The Nihilanth: Immersivity in a First-Person Gaming Mod

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`"Objects and events are not primitive experiences. Objects and events are`
`representations of relations."` (Heinz von Foerster)

All games are played towards the other. The first-person shooter computer games that concern me are about the destination of my self towards the other. Being in the game is the placement and occupation of immersive language situations, not necessarily as destined for discursive production but a heuristic or poetic situation for addressing otherness.

My focus here is immersion, with reference to the deep and dimensional environments of first-person computer gaming. Immersion in computer space is incoherent. It is not that I disclose myself to others and we meet as equals. There is not a grid or surface, a clean and smooth world, across which I encounter others. Such a space might be filled with challenges, physical obstacles, puzzles, but its inherent dimensionality and cohesion guarantees that it can be passed over. The game can be won. This is not immersion. Immersion is lost in the mediacy of gaming where the outcome is always there and guaranteed, even if the guarantee is distant and difficult, even if I cannot win but you might. No, immersion is incoherent and continuous. (The view of immersion I present here is adapted from my reading of Alan Sondheim's work e.g. Sondheim, 1977.)

"Immersion" is completely misunderstood in discussions of new media technologies. Janet Murray famously describes immersion as an aesthetic phenomenon arising from the way a medium engages our curiosity and our interest in narrative (Murray, 1999; see also Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, 2004). She argues that immersion in digital media results from spatial and encyclopedia properties. The given-ness of the three dimensional space and the encyclopedic possibilities of total simulation are the background conditions for immersion. Murray's view is typical and closely shared by many theorists of cyberspace. It is as if we begin from a three-dimensional space and play the game moving through this structure. In turn, there is a growing tradition of setting words in these spaces as a form of poetry, as in John Cayley's work or Eduardo Kac's holopoetry. Immersion in the three-dimensional environment meets the display of words. On the one hand, the words become symbols for the codedness of the environment, reflections on the material and technical base of the immersion. Immersion is reflection on the

tendency of inscription towards symbolic frameworks. On the other hand, the dimensionality and solidity of the words comes to symbolize "reading." Immersion in this environment is reading.

None of this is true. It is not that spatial poetry is not aesthetically impressive. Murray is correct in this, but the effects and the symbolics of reading are at best a kind of hallucination of immersion. Immersion is the condition for spatiality and the encyclopedic, not the other way round. The poetics of immersion are not found in the thematization of inscription and the production of a discourse of readable space. The poetics of immersion are in the heuristic playing out of bodies placed in an imaginary that is not reduced to but rupturing symbolic frameworks of inscription. The poem is what de-scribes inscription to the real.

First-person gaming environments do not create immersion in the way Murray describes. [Half-Life](#) is a model: the basic experience is often of being in the dark or haze, or up against unknown materials, or cast into water, blood, oil, sand, and plasma. Far from the given-ness and familiarity of a three-dimensional spatial expanse -- comfortably simulated to be like our world here, but unlike enough to confirm the difference – far from this, in Half-Life there is confusion, terror, speed, and fuzziness. Spatiality is always an after-construct, an imaginary mapping constantly built from the given-ness of immersion. The game does not create immersion through spatiality and encyclopedic information; the game begins from the phenomenological problematic of immersion, and the resulting narrative is a mapping and displacement of this problematic. As a "problematic," we must acknowledge that immersion *is*, but it offers no origin or teleology. The frantic violence and desperate repetitions of the game are attempts to control this initial situation. We need to stop discussing immersion as if it were a result or payoff, as if it were something that needed to be created or brought about. I am not simply arguing for a different definition or emphasis. For Murray, immersion is a kind of hallucinatory effect created by carefully manipulating symbols and structures. For such a viewpoint, the problematic of immersion in its viscerality and sentience can be thematized and reflected upon, or it can be theorized in its absence, but it remains inaccessible. The result is a regulatory institutional aesthetics: techniques for bringing about the effect of immersion; a discourse for valuing the products of computer spaces as products; and a symbolic suturing of the relation between bodies and the computer spaces. (The name of this discursive formation is "new media.") By contrast, I say we are always already immersed in viscerality and sentience.

"New Word Order" [NWO] is a mod for the computer game Half-Life, one of several I made under the title "Black Mesa Poems," with the goal of exploring immersive phenomenologies of gaming. NWO is a playable map but not a total modification. Whereas a total mod re-codes the game engine to alter the physics and "world" of the game, the map creates a new space within the existing game world. The "Black Mesa Poems" are about the limit phenomenologies of the Half-Life world and do not alter the existing game. My choice of Half-Life was not accidental. Gaming is the single largest demographic of new media usage. Half-Life stands out among other games for its combination of first-person shooter action and a coherent and compelling story sustained over many hours of gameplay. Counter-Strike, a Half-Life mod, is far and away the most popular of all online multiplayer games. It is no exaggeration to say that the world of Half-Life is the world of first-person gaming.

I made the "Black Mesa Poems" using standard wares for creating Half-Life maps. The tools are hard to configure initially, but easy to use. (My mother learned how to make a map in about fifteen minutes.) A map is simply a playable space, and may be as small as a room or much larger. The maps require the Half-Life engine to play, but it is easy enough to record and output a video of the gameplay. When you first enter the NWO map, the game's first-person viewpoint shows you a large space with words hanging in the air. The words are thin but physical objects. You can jump and climb on them, you can run along the tops, you can go behind and see the reverse of the letters. You soon find the weapons scattered around the room: a crowbar, a rifle, and hand grenades. You can keep playing and wandering in the space, of course, but you soon begin to attack the words. It cannot be helped. The attack is a part of the immersive conditions of the space. The crowbar will destroy individual letters; the rifle or grenades will take out whole words or more. Soon the words are broken and reduced. The fragments continue to hang in the air. You can use this as a reduced text, a processed writing for alternative readings. As the hanging letters swirl with smoke and become more and more isolated, the text thins to unreadability. Nothing is left in the end. Break the words, destroy the letters, and the room is empty. You can pace around but no words are left. If you still have a grenade, you can complete the destruction and drop it at your feet to end the game. Otherwise, the space is yours, cleansed of words.

My goal was this experience of emptying out of words to leave nothing but the situation, the space of the game. The whole piece, from the beginning of the mod to this conclusion of the empty space, is about the imaginary situation of bodies in the real. To continue thinking on immersion and the implications of this empty situation in NWO, I will discuss the [Nihilanth](). Its lair is at the end of Half-Life, an enormous cavern inhabited by a giant creature resembling a brain with an atrophied body, or else possibly resembling a giant foetus with a swollen brain, and with large claws and malevolent but empty stare. You must battle and kill the Nihilanth. The moment you approach it, the creature begins shooting its deadly colored energy balls. You must dodge these, destroy its supply of replenishing crystals, and shoot it in the head repeatedly until its skull peels back like a lemon and exposes the brain underneath.

In the game's narrative, a misguided scientific experiment at the secret Black Mesa government research facility opens dimensional rifts or seams. Alien creatures from another world arrive through these rips. Not only are the rips portals or gateways to our world, but they fundamentally rip the world, altering culture, physiology and physics, bringing changes to the environment and turning humans into alien zombie slaves. As a result, this is a game about defeating the aliens and restoring the world, restoring the proper dimensions of reality, as well as defeating government troops and agents intent on covering up or benefiting from the dimensional rift. As the game progresses, you must enter the alien dimension, the dimension that rips bodies and the physical world. The Nihilanth is the supreme alien intelligence, the controlling being holding open the dimensional rift. The bloated body sac of the Nihilanth *is* rupture of dimensions, destruction of worlds, and maceration of bodies.

Dimensions split. People become alien. Headcrabs transform other people, your colleagues, into walking zombies. Same becomes other and different. All that is other must die. The world of Half-Life is simple: there are immobile structures things such as rocks and walls; there are moveable structures such as boxes and tables; and there are living creatures. As otherness invades, even the rocks and walls become alien, tables turn organic. Half-Life is a shooter game and the story advances through annihilation of the enemy. As life is ruptured by the alien, all that lives must be killed. Matter moves because of the dimensional split; matter is shootable; all matter must be shot. The alien other that inhabits the living must be destroyed. When you shoot something it breaks into pieces, particles of rock or flesh or alien goo. These pieces slowly fade

into nothing. You must destroy all matter, destroy all that moves. Soon there will be nothing but space. As the game progresses, you hone your instincts and reflexes, learning to see otherness everywhere, in every object, in everything that moves. You shoot to kill. In the Nihilanth's lair you are face to face with this otherness. You face the other that inhabits the same. Its face is odd and empty, its features sockets of darkness.

All that you see in Half-Life is through your eyes. Your first-person view exactly coincides with your "character" Gordon Freeman. Since there are no "cut-scenes," no videos where you forego your control of the character to the game, your actions are effectively your own, your view is effectively that of your consciousness. What the character gives is the context and the tools of the world, but not the interactions. In effect, this is a drama of consciousness, a playing out of your viewpoint against the otherness of the Nihilanth. To destroy the alien and win the game is the triumph of consciousness, the accomplishment of a perceiving "I" that takes over and makes over the world.

Throughout your time in Xen, the alien dimension, you hear a mysterious voice speaking fragments and phrases. The voice is separate from the gameplay and seems to float in your mind. It is a kind of inner voice, a telepathy or thought insertion directly into your brain. Since the gameplay up until that point allows you total control of your interactions, with no intrusion or takeover, this voice is felt as a disturbance, a schizoid splitting, an invasion of the self-sameness of your consciousness and your first-person view. It whispers things like: "Alone, not you... alone, not you... alone" or "Now die...now die...now..." or "The truth...you can never know...the truth..." In the final scene, you learn the truth: this voice is the Nihilanth muttering in your head. As you move in to attack, the voice increase in volume. Its source is clear. You face the split within consciousness. You battle for your self. Defeating the Nihilanth silences the voices, closes over the split in consciousness. All the objects of this world are gone but you.

Facing the Nihilanth means successfully negotiating with the narratology and computer coding of Half-Life. The Nihilanth is a "boss." In computer games, you typically must defeat a boss to complete a major segment or level of a game. In an arcade game, speed and difficulty typically increase as play goes on. Eventually, no one can continue playing and "high scores" indicate records or thresholds of attempt to keep up with the computer. By contrast, a boss represents

narrative segmentation. The end of an episode and the beginning of a new one requires effort and presents challenges to overcome. These are all condensed into the boss, typically in the form of an opposing character or creature, but possibly some other physical obstacle, requiring repeated attempts, complex actions, and many lives. The Nihilanth is that special category, the "final boss." To face the Nihilanth, you must have successfully faced the various sub-bosses representing other narrative segments of the game. Destroying the Nihilanth's brain means completing the game and preventing the invasion of earth by the Xen aliens, at least until Half-Life 2. The Nihilanth, a truly difficult monster to kill, is the terminal point of the game, the end of the narrative and of the first-person shooter action.

In terms of the Half-Life game engine and the tools used by the game designers and modders alike, items in the world are chunks of code known as "entities." Entities include things like couches and rocks, as well as aliens and humans. The entity monster class covers all living things, from humans to Nihilanths (the monster_nihilanth entity). All monster entities share preset spatial relations or triggers that determine actions and responses within the game. The condition of triggers determine whether a monster attacks or not and under what circumstances. Other chunks of code such as multi-managers can direct complex and coordination actions such as the battle with the Nihilanth. The spatial relation to the Nihilanth and the unfolding narrative space of the game is tied to these snippets of code and the target flags they contain. The Nihilanth attacks because of these settings in its code. You attack because you choose to, although your movement and actions are conditioned by your own coding. Each moment in the attack is the execution and playing out of the limitations and settings within chunks of code.

The moment that interests me is when you arrive at the Nihilanth's lair. You see the Nihilanth and it sees you. If you step forward the attack begins, but everything is in suspense until you move. The Nihilanth floats around, stares, floats, you stare back. If this creature is pure other and must be killed, if it is the other ripping apart reality, splitting humanness, threatening the cohesiveness of my consciousness, and if this is a narrative structure where only killing all in your path will lead to the conclusion, then what occurs in this suspension? What other is this that does not attack, that looks like a giant floating foetus with claws, which observes and holds your gaze? For me the question addresses the phenomenology of the game world, and cannot be cleanly separated from immersive structures we inhabit in daily life. What happens when I face

others? What happens is that I disclose myself, disclose my body and begin the coded encounters we call culture, but is that all? Must I encounter the other at all? What is an encounter here?

The moment that interests me could be seen as "emergent" gameplay, in the sense of an unplanned and unexpected use of the game. The result is not a new behavior, however, in the sense of "game currency trading" and other complex emergent gaming. It is closer to a glitch like the famous "M" Pokémon glitch that introduces an alternative being from within the game's coding. Yet the encounter with a Nihilanth involves no mistake in the code but a splitting of phenomenological domains already at work within the game.

One step forward and enter the zone of path marks and trigger conditions set in the Nihilanth's code. The attack will begin. Of course, I can choose not to fight, but the Nihilanth's energy bolts will destroy me in an instant. In other words, the code executed at that moment and in that step is inexorable and can only means death, of the other or of the same. Game over. For as long as you wait, however, you share this space with the Nihilanth. I want to say that this moment is uncoded, a pure immersion in the space of the game. Of course, by definition this moment is encoded. Nothing is added by pointing out that everything in this environment is code, is executable and programmed codes. Yet in this moment, facing the Nihilanth, the code that determines that final boss and the code that I am are not yet in play, not yet executed, or at least only playing and executing in the inhabitation of this space that is not yet a battlefield. I share the space with the other, however briefly. The Nihilanth and I are located in a shared space. In this sharing, the dimensional split in reality and the schizoid split in my mind are my being and not obstacles to overcome. I am these fissures and share them with the other. This inhabitation is the condition of language and action. Moving forward, I advance the narrative, I perform or execute that narrative code. Engaging the Nihilanth in battle means accepting the address of the narrative and the coding that we are, the Nihilanth and me. The battle is the condition of language. This is the case for every action in every first-person game: to move or to act is to address and be addressed, movement is discourse production.

But holding here, circling, looking at each other, we are locations and codes without addresses. The shared space is a code space as continuous flow of the game world. Coded otherness is not executed yet -- the otherness of culture, of agendas, of narratives, of masculinist and Americanist

and heroic destruction and death – not an encounter but facing the other, a giant brain with an atrophied body or a giant foetus with a swollen brain, muttering "Deceive you... will deceive you" or "Alone, not you... alone, not you... alone."

Again, the phenomenology of the game world cannot be cleanly separated from immersive structures we inhabit in daily life. I cannot separate my expression to the Nihilanth – in the gaming narrative of a final encounter with otherness that must be destroyed to protect culture and the self — from any other expression of myself. To the contrary: we must recognize and question the specialized agenda that sees immersion as a symbolic effect rather than a real part of everyday domains. Every encounter includes this expression to the other. The Nihilanth is my other.

In NWO, the text is difficult to read, scattered throughout the space. The text in NWO is composed of phrases from "Introduction to Poetry," a short poem from former US Poet Laureate Billy Collins' 1988 collection *The Apple that Astonished Paris* (Collins, 1988). The poem is about teaching students to read a poem. Collins asks students to "walk inside the poem's room." He uses a range of images of images to suggest what he wants the students to learn from the poem. The students fail the scene of instruction: rather than waterskiing "across the surface of a poem / waving at the author's name on the shore," they "begin beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means." For Collins, the students want the poem to mean rather than be. What are the conditions for a poem to *be* in this way, as room or hive or illuminated slide, as Collins wants? The violence in Collins' poem registered for me while I made NWO in early 2003, during the second invasion of Iraq. I read Collins describing how the students read the poem, tying it to a chair and torturing it. Collins wished for a better educated reading, a more proper reading, and one that would know how to immerse itself in poetry and to arrive at the correct and pleasing symbolic fulfillment of the words. The institutional habitus Collins wanted to teach was a demand for immersion in a hallucinatory knowledge that provides the right way to read, and a proper parceling out of beings in the world. This institution is a philosophy of distance, of thematics of concern without engagement. More is at work here. Collins is disappointed that the students cannot rise to these conditions, and I sympathize with the challenges of the hermeneutic methods, but I also read their actions as a kind of refusal of inscription within the institution of literature. Their violence resists the knowledge offered by the professor, resists the capitalization

represented by the poem as room or hive or illuminated slide. Violence shorts both the desire to know and the institution of interpretation. The smooth, closed Being of the poem, the hermetic hermeneutic sought by Collins, is ruptured and fissured by other beings, by the mutter of other voices. My point is that the poem is as much about relations to otherness as poetics, as it is about the importance of literary aesthetics.

In the end, this scene of torture is the literal reality of the poem. For me, "Introduction to poetry" linked to the circulation and re-circulation of tortured-bodies and interpretive agendas. Every game and every image is part of this linkage. The destruction within NWO reveals the linkage, discloses the settings of bodies in space. Computer space is not simulation but communication. I ask: what poem remains if we destroy both the response taught by the institution of literature and the propriety of how we read and respond to images? NWO is not an alternative between the cultural capital of the literary institution, on the one hand, and a dumb literalism on the other. Rather, NWO is corrosion: corrosion as working through, as play; corrosion of poems and phrases and words down to their settings; corrosion as wearing away of the symbolic and the frameworks of inscription; corrosion down to the settings of bodies in the real.

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