First-Person-Shooter-Suicide and Some Political Provocations of Emergent Gameplay

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American culture has never had much patience for suicide. Not that we do not evince a certain fascination with it, but killing oneself is not exactly ideologically germane to the pursuit of happiness. Or is it? For George Bataille it was the ultimate luxury. But he was a Frenchman fascinated with all things abject. He would not exactly count as a legitimate interpreter of the Declaration of Independence—not in the mainstream in any case. Indeed, dominant American culture has long resisted the potential charms of suicide as a cultural form. Be it through the Japanese-styled hara-kiri made popular by Madame Butterfly[1], or the general ambivalence and skepticism with which we figure the self-offing "tormented" artist, suicide has always been the taboo "other" of American cultural expression. This situation has been ossified by 9/11—a mass crime inscribed by suicide and, in some cases, responded to with suicide.[2] The fact that footage of the so-called "jumpers" was immediately pulled from broadcast demonstrates a tacit denial of the acceptability of choosing the moment of one's own death. In the aftermath of 9/11, in the so-called "war on terror," suicide bombing is routine front page news—news that reassures us of the barbarity of bombers and our jeopardized freedom. We just do not understand why someone would take his or her own life, right? And while we are at it, let's not even use the word "suicide." Let's call them "homicide bombers." That way we need not even begin to confront the internal logic of the latest trend in martyrdom.

But it would seem that some recent expressions in videogame culture point to an emergent pedagogy of suicide. Videogames, also long debased in American culture, have a pronounced metaphysical relationship with death. Death is a repetitive quotidian fact of many videogames, and this has opened the door to a more nuanced understanding of suicide. In some games, suicide has emerged as a viable option of play. While it does not produce a win for a player, it can apparently function as a means of reclaiming certain dignity in the face of defeat. Perhaps the long sought-after educational function of videogames has *emerged*. And it in no way impinges upon market imperatives that make first-person shooter action the bread-and-butter genre of the industry. If anything, it makes their central position even more marketable.

Take, for example, a recent trend from the "emergent gameplay" world of machinima: The WORLD OF WARCRAFT character-deleting ritual. "Emergent gameplay" describes the act of using videogames outside the limits of the game designers' original intentions. Machinima is the production of animated videos using videogame imagery and technology. The WOW character-deleting ritual videos record players' systematic dismantling of their characters until they effectively and permanently "die." This typically means stripping their characters of level accomplishments until they disappear from the screen altogether. Great care is often taken in the process. Players move their characters to face forward as they delete them:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hynF6gX9zMs

They are made to face their own death. It becomes rather melodramatic in some instances, with elaborate intertitles telling the reasons given for the self-deleting. The main theme here seems to be that addiction to the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) has ruined the player's life.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3ZAdtVLoig&feature=related
Character suicide thus becomes a means by which to reclaim their selfhood, lost to hours of playtime. This is character-deleting as a last resort grab for self sovereignty. The machinima recording of this act serves as confirmation of the gesture—a punctuation of the symbolic suicide. In this sense, they mirror a popular video genre emergent from Islamist terrorist and insurgent groups: the martyr profile video. These videos present a martyr-to-be giving his reasons, his burial wishes. It is all very ceremonial, ritualistic even. Like the character-deleting ritual, they partake in a moving-image entombment—a mummification of sorts, pace Bazin. Both rituals make use of the rhetorical "sincerity" of direct address performing a stoic facing of death—one that seems invested in the transcendental promise of the moving-image in the face of imminent death. Martyr profiles are distributed across the internet, often edited together with footage of the suicide-attack. If they are not readily available on YouTube, they nonetheless circulate in similar degraded video forms.

To be sure, WORLD OF WARCRAFT is not specifically American. In fact it is rather dauntingly global. And there are plenty of non-English language versions of character-deleting rituals. However, one does not need to make recourse to demographic statistics to suggest the game's affinity to American culture. Leaving aside altogether WOW's fantasy figuration of free-market capitalism, the game, the deleting ritual, machinima, and YouTube are all widely available to and perused by Americans in a way that a given Al-Qaeda martyr profile video is not. Thus, the creation and circulation of these deleting rituals mirror the martyr profile and illuminates their purchase in our culture where suicide is always an irrational choice.

If the machinima character-deleting ritual opens up a kind of indirect understanding of suicide, however, HALO 3 apparently allows for something a touch more intimate. In a November 2007 blog for *Wired*, Clive Thompson explains how suicide bombing makes "sick sense" in the game.[3] For Thompson, the time constraints of a full time job prevent him from playing enough to stand a chance in the multiplayer X-Box Live HALO environment. Faced against "insanely good" teenager players with time to kill, who, he confesses, "can kill me with a single head shot from halfway across a map -- or expertly circle me while jumping around, making it impossible for me to land a shot, while they pulverize me with bullets," Thompson has figured out how to get his revenge. He runs at his enemy and at the last second before his death, he unleashes a grenade on his opponent. They die together and the game reports that you have "killed someone from beyond the grave." HALO 3 has programmed suicide-bombing—albeit with rhetoric that ramps-up the hubris and downplays the desperation.[4] Nevertheless, the game opens up a space to inhabit the psychology of suicide-bombing in a thoroughly elegant way. I am with Thompson, who does not want to trivialize the complexity of real-life suicide-bombing by pointing out that HALO 3 reveals the "emotional calculus" behind the act. Indeed, I would argue that the emotional lesson made available by the game is not trivial

at all, particularly in a cultural environment where the sublimation of the death drive is total. In HALO 3, suicide does not sit at the nexus of a "clash of civilizations;" it is not what "they" believe in and do; it is not infelicitously ineffable. Rather this *first-person-shooter-suicide* is a functional choice for the have-nots—an impulsive grab at dignity. And yet, in the game it is not a move performed with ease. As a colleague of mine rightly points out: it takes skill to get the grenade pin out in time. It is thus (and instructively) not a desperate choice so much as a consciously calculated one. The tension between impulse and foresight that grounds any real life suicide bombing is thus remade, with precision, in the world of HALO 3.

Not only an expression of the dignity economy in mutliplayerland, *first-person-shooter-suicide* has also been appropriated by artist Brody Condon. Known for his influence on the re-purposing of existing games or games structures to create sculpture, performance, and video installations, Condon's 2004 "Suicide Solution" (which can be seen here: http://www.tmpspace.com/suicides.html) is a montage of him committing avatar suicide in over 50 third- and first-person-shooter games. Similar to the machinima character deleting rituals, Condon seems to be acutely aware of the composition of these suicide performances. He stages the scene for clear visibility of the spectacle. Like the martyr profiles, he plays with the aesthetics of suicide, making his avatars calmly face their imminent death. In this "emergent gameplay" as art, "Suicide Solution" anticipates HALO 3's in-corporation of suicide-bombing into the game, but Condon's montage is more philosophical. With it, he makes visible the otherwise invisible fact of suicide already a part of the logic of shooter videogames. These games allow us to play with others' (meta)mortality, as well as our own vulnerability. Avatar suicide is the collapse of these two intentionalities. It subtends shooter gameplay, showing that the rules of play never exist in a vacuum. It is, in other words, a necessary condition of play. Never sanctioned by the game, suicide is the deep logic of first-person shooter games; it is an illegitimate contingency built into the game's world, the discovery of which opens that world to alternative types of inhabitation. Ironically then, avatar suicide might constitute the ground of a gamer's embodied relation to the game. More than the game controller which institutionally encourages legitimate interactivity, the always available gesture of avatar suicide opens the first-person-shooter to a significantly less controlled experience of play. Condon's "Suicide Solution" thus reveals this inherent openness of the videogame text, as in fact do all forms of "emergent gameplay."

While suicidal videogaming has been a source of enjoyment and relaxation since the early arcade days, suicide-bombing plays a major role in our current geopolitical conflict. In the West, we look upon this highly dramatic act with abhorrence. We willfully disbelieve the human capacity to do such a thing. We refuse to understand. Perhaps we are not wrong in this refusal, but such moral high ground serves to entrench the sense that the West's confrontation with radical Islam is a clash between two fundamentally opposite, irreconcilable cultures. Such a positioning elides the fact that the attackers of September 11th, and those who continue to leave their hometowns across the Middle East region to enlist in suicide-bombing missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, participate in a nihilism that is equaled only by the end logic of free market capitalism. Our supposedly irreducible ideologies are born out of the same system. Both cultures, in other words, are

profoundly capitalist-made and consumerist-based. They are both circumscribed by a system of consumer citizenship driven by a politics of envy. To be sure, there are important workaday differences between a secular liberal democracy and an Islamic state, but the top-down view reveals a false dichotomy. Bin Laden is an oil man. A recent piece in the *New York Times Magazine* described the Moroccan city of Tetouan, "where boys grow up to be jihadis." An inordinate number of the city's young male population ends up as resistance fighters and suicide-bombers in Iraq. What I find most interesting about this particular group is their relative affluence. Not rich by any measure, still, they are not destitute. Owners of large television sets, they buy Hollywood DVDs and videogame systems. They are participants in the same economy as the American soldiers they align themselves against. From the viewpoint of that economy, they do not see much of a future for themselves—they rapidly become unsatisfied with the minor compensation that their capitalist participation bestows upon them. They are lured by the promise of upward mobility, but the speed of this mobility promised by the multinational first-world economy and the specter of American-style consumption does not square with the relatively small marketplace available to them. The resulting indignity opens them up to Islamist recruitment. The endgame is nihilism either way—nihilism covered over by the glamour of capital or by the righteousness of Islam.[5] Suicide-bombing is not an absolute "other" of western cultural expression. It is not the product of some medieval spiritual belief. It is an effect of western culture's rather zealous internationalism—a troubling, radical response that is nevertheless contained by the deep logic of western cultures. As J. David Slocum has written of modern terrorism: "Rather than being simply irrational or medieval or hateful, as it is often superficially the case, acts labeled as terrorism, upon closer review, appear as a complicated inversion of the values at the roots of dominant Western society."[6] This is why it remains pertinent that it be "othered" at the cultural level, and why it is somewhat amazing that such othering is being undone by videogames.

These developments in videogame culture are therefore remarkable. They open a conceptual door out of this binary deadlock, a way to better understand the discursive bloc of terrorism. There is, of course, no existence without terror, which is just an infelicitous word for contingency. The play with videogames here described effectively simulates and objectifies a real-life phenomenon that brings terror. This is a good thing, I think, insofar as it makes tangible those affective intensities that are otherwise manipulated for political gain.

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[1] For an in-depth discussion of how Butterfly's suicide partakes in an American Orientalism, see Nick Browne, "The Undoing of the *Other* Woman, Madame Butterfly and the Discourse of American Orientalism," in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, Daniel Bernardi, ed. (Rutgers University Press).

[2] I am aware of eliding the big ugly discussion of whether extroverted suicide-bombing is the same thing as introverted suicide. Clearly these are two radically different phenomena. I will sustain this confusion, however for two reasons: 1. Both require the same commitment to one's own death. 2. The American discursive rejection of both is founded on the same ground: what is so seemingly incomprehensible to us is that one would even consider taking one's own life. We seem to have significantly less objection to the taking of innocent lives.

[3] http://www.wired.com/gaming/gamingreviews/commentary/games/2007/11/gamesfrontiers_1105

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[4] I suppose this means that HALO 3 suicide-bombing does not strictly qualify as "emergent gameplay" which denotes the creative use of the game not intended or accounted for by the game's designers.
[5] http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/magazine/25tetouan-t.html?_r=2&th&emc=th&oref=slogin&oref=slogin
[6] See his Introduction to the edited collection *Terrorism, Media, Liberation* (Rutgers University Press 2005) p. 4.