Every Game the Same Dream? Politics, Representation, and the Interpretation of Video Games

By Braxton Soderman

No. 40 – 2010

Abstract

Every Day the Same Dream is a short art game created by the radical game designers Molleindustria, formed and fronted by the Italian artist Paolo Pedercini. The game was produced in 2009 and has since garnered praise within and without the gamer community. This essay pursues a sustained close reading and playing of the game with the goal of providing an interpretation of its complex political meanings. During the exegesis of the game I explore new, interpretive forms of analysis that have arisen around the video game medium (i.e. Espen Aarseth's notion of simulational hermeneutics and Alexander Galloway's concept of gamic allegory). I argue that these forms tend to privilege the understanding of game mechanics and player actions over visual and narrative representations in a game. While these new hermeneutical methods are undeniably useful for uncovering the significance of a particular video game I show how they can be used to marginalize and eclipse interpretive methods focused on gamic representations, thus potentially truncating a game's overall significance or "message." This essay demonstrates that *Every Day the Same Dream's* political meanings cannot be exhausted by focusing exclusively on game mechanics or player actions, and that a critic needs to pay close attention to the entirety of a game's meaningful modalities—including visual and narrative representation—in order to understand the totality of a game's significance. In the end, while I engage with recent theories of interpretation within game studies, the core of the essay pursues a viable, political reading of Molleindustria's haunting, remarkable dream.
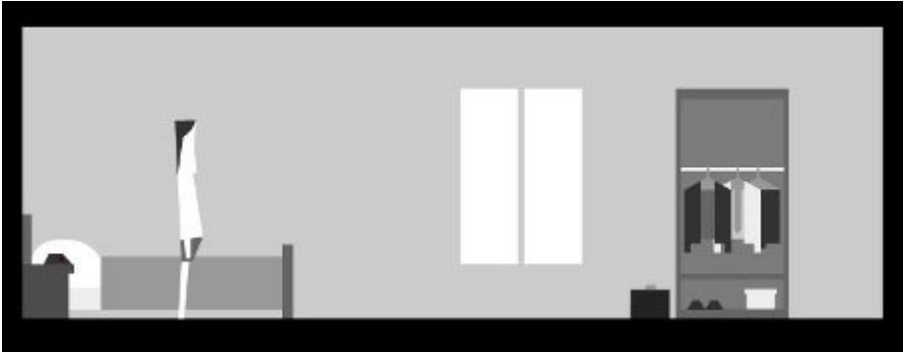
Introduction

Fig. 1. Bedroom. *Every Day the Same Dream*, Molleindustria.

I awake, standing beside a bed in a monochrome, rectangular space (fig. 1). Using the arrow keys I walk to the wardrobe where clothes are hanging, press the spacebar, and my avatar is now dressed and carrying a briefcase. I then walk off the edge of the screen to the kitchen where I find my wife, cooking, and a television set that constantly flickers different colors (fig. 2). I walk over to my wife and "talk" to her, again by pressing the spacebar, a simple action which elicits a single line of text printed at the bottom of the game screen: "C'mon honey, you're late."

From the moment I start to play this online Flash game I am struck by the bleak, austere representations that I encounter. Everything lacks detail, and I feel completely "boxed in." The grayscale rectangles that populate this world are endlessly duplicated around my avatar—the bed, the windows, the dresser, the briefcase, the cupboards, the television, the oven, the door, etc.. Even the face of the protagonist is angular and empty. In fact, all the faces of people I encounter are blank and devoid of features—an aesthetic choice which augments the expressionless and vacant tone that permeates the game's visual representations. If there is emotion in this world it is vapid, dreary, and without passionate depth. The television is the most colorful and animated object within the entire game, but even it is featureless, a blinking box which fails to resolve to an image. Walking past it, I press the spacebar and turn it off. It is now a black square which recedes into the dull background. I pass my wife and exit the apartment.

I soon realize that the accumulation of 2D spaces that comprises this game world is highly limited, modeling a set of typical locations one travels through on the way to work. Initially the game appears as a mundane sequence of events: I awake and stand beside the bed, I dress, pass my wife as I walk through the kitchen, ride an elevator with an old woman to the street, walk toward a parking lot, drive to work (fig. 3), park the car, encounter my boss who tells me that I am late to work, slowly

walk to my personal cubicle (fig. 9), and then work on a computer until the game screen fades to black. Upon completing this sequence I awake within the bedroom at the dawn of a new day where I can begin the same series of actions all over again (fig.1).

Fig. 2. Kitchen. Every Day the Same Dream; Molleindustria.
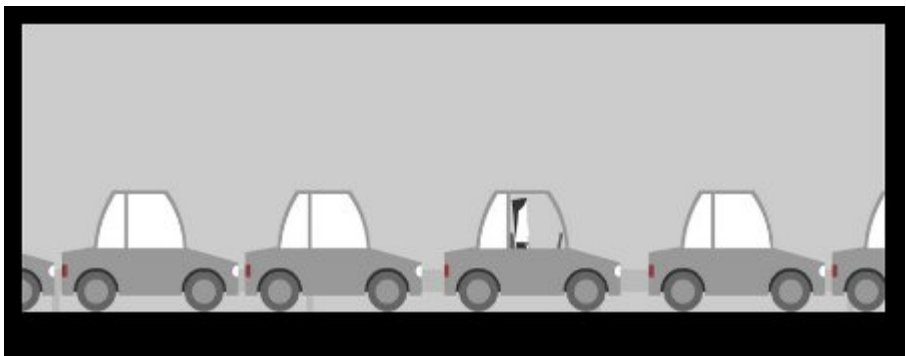

Fig. 3. Traffic on the Way to Work. Every Day the Same Dream; Molleindustria.

After tediously repeating this same path a few times I begin to understand the title of this game, *Every Day the Same Dream*. I start searching for more objects to interact with, exploring different areas of the game space that I might have missed. Indeed, when I initially interacted with the old woman in the elevator she declared, "Five more steps and you will be a new person." Such an odd phrase suggested that a goal exists within the game, that I must locate these five steps and become "a new person." So, for example, after exiting the elevator I decide to walk left instead of right to the parking lot. Doing so brings me to an intersection where a homeless

man is sitting, a man who will lead me to a graveyard if I "talk" to him (fig. 4.). Here, before the headstones, the game pauses ominously before the screen fades to black, and I appear once again in the bedroom at the start of a new day.

Fig. 4. Homeless Man and Graveyard. Every Day the Same Dream; Molleindustria.

Such is one, dreary "step" that I can take on my way to becoming "a new person." Upon exploring further I uncover four other significant actions in the game: leaving my car in traffic and petting a cow in a field, stopping to catch a single leaf that falls from an otherwise bare tree, deciding to go to work without dressing (where I am fired) (fig. 10), and finally, instead of stopping at my cubicle and working (where the day will then end and another will begin), I continue past the cubicle toward a little green exit sign on the right of the screen (fig. 9); here, I can jump off the ledge of the office building, seemingly committing suicide (fig. 5).
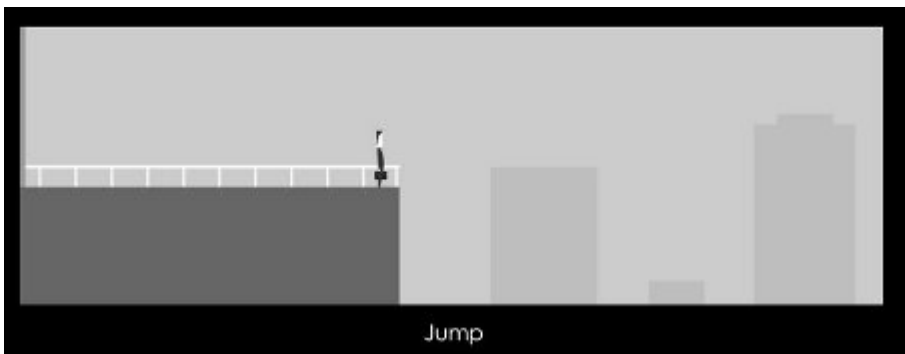

Fig. 5. Jumping off Building; *Every Day the Same Dream*; Molleindustria.

Yet, the game has not yet "ended." Upon completing these five "steps" (in any order) I again awake in the bedroom, but now the repetitive music that has accompanied the game—a droning, beating dirge that mournfully loops in the background—has ceased. Moreover, while I can still move about the same game world, all the people have disappeared—my wife and the old woman in the elevator, the workers at their cubicles, even the road is deserted. Such a space, devoid of the social, is akin to a purgatory of sorts, a manifestation of total social alienation. Nevertheless, I continue to move through this empty, silent world, eventually returning to the place where I had previously jumped from the office building. This triggers a final sequence where I approach a representation of "myself" from behind, watching as my double stands on the ledge and leaps into the void below (fig. 6).[1] It is as if I am seeing my suicide all over again, in a dream or through an out-of-body experience. After watching this final moment the game "ends" (or, perhaps, begins again), and I am returned to the title screen, "Every Day the Same Dream."
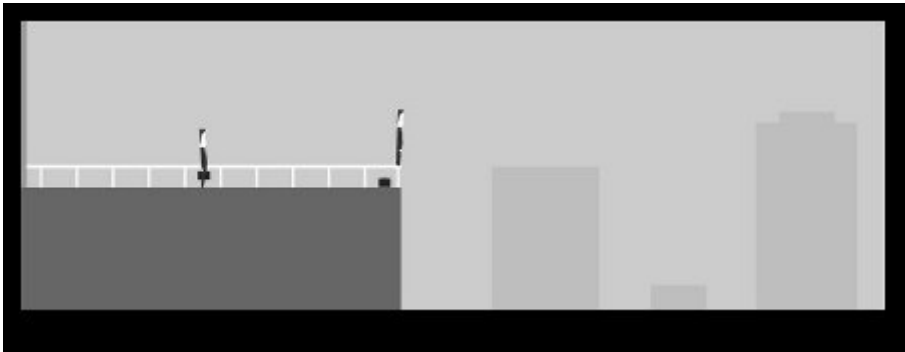

Fig. 6. End of Game, Déjà vu. Every Day the Same Dream; Molleindustria; 2009.

This is the entirety of the game, a game easily completed in ten or fifteen minutes of play. Yet, while the actual game was experienced quickly, the subtle reverberations of its significance stayed with me for some time, casting me out into the ocean of the web to see what others had to say while evoking numerous questions within the ripples of my thoughts. Why did the game leave me with a feeling of despair while simultaneously invoking a feeling of hope, beauty, and possibility? Why did I feel that this short game was so successful in commanding my need to understand it? What was it saying about video games in general? What was this game's political message, simultaneously transparent but oblique? What was the meaning of the uncanny ending that was not an ending but a return to the beginning? The game seemed to be asking something of me, asking that I interpret its dream, asking that I explore its numerous facets and provide a more complete explanation of its fleeting significance. Thus, I was led to the following thoughts, tracing the game's eddies of meaning that provoke deep political insights while

holding lasting importance for understanding how video games produce meaning and how we should interpret them.

Molleindustria's Political Games and the Reception of *Every Day the Same Dream*

Every Day the Same Dream was created by the radical game designers Molleindustria, an Italian collective of artists and activists founded and directed by Paolo Pedercini who strive to make "Radical games against the dictatorship of entertainment."[2] Through their unique games Pedercini and Molleindustria confront a variety of political, economic, and social issues, embracing a form of design "that aims at starting a serious discussion about social and political implications of videogames" ("Intro"). Yet, their games also aim at motivating serious discussion about social and political issues, not merely about the implications of games as such. For example, they have created simple games such as *Tuboflex* (2003) and *Tamatipico* (2003) which address the harsh realities of post-industrial labor. Their simulation *McDonald's Video Game* (2006) exposes the nefarious corporate practices of the globalized fast food industry. In the game *Operation Pedopriest* (2007) Molleindustria tackles sexual abuse within the Catholic Church where the player must distract authorities and intimidate parents in order to stifle news of the less-than-priestly activities that the ordained are pursuing. The simulation *Oiligarchy* (2008) models the growth and decline of the oil industry and its exploitative, self-sustaining methods. In their playful and controversial game *Faith Fighter* (2008) various "sacred" figures—God, Buddha, Muhammad, Jesus, etc.—are pitted against each other in a *Mortal Kombat* style fighting tournament, satirically addressing real and potential hostilities between major world religions. Recently they have produced the game *Leaky World* (2010), a sophisticated investigation of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange's radical essay "Conspiracy as Governance." Then there is *Every Day the Same Dream* (2009), ostensibly a critique of the bleak repetitiveness of quotidian routine where the player searches for escape, for spaces outside the everyday sameness of work which might function as pockets of resistance to a life dictated by the tedium of labor. Indeed, Molleindustria produces games that are "not just games," treating the video game form as a versatile, expressive vehicle that meaningfully engages with cultural, political, and social contexts. Pedercini and Molleindustria work to create games that educate and persuade, often producing controversial scenarios which seek to produce critical reflection among the people who play them.

Every Day the Same Dream has certainly garnered critical acclaim while producing its share of critical reflection. It has received considerable attention in the popular

video game press and within gamer forums where its significance is often debated.[3] It has been reviewed by countless blogs, inspired a short film of the same title, and even recently appeared on the online, literary and web art journal *Drunken Boat*, a fact which attests to its wide appeal even outside the gamer community. In forums and blogs players often invoke its depressing timbre, commenting on how it is an accurate expression of the tedium of everyday, working life. Some alight on the notion that the game teaches that one should stop and smell the roses, break free from the monotony of routine, while others argue that the game espouses the dark truth that abandoning one's routine can make life even worse—in the end, there is no escape from the repetitive banality of existence. Many also express frustration with the "ending," lamenting that the final sequence (where one sees oneself jumping from behind) is obscure and ambiguous to the point of insignificance. These are just a sample of interpretations that one can glean from the game's online commentary.

Although the game has catalyzed abundant reflection, unsatisfactory interpretive absences remain. On their website Molleindustria refers to *Every Day the Same Dream* as "A short, existential game about alienation and the refusal of labor." While the bleak themes of existential crisis and alienation are often invoked in online commentary, the game's political resonances (e.g. in terms of the refusal of work) are strikingly absent. Given that Molleindustria produces "radical games" that strive to provoke "serious discussion" concerning political and social situations, probing *Every Day the Same Dream's* political implications is essential to understanding its cultural significance. Indeed, Molleindustria's game harbors a more complex, political "message" than previous commentary has suggested, functioning as a symptom of larger historical and theoretical issues pertaining to the transformation of contemporary society.

Interpreting the Video Game

This essay seeks to fulfill interpretive absences through a sustained reading and playing of *Every Day the Same Dream*. Some might ask why one would want to extract more from this short game than what one can glean from simply playing it and indulging in its multiple, apparent meanings? Why attempt, as Susan Sontag put it long ago in her influential essay "Against Interpretation," "to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there" (14)? She wrote: "...interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable" (8). In place of a hermeneutic that would supposedly constrain and

intellectually "manage" the power of an artwork, Sontag argues that we must let an artwork provoke our "sensual capabilities" and fill us with affect. Certainly *Every Day the Same Dream* produces a tremor of nervousness, stoking the fire of anxieties concerning the potentially bleak and disturbing reality of everyday, working life. Such anxieties often erupt in online commentary which operates as a repository of affective shocks that have infected various players. Following Sontag's views one might claim that the game is a success, and any attempt to provide a deeper interpretation would only sap its affective strength.[4]

In his award winning essay "Metacommentary" Fredric Jameson responds to Sontag's position and argues that the content of an artwork becomes "distorted" by a form of psychic "censorship" that transforms content into a manifest system of signs that satisfies a latent desire or wish. He writes, "the process of criticism is not so much an interpretation of content as it is a revealing of it, a laying bare, a restoration of the original message, the original experience, beneath the distortions of the censor: and this revelation takes the form of an explanation why the content was so distorted" (16). For Jameson, content becomes distorted because social desires for true political change are blocked and repressed in a culture where capitalist systems forestall change through the reproduction of dominating social relations. Interpreting an artwork as a symptom of actual, blocked desires is essentially a political reading which seeks to reveal obscured wishes for social liberation. While Sontag argues that interpretation "manages" the power and untamed desires of an artwork, Jameson reverses such a proposition, arguing that artworks manage and tame social desires for change while interpretation seeks to release a critical understanding of how this management occurs. In this scenario, "leaving the artwork alone" as Sontag suggests would turn a blind eye to the political, ignoring aesthetic processes that reproduce dominant social relations.

While I am sympathetic to Jameson's position, one must also keep in mind that video games refigure the contemporary, interpretive landscape and catalyze new forms of analysis that progress beyond symptomatic readings of cultural texts. This leads to the second goal, or "side-quest," of this essay: to investigate a few, emergent forms of interpretation in game studies which seek to displace textual interpretation with forms of analysis that are tailored to the medium specificity of games. While I agree that these "newer" hermeneutic forms certainly benefit our understanding of how games create meaning, I argue that they can also mask the significance of games by marginalizing "older" forms of representational analysis which are still needed in order to understand a game's complex meanings. My sustained reading of *Every Day the Same Dream* is meant to demonstrate this claim while also performing an extensive interpretation of the game itself.

The Mechanics of Political Marginalization

Recently, some game studies scholars have sought to replace or augment textual paradigms of analysis that focus on "reading" visual representations or the narratives in games with interpretations that focus on the formal properties of game systems, player actions, rules that define the game, game mechanics, procedural rhetoric, etc. (Aaresth 2001, 2004; Bogost, 2007; Frasca 2003; Eskelinen, 2001). In some cases the interpretation of video games is split between the essential formal "substance" of game mechanics and the "accidental" appearance of representation. Yet, the marginalization of the latter can obscure significant elements of a game. This occurred in one reading of *Every Day the Same Dream* which I analyze below. But first, how can one characterize an interpretive approach focused on the formal properties of a game?

Game scholar Espen Aarseth argues that "the traditional hermeneutic paradigms of text, narrative and semiotics are not well-suited to the problems of a simulational hermeneutic" ("Genre Trouble" 54). From this perspective, an analysis of a game focuses upon its rules and how these rules work together to model reality, to create an emergent understanding of how a system functions. According to Aarseth, "*The computer game is the art of simulation*." Based on the user or player actions, these simulations create meanings that are "bottom up and emergent" and not imposed "top-down" like narrative plot structures or aesthetic representational choices ("Genre Trouble" 52). While the "top-down" elements of *Every Day the Same Dream* might concern the monochrome and angular aesthetics that cast a certain mood over the game or representational choices (e.g. depicting a graveyard or a single leaf falling from a tree) that impart associations which players can interpret but not change or manipulate, the "bottom-up" elements of the game concern the rules of its simulation which produce meanings as the player acts within its constraints. Let me explain this using *Every Day the Same Dream* as an example.

Molleindustria's game could be described as a very limited simulation of contemporary everyday life which models the mundane activity of "going to work."[5] The basic mechanics of the simulation involve the spatial exploration of different areas within the world (a typical aspect of adventure games) and limited interactions with objects and people contained therein. The repetitive motions that one undertakes day in and day out encourages the player to discover what can and cannot be done within the space of the game, to uncover difference within its space. As Leigh Alexander has observed in her reading of the game, this dynamic is integrated with the character's desire to escape from work and locate a space outside of the repetitiveness of labor. She writes that *Every Day the Same Dream* "is designed specifically for a player's natural tendency to explore and push the boundaries of game design. And their desire to do so organically dovetails with the wishes of the drone-hero: The player wants to test the constraints of the game world

just as much as the character wants to test the rules of his." Alexander argues that the game design becomes "the message, rather than a simple conveyance." The constrained interactivity that the player experiences—limited interaction with people and objects, a circumscribed 2D world which invokes the desire to escape while inhibiting the possibilities of this escape—parallels the confined world of the protagonist. As the player explores the limits of the simulation, the significant feelings of alienation and being "boxed-in" slowly emerge. Moreover, the form of the game mechanics reinforces the narrative content. The game mechanics are not simply a receptacle for a separate, unrelated narrative world, but they are integrated with it, helping the player to feel the restrictions of the bleak, repetitive world that Molleindustria created.

Such is an intriguing point about the affordances of interactive games, a statement which teaches that game design should be used to create "bottom-up" significance, meaning which emerges as the player explores the rules and boundaries of the simulation. It is this aspect of the game that Alexander celebrates:

> The game's ultimate conclusion, once the player has discovered all the possible avenues of subtle disobedience, is less satisfying than the lead-up, but it's not useful to evaluate *Every Day the Same Dream* on its narrative or 'message.' There's often a temptation, with art games, to analyze what they are trying to 'say.' *Every Day the Same Dream* is most useful when viewed as an example of how the specific nature of video games—with interface, interaction and natural player tendencies—can be used to offer experiences that passive media can't possibly. (69)

While Alexander's previous argument—that game mechanics should reinforce the narrative world—is laudable, she eventually privileges the medium specificity of the video game and the significance of its simulational hermeneutic over the significance of its narrative and representational content. Its "narrative or 'message'" is posited as "less satisfying" and "not useful" for understanding and evaluating the game. Even the idea that the game is "trying to 'say'" something is excluded in order to focus on the game mechanics and the way that they can be used to convey meaning. Alexander's argument is similar to Sontag's dismissal of interpreting an artwork's meaning and deciphering its "message." Such an interpretation is placed aside in order to focus on the artwork's form.

This dissatisfaction with the narrative elements can perhaps be traced to a tension between simulations and narratives that Aarseth has analyzed: "In the adventure games where there is a conflict between narrative and ludic aesthetics, it is typically the simulation that, on its own, allows actions that the story prohibits, or which make the story break down. Players exploit this to invent strategies that make a mockery of the author's intentions" ("Genre Trouble" 52). There are certainly moments where the narrative consistency within *Every Day the Same Dream* unravels, where the

"simulation" of everyday life is fractured. For example, if one arrives at work without wearing clothes before completing the other "steps" in the game then the boss fires the player, but upon arriving at work the following day the player is still employed. Or, if the player decides to jump off the ledge before completing the other tasks, the player awakens the next day as if nothing happened.[6] Molleindustria could have easily removed these inconsistencies—for example, conditioning one's possibility to jump from the ledge on the successful completion of the other four tasks that the player must complete, or the boss sending the protagonist home with docked pay instead of firing him.

While Alexander does not mention these particular narrative inconsistencies, she focuses on what she sees as an unsatisfying conclusion: the player watching him- or herself jump from the ledge of the building and the subsequent return to the title of the game. The ending is a moment when the game's interactive elements, which Alexander has privileged, break down: the player passively watches as a short "narrative" event unfolds instead of actively engaging with the game (e.g. the player observes the other figure jumping from the ledge without having to interact with this event in any way). Yet, Alexander's dissatisfaction with this moment does not lead to its interpretation but toward an exclusion of its potential meaning or "message," a fact which erases the importance and hermeneutic complexity of the ending.

One can detect a similar exclusion in Aarseth's text "Genre Trouble" that privileges the formal properties of games over their narrative and visual elements. In a well-known passage Aarseth writes:

> As the Danish theorist and game designer Jesper Juul has pointed out, games are eminently themeable: you can play chess with some rocks in the mud, or with pieces that look like the Simpson family rather than kings and queens. It would still be the same game. The 'royal' theme of the traditional pieces is all but irrelevant to our understanding of chess. Likewise, the dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently. When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it. (47)

These thoughts serve as an example of the marginalization of interpretive methods that do not remain on the level of "gameness" (i.e. the essential notion of gameplay mechanics, rules, etc.). To be fair, Aarseth seeks to invigorate new forms of interpretation that are not tied to older paradigms of analysis, attempting to inaugurate a new discipline of game studies distinct from other disciplines that might solely rely on textual or visual interpretations of representation in games. Nevertheless, Aarseth's argument that the visual elements of Lara Croft are seemingly "irrelevant" to the player not only serves as a polemic that brackets interpretive paradigms that focus on visual representation, but dangerously flirts

with a formalism that marginalizes considerations of the critical context of games (e.g. in this case, an analysis of gender). As Julian Kücklich warns in a polemical article positioned against the formal analysis of games forwarded by Aarseth and others, "games do not take place in a vacuum; they are embedded in cultural, social and political contexts" ("Game Studies 2.0"). When these contexts become marginalized through an analysis of the formal properties of a game, one risks overlooking important elements of a game's overall meaning.

However, Alexander's analysis of *Every Day the Same Dream* is instructive since it highlights the ability to create "bottom-up" meanings through player actions, integrating the affordances built into interactive games as significant features which can actually reinforce narrative elements of a game. Yet, in the end, she marginalizes the narrative and representational elements of the game in favor of its mechanics. If Aarseth's dismissal of the visual representation of Lara Croft brackets critical contexts such as considerations of gender, Alexander's dismissal of *Every Day the Same Dream's* narrative and "message" brackets attempts to unravel any political statements that the game may be trying to convey. It becomes clear that the interpretation of *Every Day the Same Dream*, a game created by designers with an established and radical political agenda, is significantly truncated.

Why is this? One reason might simply be that the "newer" formal aspects of video games—interactive affordances, "simulational hermeneutics" where player actions create meanings, etc.—are separated from (and privileged over) the "older" elements of traditional media such as narrative and representational structures. Alexander argues that the "usefulness" of *Every Day the Same Dream* stems from its medium specificity as an interactive game and how it offers experiences unavailable to older, "passive media." Thus, when a moment arises where narrative or representational elements become overtly significant beyond the formal structure of games—e.g. in the final moment of the game where the player passively watches a short scenario unfold—such a moment is dismissed as "less satisfying" than the "bottom-up" meanings associated with player actions and the game proper. Such a dismissal performs a disservice to games that employ complex representational elements and a disservice to political elements which permeate all levels of a cultural text. In any event, the key seems to be creating a balance between interpreting game mechanics and also narrative and visual elements, understanding that they reflect upon and deepen each other.[7]

Exploring the Political Immediacy of Video Games

While focusing strictly on game mechanics can marginalize more holistic approaches to the interpretation of video games, eliding the impact of cultural

contexts, this is not to say that one cannot politically interpret mechanics or player actions. In his book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Alexander Galloway theorizes an intriguing method of interpretation which attaches political import to player actions while also connecting the structure of video games to the contemporary, cultural context of post-industrial and networked society. While this approach provides a critic with a more robust method for analyzing the political implications of video games, Galloway also tends to replicate the separation between representation and game mechanics discussed above. In this section I describe his interpretive approach by applying it to *Every Day the Same Dream*, while also analyzing potential blind spots that emerge when viewing video games as cultural products which present immediate political experiences.

Galloway argues that "video games do nothing but present contemporary political realities in relatively unmediated form" (92). They "achieve a unique type of political transparency" unlike traditional media (e.g. film, television) which create an unsatisfactory separation between their content and their political value (92). In his analysis of *The Sims* Galloway writes:

> ...the depth model in traditional allegorical interpretation is a sublimation of the separation felt by the viewer between his or her experience of consuming the media and the potentially liberating political value of that media. But video games abandon this dissatisfying model of deferral, epitomizing instead the flatness of the control allegory by unifying the act of playing the game with an immediate political experience. In other words, *The Sims* is a game that delivers its own political critique up front as part of the gameplay. There is no need for the critic to unpack the game later. The boredom, the sterility, the uselessness, and the futility of contemporary life appear precisely through those things that represent them best: a middle-class suburban house, an Ikea catalog of personal possessions, crappy food and even less appetizing music, the same dozen mindless tasks over and over—how can one craft a better critique of contemporary life? (102-103)

At first glance, Galloway's notion of "political transparency" seemingly applies to both gameplay mechanics and representation. For Galloway, player actions in *The Sims* are banal and repetitive, immediately revealing the "mindlessness" of everyday life. He then codes the representations of the "suburban home," the "crappy food," the typical list of consumerist objects the player can buy, etc., as negative representations of boredom and sterility which reinforce the idea that the game is a transparent critique. Others would disagree with such an interpretation of *The Sims* as imparting an immediate, critical experience. One can also interpret the player's actions in *The Sims* as not a critique at all, but simply as a reinforcement of action that rewards rampant consumerism, a stance expressed by game theorist and designer Gonzalo Frasca.[8] Here, the quasi-narrative and visual aspects of *The Sims*—modeling suburban life in America—lead to a different interpretation.[9]

Galloway's description of *The Sims* as a blatant "critique of everyday life" seems even more pertinent to *Every Day the Same Dream*. For example, the tedium of the everyday is manifest through extremely repetitive gameplay actions (getting dressed, driving to work, sitting at one's cubicle, etc.). Moreover, such repetition is audibly reinforced through a musical score that builds on continually repeated elements and through various representational choices such as the identical cars (fig. 3), the repeated, cloudless windows, etc.. In the sequence where the player slowly walks toward the character's cubicle, the "virtual camera" zooms out twice as the player exits the right of the screen, receding into frames of repeated sameness as the character approaches his workstation (fig. 7, 8, 9).
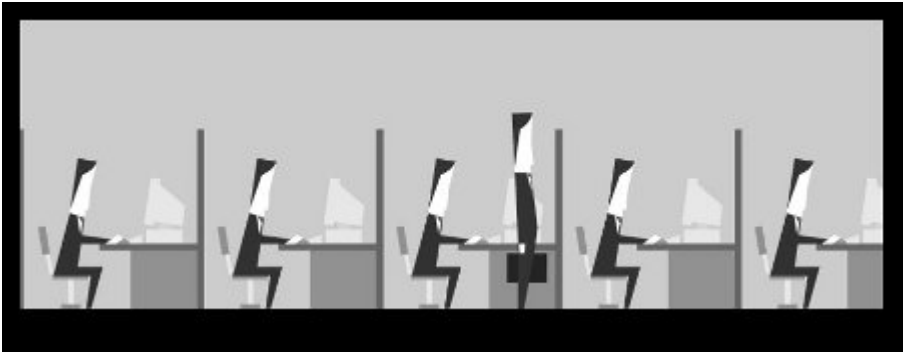

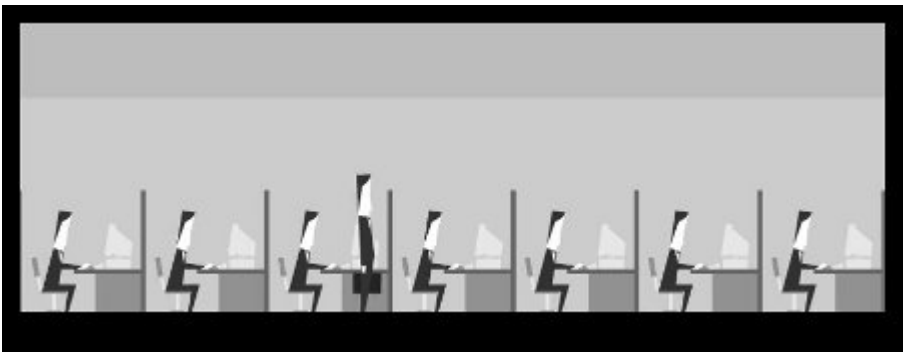Fig. 7. Walking to Cubicle. Every Day the Same Dream; Molleindustria.

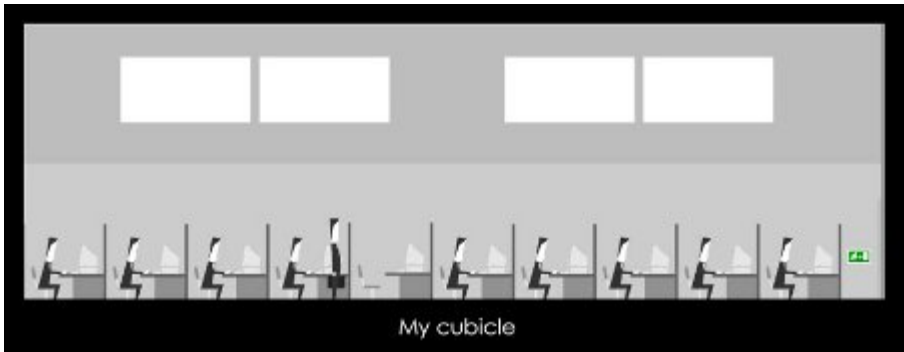Fig. 8. Walking to Cubicle, First Zoom Out. Every Day the Same Dream; Molleindustria.

Fig. 9. Walking to Cubicle, Second Zoom Out. Every Day the Same Dream; Molleindustria.

One intuits that the repetition could go on forever, engulfing the main character within its indifference. Even the "ending" scene of the game (fig. 6) (itself a repetition of a prior event) suggests a looping structure where a final escape only returns the player to the beginning, thus performing an endless repetition that is no escape at all. "The boredom, the sterility, the uselessness, and the futility of contemporary life," which Galloway observed in *The Sims*, is also undeniably present in *Every Day the Same Dream*. The representations leave little room for interpretive flexibility, and one might conclude, as Galloway did, that "There is no need for the critic to unpack the game later."

As stated at the beginning of this essay, Molleindustria describes *Every Day the Same Dream* as "A short, existential game about alienation and the refusal of labor." Certainly, these elements also appear immediately in the game: for example, the inability to communicate with other characters in any extended fashion, the social separation of workers in their individual cubicles and automobiles, the complete absence of people and the social in the final stage of "purgatory"—all of these invoke typical aspects of alienated labor. In terms of the refusal of work, Pedercini employs a subtle method that tracks the progress of the player's refusal against corporate interests: each step of refusal (or waywardness from the path of work) is represented on the financial graph that appears behind the boss when one arrives at work (fig. 10).

Fig.10. Getting Fired by the Boss. Every Day the Same Dream; Molleindustria.

Initially the financial chart represents an upward movement on the left side of the graph, and if the player arrives at work without performing any act of refusal—waiting to catch a falling leaf, showing up at work without clothes (fig. 10), abandoning one's car to go exploring, etc.—then the graph does not change. Yet, each act of refusal that the player performs within the game will add one downward "step" to the financial graph, thus tracking a loss of corporate value. Through one's actions—e.g. refusing or avoiding work—the player enacts the downfall of the company. There hardly seems a need for deep analysis or reading the game mechanics and representational signs as harboring secret meanings. Even Fredric Jameson's notion of interpretation as a revealing of political content that has been distorted and processed through a censor seems inapplicable. Are not the game's politics completely transparent? Well, not exactly. Simply describing the immediate experience of representational or gameplay elements is *not* (at least not primarily) what Galloway means by political transparency. He calls video games politically transparent because they are informatic systems just like the non-gamic computerized systems that people interact with everyday and that determine contemporary society. That is, an obfuscating, mediating layer of signs that a critic needs to decode is replaced by a more transparent *parallelism* between a player's action and the political meaning of these actions which can be traced to forms of control under contemporary conditions of information society. To be clear, this is not an argument that rejects interpretation (such as Sontag's) but one that refigures interpretation along the lines of player actions instead of representation.

According to Galloway, a deep, allegorical interpretation of representational signs in video games (i.e. visual or narrative elements) gives way to what he calls "gamic allegory" or "*polyvalent doing*" where "the interpretation of gamic acts is the process of understanding what it means to do something and mean something else" (105). Here, the gamer as critic interprets an action within a game as pointing toward a meaning that is not necessarily the same as that which is inscribed in the manifest

action of the game. Allegory remains but in terms of player actions: "The first half of the [allegorical] parallelism is the actual playing of the game, but the other is the playing of informatics" (105). Video games are not only "about" what the player is actually doing, but they also concern the "playing of informatics," i.e. the playing of control mechanisms determined by economic and cultural transformations occurring in post-industrial society, by the rise of information society and networked systems, by a computerized society where we constantly interact with algorithmic systems that organize reality, by a world of protocol which Galloway has written about elsewhere (2004). However a critic decides to define "informatics"—as protocol, as algorithmic procedures and code, as flexible networks or systems, etc.—the key point is, for Galloway, that the gamer as critic must reveal that the meaning of one's actions in a game concerns an underlying world of informatics which controls our daily lives. Let me explain this through an interpretation of *Every Day the Same Dream's* gamic allegory.

The Gamic Allegory of Every Day the Same Dream

As noted before, what Galloway says of *The Sims* is applicable to *Every Day the Same Dream*, namely, it reveals "the muted horrors of life lived as an algorithm" (103). As one plays through a series of similar days in *Every Day the Same Dream* one experiences a constant repetition of banal, limited interactions that become a repeated algorithm. Just as an algorithm is a series of steps or instructions that a program executes, the player must follow "steps" to become a new person, executing a series of interactive tasks that will complete the game (and thus return the player to the beginning where the algorithm resets). Since *Every Day the Same Dream* fundamentally depicts the social condition of labor, one can read its gamic allegory in terms of computerized, algorithmic labor within information society. The player's repetitive, laborious movement through the game space is an allegory for the protagonist's labor at his cubicle (indeed, in the world of the game the computer exists only in the workplace, nowhere else). When playing *Every Day the Same Dream* the player is not simply controlling a character as he goes to work or tries to escape from such work, but the player is also "playing informatics," enacting a gamic allegory which points toward contemporary work structures and flows associated with computerized labor.

In his essay "Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy," information theorist Philip Agre has shown how computerized work systems allow for a certain amount of freedom as workers perform their jobs in conjunction with algorithmically defined workflows (flows that Agre calls "grammar of actions," a concept that Galloway explicitly invokes and applies to video games). Unlike taylorized labor where a

worker's action (e.g. at an assembly line) might be strictly determined down to specific gestures and movements, computerized systems that outline a sequence of work or grammar of action might demand the input of information at certain points during this sequence, but between these moments of interaction workers have freedom choosing how to go about their labor. Or, perhaps interactions with the system could be performed in different sequences, thus allowing for further freedom. In a similar fashion, *Every Day the Same Dream* contains a relatively linear sequence of day to day actions which the player subtly adjusts as they explore the game space (a degree of freedom is allowed within an overall linear structure). Viewed as a gamic allegory concerning algorithmic procedures of computerized labor, *Every Day the Same Dream* could be interpreted as a critique of the limited freedom offered by such systems. That is, though the player discovers pockets of escape within the spatial construction of Molleindustria's game (just as one might discover pockets of freedom working in certain grammars of action defined by workflow systems) these are not depicted as truly liberating but as bleak moments of respite from a repetitive sequence of control.

One might even say that the opportunities for refusing work within *Every Day the Same Dream*, attempting to break the algorithm of everyday life (by catching a leaf, visiting a cow in a field, etc.), are simply workarounds: that is, temporary solutions to a problem encountered in an algorithmic system that does not actually solve the problem that was originally encountered. The brief moments of escape from work are temporary fixes to the problem of a tedious existence within information society; they do not fix the problem of manipulation and control within this society, and eventually one returns to the same world, forever tasked to perform a similar labor once again.[10] In fact, interpreting the moments of escape within the game—being led to a graveyard by a homeless "reaper" figure, catching a single leaf falling from a bare tree, committing suicide—are not coded as liberating moments of leisure separated from the time of labor but as dismal encounters with finality, the futility of escape, the ephemerality of time outside capitalist productivity. They are all, quite literally, dead ends. Even petting the cow in the field is not a revelatory escape into nature which lies outside culture, but an encounter with a Nietzschean domesticated herd animal which begins to resonate with the corralled workers in their cubicle barn (fig. 9). If a control society comprised of networks and informatic systems promises new freedom through the flexibility of protocols, open systems, etc., then Molleindustria's *Every Day the Same Dream* emphasizes the lure of this freedom and flexibility and the inevitable inability to escape the boundaries of control which return to press upon us.

Galloway's theory of gamic interpretation certainly is intriguing and powerful. It invigorates a new form of game analysis where player actions (not simply representations) are attached to an underlying cultural system of informatics. Yet, his claim that video games embody a new form of political transparency in a

"relatively unmediated" fashion is misleading.[11] Granted, this is partially true in the sense that video games are informatic systems, assemblages of code and algorithms, and thus directly embody the logic upon which a control or networked society depends. Moreover, understanding *Every Day the Same Dream* as playing an algorithm which emphasizes one's inability to escape its control structures—which becomes a sophisticated (if subtle) critique of the repetitiveness and tediousness of computerized labor—does not depend on an elaborate reading of its representational elements. When Galloway concludes at one point that in contemporary society "ideology is a decoy" (106) and that focusing on ideology critique of representational elements in video games obscures one's grasp of gamic allegory or "informatic critique" (102), he might be right. But, the reverse can also be said to be true: focusing solely on the gamic allegory might obscure complex representational elements which also inform a game's meaning. Like Aarseth and Alexander, Galloway tends to privilege an analysis of gameplay mechanics (player actions) over representation (narrative or visual elements).

Returning to the level of representation, while *Every Day the Same Dream* might initially seem like a transparent critique, even containing representational elements which foreground the idea that the refusal of work will lead to the downfall of corporate profits, contradictions remain. Why are the steps of refusal that the player performs coded as "dead ends," as ephemeral, bleak moments that offer little respite or escape from the time of one's labor? Why do these steps of refusal lead to a "purgatory" situation where one remains in the same world, completely absent of the social, heading off to work once again, only to see oneself leap off the edge of a building a second time? Why does the resistance to capitalist labor lead to a final scenario of total alienation and not to the end of alienation which one typically associates with an imagined end to capitalism? Why not choose to depict the outcome of the refusal—and the downward spiral of corporate profit—as liberating, as the moment when one becomes "a new person" (as the elevator lady suggests will be the player's reward)? One does not become a new person—liberated, non-alienated, fulfilled—at the end of the game but remains the same as one was before, returned to the beginning of the bleak world which is *Every Day the Same Dream*. True, one might interpret the moment of watching "oneself" leap from the building as an act of rebirth from this purgatory, diving headfirst into some unknown, colorful, new world outside the space of the game. Yet, returning the player to the title screen after this final sequence hardly supports an idea of escape or liberation.

We arrive at an impasse here, abandoned in the midst of a contradiction where the moments of refusal within *Every Day the Same Dream* are not coded as liberating at all. One should not dismiss this as unsatisfactory, as not being useful for understanding the game (which was Leigh Alexander's approach to the ending of the game). Nor can one simply offer a reading of the game's gamic allegory without addressing the representational elements. Although a reading of *Every Day the*

Same Dream's gamic allegory might provide a new method for answering some of the questions presented above, it does not provide a comprehensive paradigm for understanding the game's political "message" or overall significance. Recall that Galloway argued that traditional media (like film) created a "separation felt by the viewer between his or her experience of consuming the media and the potentially liberating political value of that media" (102). Only deep interpretation could alleviate this allegorical separation because these media portrayed political realities through a detour of encoded, representational signs, "mediating" reality through a sign system which required intricate, critical untangling in order to expose the reality which had been transformed. While Galloway says that "video games abandon this dissatisfying model of deferral" this separation remains and cannot be dismissed when one interprets video games.

Every Day the Same Dream is an example of a game where the sophisticated use of representation cannot be ignored. Video games are becoming complex objects integrating significant game mechanics, interactive affordances, visual representation, and striking audio and narrative elements. Witness games such as *Braid*, *The World of Goo*, *Passage*, *ImorTall*, *Don't Look Back*, *Flower*, *Machinarium*, the casual game *Diner Dash*, or the room escape game *The Mystery of Time and Space*. These games, like *Every Day the Same Dream*, cannot be understood solely through an interpretation of mechanics or player actions, nor do they completely replace the complex use of narrative and visual representation with immediate, enacted political experiences. Terry Eagleton once wrote:

> In post-1968 Paris, an eyeball-to-eyeball encounter with the real still seemed on the cards, if only the obfuscatory mediations of Marx and Freud could be abandoned. For Deleuze and Guattari, that 'real' is desire, which in a full-blown metaphysical positivism 'can never be deceived', needs no interpretation and simply *is*. In this apodicticism of desire, of which the schizophrenic is hero, there can be no place for political discourse proper, for such discourse is exactly the ceaseless labour of *interpretation* of desire, a labour which does not leave its object untouched. (69)

In terms of *Every Day the Same Dream*, the desire on the surface of the game, the refusal of work which leads to the fall of corporate profits, the desire to resist and escape the machinations of capital, seems to need little interpretation. Yet, the contradiction between this desire and the dismal representations throughout the game suggest a deeper, more obscure meaning. Within this contradiction a critic might follow the interpretive lead of Sontag and thus "leave the work of art alone," reveling in its ambiguities or accepting its immediate political "message" at face value. Or one might follow Eagleton, continuing the labor of interpretation, refusing to abdicate political discourse and refusing to "leave the game untouched" by further interpretation that seeks to mediate the game through contextualizing, historical discourses. Galloway's notion of gamic allegory certainly pursues the political labor

of further interpretation, but it cannot account for the entirety of a video game's political meaning.[12]

Mediating the Politics of *Every Day the Same Dream*

In this section I move beyond interpretive perspectives that focus solely on gameplay mechanics or Galloway's approach, which emphasizes immediate political experiences expressed through player actions and the proximity of these actions to informatic systems that organize the control mechanisms of contemporary society. Instead, I pursue two goals: first, I mediate *Every Day the Same Dream* through specific historical processes that inform its political construction, and second, I interpret the "ending" of the game, a moment which has been dismissed as unsatisfactory and which certainly does not provide immediate understanding. Moreover, this final moment in the game concerns representational and narrative events more than gamic actions. From a metaphorical perspective, it is perhaps a moment of parapraxis which erupts within the gamic system, causing a disturbance that would demand interpretation in "older" hermeneutic methods (e.g. Freudianism). Yet, in "newer" hermeneutic methods described above, it appears as an anomaly that is, at best, intriguing but unsatisfying, or at worst, non-gamic and thus a vestige or residue which players could mock and critics could sweep aside.

Let me begin with a mediation of the game through specific historical processes. As I mentioned before, player discussions on forums often invoke the bleak existential themes that permeate the game but rarely focus on the idea of refusing to work which Molleindustria explicitly mentions in their short description of the game. The strategies that the player uses to complete the game (e.g. avoiding work), also depict a historical, political strategy to resist the tedium, repetitiveness, and oppressiveness of capitalist labor. Thus, I am led to ask: what does *Every Day the Same Dream* teach us about refusing to work? Is it advocating refusing work? Is it depicting the futility of such a strategy? Or perhaps its political message is more complex than a simple yes or no? Such questions would be of interest to anyone who does not simply want to treat the game as "just a game" but as a vehicle for serious political discussion beyond the confines of the game itself. Fortunately, a straightforward, theoretical guide—a "walkthrough" of sorts—is available to aid the historical mediation of the game: Franco "Bifo" Berardi's short text "What is the Meaning of Autonomy Today? Subjectivation, Social Composition, Refusal of Work."[13]

In Berardi's narrative of the rise of post-industrialism—precarious labor, flex-work, the deregulation of the economy, the rise of the information economy and knowledge work, etc.—the refusal of work plays a key determining role. While on the

one hand Berardi argues that the rise of post-industrial society was inevitable given the restructuring of society and economic reality wrought by new computer and information technologies (what Galloway called "informatics"), he also argues that the drive toward the autonomy of the worker participated in this restructuring. The desire to become autonomous from factory production and the tedium of industrial labor—which Berardi traces in Italy to the 1970s—was a positive and liberating social desire but ended in what Berardi calls "capitalist revenge:"

> The process of the autonomisation of workers from their disciplinary role has provoked a social earthquake which triggered capitalist deregulation. [...] Workers demanded freedom from capitalist regulation, then capital did the same thing, but in a reversed way. Freedom from state regulation has become economic despotism over the social fabric. Workers demanded freedom from the life-time prison of the industrial factory. Deregulation responded with the flexibilisation and the fractalisation of labour.

> The autonomy movement in the 70s triggered a dangerous process, a process which evolved from the social refusal of capitalist disciplinary rule to capitalist revenge, which took the shape of deregulation, freedom of the enterprise from the state, destruction of social protections, downsizing and externalisation of production, cutback of social spending, de-taxation, and finally flexibilisation. (n. pag.)

What occurred was a movement from the positive, liberating uprooting of capitalist labor which led to a certain autonomy from the abusive regulations of capitalist control, and finally to a "revenge" scenario where the precariousness and flexibility of labor became forced aspects of the new economy: a massive decoding of labor led to a systematic recoding of control. The result of such a recoding produced an effect where, as Berardi says, "what used to be the autonomy and the political power of the workforce has become the total dependence of cognitive labour on the capitalist organisation of the global network. [...] What used to be refusal of work has become a total dependence of emotions and thought on the flow of information." The social desire to escape from the tedium of labor within industrial society was actually realized, though such desire was captured by post-industrial restructuring where the cognitive freedom attained through the refusal to submit to the drudgery of industrialism became the driving force of the new economy. "Autonomy is the independence of social time from the temporality of capitalism," writes Berardi. The refusal of work was linked to the desire to secure time for one's thoughts and emotions not dictated by an industrial system which rigidly controlled such time; yet, a reversal has now occurred where, as Berardi argues, the worker becomes "a mere machine possessing a brain that can be used for a fragment of time."

While *Every Day the Same Dream* certainly addresses labor-time and the desire to escape from the sameness and repetitiveness of everyday life dictated by capitalist work relations, Molleindustria actually made a little game in 2003, *Tuboflex* (fig. 11), that is beneficial for understanding their interest in post-industrial labor and the intellectual foundation upon which *Every Day the Same Dream* was based. *Tuboflex* critiques the rise of precarious labor and flex-time. Visually modeled on simple, dedicated, hand-held games from the 80s, in this game one plays a cartoon worker who, at unpredictable intervals, is sucked into a tube and deposited in different work situations (answering phones, unloading boxes from a truck, playing Santa Claus and keeping children happy, working in a fast food drive-thru window, etc.).

Fig. 11. Working the Phones. *Tuboflex*, Molleindustria.

The player must be prepared to shift from task to task at any moment for the tube can descend at any time. Once and a while the character is deposited into his home where he sits in a chair between a window and a clock with a single, constantly sweeping hand. Here the player can either look out the window (fig. 12) or up at the clock (fig. 13), waiting for the moment that he will be sucked away for another job. Such a game reveals one result of the recoding of labor by post-industrial capitalism where the wide-eyed character sits paralyzed during his free-time, his thoughts and emotions caught between a desire to escape (e.g. looking out the window) and an anxiety concerning capitalism's temporal control (e.g. looking at the clock).

Fig. 12 and 13. Looking out the Window, Looking at the Clock. *Tuboflex*, Molleindustria.

After playing the game for awhile the player cannot keep pace with the constant work rotations and becomes "blacklisted" (fig.11)—homeless and panhandling on the street (thus ending the game). Here, the refusal of work depicted in *Every Day the Same Dream* (i.e. where one avoids work to ostensibly bring down the corporation) is reversed into its dark opposite where the possibility to find work is completely refused by the system (i.e. one is "blacklisted"). Interestingly, Berardi calls this temporal fragmentation, "fractalisation despair," linking it to suicidal terrorism where the act of suicide "suggest[s] that humankind has run out of time, and despair has became the prevalent way of thinking about the future."

To return to *Every Day the Same Dream*, the widened, interpretative perspective that Berardi describes provides an apt frame for understanding Molleindustria's game. The game does not simply call for subversion and resistance through the refusal of work—which is one part of its manifest political content—but it also presents a complicated reflection on the history of the refusal to work. The suicidal repetitions within *Every Day the Same Dream* and its representation of bleak, temporary moments of escape from the repetitiveness of work act as reflections of despair where the worker can no longer find consolation in brief fragments of time snatched from the temporal fractalization of contemporary society (similar, theoretically, to the paralysis of the character in *Tuboflex* as he sits in his chair waiting for work to resume). Thus, *Every Day the Same Dream* is not a representation of the liberating decoding of industrial labor that Berardi identified as occurring in the 1970s (where the refusal of work lead to increased temporal autonomy from the demands of industrial labor), but it represents social reality after the capitalist recoding of labor in post-industrial society where the brief moments of time seized from the temporal organization of capitalist labor are increasingly fleeting and dismal.

All of a sudden video games themselves become implicated in a self-reflexive critique through Molleindustria's game. If video games are a popular form of temporal escape and entertainment within contemporary society (a widespread use of leisure time, an escape, etc.), and if the gameplay mechanics of *Every Day the Same Dream* foreground the desire of escape from the tedium of work only to represent those outside spaces as dismal prospects for liberation, then Molleindustria's game also suggests that video games as such become symptoms of the capitalist recoding of media forms, appearing as cultural products integrated into the fractalization of contemporary time in order manage and contain social desires for escape.[14]

In any event, mediating *Every Day the Same Dream* through Berardi's reflections on the refusal to work reveals that the game might not simply be about the contemporary repetitiveness of everyday life and labor (let alone a hopeful and liberating depiction of refusing labor under a capitalist system) but a more complex reflection on historical change or the lack thereof. Moreover, once one understands that the game engages with political and theoretical problems contained within a larger historical trajectory, the intriguing though obscure ending sequence begins to resolve into a clearer, interpretable image.

The Endgame: History as *Déjà vu*

One can read the final scene of *Every Day the Same Dream in multiple ways*.[15] In fact, I will show that it is structured as a moment which self-reflexively calls out for interpretation. For my purposes, I approach the scene as a catalyst for thinking about historical temporality, the old and the new, the past and the future. Moreover, the end sequence provides an opportunity to foreground my argument concerning the continued importance of analyzing representation in video games.

Placing emphasis on the historical contours and meanings of *Every Day the Same Dream* throws one aspect of the game that I have not yet discussed into stark relief. The visual representations often appear as throwbacks to a prior era, and the choice of the game's monochrome palette invokes the idea of "pastness" through the historical invocation of cinema and television from bygone eras. In the game, the wife is represented as a fixture of the home, cooking and watching TV. Identical automobiles suggest a world of repetitive, mass-standardization and cultural sameness. The protagonist and fellow workers are "company men," off to work in suits and carrying briefcases. Their boss exemplifies a typical representation of the short, pot-bellied, capitalist. Even the soundtrack contains the simulated hiss and crackle of a vinyl recording. If it were not for the fact that all the workers sit before computers in cubicles, one might place the historical period of this game in the

1950s. To some extent, this aesthetic representation of temporal shifting may participate in nostalgia, what Fredric Jameson called a "new connotation of 'pastness' and pseduohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces 'real' history" (*Postmodernism* 20). Indeed, such an aesthetic effect displaces historical thinking in many reviews of *Every Day the Same Dream* where critics tend to notice this "pastness" without taking it seriously, dismissing it as an "interesting" style instead of using it as a catalyst for historical thinking and interpretation. Yet, nostalgia as a longing for the past hardly explains the dystopic energies and dismal affect represented throughout the game.

The historical temporality of *Every Day the Same Dream* is probably best approached through the experience of *déjà vu*. *Déjà vu* means, of course, "already seen." Such a phrase begins to describe the moment in the final "suicidal" scene of the game where the character sees himself jump from the railing into the void. During this moment the character (and the player) perhaps thinks, "I have been here before, haven't I?" The dissociation from oneself is a moment of self-reflection, an opportunity to watch the previously enacted suicide from a critical distance. This moment asks the player to reflect on prior action, to contemplate its meaning. Within the historical context of the refusal to work (which I outlined through Berardi's short essay) one interpretation of this moment is the reflection that "we have been here before, we have experienced this before." Indeed, the refusal of work led to the capitalist restructuring of the economy where society's "dreams came true" (for autonomy), but only in the form of a new nightmare, a variation on an old theme where capitalism recodes the desire for escape from its strictures in a new system of control (as Galloway's work has shown). The *déjà vu* moment in *Every Day the Same Dream* asks us to recognize this historical reflection, to contemplate how capitalism contains our desires for escape, returning us to renewed systems of dominance. Just as the game emphasizes a looping structure and various forms of repetition, one could consider the game as critically examining complex, historical transformations that are not complete breaks but repetitions and continuations of cultural and political problems—problems that have not been resolved but must be re-examined through contemporary media forms. This is not a simple formulation such as "history repeats itself," just as the experience of *déjà vu* is not simply the repetition of an event in the past but a semblance of such a repetition that invokes numerous critical questions: *Has* this happened before? What is different this time around, if anything? Why am I having this experience?

While this *déjà vu* moment certainly indicates a demand for historical reflection and contemplation concerning the repetition of the past, it can also be used as a device for reflection on the future. Examining *déjà vu* as the feeling that one already experienced something in the past is not the only way to understand the experience. *Déjà vu* is also the experience of remembering an event in the past where one (supposedly) saw the future, saw the event as it was taking place just now. Perhaps

in these moments one thinks one is remembering a dream in which one saw the future. As Peter Krapp writes concerning Walter Benjamin's sense of *déjà vu* as the "future interior:" "if I have been in this situation, I might know what will happen next; there might be a clue left for me of what is yet to come" (35). Thus, while *déjà vu* might be a conduit for historical reflection it also becomes an opportunity to read the present (through the guise of the past) in order to interpret possible futures or what lies ahead. To be honest, I do not know for sure if such a "clue" exists in the game *Every Day the Same Dream*. (*Déjà vu* experiences are notoriously difficult to unravel). Yet, it may be there in the form of what was always there but never there throughout the game: sleep.

In *Every Day the Same Dream* the player is always awakening when the new day arrives, but the structure of the game—with its narrative inconsistencies, with its temporal hodgepodge of the past and the present, with the ambiguity of its title which suggests that each day is actually a dream—posits a situation in which the entire game is itself a dream, transforming its players into, on the one hand, sleepwalkers, but on the other hand, individuals reworking the residue of their waking lives. Sleep might be that single place (or rather time) where capital cannot go (regardless of Jameson's lament that capital has colonized the unconscious). Berardi writes, "Autonomy is the independence of social time from the temporality of capitalism. This is the meaning of the expression refusal of work. Refusal of work means quite simply: I don't want to go to work because I prefer to sleep. But this laziness is the source of intelligence, of technology, of progress." Sleep becomes a figure for autonomy, for a temporal space outside of "the temporality of capitalism," a time for the regeneration of social desire which can appear in different future forms. For Berardi, the social desire contained within the refusal to work may have led to a capitalist recoding of the decoding which it initially produced (i.e. led to a new form of control), but it was also a form of liberation and a force for future change as the "source of intelligence, of technology, of progress." Thus, the fact that *Every Day the Same Dream* might be occurring in the temporal interval of sleep could be interpreted as a moment of protected possibility, of working through the problems of contemporary life, regenerating ideas, searching through possible outlets of escape—just as one does in the game. Beyond the despair expressed immediately within the game—which is a marker of the present according to Berardi—the game harbors and secures the hope for liberation within the protective shield of the dream where autonomy from the strictures of capitalism rests and gathers strength. Here too the video game form itself is not simply an outlet for containing and managing social time and desire for change, but it also acts, simultaneously, as an emerging aesthetic medium where dreams are forged and played.

Finally, the fact that *déjà vu* points both toward historical reflection on the past and contemplation of future possibilities allows me to express the argument concerning

the interpretation of video games that this essay has sought to demonstrate. Arguments such as Espen Aarseth's that valorize the development of new forms of interpretation focused on game mechanics and simulational hermeneutics are essential to understanding the emergence of the video game form. Analyses such as Alexander's and Galloway's begin to develop these methodologies, making sure that when we jump into the void of the future we will not do so blindly, providing tools that will aid designers and critics in their efforts to produce historical (and political) difference within the repetition of the everyday. Nevertheless, when these attempts to trace the *new* marginalize the productivity of the *old* (e.g. historical mediation, investigation of cultural and political contexts, analysis of representational elements, etc.) then the new can be used to obscure and distort the content of contemporary cultural forms. This can blur a more complete understanding of what messages these forms transmit. Part of the positivity of *Every Day the Same Dream* is expressed in the ending sequence precisely because this "critical" moment foregrounds a scenario which embodies the contemplative action of taking a step back, of critical distance, of interpretation itself. Yet, this ending is not a "new" moment but a repeated moment, and it is not purely a "gamic" moment but also one that also exists on the level of representation (i.e. where the player watches the sequence unfold instead of purely acting). Every game should not invoke the same dream for discovering radically new forms of interpretation. Just as dreams are formed by the past while also forming the future, video games are often composed of sophisticated game mechanics *and* representational elements. They work with aesthetic materials that are both new and old, and thus interpretation must perform its work accordingly.

Every Day the Same Dream is not a game that can be understood only through interpreting game mechanics or player actions. This is also true of many other video games encountered within the widening expanse of game culture. Moreover, while it is a game which seriously and explicitly engages political discourse, its nuanced, political resonances are not entirely and immediately experienced through the playing of the game, but emerge through interpretive procedures that touch all elements of its content and form. Immediate political experiences will appear when the game of politics becomes "not just a game" but an active method for changing the everyday into a different dream beyond the sameness of life under capitalism's repetitive recodings. Until then, one must continue to decode the politics of games. This requires, as Eagleton wrote, "the ceaseless labour of *interpretation* of desire, a labour which does not leave its object untouched." The critic's labor—be it a critic of film, political movements, ideas, video games, etc.—is to ceaselessly analyze what is present before him or her, not pushing aside what is dissatisfying, not valorizing the new in order to disparage what is old though still useful, but touching the object from every angle possible and discovering its obvious and not so obvious contours. Such will provide a picture of the object's significance and the state of the culture which has produced this object and all its meaningful facets.

Works Cited

Aarseth, Espen. "Computer Game Studies, Year One." *Game Studies: the International Journal of Computer Game Research* 1.1 (2001): n. pag. Web. 3 Aug 2010. http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html

Aarseth, Espen. "Genre Trouble." *Electronic Book Review* (2004): n. pag. Web. 10 Sept 2009. http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/vigilant

Alexander, Leigh. "Analysis: Every Day's Not The Same 'Art Game'." *Gamasutra* 12 Jan 2010: n. pag. Web. 12 Aug 2010. http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html

Aarseth, Espen. "Genre Trouble." *Electronic Book Review* (2004): n. pag. Web. 10 Sept 2009. http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/26714/Analysis_Every_Days_Not_The_Same_Art_Game.php

Berardi, Franco. "What is the Meaning of Autonomy Today? Subjectivation, Social Composition, Refusal of Work." *Republic Art. European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*, Sept 2003. Web. 12 Aug 2010.

Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007. Print.

Dovey, John and Helen W. Kennedy. *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media*. New York: Open University Press, 2006. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. "Capitalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism." *New Left Review*. Vol. 1 No. 152. July-August, 1985. Print.

Eskelinen, Markku. "The Gaming Situation." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 1.1 (2001): n. pag. Web. 20 Aug 2010. http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/

Every Day the Same Dream. Molleindustria. 2009. Video game. 15 October 2009. http://www.molleindustria.org/everydaythesamedream/everydaythesamedream.html

Frasca, Gonzalo. "The Sims: Grandmothers are Cooler than Trolls."Game Studies: *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*. 1.1 (2001): n. pag. Web. 20 Aug 2010. http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/frasca/

The Video Game Theory Reader. Eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. New York: Psychology Press, 2003. Print.

Galloway, Alexander. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Print.

Galloway, Alexander. *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004.

Jameson, Fredric. "Metacommentary." *PMLA.* 86.1 (January 1971): 9-18.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. Print.

Krapp, Peter. *Déjà vu: Aberrations of Cultural Memory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. Print.

Kücklich, Julian. "Game Studies 2.0." *DIGRA Hard Core Columns* 12. (2006): n. pag. Web. 20 Aug 2010. http://www.digra.org/hardcore/hc12

Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001. Print.

Molleindustria*,* "Intro." *http://www.molleindustria.org/en/about*

Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman*. Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. Print.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays.* New York, NY: Picador, 2001. Print.

Tuboflex. Molleindustria, 2003. Video game. 4 May 2010. http://www.molleindustria.org/en/tuboflex

Wark, McKenzie. *Gamer Theory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Notes

---

1. It remains ambiguous whether the player views him- or herself jumping from the ledge of the building or if this is another individual. Given that all the workers are identical one could interpret the identity of this final, jumping individual in numerous ways—as a depiction of oneself, as another worker, as a symbol of "everyman," etc.. Since the final stage of the game is devoid of all non-player characters, the player is lead to believe that it is an image of oneself, seen from behind, as if in a dream.

2. This description stems from the splash page of Molleindustria's website.

3. Among others, some popular forums and online portals where *Every Day the Same Dream* has been discussed include the influential video game forum NeoGAF, the online gamer magazine The Escapist, the casual game portal Jay Is

Games, and in numerous reviews of the game on the flash game portal New-grounds.

4. Even the world depicted in *Every Day the Same Dream* seems an apt representation of the "depleted world" that Sontag laments in her essay. She writes, "To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world - in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings.' [...] The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough" (7). Is not the monochrome world of *Every Day the Same Dream*, sapped of color and expressive detail, an image of a rationalized, impoverished existence? A dismal shadow world of our own? Following Sontag one might say that the critic should add color to this world, describing the breadth of its affective touch on the player; for her, extracting another gray, intellectual layer of meaning that resides beneath its surface will only deepen the bleak reality which the game itself has set out to critique.

5. Later in the essay I will address representational aspects that complicate a reading of the game in terms of its historical situation being completely "contemporary."

6. These inconsistencies are, perhaps, resolved through the idea that the entire game is a dream (its title serving as an ambiguous signpost). In fact, they might be included in order to reinforce the idea that the player is playing a repeating dream—a dream meant to be interpreted. Moreover, these inconsistencies seem consciously intended and feed into the overall sense of futility within the game: that is, even committing suicide does not provide escape from the drudgery of tomorrow's labor.

7. Indeed, more holistic approaches to game interpretation which take into account both gameplay elements and visual and narrative elements do exist. See, for example, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*; or, Jon Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy's *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media*.

8. Video game scholar and designer Gonzalo Frasca has read the game differently: "One of the most controversial features in *The Sims* is its consumerist ideology. Literally, the amount of virtual friends that you have depends on the amount of goods that you own (obviously, the bigger your house, the better). Nevertheless, I met some people that firmly believe that *The Sims* is a parody and, therefore, it is actually a critique of consumerism. Personally, I disagree. While the game is definitively cartoonish, I am not able to find satire within it. Certainly, the game may be making fun of suburban Americans, but since it rewards the player every time she buys new stuff, I do not think this could be considered parody" ("The Sims"). Here, Frasca looks to the game mechanics of the simulation arguing that the game "rewards" players for consumptive actions.

Perhaps Frasca's understanding of the game reveals more clearly what the "up-front" politics of the game actually are: in terms of *The Sims* it is not just what the player does that matters, but how the simulation changes based on those actions. To answer Galloway's question—"How could one craft a better critique of contemporary life?"—Frasca might answer that one should change the simulation, perhaps changing the friendship "rule" so that if you own a lot of possessions you would lose certain kinds of friends and gain others.

9. Drawing on the work of Peter Sloterdijk and his concept of cynical reason Lev Manovich writes: "...ideology does not demand that the subject blindly believe it, as it did in the early twentieth century; rather, it puts the subject in the master position of someone who knows very well that she is being fooled, and generously lets herself be fooled. You know, for instance, that creating a unique identity through a commercial mass-produced style is meaningless—but you buy the expensively styled clothes anyway, choosing from a menu—'military,' 'bohemian,' 'flower child,' 'inner city,' 'clubbing,' and so on" (209). Galloway positions the players of *The Sims* as inhabiting this master position, players who interpret it as ironic, as parody, as self-evident critique. Yet, perhaps the game is both a blatant critique while also acting as a representation of blatant consumerism. Such a double-address expands the game's consumer demographic, capturing players who would tend to valorize contemporary consumerism as well as those who despise such a cultural situation.

10. Such an interpretation might begin to explain the narrative inconsistencies that arise in the game. For example, getting fired from work does not relieve one from the work situation. The next day the boss treats the player as an employee once again. Thus, getting fired was a "temporary fix," a "workaround," to the problem of a life filled with tedium and repetitive labor.

11. Galloway's interpretative method is a plain and simple ideology critique, only transforming the methodology to an analysis of player actions instead of representational sign systems. Indeed, when you think you are doing something (i.e. playing the manifest actions in a game) but you are actually doing this other thing that is not so evident, a bit murky, something which needs to be exposed and interpreted by the game critic (i.e. playing informatics), then one still is involved in the structure of traditional ideology. In this case, an "immediate" political experience while playing a game is not so immediate. In fact, the critic *mediates* an understanding of player actions through a system of relations defined by informatic society. While the critic might not need to produce complicated readings of sign systems embedded in narrative or visual elements, the critic must still theorize the complicated informatic systems of control society and *reveal* how the video game embodies such systems. The ideology concerns the fact that we think are "playing" a game, when in fact, informatic systems are playing us. Or, as McKenzie Wark wrote in a different context, "it is the game

that plays the gamer. It is you, the gamer, who is an avatar, in the sense of being the incarnation of an abstract principle" (217). Thus, the gamer is the information that is being reworked by the abstract principle of informatics.

12. To be fair, Galloway does realize the continued importance of representational analysis, eventually arguing that "the game critic should be concerned not only with the interpretation of linguistic signs, as in literary studies or film theory, but also with the interpretation of *polyvalent doing*." (105). Such an argument is a softer version of the idea that gamic interpretation should replace textual or representational analysis, and it is ultimately the argument which I embrace as well. Indeed, part of the thrust of this paper is to recover the importance of representational analysis in the interpretation of video games.

13. Given the subject matter of this article it could have been one inspiration for the creation of *Every Day the Same Dream*.

14. One could even interpret the appearance of the television set within *Every Day the Same Dream* as indicating that television's occupation of containing and managing leisure time outside of work is now partially being channeled into the video game form. Within Molleindustria's game, the television endlessly flickers different colors (fig. 2), and while one can turn it off, one cannot "watch" it in any meaningful way. On the one hand it represents the epitome of distraction with its colorful, oscillating display, but on the other hand it is, literally, malfunctioning, unable to present images within its frame, unable to produce its cultural function within the game space. It seems completely out of place—a brightly animated, colorful aspect of the game world which does not fit its monochrome, static surroundings. Its glaring presence only serves to signify its blatant incompatibility with its environment. The player can only pass it by, perhaps shutting it off. Yet, as the only representation of "media" proper within the game space—and a media form that is stereotypically defined as a mode of distraction, as escape—it causes a moment of self-reflection concerning the player's actual activity playing the game as also a form of distraction and escape. The television does not function in this world, but the video game has perhaps usurped some of its prior functions as distraction, as a cultural containment of the desire to "escape" (a motif which *Every Day the Same Dream* constantly orbits). When Alexander wrote that "*Every Day the Same Dream* is most useful when viewed as an example of how the specific nature of video games...can be used to offer experiences that passive media can't possibly," she is correct from a certain perspective that seeks to define the "new" against the "old" in terms of medium specific properties. Thus, within the medium of the game the television seems out of place, unable to operate, malfunctioning. Yet, it might also be useful to see these different media technologies (television and games) as serving

similar cultural functions, providing experiences that—seen from the perspective of larger cultural contexts—travels beyond the distinctions between media forms while expressing continuities of function.

15. For example, after watching the sequence of the figure jumping from the building a second time, one could follow Sontag and choose to let the moment be, reveling in the uncanny doubling and nervousness that the unanticipated event creates. Indeed, many brief comments on gamer forums describe multiple emotions which the moment conveys: despair, mystery, frustration, sadness, even relief. *Or*, one could perform a symptomatic reading where the sequence presents reality in a distorted form. Thus, following an interpretative move that Fredric Jameson often makes one could argue that the identification of the jumping figure as oneself (as seen from behind by oneself, etc.) is a reading that translates social problems of the collective into reflections concerning individualized subjectivity. That is, since the two figures are identical one tends to read them as the same person whereas the correct perception would be to read them as two different workers, a reduced image of a social class. Then one would follow a procedure of retranslation where the game is not primarily about individual, existential issues concerning alienation, but actually about the social alienation of workers from one another and their collective labor under capitalist conditions of production. *Or*, one could even attach this moment to an interpretation of game mechanics where what is at stake concerns a refiguring of the common, repetitive element of games where a player "dies" within the game and is forced to replay the same level until a solution is found. Such a desire was actually invoked by Molleindustria when describing their game on Newgrounds.com: they wrote that *Every Day the Same Dream* sought "to charge the cyclic nature of most video games with some kind of meaning (i.e. the 'play again' is not a game over)." Following this, one could focus on describing the potential meaning of their aesthetic transformation of a common game mechanic, perhaps leading to an analysis that focuses primarily on the medium specificity of the videogame. In any event, multiple avenues of interpretation certainly exist when approaching the game's final moment.