

# The Other Side of the Valley; Or, Between Freud and Videogames

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## Abstract

*The digital world breathes new life into psychoanalysis, as simulations achieved with new technology challenge our notions of self, identity, and representation, which are at the basis of Freud's work in psychoanalysis. I will discuss some seminal theories of Sigmund Freud, such as the uncanny and masochism. I explore the root of the uncanny valley as based in Freud's uncanny and posit that the uncanny valley is essential to videogames as they stand today. The uncanny valley allows us to engage in acts of violence and enjoy a masochistic relationship with the videogame; this relationship would break down if the uncanny valley is conquered. And, these questions must be asked before technology catches up to our desire for photorealism.*

Digital media, particularly videogames and 'simulation' technologies, have brought about a renewed interest in psychoanalysis. The digital world breathes new life into psychoanalysis, as simulations achieved with new technology challenge our notions of self, identity, and representation (after all, on the internet, nobody knows you are a dog). Freud wrote that psychoanalysis "is a medical procedure which aims at the cure of certain forms of nervous disease (the neuroses) by a psychological technique" (as cited in Gay, 1989, p. xxii). Of course, interest in psychoanalysis quickly grew to include a large number of disparate fields, which according to Peter Gay (1989) have included "philology, philosophy, biology, the history of culture, aesthetics, sociology, and pedagogy" (p. xxiii). I will discuss Freud's theory of the un-

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## Author Biography

Kent Aardse, BA and MA (University of Lethbridge), is a second-year PhD student interested in the construction of the human as a fundamentally technological being. Drawing on the works of Martin Heidegger, Bernard Stiegler, and Cary Wolfe, his research explores posthumanism as means of digital media critique, particularly in the field of electronic literature. Supervising his work is Dr. Beth Coleman. He is the Commentaries Editor at FirstPersonScholar.com.

canny, as well as his theory of masochist behaviour, in order to elucidate an understanding of the relationship between player and videogame.

In what follows, I argue that the uncanny is crucially beneficial to videogames as they stand today. Were it not for the uncanny valley, which I will discuss at length in this paper, videogames would reach a level of *simulacra* (Baudrillard, 1981) that would deter violence in videogames because the violence would be frighteningly realistic. Although eradicating violence in videogames is a contentious subject and one that many people believe strongly in, I argue that this violence actually reinforces morality in the player (both in the game world and in the real world). I extend this discussion of realism, the uncanny, and violence into Freud's theory of masochistic behaviour.

I posit that the uncanny valley, by constantly reinforcing the videogame as fiction and as a site of play, allows us to engage in violent behaviour and to enjoy the trials and tribulations of an extremely difficult videogame challenge. This view is in opposition to much of mainstream media's coverage on the "direct" correlation between violent videogames and real world acts. The common argument is that videogames are "too real," so they create a disinhibiting effect which translates into deviance in the "real" world (Suler, 2004). I argue that the uncanny valley disrupts this causal linkage; indeed, it is precisely the distancing effect of the valley which places the player at a safe distance from all too "real" acts of violence. The sado-masochistic relationship is another site of play, where the willing suspension of disbelief is required and encouraged. The masochist, then, engages with a fictional world much in the same way as the videogame player does. I contend that the uncanny valley, by reinforcing videogames as a fictional space of play and relying on a willing suspension of disbelief, allows for players to engage in a form of masochism, a desire to exert control and power over the game while simultaneously being challenged by dominating artificial intelligence and programming. I argue that, if the uncanny valley is conquered, videogames will no longer be a site of play, and our ability to enjoy masochistic gaming tendencies will cease to exist.

### The Uncanny Valley

Sigmund Freud's (1919b) essay "The Uncanny" expounds upon ideas previously put forth by Ernst Jentsch (1906) in his essay entitled, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny." By nature it would seem that the uncanny is inherently difficult to define, as there are many different responses to the uncanny by different people. Jentsch (1906) wrote that one of the most common instances of the uncanny comes from the "doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate" (p. 8). In "The Uncanny," Freud (1919b) searches for a similar definition while exploring E.T.A Hoffmann's (1817) short story "The Sandman." What Freud considers to be the primary site of the uncanny in Hoffmann's story comes from the fear of losing one's eyes, which he relates back to the castration complex. Freud (1919b) traced the uncanny back to the German world *heimlich*, meaning "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame,

intimate, friendly” (p. 2). Thus, the German word *unheimlich* comes to mean “the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar” (Freud, 1919b, p. 5). Freud’s emphasis on the uncanny as being a site of repression—something that was once known and has since passed from memory only to return—leads the psychoanalyst to conclude, “that the feeling of something uncanny is directly attached to the figure of the Sand-Man, that is, to the idea of being robbed of one’s eyes, and that Jentsch’s point of an intellectual uncertainty has nothing to do with the effect” (Freud, 1919b, p. 7). For the purpose of this paper, I see this as a grave misreading of “The Sandman.” Samuel Weber (1973) wrote that “castration reveals itself here to be only one theme among the many which Freud musters up and which include, as second major thematic complex, that of the *Doppelgänger*, the Double, be it as duplication, ego-splitting, revenant, or the recurrence of traits, characters, destinies” (p. 1105-1106). Unfortunately, it seems that Freud is too wrapped up in his own theories of sexual identity and the Oedipal complex, to see much else operating in “The Sandman”. Within the character of Olympia, the eerie automaton to which Nathaniel projects his self-love, resides an important instance of the uncanny in Hoffmann’s tale. The uncertainty of whether an object is alive or dead, animate or inanimate, fictional or real, creates the greatest instance of the uncanny, and this uncertainty is extended in the world of videogame graphics.

Freud (1919b) does not entirely dismiss Olympia’s character. He wrote that “the theme of the doll Olympia, who is to all appearances a living being, is by any means the only, or indeed the most important, element that must be held responsible for the quite unparalleled atmosphere of uncanniness evoked by the story” (p. 5). This “intellectual uncertainty” mentioned by both Jentsch (1917) and Freud was taken up by the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori.

Extending Freud’s position that something can be strange yet familiar at the same time, Mori (1970) conceptualized the uncanny valley in his paper entitled “The Uncanny Valley.” Although primarily focused on robotics (as Mori was a roboticist himself), the uncanny valley has been a crucial topic in the field of videogames and film, as computer graphics (CGI) have progressed to a level that, for all intents and purposes, lies in the realm of the uncanny valley. Mori chose the term ‘uncanny’ wisely, as he noted the varying levels of reception his robots received. To sum up the basis for his declaration of the uncanny valley, Mori noticed that when robots that were clearly not human were given human characteristics, humans found them to be charming and endearing. However, when his robots were given synthetic skin and began to look even more like real humans but still not quite representational, reactions became cautionary and frightful. Mori then prognosticated that if a machine was ever built that would be indistinguishable from a real human, that sense of uneasiness would dissipate and reactions would again be positive. The decline in positive reaction represents Mori’s uncanny valley.

Currently, the uncanny valley is seen as somewhat of a hurdle in videogames. Developers stress the importance of near photo-realistic graphics, and the money poured into animation

and motion-capture technology is staggering. It is my contention that this desire to reach the 'other side' of the uncanny valley is a misguided goal. Videogames are only able to achieve levels of violence and satisfaction precisely because the graphics *are* uncanny. The uncanny valley encourages the divide between fiction and reality, meaning that the player is able to enjoy the pleasures of the game without a sense of guilt (1) or reservation.

As a case study, I will explore the crime videogame *L.A. Noire* (Team Bondi, 2011). I have chosen this particular title because of its extensive use of motion capture technology. Team Bondi, the developers, patented their own technology which accurately captures facial expressions of a human. The game was made by filming real world actors delivering their lines while hooked up to this new facial motion capture system and then importing and mapping the data collected onto the virtual actors in-game. The technology is called MotionScan, and the actors were recorded with thirty two cameras to fully capture their facial expressions from a wide variety of angles.

*L.A. Noire* did not simply use this technology as a gimmick to sell the game, however. Rather, the facial tics of the characters are essential during the process of interrogation. The player controls the protagonist Cole Phelps, a Los Angeles Detective who is working on solving a variety of crimes that eventually culminates into an intriguing crime drama. Thus, interrogation scenes are crucial to solving the crimes, and the realism of the characters is essential to deciding if they are lying or telling the truth.

Before the release of *L.A. Noire*, the producers were convinced that the game finally had conquered the uncanny valley. With the help of their new technology, the developers and producers believed that the sense of uneasiness when confronting near life-like characters in games had dissipated, and the game could be enjoyed as being virtually unmistakable from real life. Ultimately, though, the technology actually reinforced the uncanny valley. The characters in-game are so close to being life-like—but, the graphical prowess does not match the motion capture technology, and thus the characters are eerie and unsettling. Somewhat paradoxically, the uncanny valley leads to a stronger enjoyment and freedom for the player to engage in particular acts in the game, due to the opposition that the uncanny valley creates between the real and virtual world. As the game is situated in a world of crime, the player-as-protagonist must engage in violent and disturbing acts in order to advance the story and uncover the multitude of mysteries in the game world. The uncanny nature of the game characters works to continually reinforce the fictional nature of the game world; thus, the player is able to gun down fleeing characters or explore the grisly scene of a murder without becoming completely and irrevocably 'lost' in the game world (a point I will return to later in my discussion of masochism).

Somewhat circuitously, the uncanny valley reinforces the fictional world, while at the same time the fictional world is uncanny in and of itself. Freud (1919b), discussing literary fiction, writes that "fiction presents more opportunities for creating uncanny feelings than are

possible in real life” (p. 19). What is scary is the truth of literature and the fictional worlds we encounter. When we give ourselves to that world, we encounter the uncanny as we realize that reality is structured through fiction. In fiction, we encounter something that is familiar but has become stylized or mediated, and it is when we are reminded of this fiction that the uncanny strikes us. It is not simply the experience that reminds us of the uncanny, but the representation or the fictionality, the rhetoric of being reminded of the distance between reality and fiction. The uncanny valley reinforces this distance, by enforcing the fact that we are engaged with a fictional world. Moreover, once we are reminded of this fiction, we analyze the real world through the lens of this fiction, and this in turn leads us back towards a feeling of uncanniness. This circulatory fiction cycle allows us to maintain the distance that is essential to videogames as they are today. If the player is constantly reminded of the fiction being played out, then the player is able to engage in acts one would typically not consider doing in real life. This fiction cycle works to the benefit of videogame developers; thus the goal of trying to overcome the uncanny valley is a misguided effort.

Beyond anthropomorphic videogame characters, there are other instances of the uncanny that can be found in videogames. The uncanny can be said to exist in any site of play, as a way to disrupt the boundaries or rules of the game. This argument owes much to Johan Huizinga’s (1955) seminal study of games and play from his book, *Homo Ludens*. In his book, Huizinga (1955) brought forth his influential theory of the magic circle in a passage worth quoting at length:

More striking even than the limitation as to time is the limitation as to space. All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the “consecrated spot” cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (p. 10)

For Huizinga, play is always structured by rules and limits, but it is also structured by the physical play-space that the players inhabit. This is the magic circle of play, the site where the game occurs, inherently set in the real world but existing in its own realm of fiction and fantasy. This concept is easily transferred to videogames, as they exist in their own magic circle, located within the boundaries of the screen (2). What this magic circle does, however, is reinforce the fiction of the game, simply by placing these boundaries and borders on the play-space. In her article “It Walks: The Ambulatory Uncanny,” Susan Bernstein (2003), discussing Weber and Heidegger, stated that “the uncanny happening or event disrupts the circle, breaks it apart, and creates the possibility of an openness towards something other,

something strange and alien" (p. 1115). Somewhat counterintuitive, this breakdown of the magic circle actually reinforces the fictionality of the game. If the magic circle is a space in which one can get lost in the game, the disruption of this circle reminds the player of the fiction, thus encouraging immersion into this safe space.

In "Playspace Invaders: Huizinga, Baudrillard and Video Game Violence," Randy Schroeder (1996) discussed this tenuous link between reality and games, violence and morals:

There is no ethics of the hyperreal. The potential problem with video-game culture and the simulation theories that describe it is not, then, an actual leakage of the playspace, but an electronically induced amnesia. Video games do not teach the wrong ethics, they teach that ethics are superfluous: only the game counts, and the game can be started over and over again. This looping recursive world is fine if we remember that its existence is confined to a playspace. But in virtual reality we may be tempted to forget. And if immersive media, as increasingly "real" environments, teach us to forget the parameters of play, they do it in conjunction with simulation models that theorize the hyperreal. The problem is to maintain a "structuralist" critique of a medium that increasingly threatens post-structuralist collapse, for if the world itself becomes a playspace, then accountability and ethics drop out. There are no more consequences, except the need to push restart.  
(p. 150)

While I agree with Schroeder's assertion that moving videogames into more 'real' spaces is dangerous, I disagree with his assertion that video games teach that "ethics are superfluous." Indeed, the uncanny valley actually encourages releasing certain acts of aggression in a virtual space--acts that could be labeled as immoral--thereby (hopefully) discouraging those acts in the real life. The magic circle of the videogame is a safe environment for mentally-healthy individuals to act in ways that they would not otherwise consider in real life. In his convincing essay "Moral Decision Making in *Fallout*," Marcus Schulzke (2009) stated that "[o]ne of the oldest fears about art is that it may corrupt observers and lead them to immorality - a criticism that has resurfaced with video games." Schulzke (2009) continued by discussing how, "Aristotle believed tragedy had the power to make audience members into better people." Finally, Schulzke (2009) sums up why he believes the *Fallout* series, and potentially other videogames, can lead us to become better moral actors in the Aristotelian sense:

An opponent might claim that the greatest weakness of *Fallout 3* when judged as a way of exploring morality is that it does not put forth a moral code. In this regard it seems to be a strange source of moral instruction, yet the lack of a moral message is one of the game's strengths. It mirrors real life in that one is not forced to obey a particular moral code. The player has a vague notion of what is right and wrong, but does not encounter the game's morality as a coherent system. The consequences of actions are realized after the actions are

made. It does not teach a particular morality. Instead, it shows that there are consequences for every action that arise from the response of other characters; it throws players into a world of moral judgment without offering any definite rules and forces players to t [sic] in a morally ambiguous world. This will never lead the player to a systematic moral philosophy, but it will help teach the practical wisdom which Aristotle thought was so much more valuable than theoretical knowledge.

Again, the uncanny valley plays a role in this thought. If the games were too photo-realistic, the levels of violence and drug use as seen in the Fallout series would probably not be accepted as appropriate content for a videogame to portray. However, the uncanny valley and the reinforcement of the fictionality of the game world means that the games can be produced, and a series like Fallout takes advantage of the uncanniness of the gameplay to perpetuate morality. For Schulzke, the morality of decision making in the fictional world will hopefully perpetuate itself in the real world. Of course, this is a double-edged sword: if we expect good moral choices to carry over into the real world, we have to accept that violence can spill over as well. This is the trade-off in videogames today. Ultimately though, I posit that the magic circle provides a sanctuary for behaviours otherwise unacceptable in the real world, thereby discouraging those acts to occur outside of the magic boundaries of the game. If videogames reach a level of ultimate simulacra, this would disrupt any feeling of uncanniness to be had, and in turn the line between fiction and reality would be eroded.

Despite the attention mainstream media pays to the issue of violence in videogames (most notably after the horrendous Columbine High School tragedy), the ability for players to engage in these violent acts in a fictionalized, safe arena is philosophically important. As the uncanny valley reinforces the schism between reality and fiction, it further reinforces the fact that these violent acts should be confined to the play space, and should not spill over into the real world. Ubiquitous videogame conventions, such as the ability to continue games after the player's avatar has 'died', furthers the fictionality of the game (3). By understanding how these conventions operate, the player is able to distinguish between reality and games, ultimately leading to a better understanding of human life, mortality, and decision-making.

Beginning with Huizinga (1955), play theory has long considered the supposed dichotomy between play and seriousness, and as revealed, the dichotomy is not as clear cut as one might think. Ian Bogost (2007), in *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, astutely observes that Huizinga "remains conflicted to the end on the interrelation between play and seriousness" (p. 55). Indeed, as observed in the passage worth quoting at length, Huizinga (1955) observes a distinction between the two concepts, but the border is blurred as it is interrogated:

To our way of thinking, play is the direct opposite of seriousness. At first sight this opposition seems as irreducible to other categories as the play-concept itself. Examined more closely, however, the contrast between play and serious-

ness proves to be neither conclusive nor fixed. (p. 5)

Huizinga (1955) finds the supposed dichotomy between play and seriousness to be tenuous at best, but this is only after an in-depth study of the nature of play. Huizinga (1955) carefully maneuvers around any definition, and is perfectly comfortable in stating that play has a “significant function—that is to say, there is some sense to it” (p. 1, emphasis in original). Huizinga (1955) remarks that play exists in all cultures, across all societies, and “animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing” (p. 1). That play is *significant* and a large part of culture is taken as a given in game studies, but scholars have attempted critical definitions of the concept in an effort to gain legitimacy. I propose that play and seriousness are inextricably linked, and this will be illuminated through discussing the S&M nature of videogame playing.

### Masochism in Videogames

As mentioned above, the uncanny valley allows videogame players to engage in certain acts or situations that one normally would not consider in real life, as the uncanny constantly reiterates the divide between the fictive and the real. By fortifying the divide between the fictive and the real, the uncanny valley allows players to test themselves and their limitations within a ‘safe’ environment. The Freudian concept of sado-masochist behaviour is useful in this discussion of violence and taboo in videogames. The videogame player willfully engages in masochistic acts in a fictionalized game space, always reminded that the site is fiction because of the uncanny valley. Bounded by the contract and rules set in place, masochists feel entirely safe engaging in S&M acts in a sanctioned game space, just as videogame players find a safe environment contained in the screen. In “Masochism as Escape from Self,” Roy F. Baumeister (1988) examines how masochists seek a certain level of transcendence from their corporeal existence, thus expounding on Freud’s (1919a) assertion from an early paper that a subject can take up “multiple identificatory positions in a fantasy.” I will return to this point later on, but as a preface to this discussion it is useful to frame the S&M relationship as a site of play, providing yet another link to videogames.

Essentially, there is a strong tie between the S&M relationship and the world of videogames; this link lies in the idea of ‘play.’ The sado-masochist relationship is usually established as site of play by the participants. There is a strong sense of boundaries and borders, rules are in place, and the safety of the participants is usually carefully controlled, just as in any other type of sporting event or game. Indeed, in her dissertation entitled *Useful Dangers: The Erotics of Form, Sadomasochism, Victorian Narrative* (2012), Mary Ann Davis wrote that the contract is “so extensively eroticized by Sacher-Masoch, and still a central part of the process of contemporary BDSM practices today” (p. 73). The contract defines the rule and structures for the BDSM play-space. The same holds true for videogames: the games are always structured through rules and videogames which control the game. In framing both S&M situations and videogames as a site of play, it becomes easier to make connections between these seemingly

disparate acts. In the seminal book *Rules of Play* (2003) by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, the authors defined play as “free movement within a more rigid structure” (p. 304). A certain quality of ambiguity coats this definition, which effectively allows a multitude of activities to connect with play; this works towards creating an atmosphere of ubiquity for play, leading to inroads for more serious discussion. Further, Bo Kampmann Walther (2003) wrote in “Playing and Gaming: Reflections and Classifications,” “in playing there is the inherent fascinating danger of being ‘caught’ in reality. Nothing is more disturbing for play than the aggressive intermission of reality which at all times jeopardizes play as play or simply threatens to *terminate* the privileges of play” (emphasis in original). This effectively links the two forms of play inherent in gaming and the S&M act. In S&M relationships, the masochist is exerting power and control by sacrificing their body to the game (even though this seems paradoxical; most would incorrectly view the sadist as holding the power in the S&M relationship simply because of the nature of the play) (4). They seek pleasure in the pain that is inflicted to them. In many ways, videogames players take part in these same sorts of acts. Ultimately, this link between S&M and videogames hinges on the relationship between play and seriousness discussed above.

Videogame players seek to assert their own power and control over the game, taking pleasure in the inevitable failures that occur as they try to exert mastery over the game, just as masochists do in S&M situations (5). Furthermore, by engaging in these sites of play, both the masochist and the videogame player enter into a contract. In “Coldness and Cruelty,” Gilles Deleuze (1989) wrote that “the masochistic contract penetrates a type of law which leads straight into ritual. The masochist is obsessed; ritualistic activity is essential to him, since it epitomizes the world of fantasy” (p. 94). The videogame player enters into similar contract, a ritual that guides the gameplay along and encourages the world of fantasy that Deleuze notes as instrumental in the masochistic ‘game’. Deleuze writes that the S&M relationship “must be regulated by contracts that formalize and verbalize the behavior of the partners. Everything must be stated, promised, announced and carefully described before being accomplished” (1989, p. 18). The same can be said of the relationship between videogame player and game. The programming of the game means that the artificial intelligence cannot act out in ways that violate the contract of the game; a game would be entirely too frustrating if the computer-controlled characters could circumvent the contract of the game and inflict damage on the player, for example. The enjoyment of the game only occurs when the game and the player act on the same level and agree to the same terms and conditions that the programming code dictates. This contract emphasizes the similarities apparent between the S&M relationship and the player-game relationship.

In the videogame fandom community, a sub-genre has been formed that encourages difficult challenges in gameplay; this is called Masocore (a portmanteau of “masochism” and “hard-core.”) The best description I was able to find comes from the website *GiantBomb*:

Masocore ... is a theoretical video game sub-genre specifically designed to

frustrate players by combining complex game mechanics with intense, seemingly impossible difficulty, in special “trial and error” scenarios, creating video games that no one in their right mind would actually enjoy. Characteristics of masocore games include infinite lives (forcing players to retry sections of the game over and over in order to proceed), twitch gameplay, and confusing (and often conflicting) goals. Most popular in postmodern indie games, masocore games usually fall under the 2D platformer genre. (Masocore (Concept), n.d.)

Even though this description states that “no one in their right mind” would enjoy these games, they have found a niche fan community on the internet, and they are being produced and played. These games take videogame masochism to the next level. In a way, all videogame players are masochists as they attempt to assert their power and control over the game, but these games amplify the pleasure-in-pain theme prevalent in S&M relationships. A quick *Google* search for videogame masochism leads to a strikingly large number of websites dedicated to specific challenges for the willing masochistic player. One site in particular, *F This Ga.me* (sic), accepts submissions from players worldwide who want to showcase their proudest achievements in the masocore sub-genre. From the site’s “About” section:

Nowadays every game comes with an near-infinite list of accomplishments to reward players at every step. Not this site. This site was designed to reward the upper echelon of gamers. And let the best stake their claim at the top. Our challenges are beyond tough - often we question if they are even possible. We want to see what people are capable and share it with the world. Think of it was recreational crowdsourcing. The site was built by three gamers living in Ithaca, NY and Buenos Aires, Argentina. And although we like games, we know it is overshadowed by the enormous passion we’ve seen in others. We’d like to reward that passion, especially for the older games. You will find many of the challenges focus on older out of date consoles. Although we are not going to limit ourselves to retro gaming, we like the idea of injecting replay value into old classics. (About)

This brief explanation illustrates the perceived link between masochism and voyeurism, discussed by theorists such as Laura Mulvey and Gilles Deleuze. *F This Ga.me* displays a pleasure in masochistic videogame challenges while at the same time providing a venue for players to share their experiences via the submissions and challenges feature on the website. The masochistic pleasure in videogames, then, comes from exerting control and power over the game, and the internet provides a place for players to share their experiences and take pleasure in voyeurism. By sharing videos online, the masochistic videogame players exercises a desire to be both subject and object, a ubiquitous theme in masochism. There is an element of performance and theatricality in masochism: the masochist wants to be watched, to have experiences mediated by the gaze. Sites devoted to videogame masochism illustrate this performance, as videos are shown of Masocore challenges being completed. Finally, it

is worth noting that games outside of the Masocore genre may still encourage masochistic behaviour in the player: One can simply attempt playing *Demon's Souls* or *Dark Souls* (Namco-Bandai) without the use of a guide and yet take full pleasure when finally completing a difficult challenge. The masochist behaviour of videogame playing runs deep.

Videogames have long been characterized as a site of escape: The player is able to create an entirely different persona through the avatar, as a possible extension or opposition of the real world self. Roy F. Baumeister (1988) argues that “masochism is essentially an attempt to escape from self, in the sense of achieving a loss of high-level self-awareness” (p. 28 – 29). The player of a videogame is also seeking this sense of transcendence, as the game world invites the player in and encourages them to create avatars and characters in a virtual setting, effectively transcending their corporeal existence. Baumeister continues by stating that masochism “represents a systematic attempt to eradicate (temporarily) the main features of the self. The self as active agent who makes choices and takes initiative, and the self as evaluatively toned concept, are eliminated in masochism” (p. 34). Videogames offer this same sense of escape from the self, as the player willfully takes control of the avatar, and although they cannot entirely escape the corporeal body, there is a level of transcendence that occurs between the self and the avatar. Indeed, as Laurie Taylor (2003) wrote in “When Seams Fall Apart: Video Game Space and the Player,” the videogame player “*in play* is present in more than one spatial domain” (emphasis in original). Thus, goals sought after in videogames align with the goals of a masochist. In a sense, videogame players and masochist players seek an escape, while at the same time attempting to find power and control within the rules and limits of the game space.

## Conclusion

Freud's theories and writing are essential to our understanding of digital media. Indeed, in “Freud as media theorist: mystic writing-pads and the matter of memory,” Thomas Elsaesser (2009) writes that Freud should be seen as a media theorist for a number of reasons, “the main one being that he thought of the body/mind as a storage and recording medium as well as an input/output device” (p. 102). Videogames in particular benefit from these theories, as these games provide a digital mirror of our world. When we look upon this mirror, we learn more about ourselves and the ways in which we operate within our rapidly changing world. Freud's uncanny helps us understand the realism in computer graphics and how this realism will affect us if graphics become indistinguishable from real life. Further, Freud's discussion of masochism helps in understanding how and why we gain pleasure from challenging games. This pleasure is only advanced by the uncanny valley, as it furthers the magic circle, a site of fictionalized play. If these games become too real, they will cease to be games, and the joy (the masochistic pleasures) videogame players experience will evaporate. If the virtual becomes indistinguishable from the real (or, in other words, if the uncanny valley is every truly conquered), we will have to completely reconceptualize what is acceptable in these game spaces.

### Endnotes

1. Guilt in videogames is a topic that really warrants a paper all to its own. Freud (1919a) believes that “a sense of guilt is invariably the factor that transforms sadism into masochism” (p. 189). Further, Deleuze (1989) wrote that “guilt and expiation ... are genuinely and deeply experienced by the masochist” (p. 100). It seems to be that there is less of a sense of guilt because of the uncanny valley; thus, more pleasure is derived from gameplay. Another compelling argument for the positives of the valley...

2. We can certainly expand the circle to include the physical space in which the player operates, as well as the engagement with various controllers, keyboards, joysticks, etc. Indeed, the current push towards Virtual Reality equipment, from the likes of the Oculus Rift, Razer Hydra, etc. are in and of themselves requiring and exploration via the uncanny. Unfortunately, at this time, the author has not had the opportunity to use one of these devices and, thus, will leave that conversation awaiting for another day.

3. This is not to state that videogames are not violent or that the ESRB rating system is moot. Think of the oft-cited “No Russian” mission from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward, 2009). The uncanny valley and lack of total photo-realism makes it so that this mission can actually exist in videogames. Of course, this is purely speculative, but if we pass over the uncanny valley, we must stop and ask if we can engage in these same sorts of acts via an unflinching simulacra.

4. For an interesting take on the relationship between masochism and power, see Nick Mansfield's (1997) *Masochism: The Art of Power*.

5. I wish to acknowledge that the role of the player is not always so clear-cut. There is a case to be made for a dual sado-masochist role, as the player compels the game forward by choosing to play and not simply turning the game off. And, if the player is the masochist, does this mean that the developers of games must be inherently sadist? These are questions for another paper.

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