

WHEN REPRESENTATIONS BECOME ACTS: GAMEPAD VIBRATION AS PHYSICAL VIOLENCE IN DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED

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Abstract: This essay performs a close reading of a 30-second sequence taken from *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* (Eidos Montreal 2016), in which haptic feedback (gamepad vibration) is used to extraordinary representational and beyond-representational effect, and ultimately performs an act of physical violence against the player. Responding to Brendan Keogh's challenge to "start with the embodied and sensorial engagement with the videogame as an audiovisual medium" (Keogh 2018, "Introduction"), the close reading pays special attention to the various points of connection between the videogame hardware and the player, considering their relevance and contribution to the hermeneutic process as a whole. Drawing on Rikke Toft Nørgård's work with bodily memory in the player-avatar connection, Paul Martin's elaboration of the processes of carnal hermeneutics, and Brendan Keogh's articulation of videogame play as a "messy, fleshy engagement with an audiovisual-haptic form" (Keogh, 2018, ch. 4), along with Daniel Vella's work to articulate the ludic subject position and the ludic self, this essay examines the various relationships and interactions between player, videogame, and hermeneutic processes. In the jumble of cyborg bodies shown to be present during gameplay, the vibration event under analysis transforms into a violent act. Vibration-as-representation becomes vibration-as-violence, as the videogame mounts an attack upon its player: an attack which strikes where they are most vulnerable, at the precise point where their body fuses with the cyborg circuit of videogame play.

Keywords: haptics, hermeneutics, violence, close reading, embodiment, ludic subjectivity.



Introduction

To engage with a videogame is to enter into an intimate relationship with a set of complex electrical, mechanical, and semiotic systems. It is to place oneself at the mercy of technology, opening one's sensorium to new experiences delivered through the eyes, through the ears, and also through the hands. This latter aspect of videogame play is often neglected in analyses of videogame experiences. As Keogh passionately puts it, "to adequately account for the embodied experience of videogame play we must start with the embodied and sensorial engagement with the videogame as an audiovisual medium that mechanistic analyses take for granted" (Keogh, 2018, Introduction).

This essay takes up Keogh's challenge, concerning itself with a 30-second sequence¹ taken from *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* (Eidos Montreal 2016) in which haptic feedback (gamepad vibration) is used to extraordinary representational and beyond-representational effect. After providing some theoretical background, the essay performs a close reading of the sequence in question, situating it within the larger narrative and thematic structure of the videogame, while paying special attention to the various points of connection between the videogame hardware and the player. Details of the close reading are used to motivate a claim that the gamepad vibration in this sequence represents a psychological act performed within the game world.

The essay then claims that this psychological act is an act of psychological *violence* performed upon the *playable figure* (Vella, 2015, p. 10), and thus upon the player's *ludic self* (Vella, 2015, p. 17). Finally, it argues that by way of the complex sets of relationships that make up the "videogame experience", "a play of bodies that flickers between present and absent, corporeal and incorporeal, immanent and transcendent, actual and virtual, 'me' and 'not me'", (Keogh, 2018, Introduction, emphasis removed), this psychological violence *leaks out* of the videogame world into the real world, transforming the moment of gamepad vibration understudy from an innocent representation of a psychological act, into an act of actual physical violence performed by the videogame upon its player.

Theory

In *A Play of Bodies*, Keogh presents a notion of videogame *dressage* developed by applying Henri Lefebvre's concept of the same name to a reading of David Sudnow's 1983 book *Pilgrim in the Microworld*. Keogh finds in Sudnow a record of the *feeling* of coming to understand

1 The reading is drawn from gameplay sessions performed on a Sony PlayStation®4 with a DUALSHOCK® 4 gamepad, with default gameplay options.

how a videogame re-wires the player's sensorial perceptions and their perceptions of their own body, as well as the expressions their body makes in response to those perceptions, to suit its purposes (Keogh, 2018, ch. 1; Sudnow, 2000, p. 97 and others). This process is understood as a kind of *dressage*. For Lefebvre, *dressage* refers to the process through which the range of possible actions that the human body can perform become restricted to a particular set of socially permitted behaviours and responses: a *breaking-in* of the body via the (implicit) violence of everyday life, or the threat thereof (Lefebvre, 2004/1992, p. 39). Reading Sudnow's experiences through Lefebvre's lens, Keogh shows how the Atari videogame *Missile Command* goes to work on Sudnow's body, enacting a *breaking-in* process through which Sudnow becomes able to adequately perform the acts of perception and reaction that *Missile Command* demands, a process that Sudnow himself describes as "being turned into a chip" (Sudnow, 2000, p. 97).

In a related line of thinking, Karhulahti frames videogame play as a "double hermeneutic process" in which "the player's interpretations repeatedly shape both the player and the game" (Karhulahti, 2012, p. 21). Keogh's application of *dressage*, however, generalised to all instances of videogame play, is a much more radical proposition. What for Karhulahti is a gentle-sounding process of "shaping" is for Keogh a radically rougher ordeal in which the player's body and mind are subjected to pressures and forces (*violent, breaking forces*) that enact permanent, irreversible change.

As Keogh argues, any given videogame will "demand[] certain bodily configurations [...] while denying others" (Keogh, 2018, ch. 3). Videogame *dressage* is, then, the process by which a player becomes able to produce those bodily configurations that the videogame demands while unlearning preferences for those bodily configurations that the videogame denies. This is a physical process, involving no small degree of violence and submission; in severe cases, it may even cause actual physical pain (Zapata et al., 2006, p. 408). It lies at the core of some of the more acute accessibility issues that videogames suffer from, as some players simply may not have bodies capable of contorting into the configurations demanded by a videogame. For these players, preferences for alternative bodily configurations may be *requirements*; if the videogame refuses to negotiate on its demands, these players end up simply being denied access to play. Further investigation of this aspect of *dressage* is warranted but is beyond the scope of this essay.

Submitting to a process of *dressage* is, thus, the price the player has to pay if they want to play. Keogh cites Lister et. al., who argue that videogame play can be thought of as "literally cyborgian[...] an event assembled from and generated by both human and nonhuman entities." (Lister et. al., 2009, p. 306). In videogame play, the player's body becomes integrated into a cyborg circuit made up of the player, the videogame hardware and software, and the audio and video

technology attached to the videogame hardware. To successfully integrate themselves into this circuit, the player must submit to dressage: an ongoing breaking-in not just of their hands but also of their perceptual and interpretive faculties in general.

For the player able and willing to submit to this process, a situation arises in which two cyborg bodies are active simultaneously. Dovey & Kennedy refer to these two cyborg bodies using two very similar terms: the cyborg *at* the machine, and the cyborg *in* the machine (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 110-111). The cyborg *at* the machine primarily occupies physical space and is composed of human flesh fused with videogame hardware, as eloquently and evocatively described by Keogh:

The body-at-the-videogame is a particular, augmented version of the player's body: limbs are wrapped around controllers and extended through the screen; senses become heightened or muted; identities, abilities, literacies, and perspectives are taken up and put aside; flesh integrates with plastic and code in what Martin Lister and his colleagues highlight as a "literally cyborgian" phenomenon. (Keogh, 2018, ch. 1)

The cyborg *in* the machine, on the other hand, exists primarily in virtual space. It manifests through the playable figure, the entity that makes available the primary axis of the *ludic subject-position* (Vella, 2015, p. 17) around which the player's *ludic self* (Vella, 2015, p. 17) forms during videogame play.

In *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*, these two cyborg bodies are joined by a third, in the form of the narrative protagonist and playable figure Adam Jensen. Jensen is a science fiction cyborg *par excellence*: a human being whose body is so heavily modified with technological and mechanical gadgets that it is difficult to tell where the human ends and the technology begins. To engage with *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* is thus to engage in an activity in which no less than three cyborg entities are present and active simultaneously: the cyborg *at* the machine (that comes into existence every time one interacts with videogame technology); the cyborg *in* the machine (wherein the player locates their ludic self); and the character of Adam Jensen himself.

Close Reading

Deus Ex: Mankind Divided is structured as a series of linear sequences interspersed with opportunities for free-form, undirected exploration of a science fiction representation of the city of Prague in the year 2029. The city is populated with various characters, some of whom are "aug": people whose bodies are implanted with "augments", electro-mechanical devices that enhance their natural biological skills, abilities, and senses, or grant new ones. Adam Jensen is one such character, although the narrative fiction implies that his "augments" are

somehow more sophisticated and exotic than those borne by most of Prague's "augmented" citizens.

While undertaking this free-form, undirected exploration, the player may come across one of several locations where it is possible to enter the sewers underneath the city. Depending on if and where they do this, the player will be guided to discover a personality cult² in a chamber in the sewers, which is led by a man who styles himself "Richard the Great". Richard is in command of a piece of technology that can disrupt people's "augments", allowing him to exercise a kind of technologically mediated "mind control" over the members of his cult. He uses this to keep his followers docile as well as loyal to him and the cult, presumably against their will.

When Jensen enters the room where the cult is located, he also becomes subject to this "mind control". It strips him of access to his "augments" (many of which correspond to gameplay elements available to the player) and also prevents him from performing violent actions. The game passively reflects these losses of agency to the player by ignoring gamepad input requests for violent actions and for gameplay actions and elements that rely on Jensen's now-disabled augments. These restrictions constitute a rather drastic change to the conditions of dressage under which the player has been operating thus far: there is a sense that the regular rules of gameplay have been suspended, that something *different* or *special* is underway.

The player, tasked with dismantling Richard's cult, enters into a conversation with Richard to try to convince him that what he is doing is *wrong*. As the conversation unfolds, the dialogue system offers various responses to Richard's statements, each of which the player can read in full before selecting (see Figure 1). The conversation is presented as a kind of a puzzle; it is not clear what effect each of the dialogue options might have, nor which option will "solve" the puzzle. The player is therefore implicitly encouraged to read through each dialogue option carefully before making their selection.

The conversation proceeds through a number of these prompts until the selection depicted in Figure 1 appears. When the player presses the X button to choose one of the options, Jensen begins to speak it out loud as the player listens — until, with no warning or reason, Jensen abruptly stops speaking. A short spike of audio static occurs at this moment, which provides us with a clue as to what might be going on here. The most salient reading is that Jensen has been interrupted by an impulse from Richard's "mind control" technology, which acts on Jensen's "augments" in such a way as to cause him to abruptly stop speaking. The audio static is therefore a secondary result of this impulse, an aural glitch representing a glitch in the technology underlying Jensen's "augmented" hearing.

2 See discussion in section 6.



Fig.1.

Because the player has likely read each of the dialogue options fully and made a careful choice when Jensen abruptly stops speaking it comes as something of a shock. The player has willed Jensen to speak; as Jensen, the *ludic self* speaks the words into being. Being interrupted feels like a loss, as if something has been ripped out of one's grasp: Richard hasn't just ripped the words from Jensen's tongue, he has ripped them out from under the player's fingers.

What makes this moment extraordinary, however, is a strong burst of gamepad vibration which occurs at the same time as the audio staccato. This vibration motivates the discussion throughout the remainder of this essay. To make sense of it, we have to step back and take a broader look at the various technologies at play in the present gameplay situation: physical, psychological, fictional, and real.

Interpreting Haptics

Richard's psychological/electrical/technological interruption of Jensen's speech works by disrupting Jensen's "augments", the pieces of technology embedded inside Jensen's brain and body which constitute him as a cyborg entity. However, during gameplay, Jensen is not alone in occupying his cyborg body: due to its status as the playable figure, bearer of the ludic subject-position, the player's ludic self is *also* located here. Jensen's body, a cyborg body formed from narrative fiction, is the seat of the cyborg *in* the machine, a cyborg body formed of software and ludic selfhood. Recall that if the player wants to access this cyborg *in* the machine, they must first become the cyborg *at* the machine, by inserting their body into the conglomeration of input and output technologies that both host the videogame and make it sensible and in

a sensorial way available to the player. All contact between the player and the videogame takes place through these cyborg bodies; just as Jensen's perception of and interaction with his world are mediated by his fictional cyborg body, so are the player's perceptions of and interactions with the videogame world mediated by the real cyborg bodies inherent to all videogame play.

To the extent that the player's ludic self speaks when Jensen speaks, Jensen's words are also the player's words. This means that when Richard disrupts Jensen's "augments" to interrupt his speech, this interruption is *also* effectively an interruption of the player. As claimed earlier, the player has likely read each of the dialogue options fully before making a careful choice about what Jensen should say; thus, when Jensen abruptly stops speaking, it feels like a jolt. The player has willed Jensen to speak; *as* Jensen, the *ludic self* speaks the words into being. Being interrupted during this process feels like an abrupt loss as if something has been pulled out of one's grasp. Richard hasn't just ripped the words from Jensen's tongue — he has ripped them out from under the player's fingers. This isn't just an interruption, it's a show of force: a metaphorical pair of hands roughly forced over Jensen's mouth; a psychological gagging act performed against his will, against the player's will; an act of psychological violence.

But it doesn't end there. The game takes the extraordinary step of projecting this interruption out of the videogame world and onto the cyborg *at* the machine as gamepad vibration: physical forces enacted directly upon the player's hands. The player physically *feels* the words being ripped from under their fingers (from Jensen's tongue/from *my* tongue). The sensation is a brutal one. That part of the cyborg *at* the machine where the connection between human flesh and digital hardware is most intimate — the place where flesh presses against and is pressed against plastic, the place where "[w]e intermingle with videogames", the place where "[w]e poke them, and they, in turn, poke us back" (Keogh, 2018, Introduction) — is shaken, roughly, with as much strength as the hardware can muster, *for a full second*: an eternity in haptic feedback time. Richard performs a psychological act upon Adam Jensen (which is also a psychological act performed upon the player's ludic self); the game reflects this by performing a physical act upon the player's body.

We have now arrived at a reading of the gamepad vibration in this sequence as a physical, real-world representation of a psychological act performed in the game; moreover, the psychological act in question is not just a simple interruption but a psychologically violent denial of the will the speak. Moving forward, the following paragraphs will demonstrate that this violence does not remain inside the videogame but leaks out into the real world, transforming the physical representation of Richard's interruption of Jensen into an act of physical violence performed against the player by the videogame itself.

First, it is necessary to establish what (and how) haptics typically *mean* in videogame play. Parisi argues that, in the context of “tele-existence” (of which videogame play is one example), “tactile sensation feedback and force sensation feedback [...] facilitates the feeling [...] of acting on and being acted upon by the distant or computer-generated space” (Parisi, 2016, p. 86). Parisi’s phrasing here suggests that the role of haptics is to provide a mimetic translation of the sense of touch from one space to another. Typical haptic feedback in a videogame does indeed follow this pattern, transforming simulated physical forces acting on the playable figure in the videogame world into vibrations that the player can feel in their hands.

However, as Parisi points out, “rather than passing touch data directly into the brain, [haptic feedback technologies] depend on a messy and often imperfect set of electromechanical mechanisms [...]. The haptic image they transmit is blurry and filled with gaps” (Parisi, 2016, p. 92–93). We must, therefore “treat[] the relationship between touch and mediation” as something “that exists embedded within rather than apart from culture” (Parisi, 2016, p. 93): haptics *do not* mimetically translate physical sensation between spaces; rather, the physical sensations that haptics invoke are *interpreted* by the player in culturally-informed ways.

Writing about the WASD keyboard input pattern that is commonly adopted by first-person videogames and their players, Martin argues that “there is [...] a fairly standard generic template that I remember and apply without conscious effort as I move between games” (Martin, 2018, p. 13). Martin draws on Nørgård’s conceptualisation of the “player-avatar identity” as “a relation that is stored and recalled as *body memory*” (Nørgård, 2011, p. 8, original emphasis) to arrive at a formulation of this “generic template” as a set of unconscious bodily memories, encoding expectations of how a game will respond to the player’s input, that is used by players to approach an unfamiliar videogame. The template forms the starting point of the “carnal hermeneutic” process (Martin, 2018, p. 2) underlying the videogame experience, wherein the player’s body makes “non-predicative” interpretations (Martin, 2018, p. 5) of sensations arising from videogame play. These interpretations guide the player’s interactions with the videogame at an unconscious, bodily level.

We can apply this insight to understand something about videogame dressage. A part of the dressage process involves adapting the player’s generic template to the needs of a specific videogame title: a breaking-in of the player’s body through which the videogame forces its player to forge new body memories, constructing within them the particular type of “carnal hermeneutics” that the videogame demands successful play.

Just Who Is Under Attack, Exactly?

Our haptic feedback moment in *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* presents something of an outlier for the carnal hermeneutic process outlined above. Vibration events such as the one currently under analysis do not typically occur within conversation sequences, and thus they are unlikely to find a place in Martin's "generic template". If the player has any prior experience with vibration events during conversation sequences, I suggest that these most likely come from moments when a player triggered a conversation sequence at an inopportune moment in a videogame in which the virtual world does not "pause" during dialogue. In such cases, the vibration would mean "you're being attacked; you need to exit the conversation quickly and fight or run away." It is, of course, highly possible, and perhaps even likely, that the player has no prior experience against which to form a template understanding of what vibration during a conversation sequence might mean.

According to Martin, the bodily memories involved in the process of carnal hermeneutics "can also become available for conscious reflection, especially [...] in times of 'crisis' when the re-enactment of the body memory fails to 'understand' the present situation" (Martin, 2018, p. 13). Although the reception of vibration is a more passive act than what is implied by the term "re-enactment", our situation nevertheless presents a good candidate for this type of "crisis" condition. It seems reasonable to claim that the vibration within this particular conversation sequence is wholly unexpected by the player, who, due to the lack of a suitable "template", will have nobody memory available to help them 'understand' the situation.

At this point, three things are likely to happen. First, because it is so wholly unexpected, the player becomes suddenly conscious of the vibration their hands are being subjected to, of its duration and its level of intensity. The experience has no counterpart in body memory, so the carnal hermeneutic process fails to come up with an interpretation; the player is pushed into Martin's "crisis" mode, wherein their bodily memories become available for conscious reflection against what they are currently experiencing.

Second, the player begins to grasp about for an interpretation. The thematic environment of "mind control" and the implied (and experienced) vulnerability of Jensen's cyborg body to the mind control technology that Richard commands (represented through the drastically reduced scope of actions available to the player while Jensen is under the influence of Richard's technology) encourage the reader down a particular interpretive path, supported by the evidence that Richard is attacking Jensen *right now* as located in the form of the "glitch" in the audio that occurs simultaneously to the vibration. The player thus makes an interpretive connection from the physical vibration under their fingers to the physical/electrical/psychological act that Richard

has performed on Jensen via his augments: the player *feels in their hands* the brutality of Richard's psychological attack on Jensen.

Third, under the weight of a sudden conscious awareness of all of the connections forged and maintained amongst the soup of cyborg bodies at play – an awareness that emerges out of the player's struggle to understand just *what is going on* in this moment – the distinction between the ludic self inside the videogame and the player outside the videogame is destabilised and threatens to collapse. Richard attacks Jensen, but Jensen is the playable figure, the site of the ludic subject-position occupied by the player; therefore, Richard attacks the player. But, looking beyond this moment of gameplay, the player is also involved in a long term relationship with the videogame itself – a relationship negotiated and maintained through the overlapping logics of dressage and carnal hermeneutics.

It is through this relationship that something rather more sinister occurs. Exploiting the player's confusion and the precarious command (or lack thereof) that they hold over the situation (both in ludic and in hermeneutic terms), *the videogame itself performs an act of physical violence upon the player*. Not only does the player's ludic self come under attack by way of the physical/electrical/psychological attack that Richard performs on Jensen, but also, the player's *physical* self comes under attack, as the threatened collapse of the distinction between ludic self and extra-ludic self creates a confusion of representation, wherein representations of acts become actual acts, and physically-represented psychological violence becomes actual physical violence.

On some level, the video game has *broken the rules*. The player's willingness to play – their willingness to put themselves through the process of dressage necessary to access the game in the first place – involves the establishment of an element of *trust* between the player and the game. Part of this trust is an understanding that what happens inside the videogame stays inside the videogame: if the playable figure is wounded or killed, the player's real body remains safe from harm. When Vella writes that “the player inhabits *both* an internal perspective within the gameworld [...], *and* an external perspective on the game as a textual artefact” (Vella, 2015, p. 143, emphasis added) this safety buffer can be located in the implied air-gap between the two perspectives. It is not clear under which conditions these perspectives might meet if they can meet at all; indeed, the terms “internal” and “external” suggest a binary oppositional structure in which the two *cannot* meet.

In any case, despite this implied air gap, the player must somehow enact a psychological transferral of their sense of *self* into the game world to occupy the ludic subject position – and with this comes no guarantee of safety. Drawing on Ash's “refram[ing] [of] technical expertise in terms of *vulnerability*,” Taylor and Chess locate a situation in multiplayer videogame play where “players' bodies are vulnerable to external stimulation both from the semiotic and technical apparatus of

play” (Taylor & Chess, 2018, p. 271, original emphasis). Their argument is mainly concerned with the sexual politics of the online play, but if we place this aspect to one side, we can recognise a similar dynamic of vulnerability present during the gameplay sequence currently under examination, here contained entirely within a single-player experience.

Through the dressage process, and as a part of the cyborgian nature of videogame play, the player offers up their body with all its vulnerabilities as a site to be visually, aurally, physically, and psychologically stimulated by the “semiotic and technical apparatus” of videogame play. The trust encoded in this offer is breached when *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* commits its violent act: an act that is at once psychological and physical, at once enacted upon the playable figure and upon the player.

Implications

This essay has argued that, through an extraordinary usage of haptic feedback, a particular sequence in *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* enacts physical violence against the player. This section will consider a few implications of this reading.

A theme of technological anxiety can be drawn from the narrative material in this sequence. Adam Jensen as a cyborg being represented, on the one hand, the epitome of masculine power fused with technological mastery, and on the other hand, a site of anxiety around the question “what is human?” that is inevitably tied up with cyborg and transhumanist discourse, where, as Parisi notes, “[t]he narrative positioning of technology as a humanistic agent” is often “situated in opposition to a more pernicious desire to use technology to augment the body’s natural capacities” (Parisi, 2016, p. 83). It is this “pernicious” take that *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* foregrounds; in particular, the game here raises the spectre that the same technology we might want to use for the betterment of humankind could also leave us open to new and awful kinds of vulnerabilities, perhaps even ones that we cannot imagine.

In this specific case, the vulnerability that emerges centres around a piece of rogue technology in the hands of a bad actor who appears in the form of a personality cult leader. It should be noted that the narrative makes no serious effort to explore the idea of what a “cult” is: at best, this is a representation of the popular fiction of what a personality cult looks like, rather than an accurate or thoughtful portrayal of how such a thing as a “personality cult” might function in the real world. Nevertheless, an explicit reference to personality cults made in the paratext (the associated “subquest” to be found in the in-game menu system is called “Cult of Personality”) should encourage us to make some conclusions in this direction.

Given that personality cults already exist in our world *without* the need for any fancy cyborg technology, what role is the piece of rogue technology that Richard commands performing here? Perhaps the game wants to suggest that anxiety around new, unfathomable vulnerabilities is misplaced; actually, what we would see with the invention of “mind control” technology such as this is a straightforward repetition of the same old systems of social relations that already exist in our world. People will always be people, regardless of the technology they have in their grasp.

Or, perhaps, for the player, something strikes a little closer to home. To engage with *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* and reach the place where this scene unfolds, the player has had to offer themselves up to the whims of a technological system, submitting to a process of dressage on the way to the state of cyborg personhood that is a prerequisite for all videogame play. This process bears certain similarities with the imagined processes that Jensen or indeed any bearer of “augments” must have had to submit themselves to get their “augments” implanted in the first place. It also bears certain similarities with the process of submission that Jensen is forced to go through to enter the room where he meets and interacts with Richard, where his “augments” (and the senses that pass through those “augments”) are hobbled and manipulated by technology he does not control, leaving him vulnerable to the whims of the commander of that technology.

For the videogame player, as long as they continue to play, their senses are similarly manipulated by technology that they do not (directly) control, vulnerable to the whims of a software system that may not have their interests at the fore. Videogames are already a cyborg technology, and to a lesser or greater extent they do already take away the player’s autonomy; a player whose fear of “mind control” via rogue cyborg technology is stoked by this sequence may perhaps want to bring their anxiety to bear on the very same process of videogame play that enables their experience of this fear in the first place.

Maybe we can combine these two perspectives, and claim that engaging with a videogame has something cult-like to it. What similarities can we find between becoming a member of a personality cult, and thereby devoting hundreds or thousands of hours of your life to completing tasks that from the outside might appear utterly arbitrary, assigned to you by an inscrutable power, appearing to bring no material benefit to you or your existence — and playing a videogame?

Conclusions and further research

The present article demonstrates that Keogh’s notion of videogame dressage and his insistence on understanding videogame play as “a particular, messy, fleshy engagement with an audiovisual-haptic

form” (Keogh, 2018, ch. 4) is a fruitful method for uncovering novel meanings and meaning-making processes that arise during videogame play. This is exciting, heady stuff; it opens new avenues for understanding videogame experiences with fresh eyes (and ears, and flesh). The fusion of Keogh’s approach with Rikke Toft Nørgård’s understanding of videogame play as a bodily process and the carnal hermeneutics that Paul Martin draws from this appears to be especially productive.

However, what’s also clear is that there is plenty more work to be done in this direction. Close analyses of the specific ways that haptic feedback manifests itself during videogame play remain thin on the ground, especially research exploring the ways haptic feedback expresses non-physical events. There are potentially fascinating insights to be drawn by applying this methodology to any one of several recent videogames that use haptic feedback in a non-mimetic fashion. In *Mad Max* (Avalanche Studios 2015), when the player brings Max’s binoculars over an enemy encampment, the gamepad gives a brief jolt, as if to signify Max’s sudden burst of shock or recognition. In *Heaven’s Vault* (Inkle, 2019), uncovering new fragments of texts yields long, sustained controller vibration, perhaps reflecting a sense of the sublime as new understandings of the ancient past reveal themselves to the player. In the *Dishonoured* series (Arkane Studios 2012/2016), the playable figure carries a heart which beats in sympathy with arcane objects in the player’s environment. Drawing out the heart allows its steady pulses to connect the playable figure to the Void that exists beyond and beneath the represented worlds of Dunwall and Karnaca; these pulses are in turn reflected in pulses of gamepad vibration, forging a connection from the player directly to the Void, bypassing the game itself – as if the Void is a real thing that was always there, just under the player’s fingers, irrespective of the existence of the represented world in which *Dishonoured* plays.

It is also worth returning to the discussion of the intersection of dressage and accessibility briefly addressed in section 2. This concern raises several questions related to the universality of videogame dressage, as well as its scope during videogame play. First, to what extent can the pain and violence implied by dressage be minimised or bypassed without affecting a particular videogame’s processes of generating meaning? In other words, if dressage is connected to difficulty, and dressage is connected to meaning, can we understand and accept that different “difficulty settings” just will give rise to different meanings due to the differences between the dressage processes that the player must undergo for each difficulty setting? Does an “easier” difficulty correspond to an “easier” process of dressage?

Second, to what extent does the process of dressage remain active while the game continues to be played? Do players go through a short stretch of dressage at the start as they learn to play, after which the game backs off and leaves their broken-in body at peace? Or does the

process take longer than this? Is videogame play something that is *always* underscored by an ongoing process of corporeal breakage?

As a final consideration, to what extent might we find instances of violent acts performed by a text upon its readers, outside of the medium of videogames? The thoughts of Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen on their processes of writing, as highlighted by Elizabeth Inglesby, may offer clues to answering this question. Inglesby cites Bowen's lecture notes for a class on fiction writing, where Bowen shares a writing technique with her students via a "vaguely unsettling metaphor[...]: 'pinpricks dealt to the reader's imagination.'" (Inglesby, 2007, p. 311). Woolf seems to speak about something similar when she exhorts the reader to attend to the physical aspects of perception: "let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind[...], let us trace the pattern [...] which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (Woolf, 1984, p. 150, quoted in Inglesby, 2007). For Inglesby, "[b]oth authors imply that acts of perception involve acts of violence[...]. They are aiming [...] to leave not mere impressions but scars (or at least score marks) on the mind" (Inglesby, 2007, p. 311). It seems that in fiction writing at least, we can certainly find processes of perception that involve violent acts, both as representations and as the products of creative techniques.

This essay has argued that *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* commits an act of physical violence against its player. The violence takes place during a conversation sequence, in which the playable figure is subjected to psychological violence via his cyborg body; this psychological act is represented as an aggressive gamepad vibration through which the violent act inside the game can leak out. Reading this situation with "an appreciation for the complexities and tensions and irreducibilities of the circuit of videogame play across worlds and bodies where the player and the videogame intermediate each other in reflexive loops" (Keogh, 2018, ch. 1), with an appreciation for the bodily memories in play (Nørgård, 2011, p. 8) and the carnal hermeneutic processes that these memories enable (Martin, 2018, p. 2), we find that, in the jumble of cyborg bodies, this vibration event has been transformed into a violent act. Vibration-as-representation becomes vibration-as-violence, as the videogame mounts an attack upon its player: an attack which strikes the player precisely at their most vulnerable point of connection within the cyborg circuit of videogame play.

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