertext; Games as textual objects

Aarseth shows in his work '*Cybertekst, perspectives om ergodic literature*' that games, just as traditional literature and hypertexts can be understand as a textual object or machine that works through a complex dynamic between three elements. These three elements that make up every textual machine are; the operator, the verbal sign and the medium. For a textual object to mean anything as a cultural and aesthetic process it must always work through these three determining elements. A text, as Aarseth argues, needs an image, the verbal sign, in order to focus on anything at all and an 'operator' to read it. 'Reading' is here a metaphor that shows that our apprehension of a text will always be partial. This divide is the difference between a text as "intentional object" and the "mental event".¹ The third element, the medium, is the technology needed to store and deliver the verbal sign to the operator in a particular way. Particular in that a medium is never 'neutral' but a deterrent factor in the functional possibilities of the text. The triad that makes the text/machine is represented in Aarseth's work by this figure:



The boundaries between these three elements are 'not clear but fluid and transgressive, and each part can be defined only in terms of the other two'². He also adds that the functional possibilities of each element combine with those of the two others to produce a

¹ Aarseth, 1997: p. 20

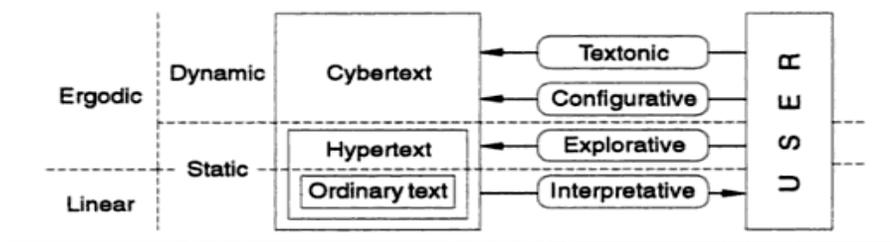
² Aarseth, 1997: p. 21

large number of actual text types'.³ With this model Aarseth aims to contribute to humanities research methods by showing how all textual communication whether traditional literature, hypertexts, cybertexts are like each other, in that they all exist as a textual machine that relies on a construction of the three determining elements, but at the same time can also be different depending on the functional possibilities of these combined elements. We can call this a cybernetic qualification of text types since it presumes a mechanical process where both machine and man work together, by regulating each other through feedback loops, as elements within a greater system. Norbert Wiener's work '*cybernetics*' (1948) introduced an overarching study of "*communication and control in the animal and machine*". In his work Wiener shows how machine and man can function in a system that achieves high levels of balance, self regulation, circularity, and control through information feedback loops. With this cybernetic view on textual communication Aarseth distances himself from two research attitudes that seem to dominate humanities and the research field of literature in particular. One sees textual communications of new media as radically different than non computerized textual communication process. The other blindly applies literary theory to different textual objects without eye for the difference in the relationship between the three elements (most often the used medium is neglected) that construct the textual machine that is the object of analysis. Important to note here is that Aarseth's notion to include the functionalities of the medium of textual objects does not lead to approaches that are strictly specific to certain known media. For instance not all computerized textual communication show the same degree of interactive functionalities. A computer could very well simulate in a large degree the medium functionalities of an ordinary printed book when presenting a text. The reverse is also possible as shown with the example of the ancient Chinese classical text '*I Chin*', in that a textual object of which its verbal signs are stored and presented through ink on paper can entail media functionalities that in relation with the other two elements make it a 'cybertext'.⁴ A dynamic textual machine of which many consider its existence to be inherently linked with the rise of computer technology. Although there is a lot more to say about Aarseth's empirical model and how

³ Aarseth, 1997: p. 21

⁴ Aarseth, 1997: p. 9-10

it aims to map all possible textual communications/machines and bridges the literary field with that of new media studies, I will have to focus for the specific aim of this essay on Aarseth work on 'games'. With Aarseth's perspective games as are placed within the literary category 'Cybertexts'. A 'Cybertext' according to Aarseth's work is an ergodic type of text, meaning that the operator needs to make non trivial effort to traverse it. This non trivial effort is also what differentiates 'hypertexts' from 'ordinary' texts since its structure does not have a predestined sequence (like the numbered pages of an ordinary book) the user thus needs to make non trivial choices to structure the text in a personal sequence. Furthermore a 'cybertext' is configurative meaning that all 'scriptons' ('strings of signs as they appear to the user'⁵) are in part chosen or created by the user.⁶ In part since these 'scriptons' are the outcome of a feedback loop between the ergodic practice of the operator and a calculative force of the medium. In the case of 'I Chin' for instance the text contains a mathematical mechanic that works through the multiple flipping of a coin by the user to create a specific binary sequence that determines which verbal signs of the text will appear and how they will be configured. This aspect differentiates 'cybertexts' from 'hypertexts' since in the case of a 'hypertext' the function of a user is only explorative by choosing pathways to traverse the non hierarchal structured 'scriptons'. The relation between ordinary texts, hypertexts and cybertexts is visually shown by Aarseth in this model:



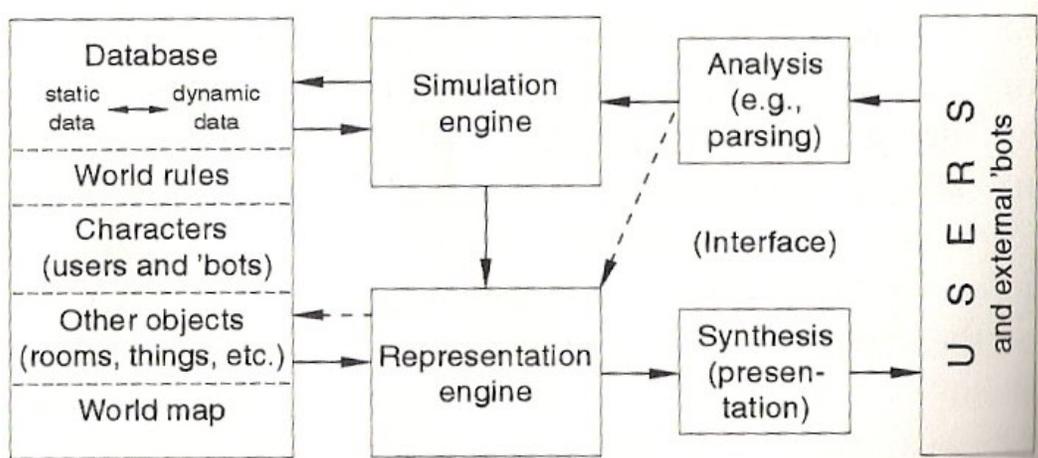
(The arrows symbolize the flow of information and a cybernetic feedback loops between text and user)

Aarseth perception of a 'cybertext' makes sense when applied to games. When the user of say a plat forming game like '*Super Mario Bros.*' (1987) wants the main character who

⁵ Aarseth, 1997: p 62

⁶ Aarseth, 1997: p 64

he controls (Mario in this case) to traverse an obstacle by jumping over it, he does not simply choose this particular event but tries to achieve it by pressing some buttons. When the user presses these buttons it sends information to the medium that then calculates and constructs what will happen. Main character Mario could traverse the obstacle but he could also die or something else could happen. Whatever event will appear, it is partly constructed or chosen by the input of the user and the calculations of the medium, resulting in an information feedback loop. Of course a game like Super Mario isn't based on text and its internal design responsible for calculating the user's input and configuring 'scriptons' is much more complicated than that of 'I Ching'. This however, doesn't mean according to Aarseth that they are fundamentally different as literary objects. They still can be considered textual objects that fall within his cybernetic topology of literature. Aarseth's history of the adventure game shows how adventure games, who emerged from the 1970s, started as mainly textual but since images were better in presenting spatial relations with time they became more and more image based to the expensive graphical products that games can be today. Still the player's creative options have largely stayed the same.⁷ Without going into detail how the 'cybertext' system of computerized adventure games are programmed Aarseth shows the following model of how their internal mechanics work:



⁷ Aarseth, 1997: p 103

This model should be seen ‘as a generalized conceptualization of the functionality of a typical, but advanced, adventure game. Aarseth also adds that ‘the model is not limited to single user adventure games or text-based games but can also describe multi-user dungeons and graphical games such as *Doom*’.⁸ It represents the four groups of components that make up the game: ‘the data, the processing engines, the front-end medium (interface) and the users’.⁹ Information flows in feedback loops among these components, represented by the displayed arrows. Aarseth calls the middle two layers an artificial heart that pumps information between user and the cybertext’s database. The first layer (from left to right) is the database consisting of static and dynamic data. Static information is read only while dynamic information can change in status and position. The processing engines are the core of the cybertext where the course of events is decided based on user input, idiosyncratic rules of the cybertext and the current state of the simulated world. Two types of events can be the product of this processing; events (partly) based on user input (user events) and events generated by the simulation itself (system events). The third layer, known as the interface, has an input and output component. The input component translates user commands into a semantic code that the simulation engine is able to process. The output component does the reverse by transforming the information it gets from the representation engine into ‘scriptons’. The last layer represents the user which is ‘external to the design of the cybertext, but not to its strategy’.¹⁰ According to Aarseth in early adventure games this strategy assumed an ideal reader that by solving all riddles constructs the one definite plot. Overtime however games allowed the role of the reader to be a more flexible and freer one.¹¹

The earlier described critique on how within humanities textual new media objects are analyzed is representative to how games are treated as object of study. Aarseth argues that the common approaches to adventure games fail to grasp the intrinsic qualities of the genre because of their apologetic and trivialization nature. He states: “*The adventure game is an artistic genre of its own, a unique aesthetic field of possibilities, which must*

⁸ Aarseth, 1997: p 104-105

⁹ Aarseth, 1997: p. 104

¹⁰ Aarseth, 1997: p. 105

¹¹ Aarseth, 1997: p. 105

be judged on its own terms."¹² Many literary critics have used Wolfgang Iser's notion of *leerstellen* in his reader response theory, which entails that a literary text has semantic gaps that readers must fill for a literary work to come into existence.¹³ Critics like Niesz and Holland, Buckles, Randall and Ziegfeld used Iser's concept to point out that the adventure game has a second gap, 'a narrative vacancy', which must be filled in by the reader for the text to continue. Aarseth argues instead that Iser's notion, although relevant for cybertext as it is for any other type of literature, is not relevant to describe how adventure games are different from ordinary literature. 'The "openings" of determinate cybertexts are not gaps, in Iser's sense, since they are not used to complement the written parts in a game of imagination; rather, they are used as a filter, in which only the "correct" response lets the user proceed through the text. Aarseth describes these openings as keyholes in the text that are fitted for specific keys that may or may not advance the strategic position of the player. *"Only the first are gaps in the quest for the solution of the game, but on a "narrative" level there is no discernible difference"*. This shows, as Aarseth argues, that these perceived narrative gaps in games are not actually a narrative phenomena but 'is related to the game's structure in a fundamentally different way. This also means that 'standard concepts of narratology are not sufficient to explain the literary phenomena of adventure games'.

To get to a better understanding for games as literary objects Aarseth introduces some alternative concepts of its own to examine adventure games, that should free them from traditional narrative theories 'they have been obscured by'.¹⁴

He takes Iser's notion that the story of a narrative plot is produced by a "convergence of text and reader". By interacting with the plot, that has many significant gaps, the reader enriches the literary work and constructs a story with his imagination. In the case of games, Aarseth notes, we see the reverse happening. *"From many potential stories, a single plot is extracted (if the player is successful)"*.¹⁵ Have then the function of plot and story traded places within games? Not exactly according to Aarseth; the plot is an unsettling concept for the player since he is in no position to imagine a story behind it

¹² Aarseth, 1997: p. 107

¹³ Aarseth, 1997: p. 110

¹⁴ Aarseth, 1997: p. 111

¹⁵ Aarseth, 1997: p. 112

while acting strategically within.¹⁶ One could say that in the case of the novel a mystified narrated plot could also make sense to a reader only just after finishing the whole book. But in the case of a game the situation is still very much different according to Aarseth: “...the bewildered reader of a narrative can safely assume that the events that are already encountered, however mystifying, will make sense in the end...”¹⁷ While in the case of a game the player it is not guaranteed that ‘all the events thus far are at all relevant to the solution.’¹⁸ This means according to Aarseth that there is no story in the ergodic situation of a game since it ‘disintegrates any notion of story by forcing the player’s attention on the elusive “plot”. “Instead of a narrated plot, cybertext produces a sequence of oscillating activities effectuated (but certainly not controlled) by the user.”¹⁹ Aarseth calls these activities not controlled by the user because the controlling comes from a structuring element in the text. To clarify this notion he uses the concepts of the ‘intrigue’, and ‘intrigee’. ‘Intrigue’ suggests a secret plot with no already decided outcome that targets the voluntary but innocent reader. The ergodic ‘intrigue’ is directed against the user ‘who must figure out for herself what is going on’. There can not be only one explicit outcome of this ‘intrigue’ since the outcome has to depend on the actions of the player. The ‘intrigee’ is the target of the ‘intrigue’ which can be considered the ‘implied reader’ of a cybertext. This is the main character also known as the “puppet” or “avatar”. “the user assumes the role of the main character, therefore, will not come to see this person as an other, or as a person at all, but rather as a remote-controlled extension of herself.”²⁰ Aarseth’s ‘intrigue’ is not something that can be located on a particular level of the text but must be seen as constituting ‘a multidimensional event space and unfolds through the negotiation of this space by text and user’²¹.

¹⁶ Aarseth, 1997: p. 112

¹⁷ Aarseth, 1997: p. 112

¹⁸ Aarseth, 1997: p. 112

¹⁹ Aarseth, 1997: p. 112

²⁰ Aarseth, 1997: p. 113

²¹ Aarseth, 1997: p. 114

Game mechanics of power

In the previous chapter I showed how Aarseth argues how games function through an interaction between the user and a structuring element in the texts. This element somehow controls or at least motivates the player in his actions within the game.

Aarseth describes this element with the concepts of the ‘intrigue’ an undetermined secret plot, and the ‘intriguer’, a remote controlled extension of the reader. This relationship between the user and the game text is important to understand games on their own terms as literary objects. In this essay I want to explore more about how this described control and interaction between player and game works. This will be done by exploring how the theoretical works of Deleuze and Foucault on power/control mechanics within a society can help in understanding these controlling mechanics described by Aarseth. Deleuze and Foucault identified three types of societies each characterized by a type of power mechanism and each belonging to a certain historical period. The idea here is that the work on these three different types of power structures can also give us insight in the way the motivations/actions of a player are controlled when they negotiate and explore the game text. To explore this I will give a short case study of three different games. Each case study exemplifies how the particular control mechanism experienced within the game can be understood through one of the power mechanisms described in the works of Deleuze and Foucault.

In *Discipline and Punishment* Foucault describes a shift, from sovereign societies characterized by a punitive system of public spectacle on the scaffold, to disciplinary societies characterized by a punitive system of panoptic surveillance in enclosed correctional institutions. In the sovereign societies, which took place in the classical era of the eighteenth century, the power of the king was established and re-established in public executions aimed at disciplining subordinates of society through direct physical torture and removal/exclusion of bodies that disobeyed the law. With the rise of disciplinary societies between the years 1750 and 1830 however, the Sovereign has been abstracted into the legal constitution of the state, established and re-established through the legalized institutions of the state. The rise of this society is marked by the rise of the penal institution. The disciplinary mechanisms of this modern age society work through

institutional sites of confinement ‘where individuals are always going from one closed site to another’ such as the prison, the school, the barrack and the factory.²² Each of the enclosed sites has their own rules tailored for their specific disciplinary aim. Within these enclosed sites individuals were confined and surveilled by an unequal panoptic gaze. This established a discipline that was internalized in the bodies of society’s subordinates as a natural behavior of the good citizens. In ‘The Society of Control’ Deleuze adds to Foucault’s work a following historical period. Deleuze argues that the institutions responsible for the disciplinary society of the modern age are in crisis in the postmodern times of late twentieth century. “...everyone knows that these institutions are finished, whatever the length of their expiration periods. It’s only a matter of administering their last rites and of keeping people employed until the installation of the new forces knocking at the door. These are the societies of control...”²³

Instead of the disciplinary enclosed spaces that ‘mold’ individuals into distinct castings, a control is emerging that works through ‘modulation’, ‘like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point’.²⁴ Where in the disciplinary society the signature and the document were key to cast and mold individuals, the key to control in the control society lies in codes and passwords that restrict individuals from certain access and information. The duality between the mass and the individual becomes less important. Since, ‘individuals become ‘dividuals’’, and masses become samples data, markets, or ‘banks’”²⁵. This means that instead of ‘always starting again’ as marked and observed individual from one specific enclosed space to the next, in the societies of control one is ‘never finished with anything’ since it functions ‘like a universal system of deformation’²⁶.

²² Deleuze, 1992: p. 3

²³ Deleuze, 1992: p. 3

²⁴ Deleuze, 1992: p. 4

²⁵ Deleuze, 1992: p. 5

²⁶ Deleuze, 1992: p. 4

Asteroids

‘Asteroids’ is an arcade game released in 1979 by Atari and became one of the most popular games of its days. The setup of the game is relatively simple. The game consists of a black screen with different dynamic objects that light up. The player controls a triangular object that represents a spaceship which is the extended self of the player (‘intriguee’). The other objects on the screen are giant floating asteroids that constantly threaten to hit the spaceship. To survive and score points the player must use his skills and wits to maneuver through the floating asteroids and shoot them in pieces before they damage and destroy the ship.



(Gameplay image of Asteroids (1979))

The game is over when a player reaches the maximum allowed of times the spaceship is hit by an asteroid and explodes. The only thing that remains after the ‘game over’ screen is the player score which can be saved in a top score’s chart if it’s high enough. This type of game play is typical for what is often revered to as (classical) arcade games. The player constantly uses reflexes, skills and strategic thinking to successfully survive from an always immanent death or ‘game over’. Turkle showed in ‘The Second Self’ with an

analysis of the famous arcade game *Pac Man*, that such games are not just mindless action but requires a lot of mental effort to master. She goes as far as stating that ‘in a way it’s more than thinking’ that is required to play properly.²⁷ This simple setup of *Asteroids* shows a power system that is comparable with the sovereign power of Foucault’s sovereign society. Wrong behavior is instantly punished by the physical hitting of the extension of the user by an asteroid or a virtual death that immediately excludes the player from the game. The player therefore learns what ‘good behavior’ is through physical/corporal punishment, virtual death and exclusion of the game. Foucault described such a punishment system as the old power of the sovereign over life that is in contrast with the ‘disciplinary’ methods at play in modern societies. Foucault’s sovereign power entails a punishment system with an emphasis on physical punishment or the removal from society by death or exclusion, explained by examples of public torture, public execution, leprosy colonies and dungeons.²⁸ The public punishment methods were in place to show of and establish the power of the sovereign king so its rules would be obeyed and learned by all individuals within society. Off course a player learns from seeing and experiencing the punishing of his digital alter-ego or ‘intriguee’ instead of the public torturing or execution of the physical body of someone else. When the player experiences his virtual death and is excluded from the game the collapsed distance between user, ‘intriguee’ and ‘intrigue’ disappears. *“The main character is simply dead, erased and must begin again. The narratee, on the other hand, is explicitly told what happened, usually in a sarcastic manner, and offered the chance to start anew. The user, aware of all this in a way denied by the narratee, learns from the mistakes and previous experience and is able to play a different game”*.²⁹ It is also interesting to note that there is no particular reward within the game world of ‘*Asteroids*’ for the player’s good behavior. One plays the game until making to many mistakes; the game can never be finished by just good behavior. There are only the points a player earns to put behind his name after his virtual death or exclusion from the game. No one has ever reached the end of *Asteroids*. The current world record score is 41,336,440 by Scot Safran which was done by ‘surviving’ for more then 80 hours in the game. The same can be sayd about

²⁷ Turkle, 1985: p. 66-68.

²⁸ Foucault, 1975: p. 195-228.

²⁹ Aarseth, 1994: p. 73-74.

Pac-man (Namco: 1980) as long as the player behaves good and is not killed by the ghosts in the maze he should be able to continue endlessly. However, due to a bug in the game the 256th board becomes a garbled mess of texts and main character Pacman can not survive anymore. Dying like this in *Pac-man* is experienced as a great achievement since it means one died of ‘natural causes’ instead of being punished by exclusion for ‘wrong’ behaviour. Only a hand full of people have ever managed to make it that far.

Portal

Portal is considered to be a first person action/puzzle game and was developed by Valve Corporations. The game was released in the bundle package *The Orange Box* for Microsoft Windows and Xbox 360 in 2007. Where *Asteroids* game world only exists of dynamic objects on a black field, *Portal* presents a completely graphically rendered virtual space where object and the surroundings are all viewed three dimensionally. The player controls the main character named Chell from a first person perspective. At the start of the game Chell wakes up in an enclosed white room. A mysterious robotic voice tells her that she is the object of an experiment and challenges her to navigate through a series of rooms using a “portal gun”. This gun allows the player to create two distinct portal ends, orange and blue. Neither of the portals is specifically an entrance or exit; all objects that travel through one portal will exit through the other. Every level or stage of the game consists of a room that has only one exit point that can only be reached by making clever use of the portal gun. Every room is thus a puzzle that needs to be solved by the player to get to the next room. The more progress a player makes by traveling through the rooms the more difficult the puzzles become and the more inventive use of the portals is needed to pass. This shows a different relation between the player and the game environment than was the case with *Asteroids*. The objective of the player becomes traversing an enclosed virtual space, this makes the user traverse through the game text, rather than just managing to ‘stay physically untouched and alive’. ‘Corporal punishment’ or a ‘virtual death’ that means exclusion is no longer what motivates ‘good behavior’ of the player. The power structure of the game system works with a more

positive punishment and reward system. Good behavior is awarded by the passing of a closed environment to enter the next one. Each next room implements a more difficult challenge that needs a further enhancement of the player's behavior for it to be able to pass it. Not behaving according to the rules of the system simply means that the player is stuck in the enclosed space and no progression occurs. The only way the game finishes (without walking away or turning it off) is by clearing all the levels. Mastery of the good behavior needed to pass all the enclosed spaces will at the end result in the 'Intriguer' exiting the closed game environment for ever and disappears. This is the moment, when in *Portal* the collapsed distance between user and 'intriguer' or 'avatar' ends. When playing *Asteroids* the opposite is the case, it is bad behavior punished by an exclusion of the game by a virtual death that erases the main character and ends the merging of player and 'intriguer'. In some of the levels/rooms of *Portal* it is also possible for main character Chen to die, for instance by falling from an edge into a pool of acid. However when this occurs an automatic save function automatically reloads the game and puts main character Chen right back where she was just before the accident happened. Chen is alive again and the player can instantly continue where he or she left off before getting killed. This shows that the sovereign power at work in *Asteroids* with its measures of corporal punishment, death/exclusion has been replaced for something else. It's the positive goal of learning good behavior to traverse the rooms or levels that drive the player. Of course it's not the implementation of a saving device that changed the structure of the game; it's the structure of the game that makes the implementation of such a device sensible. Implementing a device that constantly saves your progress in '*Asteroids*' so one can always start from just before the ship exploded makes no sense. It would take away almost every reason to play and master it.

The above also explains why *Portal* doesn't have a point system like *Asteroids*. In *Portal* good behavior is rewarded by the passing of enclosed spaces, it therefore doesn't need points. In *Asteroids* good behavior means not being punished, the only way of marking this is by the implementation of a non-diegetic element such as a points system.

The described relation between game system and player is comparable with Foucault's concepts of the disciplinary society. "*They (disciplinary societies) initiate the organization of vast spaces of enclosure. The individual never ceases passing from one*

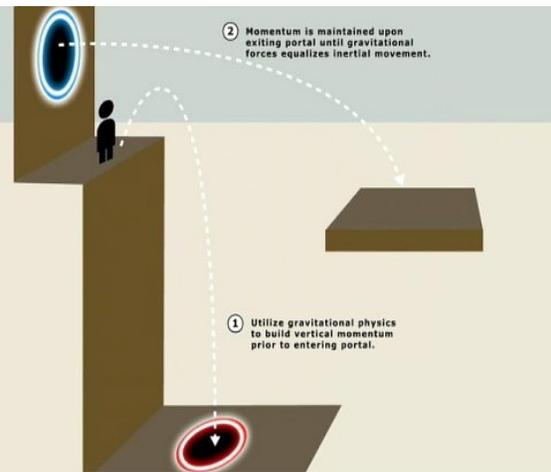
*closed environment to another, each having its own laws: first the family; then the school ("you are no longer in your family"); then the barracks ("you are no longer at school"); then the factory; from time to time the hospital; possibly the prison, the preeminent instance of the enclosed environment. It's the prison that serves as the analogical model..."*³⁰. It is interesting to note that in *Portal* the prison as analogical model is clearly visible. Main character Chen is constantly imprisoned in white cells and is constantly monitored by camera's on the wall in every room. The robotic voice that gives Chen instructions and compliments by monitoring her through the implemented cameras is invisible to her. This situation corresponds therefore exactly with that of Jeremy Bentham's 'Panopticon'. At a certain point escaping this imprisoned panoptic situation becomes part of *Portal*'s narrative. After Chen has traversed multiple rooms as instructed by the robotic voice there is a crack in one of the white rooms that the player needs to go through to traverse the level. Chen has then escaped the panoptic vision of the robotic voice and traverses enclosed spaces in the same way as before, but now they are represented as outside the panoptic construction (of the narrative). The enclosed spaces that need to be traversed aren't the sterile white prison rooms with the mounted camera's anymore, but dirty environments with visible tubes and electricity cords that give a backstage feeling. Paradoxically while Chen has now changed the power relationship between her and the robotic voice, the relationship between the player and the game mechanic has stayed exactly the same. While Chen is now acting against the instructions of the robotic voice, the player is still following the 'good behavior' that is needed to traverse the text. This shows that it was never just the instruction of the robotic voice that motivated the actions of the player to progress the text by passing the enclosed spaces in the first place. In the final level of *Portal* Chen reaches the center of the 'panopticon', a control room where she meets face to face with the robot/computer system that was behind the voice. Here the player must defeat this robotic entity by applying the inventive usages of the portal gun he or she learned and trained by progressing through all the previous enclosed spaces. When the robotic entity is defeated the player has reached the end of the game. In the structuring mechanic of *Portal* we can see aspects of Foucault's 'disciplinary society'. 'Good behavior' is now more internalized as a natural behavior of

³⁰ Deleuze, 1992: p. 4

the player that needs less or no direct physical force to learn how it should behave to progress in the game. The evolution of the activities of the player is controlled by the passing from one enclosed environment to another that discipline the player to absorb the ‘good behavior’ needed to traverse them. While the ‘panopticon’ was clearly present in the fictional world of *Portal* it is problematic to apply on the structuring elements of the game text. The only gaze that actually exists is the one of the player at the main character or ‘intrigee’. One could maybe argue that the relationship of the ‘intrigee’ and the textual machine is panoptical since the actions of the ‘intrigee’ are based on what a player can deduct only from the interface level. The textual machine however ‘monitors’ every aspect of the ‘intrigee’ (while constantly saving its exact location) to calculate what will happen next, resulting in an unequal gaze.



(In game image of Portal showing the two portals next to each other)



(This drawn image shows one of the inventive ways one could use the portals to launch oneself across an obstacle)

World of Warcraft

World of Warcraft, often referred to as just *WoW*, is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). The game was released by Blizzard Entertainment in November 2004. To give a good and complete description of how this game works and is played would take up more room in this essay than is preferable. I will just explain the gameplay elements that are relevant for a comparison with the previously discussed games and the aim of this essay. As in *Portal*, *WoW*'s world is a completely graphically rendered three dimensional space. However where in *Portal* one could speak of a series of enclosed virtual spaces *WoW* presents a huge open virtual world or landscape that can more or less be explored freely. More or less because this depends on the 'level' and 'strength' of the players 'character' or 'intriguer'. The virtual world is run from a server by Blizzard which players can login to with their personal character. The virtual game world is always online and running to facilitate a large amount of people that together massively login in to play. In this virtual open world the different 'intriguer's' can explore by traveling, doing quests, defeat AI controlled enemies (that are roaming the world) and socialize with each other. By doing these activities the player earns experience points, gold and items. These three types of rewards are saved to the player's personal 'character' and will always be his virtual property even after he logs out of the game world. Experience points are automatically accumulated till a character has enough to level up which means that his 'character' becomes stronger, in that his attacks and abilities have become more effective to defeat the AI controlled enemies and fulfill quests. Items can be equipped or used and also contribute to the effectiveness of a players abilities and strength. Gold is used to trade and buy items. Like mentioned before a 'characters' strength, decided by his level and the items he equipped, influence how freely the player can navigate through the world. Some enemy caves, dungeons or castles can only be entered by a 'character' that has surpassed a certain level. If a player tries to enter such a place with a lower level character it walks against a force field and a text will appear on the screen saying that a higher level is required to enter. The whole virtual world is divided in districts. Each district has its own cities, NPC (non player controlled) characters, quests and items. In theory one can travel freely from one district to the other

but in practice this could become rather difficult. Every district has its own type of enemies that roam around. The NPC enemies of a district are all around the same level. When a 'character' enters a district while having a level that is considerably lower than that of the roaming enemies he will not be able to defeat them nor travel safely through them. This means that traveling through such a district and completing its quest becomes almost impossible. Furthermore the quests of this district will not even be accessible to the player because also these are restricted by level. This means that for a lower level player the playing experience becomes frustrating since access is denied, his actions will constantly fail and he will thus not harvest any rewards. To be entitled to this area a player should therefore first complete his tasks within a district better suited for his level, in that he is able to travel, complete quests and kill enemies so his character can grow further and the access to more parts of the world, items, quests and rewards opens. This access in turn is important for the characters growth because it is in the higher level areas where the best rewards in terms of experience points, items and gold are. This process of personal progress/growth and opening access continues endlessly because there is no event in the game that leads to an end of the game. In the case of a virtual death the player becomes a ghost that can immediately resurrect himself by traveling to the nearest graveyard or the location he died. One could imagine that the game is finished when a player has accessed everything in the game. But the enormous scope of the virtual world and the fact that new items, levels, quests and areas are being added to this world overtime makes this an impossible task. The relation between user and game are different than was the case with *Portal* and *Asteroids*. *WoW* shows a power structure similar to the one Deleuze describes as characteristic to a 'society of control'. This controlling structure entails continuous training and the getting access or rejection to information and space. To which parts of the virtual world the player has access to is based on the data he collected and saved onto his digital alter ego. Where in *Portal* the specific location of the 'intriguer' was constantly monitored and saved on the exact location within a distinct enclosed space, the exact location of a *WoW* player within the open virtual world is not important to save. The position of the 'intriguer' within his confined space doesn't necessarily matter anymore to the player's progress within the game. What is important is the data collected to his personal alter ego or 'intriguer' on which the game text can

decide his ‘access clearance’ within the ‘open’ virtual world. One could thus say that instead of a monitored individual confined in a particular enclosed space necessary to discipline/train him the next step in ‘good behavior’, the player is treated as a ‘dividual’ based on the information that is saved on his personal virtual ‘character’.

“one would be able to leave one's apartment, one's street, one's neighborhood, thanks to one's (dividual) electronic card that raises a given barrier... ...what counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person's position--licit or illicit--and effects a universal modulation.”³¹



(WoW gameplay image showing a player character fighting a NPC enemy)

³¹ Deleuze, 1992: p. 7

Conclusion

This explorative case study has shown how all three games show a different power mechanic between user and game text. It also shows how general concepts from the work of Deleuze and Foucault on power structures within different type of societies can help understand and describe these power relationships. Such an approach could shed new light on games, in how they work, are experienced and what the differences is between particular games. One can even think of making a model capable of mapping games on the basis of their power structure. Such a model just based on this explorative essay would look like this:

Game taxonomy based on power structure

| Power structure type: | Sovereign | Disciplinary | Control |
|--|---|--|---|
| Game space is experienced as: | Dynamic objects within an empty almost irrelevant space. | Series of enclosed virtual space that need to be traversed. | Open virtual 3D world or landscape that seems freely to exploration and navigate |
| ‘Good behavior’ of the player is enforced by: | Virtual physical punishment & death penalty for doing ‘wrong’ resulting into exclusion from the game. | Confinement in a series of virtual enclosed spaces that mold/train the player to be able to pass them. | Modulation through the opening and closing off of certain types of access based on the (dividual) data saved on the ‘intriguee’ |
| Progress in game is measured by: | The amount of points gained by the making sure the ‘intriguee’ survives as long as possible | The physical location of the ‘intriguee’ location within the series of enclosed sites. | The rewards and levels earned by the ‘intriguee’. |

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Game ends when: | Player experiences his virtual death and is excluded from the game because of 'bad behavior' | When player passes all the enclosed environments through 'good behavior' | Never ends. |
| Save system implemented to: | Save your score after a game is finished. Progress within the game is not saved. | Save the physical location of the intrigue within the specific enclosed site it is still 'stuck; in. | Save the level, items and virtual money onto the (dividual) 'intriguee' of the player. |
| Prototypical example: | <i>Asteroids (1979)</i> | <i>Portal (2007)</i> | <i>World of Warcraft (2004)</i> |

Of course the boundaries within such a model should be used with a degree of flexibility for it to work. For instance a game that functions according to most of the elements of the disciplinary power structure could still also have an option implemented to save your points after the game. It probably will not have the same value and necessity as with a sovereign power structure game as *Asteroids* but it could have been implemented nevertheless. Games could also be mapped on the border of two different categories when they work through a mix of characteristics of two different power structures. If a game doesn't seem to be map able within any of the three categories it would be interesting to analyze further what makes them different and add a new category based on these differences.

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