Video Games as Microresistance: Challenging Coercive Mimetics in Video Games

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Abstract:
Video games provide the player with the unique capacity to fundamentally alter the storyline. In this sense, video games can be understood as a form of ergodic literature, perhaps to a greater extent than their conventional literary counterparts. Through this understanding, video games can provide players with the capacity to assert their individuality through their style (how they play the game), even within the disciplinary structures of the game (strategy). Style is thus something that belongs more to the player than the game designer.
This chapter seeks to take that argument even further, by using Michel Foucault's work on power relations to analyze what exactly this expression of the individual means and how it is possible. The expression of identity through gaming style can be an act of performative microresistance. When a player chooses a certain group to play as – such as a civilization or race – they adopt that group's identity and history by being placed within the disciplinary structures the game provides – a macropolitical order within the game, based in a historical and social context. The player then asserts their individuality through their style, either rejecting the disciplinary strategies or embracing them. Essentially, the player is stuck within the dominating macropolitical order of the game (just as one is stuck within power politics in the "real world") but is free to resist against the stereotypical dominating structures through ergodic choice.
In this way, histories can be challenged and the fragility of "stable" notions of identity can be revealed by the alteration of storylines and historical occurrences – simply by playing the game. Video games thus have the potential to advance the same implications as genealogical works, the opening of a critical space for identity and the advancement of a micropolitics of resistance. As such, the resistant act in the interaction of game text and play is something that is always already reflected into the broader social sphere as a resistance against macro-identity construction. In addition to the genealogical method, I also argue that Ricoeur's work on mimetics is equally applicable to Aarseth's ergodic texts as it is to narrative. As such, Ricoeurean mimetics is a second method by which video games impact "real world" social dynamics.

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Much has been written on the topic of video games as a new medium enabling various forms of social criticism. However, the overall discussion has been rather limited by the singular focus upon in-game interaction. For example, how game play effects how one views the game's use of various social constructs rather than how game play alters how the player views the social constructs themselves both within the "virtual" and "real worlds." Therefore, it appears that there are two main areas in need for greater examination. First, there needs to be a greater discussion of the critical mechanisms involved within gameplay. For example, do the critical implications of gaming come from the game writers in a top-down fashion or by a sort of bottom-up method through the act of play itself? The second push must be a questioning of what the effects of critiques derived from video games actually are, whether or not they can reach beyond the game and the immediate action of play and if so, how?

In examining these questions, I contend that, first, within video games there are both top-down and bottom-up mechanisms that influence game play. The top-down mechanism of the game's writers structure the game and attempt to influence play by advancing identity politics and attempting to discipline the player through in-game dynamics into conforming to the various stereotypes advanced. For the bottom-up mechanism, the player is given, through its inherent agency, the ability to challenge these notions. As to the second question, the aforementioned challenge to the game's disciplinary structure is a resistance to the game's identity constructs and this resistance is not limited to the game but can actually be reflected back into society just as the constructs were initially reflected into the game.

To provide clarity and direction to this attempt I draw upon Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* where he created a framework through which video games were analyzed as works of literature

under his new genre of ergodic text.[1] Furthermore, Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp expand Aarseth's argument by showing how social dynamics are mimetically reflected into video games and the significance of the critical implications of a player's style in counteracting the disciplinary regimes established by that relationship.[2] With this foundation in mind, I contend that video games allow the player to act in a microresistant fashion against the disciplinary regimes imported from the "real world" in the form of identity politics. Furthermore, that the very act of playing the game writes a new history that constitutes the functional equivalent of the writing of a genealogical text and that, ultimately, the implications of these critiques of identity politics are reflected back into society by means of Ricoeur's notion of mimesis.

Aarseth's ergodic literature differentiates itself from the more conventional literary styles, narratives for example, by establishing a genre for works that rely upon the active participation of the reader (or player) for the storyline to develop and progress. Aarseth discusses various theories on the subject of what constitutes a narrative. However, the clearest description of the difference between narrative and ergodic texts deals with the "levels" of interaction. A narrative contains two levels: narration and description. Narration consists of the telling of events as they unfold in the story and is thus dominant to description, which provides setting and detail to complete the scene.[3] Ergodic texts may have anywhere from one to three levels: only the ergodic, the ergodic and description, or ergodic, narration, and description. The first category consists of games such as football or soccer in which, in-game participation is directly associated with in-game action. The second category contains video games in which actions take place within a descriptively constructed world. While it is the case that these video games have developed storylines, they are tangential to gameplay; providing explanation for why the completion of a level or mission may be necessary to understanding the storyline but are not necessary for the choices the player has to make. The final category consists of hypertexts in which the reader necessarily provides narration to provide meaning to the text through ergodic choices. However, this shows that the text itself does not contain a narrative.[4]

The separation between the last two categories is not to claim that the act of play in video games cannot have significance merely that the meaning of such an act is distanced from the game. Aarseth notices the political implications of the player's role in the relationship between the player and the game and that there must exist something political within the game that the player interacts with that would contend or oppose the player's ergodic choices. My hope is that through translating the various dynamics of gameplay into the terminology that Michel Foucault utilizes, this issue can be cleared. Ultimately, I will claim that the player is challenging the identity politics within the game that arise from the descriptive elements. Specifically, it will be shown that the mimetic reflections of the game's aesthetic and disciplinary, *strategic*, elements from society are what the player politically acts against.

Furthermore, the study of ergodic literature recognizes the significance of the active participation of the reader or player as an author, one that is often more significant than the initial writer. This agency of the reader or player is perhaps the most significant aspect of ergodicism; the traditionally impotent role of the reader becomes the active and essential one.[5] As such, Aarseth rejects the label of *reader* for a person in such a position and instead adopts the term *user* (throughout

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[1] Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
[2] Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp, 'Style: Strategy and Mimesis in Ergodic Literature', *Comparative Literature Studies* 41 (2004).
[3] Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 94-5.
[4] Ibid., 94-5.
[5] Ibid., 4.

the text I will use the labels "player" and "user" interchangeably).[6] There are two advantages to the *user* label that Aarseth identifies. First, in contrast to hybrid terms such as *wreader* (writer-reader), *user* provides a clearer distinction of terminology that denotes both a differing form of text and an alternative form of interaction.[7] Second, the user engages in some form of political action that is both active but simultaneously dependent.[8] Thus, instead of a dualistic relationship between writer and reader, there exists a relationship in which the writer (him or herself a user in a certain form) creates an incomplete text/game to be engaged with by the user whose actions "complete" the construction of the text/game, this would be a triadic relationship in which the interaction of the writer, user, and text/game are necessary for the meaningful significance of each role and the whole.

In advancing the discussion of the political agency of the user, Hayot and Wesp show how the player can use their ergodic choices to critique notions such as identity politics. Hayot and Wesp do this by demonstrating the potential of style to resist a game's disciplinary structure, which operates through encoded strategic choice. For Hayot and Wesp, the very structures of the video game (which they understand as an ergodic text) mimetically reflect various "real world" social dynamics. The mimetic reflection embeds within the game those social dynamics implicit within identity politics, not simply in a descriptive form, but in an intentional, choice-effecting manner.[9] *Strategy*, the mechanism that influences choice, is grounded in identity politics through social stereotyping. As such, disciplinizing strategic options are embedded within the game's very ergodic structure making the strategic disciplinization all the more effective.[10]

To be clear, first, identity constructs are mimetically reflected into the game from society. From these reflections, certain advantages based on various stereotypes of an identity manifest themselves in the game through the basic computing structure, such as the calculative advantages and disadvantages of certain types of units in a combative game. From the amalgamation of an identity's various advantages, the game promotes a certain method of play for that identity and that method is that identity's strategy, the effect of which is the reification of those stereotypes initially assumed. Strategy can be understood as the internal binary logic of power within the game that rewards certain behaviors and punishes others. The subtle and entrenched nature of this mechanism is not without its purpose. By virtue of its hidden nature, strategy becomes an ever more effective mechanism for power.[11] As Foucault states, '…[P]ower is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.[12]

Two major implications can be drawn from this application of strategy. First, within games, identity is essentialized to certain national, cultural, racial, or other group characteristics based on historical "universalities." As a result of such essentializations, player's actions in a game are dictated, through strategy, even in situations that do not reflect the historical occurrences that supposedly gave rise to such identity characteristics. Second, the disciplinized mimetic relationship that is strategy reinforces identity politics through a carrot-and-stick framework by tying the disciplinary strategy to success. Thus, in addition to the essentialized identities that ground the games' base

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[6] Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 173.
[7] Ibid., 173.
[8] Ibid., 173-4.
[9] Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp, 'Style: Strategy and Mimesis in Ergodic Literature', *Comparative Literature Studies* 41 (2004), 409-11.
[10] Ibid., 418.
[11] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage books, 1990), 86.
[12] Ibid., 86.

structure, the game installs a teleological dimension to identity politics as success occurs through the perfection of one's newly adopted identity.[13]

It is this second, teleological, implication that Hayot and Wesp identify as capable of being challenged through a player's ergodic choice. The player, though having subjected him or herself into a certain disciplinary mechanism, is not required to subscribe to the game's strategic framework as the game can only push the player to play via the representational strategy. However, the player may play tangentially or counter to the game's strategy as Hayot and Wesp identify:

> …[W]hile the game can make the player who chooses the 'Chinese' act 'like' the 'Chinese' (and by extension gesture toward the history of geopolitical China), it cannot make the player who chooses the Byzantines act 'like' the Huns.[14]

The player's agency, his or her ability to make ergodic choices as identified by Aarseth,[15] allows for the player to act either with the game's advantageous strategy or without it or even in some cases against it. In relation to strategy, ergodic choice allows for the aesthetic *stylistic expression*, which no longer has to simply be an expression of the conventional writer's individuation, but makes this expression available to the user as well. Style is capable of challenging the very form of the game through this ergodic act, changing the text's structure.[16]

However, style is more than the expression of uniqueness and difference, as Hayot and Wesp would have it. Through the representation of identities, strategy's effect on choice politicizes both ergodic choice and the game itself. Just as one can challenge identity constructs in the "real world" through political actions, so to can one challenge them in the "virtual world." As such, style is both the aesthetic and political expression of the individual and is thus capable of challenging the dominant discourses within the ergodic text; style is an act of political microresistance.

Michel Foucault's notion of microresistance attempts to break down the power of macropolitical regimes through individuation. Microresistance, most simply, is the non-acceptance of the legitimacy of macropolitical interpretations or notions, such as the construction of identities. For Foucault, social norms, including notions of identity, rise in a moment of emergence (*Entstethung*), in which, two or more opposing interpretations compete for the dominating position. As a result, all dominating orders rise with an always already existing resistance. Having lost to the empowered (macro-) interpretation, the resistant position(s) can only take place on the micro-level. As such, microresistance is the individual's attempt to challenge the metaphysical justifications of the macropolitical in favor of the individual. Microresistance is, therefore, located within the 'aesthetic of self-creation.'[17]

Style constitutes the self-assertion of the player's identity, their aesthetic of self-creation, within video games. In contrast, strategy is the dominating macropolitical regime in the game, just as it is a mimetic and political reflection of the macropolitically constructed identities of the "real world." As the dominating discourses of the real world attempt to define identity and incorporate everyone within its totalizing frameworks, so too does game strategy attempt to make the player act as the identity to which they have been subjected. Style's individuating expressionism – always

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[13] Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp, 'Style: Strategy and Mimesis in Ergodic Literature', *Comparative Literature Studies* 41 (2004), 419.
[14] Ibid., 419.
[15] Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 4-5.
[16] Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp, 'Style: Strategy and Mimesis in Ergodic Literature', *Comparative Literature Studies* 41 (2004), 420.
[17] Jessica Kulynych, 'Performing Politics: Foucault, Habermas, and Postmodern Participation', *Polity* 30.2 (1997): 328.

already present in one's gameplay – allows for an individualized, or micro-, resistance against strategy's disciplinization.

Thus, when one's style challenges strategy by either not making the encoded "strategic choice" or by establishing the "strategic choice" as an obstacle rather than an advantage, the player is performing the political act of microresistance by recognizing the contingency of identity norms and challenging its disciplinizing structure.[18]

The earlier quote from Hayot and Wesp regarding a game's inability to make a player playing as the Byzantines act as the Huns then shows both the means and significance of this performative resistance. The game can promote an identity but agency lies with the individual and the individual can use their agency in a responsive and resistant fashion.

Identity within the game is a political choice and style is the performative expression of that agency. Understanding style as microresistance shows how Hayot and Wesp's argument allows video games to break down the teleological aspect of identity politics in games. However, through translating Hayot and Wesp into Foucault's terminology it seems clear that video games also have the means to disrupt the essentializing aspects of identity politics through two interrelated mechanisms: microresistance and genealogy. Thus, style can challenge both of the implications of strategy described earlier, essentialization and teleology.

Hayot and Wesp's limited recognition of the political implications and choices of ergodic texts as they relate to identity politics limits the possibilities that scholars can draw from stylistic expression. Understanding style as microresistance also allows for the critical enquiry that challenges socially and virtually essentialized identities, not simply the game's strategic teleology.

As an example, imagine a modern war-oriented skirmish game in which the player chooses one national identity to combat another. Here I will use a rough example that is loosely based upon the game, *Command & Conquer: Generals*.[19] The player is charged with destroying the opposing nation's army and buildings to win the game. Say the player chooses to play as the Chinese and to play against the United States. The player, being the Chinese, would then be subjected to the strategy the game has in place for the Chinese identity and the player's opponent (even if the opponent is a computer simulation) would be subjected to the strategic considerations the game instills upon the American identity.

In almost all video games focusing on modern warfare, the strategic advantages of the Chinese focuses upon cheap labor to build the base and its defenses with an army consisting of a mass of soldiers (who usually are also cheap to train) and support units that are typically mid-range in terms of technological advancement compared to the other nations. Usually this is translated into the game by having the Chinese military capable of developing tanks, aircraft, and naval units that reflect Cold War Era and some contemporary military equipment. (Some games will make these advantages clear by having scales comparing various factors, such as technological development or the average unit cost, that the player should consider when choosing an identity to play as.) For the Chinese, the strategy for victory, is to build a massive army and beat the opponent by creating an army so large that any advantage the opponent may carry cannot counter the weight of the onslaught.

The American opponent however, will almost always have the technological advantage. While the costs of units, buildings, and whatnot will be higher, their effectiveness is almost universally greater than their opponent's counterparts. The American military will reflect the latest in military technology and will include many items that are clearly futuristic and seemingly from some science fiction novel. The army of the American player will almost never be as large as the Chinese

[18] Jessica Kulynych, 'Performing Politics: Foucault, Habermas, and Postmodern Participation', *Polity* 30.2 (1997): 338.
[19] Electronic Arts, *Command & Conquer: Generals*, CD-ROM (Electronic Arts, 2003).

army as the costs are too high and the production time too long. However, each American unit would most likely defeat multiple Chinese units before ultimately being defeated. Thus, the American strategy is to advance technologically as fast as possible and develop the most sophisticated and efficient army.

In both cases, the game's disciplinizing mechanism is a strategy that is justified by an identity construction of what the Chinese and American nations represent. The Chinese national identity is typified by the technology, architecture, and even the sound of the voices when you select a unit or building all of which reflect stereotypes of Chinese technological sophistication, building designs, and accents. This form of coercive mimetics is common to many games as Hayot and Wesp identify.[20] Strategically, the game emphasizes the massive population size and a resulting willingness to exploit its laborers and soldiers for low cost and military sacrifice to reinforce the stereotypes of Chinese national culture as Hayot and Wesp identify as occurring in other games utilizing the Chinese identity.[21]

The American identity is treated the same way. The technology, the architecture, and the voices all reflect American stereotypes as does the strategic method of play. The strategy and technology of the American identity makes it such that the human element of war is nearly absent. Infantry units are not usually cost-effective (except for certain unique advantages such as clearing out buildings). Resources are gathered by helicopters, buildings built by trucks, and the military consisting of mostly aircraft and specialized tanks. The strategy is focused on units that are as close to being invincible through technological sophistication as possible so as to preserve life. For example, American tanks in *Generals* are capable of making robotic machines that repair the vehicles and defensively protect them against imminent danger.[22] The high-tech and high-cost defensive capabilities of the American military situates the American identity as essentially the opposite of the Chinese identity. Whereas the Chinese identity is based on comparatively low-tech units that are expendable, the American identity is focused on preserving its own units while maintaining maximum destructive effectiveness against opponents.

However, either side could act in opposition to these strategic frameworks. The player that chose the Chinese identity may decide that rather than building an army based on massive size, they wish to win through a technological victory. One way of doing this may be to focus on advancing themselves technologically as quickly as possible, potentially at the cost of not being able to defend themselves during the opening stages of the game. Ultimately, the player would hope to be able to reach the top level of technological advancements that the Chinese have available in enough time to build an army and combat their American opponents who would now be technologically inferior. Another possible avenue for achieving victory through a technological advantage may be for the Chinese to "steal" an American unit or building that allows the Chinese to build an American-style military.

The player that chose the American identity may choose to do the inverse and play with American units while employing a Chinese strategy. The option to steal Chinese technology remains a possibility of course. However, the player may choose to simply not spend money upon technological advancements and spend that reserved capital towards building a sizeable army of America's low-tech units and seek to achieve victory through numbers.

Depending on the game, there may even be other nations that rely on a different advantage that both the American and Chinese may have units capable of accessing but simply to a lesser

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[20] Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp, 'Style: Strategy and Mimesis in Ergodic Literature', *Comparative Literature Studies* 41 (2004), 409-11.

[21] Ibid., 412-3.

[22] Electronic Arts, *Command & Conquer: Generals*, CD-ROM (Electronic Arts, 2003).

degree. For example, the Global Liberation Army (GLA) is a terrorist organization in *Generals* that focuses on using stealth and dirty weapons.[23] Though the GLA does not have as clear of a connection to the "real world" as the Chinese in-game identity or the American one, the presentations of the GLA throughout the game through voice, architecture, cut screen videos, and so on, show that the GLA is intended to be an organization that parallels a Middle Eastern terrorist organization such as al Qaeda. Hayot and Wesp contend that such connections can exist and may subject themselves to the same level and kind of critiques as those with more transparent connections.[24]

Despite the fact that it is the GLA that focuses upon stealth, both the United States and China have stealth units, just not as many or as efficient stealth units and functions as the GLA. However, in a game of China versus the United States, either player may choose to embrace the GLA strategy and utilize stealth as a way to bypass their opponent's advantages, even through the GLA may not be represented in the game at all.

Each of these alternative ways of playing represent a conglomeration of ergodic choices that the player can make that would compose their particular style. By playing counter to the inherent strategy of the video game, the player is challenging the stability of an identity's formulation. Such a challenge occurs through the promotion and validation of an alternative conception of that identity. By changing and thus challenging the essentialized characteristics of that identity which established the beginning baseline of the game, the player validates an alternative methodology or criterion for teleological success.

However, at this point, style becomes the alternative strategy of the player imposed upon the game, just as a microresistant act is the promotion of an alternative interpretation of an identity and never from a position of exteriority.[25] What we see then is that the top-down mechanism of strategy and the bottom-up mechanism of style are both present within games and necessarily interrelated as significance for one can only arise insofar as the other represents its alternative. Thus, identity as a concept is not destroyed, as such an attempt would itself be impossible as identity, like politics, is inevitably present.[26] However, the player's style – the presentation and promotion of an alternative conception of an identity – challenges the dominant political structure that defines the current identity construct by showing that it is not in fact a necessarily true formulation of that identity. As such, the conception of an identity is shown to not be necessary, metaphysically derived, or "true," but rather that the identity and, by extension all identities, are fluid social constructs emerging from the politics of power.

Microresistance contests the legitimacy of a game's normalizing structure both in terms of its ability to define an identity and to historically situate it. These are questions of power relations; from where does the disciplinary regime gain and justify this power to define identities? Resistance recognizes the lack of justification for the interpretation of an identity that the dominating order presents without being dependent on such understandings (the player does not have to justify why the counter-strategy is valid for an identity).[27] By using the very structures that power utilizes to legitimate itself, resistance can challenge its hegemony.[28]

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[23] Electronic Arts, *Command & Conquer: Generals*, CD-ROM (Electronic Arts, 2003).

[24] Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp, 'Style: Strategy and Mimesis in Ergodic Literature', *Comparative Literature Studies* 41 (2004), 414-17.

[25] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage books, 1990), 95-6.

[26] Ibid., 94-6.

[27] Jessica Kulynych, 'Performing Politics: Foucault, Habermas, and Postmodern Participation', *Polity* 30.2 (1997): 331.

[28] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage books, 1990), 101-2.

The example used above refers to a very specific type of game. However, I would contend that many games contain within themselves the potential for microresistance. Any game that ties with it some form of mimetically reflected identity construction that is encoded into the logics of gameplay and thus encompassing strategy and the ergodic choices that may counter it enables a critique of identity politics. Therefore, it is not simply a question of which game genre is being played but rather the content and thus is more a matter of degree. Playing a video game version of football or soccer, for example, encodes a certain type of play for one national or club team versus another by virtue of player and team attributes, such as the current Spanish team excelling as a midfield passing team (this is made only more significant by it being an attempt towards authenticity). However, it is unclear, for example, how a game such as Tetris may allow the player to engage in this type of in-game critical examination.

As such, it may be possible to detail a few of the conditions that may be necessary to make possible the critical attempt being discussed here. However, I am not willing to claim that this list is necessarily exhaustive of the various requirements nor that a game could not still be able to critique identity politics if lacking in any of these qualities. First, the video game must contain some identity construct that can be found to be reflective of a "real world" identity. Second, the game must in some way attempt to reinforce that identity through some in-game strategic advantage. And third, that the game encompasses avenues of ergodic choice that make the player capable of challenging that strategy, enabling the player to have a style counter to the game's strategy. A fourth condition may be necessary as well, dealing with the conclusion of the game. For one thing, without a terminal point to the game with a determined outcome of success, failure, or draw, the teleological element of strategy may not exist and thus not need to be challenged. However, the essentializing aspects are still sufficient to claim some form of validity for an identity construct and thus gameplay may still function as a microresistance against that essentialization. Secondly, a game with no ending would also fail to satisfy the necessary conditions for Ricoeur's mimetics which will be discussed later. However, it would still seem to be the case that the genealogical aspect of the game would suffice as a clear mechanism by which the impacts of the microresistant act would engage the "real world."

It is to this question of genealogy that I turn to next. The very playing of the game – as it constitutes the writing of a genealogical work – makes clear this contingency of macro-identity construction and the inability of history to justify it. According to Foucault, genealogy's critical stance towards identity functions in three ways:

> The first is parodic, directed against reality, and opposes the theme of history as reminiscence or recognition; the second is dissociative, directed against identity, and opposes history given as continuity or representative of a tradition; the third is sacrificial, directed against truth, and opposes history as knowledge. They imply a use of history that severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model, and constructs a countermemory – a transformation of history into a totally different form of time.[29]

Gameplay accesses these three critical stances via the historical situatedness of identity within a game's storyline. Distinct from gameplay, game designs are written in the objective historical tradition rather than the genealogical one. Identities in the game are defined by their historical origins (*Ursprung*).[30] Identity's basis in the objective tradition attempts to do three things. First, it provides exactness to determining the essential characteristics of an identity via the mimetic reflections of social characteristics. Second, objective history, via strategic gameplay, tries to locate

[29] Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 93.
[30] Ibid., 77-8.

the idealistic identity to which one ought to return. Finally, it attempts to provide truth through the game designer's distanced and objective position.

These three attempts of objective history demonstrate the problem of strategic choice within a game's structure by providing a metaphysical basis for identity construction. In the first attempt, identities are the coercively mimeticised reflections of social dynamics via strategic choice.[31] By trying to find an idealistic identity, the second attempt of objective history subjugates a player's agency by declaring the essential characteristics of an identity. Finally, the game designer's objectivity is a false one as their input directly affects the game's story. The agency of the game designer is sacrificed, just as the historian's is, and thus objectivity is impossible.

Gameplay is capable of critiquing the objective historical model of game design in favor of the three genealogical stances detailed by Foucault. The parodic use of history through video games is the most apparent. The use of historical figures as characters to either play as or to use for some alternative function within the game allows the player to break the ties of historical identity construction to figures that represent both an identity's origins and epitomic greatness.

Acceptance of an identity within a game expands this effect beyond simply the use of a figure to the dawning of the mask of an entire nation, ethnicity, or other group identity. The game creates this "carnival of history," as Foucault labels it, through the ability to choose an identity completely unrelated to one's own and restructures its particularities via the gameplay's unreality and historical revisionism.[32]

Video games utilize the genealogical use of history through the stylistic rejection of strategy. As the Hayot and Wesp quote on geopolitical China suggests, strategy stresses the historical continuity of events as necessary. As such, the identity construction of the Chinese in the "real world" can be extended into the "virtual" one through the game's storyline. However, stylistic gameplay shows that identity is not grounded in the continuity of historical "truth," but that identity, severed from its false historical groundings, resides simply in the interpretive realm of the individual. This separation, or dissociation, allows for the exaggeration of the lack of historical necessity.[33]

Style's individualism and its rejection of strategic disciplinization breaks down such historically situated metaphysical premises, specifically when the player dawns the mask of an identity and incorporates him or herself into a disciplinary regime. However, the activity of gameplay serves to parody the identity so as to reveal the actual dissociation of the individual with the group's identity and its historical baggage.

Finally, gameplay's historical revisionism overcomes objective history. Thus, history is no longer used as a basis for identity politics. The game's "new history" counters the historical memory to provide an alternative understanding of identity politics severed from the historically determined, macropolitical, metaphysical and meta-narrative designations. A video game's insistence on the player's style and its implications on the destruction of macro-identity opposes objective history's problems. Rather than sacrificing the subject for a false objectivity,[34] video games replace objectivity with an effective history.[35]

Take the game *Civilization IV*.[36] At the beginning of the game, the player chooses which Civilization they wish to play as. Say the player chose to play as Persia starting at the dawn of civilization (for the game this means beginning at 4000 BCE). The player assumes control of the

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[31] Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic & the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 107.
[32] Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 94.
[33] Ibid., 95.
[34] Ibid., 91-2, 95.
[35] Ibid., 88-9.
[36] Take-Two Interactive Software, *Civilization IV*, CD-ROM. (Take-Two Interactive Software, 2005).

empire's entire history from the initial settler group establishing the first city until the year 2050, when the game ends. In this scenario, the player would establish the first city and advance the empire through expansion (militaristically and culturally), technological development (following a technology tree that is intended to be accurately representative of a historical chain of intellectual and scientific growth), and civic changes (including governmental form, economic system, and religious influence on government).

The player thus has the ability to functionally rewrite the history of Ancient Persia. While the player is initially set up to mirror the stereotypes of Persian society, they have the complete ability to change it. The Persian Empire has the Immortal as their special unit, Cyrus the Great as their leader (meaning that the Persian civilization starts with the advantages of being "Expansive" and "Creative" and favoring a "Representative" government), and they begin the game with the hunting and agriculture technologies.[37] All of these factors are input into the Persian civilization with the intent to promote authenticity and a play for historical accuracy. However, the player can completely reject this history.

As the game is played, events occur with the discovery of various technologies. Religions arise, new forms of civics (government type, labor form, economic system, the role of religion, and environmentalism) become available, and great persons are born. Playing as the Persian civilization, the player would ideally allow for Zarathustra to be born in their empire, would eventually become an Islamic nation, would have a heavy influence of religion in their government, and so on. However, the player has the ability to do the exact opposite. For example, the player may make Persia be the founding empire of Christianity or Hinduism, a Pacifist religious state, while also being economically Communist. The player could choose to make Persia the fundamental opposite of the "actual" Persian state and culture challenging the Persian identity in the same functional way but with more options than the previous example.

However, the advantage of this game is the clarity with which it functions as an example of historical revisionism. Not only does the game challenge the "essential" characteristics of Persia, but also allows the player to write a completely new history to show where Persia began and how it progressed but one that is intentionally false. The challenge is that this alternative history parodies the "true" history that the game bases the Persian identity upon by revealing its own lack of clarity and necessity, just as style challenges the necessity of an identity's strategy. The player's input allows for a dissociation from history through its opposition to identity, via the player's microresistant act, and the rejection of a necessity for historical progression. Finally, the player's role in the creation of the new history forces the player to recognize their agency and apparent role, dispelling the player from any notion that they are coming from an objective position.

The new history is one that is not focused on the "truth" of historical progress but on the reaction to the role of necessity in objective history. Certainly events occurred in history that can be factually stated. However, the meaning and significance of these events cannot be objectively determined. The game's new history is not meant to serve as a basis for a new history textbook but rather to show the lack of necessity in the construction of an identity. As such, the genealogical play of the game is not the attempt to literally rewrite the history of Persia, but to show that the "history of Persia" is a contradiction, as "Persia" as an identity and one that could posses a "history" is itself a problematic statement.

Michel Foucault frequently cites various forms of art and literature in his genealogies without the intent to claim that they state historical truth. Rather, these artistic creations present the genealogist an insight into a certain historical context in which a certain interpretation of some subject matter was in power. The video game represents something similar. The game presents that

[37] Take-Two Interactive Software, *Civilization IV*, CD-ROM. (Take-Two Interactive Software, 2005).

artistic insight through the mimetic influences that lead to a strategy. However, the influence and challenge of a player's style shows a combative moment in which the strategy is being challenged through a microresistant counter-interpretation. Such moments reflect an emergence (*Entstethung*) and the game's counter history is a genealogical text uncovering those moments.

Understood as a genealogical work, the ability of video games to transfer their effects from the "literary" or "virtual world" to the "real world" mirrors a traditional genealogical text. However, the literary aspects of the work allow for video games to access society in yet another way, as demonstrated by Paul Ricoeur's mimetic circle.

Ricoeur's mimetic circle attempts to show the way in which a text transcends itself so as to have an effect in the "real world" or, as Ricoeur calls it, the world of action. The process of the mimetic circle is not a static process but one in constant flux. The three mimeses are dependent upon the "completion" of each to provide meaning to the whole – it is a unitary holistic process. This is to say that, Ricoeur's mimesis is not result oriented but rather a continuative process of re-description and transformation. This transformation occurs through references to the world of action being made within a text and then challenged by the text's storyline or plot and then the text transcending itself back into the world of action and bringing with it the destabilization of those initial references.

The mimetic circle applies to the video game ergodic model, perhaps even more effectively than the conventional narrative form, due to the agency inherent within ergodicism. In fact, Aarseth refers frequently to Ricoeur when discussing the uniqueness of the relationship between time, narrative, and ergodic literature.[38] The mimetics discussed in the works of Hayot and Wesp do not fully account for the implications of Ricoeur's argument. Hayot and Wesp's mimetics provide a sufficient grounding for a detailed explanation of the mimetic reflection of social relations into video games;[39] however, this would only be the first mimesis of Ricoeur's three. The implications of gameplay (which constitutes the second mimesis) are not shown to have any significant return effect in society (the third mimesis). Without providing a clear avenue for the social manifestation of gameplay, Hayot and Wesp's argument misses out on much of its potential impact.

In contrast, Ricoeur's mimetics provides a mechanism through which video games can directly affect society. Ricoeur's mimetics occur in three stages, M_1, M_2, and M_3. $Mimesis_1$ is the prefiguration, the basis of the descriptive influences within the text. As Ricoeur describes:

> Whatever the innovative force of poetic composition within the field of our temporal experience may be, the composition of the plot is grounded in a preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character.[40]

Video games incorporate these structures within their architecture. Hayot and Wesp discuss much of M_1. Their discussion of symbolism, strategy, and cultural architecture illustrate a game's adopted elements taken from the prefigured world of action, the "real world." But it should be noted that it is both the game writer and the player or user that come from this prefigured world in which various significations have a certain meaning.

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[38] Espen Aarseth, 'Aporia and Epiphany in *Doom* and *The Speaking Clock*: The Temporality of Ergodic Art', in *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 32.

[39] Hayot and Wesp utilize Rey Chow's concept of "coercive mimeticism," which has been cited earlier, from his book, *The Protestant Ethnic & the Spirit of Capitalism*. Coercive mimeticism, however, only equates to the first of Ricoeur's three mimeses and thus is not sufficient to show the reflective impact video games can have upon society.

[40] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 54.

Mimesis$_2$ is the configurational dimension, in which the text experiences three transformations. First, events within the storyline come together to make a meaningful whole. Second, the plot provides the user with a conclusive feeling to help understand the meaningful whole. And third, repetition allows for the order of time to be reconfigured.[41] Gameplay too accesses this configurational dimension. The concept of a storyline within video games, even the simple establishment of "victory conditions" in skirmish games, create a concluding story that depends on preceding events. Furthermore, Aarseth discusses the repetitive nature of games in addition to the ability to save games at certain checkpoints and restart play.[42]

As ergodic literature provides the player an active role in the progression of the plot, the impact of mimesis$_2$'s configuration is magnified. This magnification occurs not simply through the author's ability to alter the prefigured world, but also by the allowance of the active user to change it as well. Functionally, both become the writer of the text's development as new understandings of identity arise through the player's challenging of the game designer's reifying elements. Mimesis$_2$ is the interaction between gameplay and style. While strategy resides in mimesis$_1$, style, and its potential combativeness to strategic disciplinization, is the essential characteristic of mimesis$_2$.

Finally, mimesis$_3$ is the refiguration of the world. When the player's style has delegitimized the stereotypes that mark the first mimesis (strategy), the player's own understanding is altered.[43] With this, the player then reenters the "real world" with a new conceptualization of identities and their origins. Ultimately, mimesis$_3$'s significance lies in the interaction between plot and reader or game and player. This interaction alters the player's preunderstandings within mimesis$_1$. As stated by Ricoeur:

> …[I]t is the reader, almost abandoned by the work, who carries the burden of emplotment. The act of reading [or playing] is thus, the operator that joins mimesis$_3$ to mimesis$_2$. It is the final indicator of the refiguring of the world of action under the sign of the plot.[44]

Through this refiguration, the process of the mimetic circle attains meaning and significance. This is the case as, only if mimesis$_3$ occurs has anything changed. If emplotment has altered the user's understanding of the prefigured world and no transformations occur, then in fact the alterations are meaningless and impossible in the first place. Meaning is thus retroactively attained through mimesis$_3$. It is tantamount to the realization that, if no one were to engage in any way with a certain game, then, in fact, there was never a game, as no one and nothing was played.

In addendum to this discussion of Ricoeur, I should add that the significance of the process lies within its holistic nature. While the ascribing of the labels of mimeses$_{1-3}$ is important to aid in understanding the process, the point should not be to get bogged down in wasteful quibbles about whether a certain action resides within one mimesis or another. Rather than fully defining out each mimesis as it corresponds to video games, my intention is to show that the application of Ricoeur's mimetics is in fact a valid use and that the potential claim against it based on the difference between ergodicism and narrative is only applicable through a shallow employment of semantic reductionism.

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[41] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 67-8.

[42] Espen Aarseth, 'Aporia and Epiphany in *Doom* and *The Speaking Clock*: The Temporality of Ergodic Art', in *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 37.

[43] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 71.

[44] Ibid., 77.

By pushing the discussion of video games forward in two directions, both in terms of in-game critical space and the interaction between the "virtual" and "real world," it may now become possible to get past the stagnation of contemporary philosophical thought on the topic or at least be more precise in the function of the mechanisms being discussed. As a new political space for the critical inquiry of identity, video games provide an avenue to not only critique specific aspects of power politics, but also the macropolitical system as a whole. To this end, we see that video games enable the player to challenge various identity constructs. This process functions through the game designer's creation of the game utilizing coercive mimetic reflections of identities and their essentialized stereotypes. By virtue of strategy, games have encoded within them a binary logic of the right and wrong methods of play based on the identity in question. In this binary system, a teleological justification through victory attempts to ensure that the player seeks to further reify those stereotypes.

However, the ergodic nature of video games, with their prefigured coercive mimetics, allows for the space to challenge the disciplinizing force of strategy through an individualized style. This constitutes an act of microresistance in the tradition of Michel Foucault, challenging not the existence of politics but rather the problematic metaphysical justifications that politics utilizes to secure its power. Through the microresistant act of style, notions of identity are shown to not be merely static claims rooted in some sort of "truth" but rather fluid constructs.

Gameplay then allows for a sort of revisionism that challenges macropolitical identity constructions by critiquing both the teleological and essentializing justifications for them. The new story, or history, that is created through the storyline of the game as altered by the player's actions constitutes a genealogical work, of which, the effects are capable of reaching beyond the virtual space into the "real world." This occurs through a parodic reimagining of the justifications of identity. The parody dissociates the player with traditional historical form as well as the claims to objectivity that legitimize traditional history's problematic existence.

However, it is not merely the genealogical story that breaks through the glass barrier between the "real" and the "virtual" but also the very mimetics that opened up the political space within games also enables it to simultaneously be a focal point of resistance. Ricoeur's mimeses, as a unitary whole, enables the text, the game, to transcend itself and destabilize the prefigured notions we hold in place. The critique that style makes of strategy is thus brought back into the world of action and simultaneously providing meaning to the whole of the relationship between game designer, player, and the game itself.