Panel Proposal:

Making sense of game aesthetics

We are:

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Graeme Kirkpatrick, University of Manchester, England
Simon Niedenthal, Malmö University, Sweden
Cindy Poremba, Concordia University, Montréal, Canada

In recent years, game studies scholars have brought an expanded conception of aesthetics to bear in the study of digital games. Far from being limited to speaking about the visual presentation of games and graphic styles (with the negative associations of "eye candy"), game aesthetics has become a perspective that allows us to examine the overarching principles and qualities of the gameplay experience. Our aim is to contribute to a fuller picture of what games can hope to become.

Although some of us root our work in a consideration of aesthetics as practiced historically, our perspective draws upon a range of critical and creative practices drawn from cultural theory, art history and fine art practice, visual semiotics, psychology and interaction design, We hope to supplement aesthetics' traditional strengths in discussing the senses, emotion, pleasure and the aesthetic experience, with arguments that allow us to consider embodied play, tangible interfaces, and creative player activity.

Game studies is an emerging discipline that draws upon many scholarly practices, but one thing we share is taking pleasure in play. This panel will accordingly seek to demonstrate the breadth, power and relevance of current approaches to game aesthetics by inviting scholars whose work engages aesthetics to examine a single game of their choice in depth. The games we have chosen for analysis are *dot.hack, Flower, Hitman* and *Okami.*

1. From Game-World to World-Game: The Workings of Allegory in *dot.hack*
Graeme Kirkpatrick, University of Manchester

This paper argues the centrality of allegory to understanding computer game aesthetics. Drawing on Thrift (2007), games are viewed as 'post-representational' forms. In this they resemble traditional games, where the representational dimension has receded like a childhood memory behind the present façade of play, with its rules, intensities and, especially, its formal tensions. Chess and even football, for example, are at some distant level representations of armed conflict and this is what children see when they are introduced to the games, but it is not what makes them interesting to adults. Similarly, computer games present us with visual, auditory and tactile elements that can be combined in ways that create resemblance to real world situations but they do not speak to or about those situations in the way that even a fictional text might. The way meaning gets into the game is therefore different than with other cultural artifacts, in which representation and signification generate resemblances or correspondences. Instead, we have what Walter Benjamin (1977)

called a kind of degraded representation. Allegory is central to the aesthetic analysis of the computer game form because it accounts for the often dreamlike nature of games; for their preoccupation with death; for the essentially cartoon aesthetic of even the most 'realistic' games, and for the emphasis on representations of space within game spaces.

The paper will take as its principal example the Bandai game, 'dot.hack'. This is a game about MMORPGs. Its central conceit is the idea that activities in a fictional game world, called simply 'the world', are beginning to spill over into real society. Power cuts, the collapse of the Internet and its replacement by a sinister corporate monolith are all reported on the discussion boards that players encounter in their role as a player of the game. When they enter 'the world' (the game within the game) players of 'dot.hack' enter a second level fantasy role, in which they traverse hundreds of dungeons (hosted on multiple servers), accumulate points and discover the evil force that lurks within the game and threatens society. They fight this force by hacking the game and ultimately these hacks destroy 'the world', leaving it in ruins. At the end there is a sense of pathos – the threat to the world has gone but so has the game. This resonates with the prevailing sense of powerlessness, related to a culture of morbidity and cynicism. Yet 'dot.hack' is basically a game about games. How can a game be about all these things and none of them?

The paper will argue that when we ask about the meanings of computer games we need to analyse the fundamental tensions they establish in the body of the player (Kirkpatrick 2008). Fluctuations in the grip we have of the controller, alterations of focus in the eye and attention to or exclusion of sound are all factors in the emergence of an experience of form that is characteristic of computer game play. This structure, which is at once robust and delicate, is also dynamic in the course of game play while at the same time its 'meaning' is an effect of the 'worldness' of the game – its totality. The paper focuses on this concept of 'game world', which features in gamer discourse and has made its way into game studies largely without due critical attention. Players construct worldness from the manifold of experiences associated with the game, but it is clear that this process is not inevitable. Rather, it is a function of the social and cultural context, within which allegory and self-referential pleasures of movement and space have superseded representational forms.

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Graeme Kirkpatrick is senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Manchester. His previous publications include *Critical Technology* (Ashgate: 2004), which won the 2005 Philip Abrams Prize from the British Sociological Association, *Historical Materialism and Social Evolution* (Palgrave 2002, co-edited with Paul Blackledge) and *Technology and Social Power* (Palgrave 2008). He has also published numerous articles on critical theory, technology and society in a range of internationally refereed journals. He is currently working on a study of the aesthetics of video games for Manchester University Press.

2. *Woosh!* Why Aesthetics Rule *Flower*
Cindy Poremba, Concordia University

It is fitting that *Flower* (2009) is described by thatgamecompany co-founder Jenova Chen as a video game poem or dance. Both forms structure aesthetic experience—but seldom do we imagine that structure as central to their expressive potential. The drive to formalize game design and criticism, and to distinguish between games and play, has lead to a rule-centricity that inflects our understanding and interpretation of games. This has lead to both the broadening of the term "rule" to encompass any aspect of structure in games, and the downplay of alternative paths towards the support of aesthetic experience.

Kattenbelt and Raessens have critiqued the dominance of a rule-driven action paradigm in digital games, suggesting games can also focus on experience intensity (a Kantian frame of feeling, or Peircean phenomenological firstness)(421). A game like *Flower* might begin from a somatic theme (the feeling of floating on the wind) or a sensory image (flying in a Miyazaki movie, a hand brushing against the grass). States Chen: "The goal with *Flower* is to give the player the sensation of flying in a field and seeing the beauty of the world…(m)uch like a dancer only understands how a dance makes them feel…." (Rutherford). Indeed, starting design from target experiences, around mechanics (which may or may not be viewed as "rules"), or around more aesthetic ideals such as phenomenological orientations or visceral states, upends the presumption that aesthetics play a supporting role in what we might call game meaning.

As Galloway observes, computational systems like videogames demonstrate a shift in means of control (away from confinement and enclosure) towards opening specific legitimate paths (87). We can say these paths are established by rules, but we should also consider that these paths are not exclusively rules. In *Flower* you begin by directing petals on the wind, moving the controller in a loose, fluid motion that expands the feeling of orientation beyond your thumbs, into the body. As you collide with flowers musical tones amplify your contact—a rhythmic pleasure that can be traced through Mizuguchi's *Rez* (2001) to Rauschenberg's *Open Score* (1966). "What do I do" becomes a secondary concern. You are propelled forward, not by rule obligation or the constraints of the gameworld, but by viscerally compelling gesture. Following Wittgenstein and Suchman, what will become the games "rules" will be interpreted through this aesthetic experience. As such, the rules do not causally construct the play experience of *Flower*. They play a more complex role in meaning making centered on the support and maintenance of the game's expressive aesthetic experience.

While the pragmatist experiential aesthetics of Richard Shusterman and Arthur Danto provide a means by which to view game experiences as potentially aesthetic, we can also look at *Flower* in terms of what it means to have been *designed* to prompt aesthetic experience, through the integration of representation, structure and the quality of gamic action. In this sense, it is important to appreciate gamic action as not ontologically fixed, but as potentially aesthetic— yielding gameplay not about what you do, but the quality of doing it. As Chen describes, "the music and ambiance combined with the visuals and controls convey more (than more complex gameplay).

That's why there are no voices, no words, and no instructions" (Gladstone). *Flower* demonstrates how an expanded expressive toolkit linking aesthetic action with audio and visual representation and embodied play, can play the central role in game meaning—an insight the dominant focus on game rules tends to obscure.

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Cindy Poremba is a digital media researcher, creator and curator, exploring the intersection of documentary, games and interactive art through Concordia University's Doctoral Humanities program (Montréal, QC). She holds an MASc in Interactive Arts from Simon Fraser University, as well as an Hon. BA from the University of Waterloo in Rhetoric & Professional Writing. She is a former faculty member in Simon Fraser University's School of Interactive Arts and Technology (SIAT), and has published work in journals such as Eludamos and Games & Culture, as well as edited collections. Cindy has also organized non-traditional exhibitions as an independent curator; and "new arcade" events as a member of the Kokoromi game art collective.

3. *Hana-bi*: Fireworks in *Okami*
Simon Niedenthal, Malmö University

Fireworks are to explosions as games are to play. Think about it: in both cases, the wild energies of the latter are shaped into coherent aesthetic experiences in the former. But what does it mean to integrate fireworks into game forms? And what can we learn about the workings of individual games by studying their use of fireworks? We can consider fireworks an entrée into games as felt experiences that move us beyond linguistic modes of analysis. As Adorno points out, fireworks represent "a script that flashes up, vanishes, and indeed cannot be read for its meaning" (as quoted in Tone 2005). Fireworks, rather, are a boundary phenomenon, and the meaning of fireworks in games is best sought through a threefold aesthetic perspective that focuses on the senses, on art, and on the aesthetic experience that gives pleasure through deep attentiveness, strong emotion and a sense of make-believe.

Fireworks acquire their power from their visual, aural, percussive and olfactory effects. It is still meaningful to discuss a subset of these effects within digital games, but one of the greatest differences between fireworks in games and real space is the presence of a frame. As pyrotechnics expert Takeo Shimizu writes, "Fireworks art is different from the pictorial art, i.e. there is not framework, and it can be appreciated from all quarters. . . . firework art has no framework with the result that fireworks often lose their stability and are apt to give people unpleasant feelings" (Shimizu 1981). Fireworks can be associated with sensory disruption and, even though digital games introduce a frame, in the case of *Okami* (Clover Studios 2008) we often see the frame being used to increase the disruptive power of fireworks, through extreme angles and foreshortening. Fireworks in games can thus contribute to the sort of playful disruption of the senses that Callois (2001) refers to as "ilinx."

Fireworks are foregrounded in games that range from very simple Flash-based fireworks simulators (*Fireworks simulation engine v. 1*) to rhythm games such as *Boom Boom Rocket* (Bizarre Creations 2007). In these examples, the pleasure that fireworks provide is found in manipulating the design of the firework burst (by setting the variables of individual shells and then firing) or by synchronizing the burst with a musical soundtrack. In both of these game types, fireworks manifest a clear three stage temporal structure: firing, the flight of the shell (trailed by sparks), and burst. This establishes a very primitive and effective anticipation and fulfillment mechanism, with player input on burst further reinforcing this pattern in *Boom Boom Rocket.* In more complex games, fireworks often appear as light effects that have positive or celebratory associations. In *Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz* (Amusement Vision 2006), for example, successfully reaching the finish line often results in a chrysanthemum fireworks burst (along with stars and other festive light forms). Here fireworks function as part of a much larger class of light effects in games that go well beyond visual feedback effects, indicating that something has been performed, or that some change in the game state has occurred (this can often also be seen in fighting and spell casting).

In *Okami*, the range of firework references is far richer. Fireworks serve not only as emotional punctuation, and as light effect, but also acquire thematic and narrative relevance through the character of Tama the pyrotechnist. The figure of Tama draws upon the Japanese tradition of fireworks craftsman as outsider, with the potential to destroy or to soothe the social and urban fabric (Plimpton 1984). Moreover, evoking the explosive cherry bomb called up via player agency highlights the sometimes counterintuitive affordances of the brush in the game, in which both creativity and force are expressed through artistic activity. Finally, fireworks are employed in *Okami* as a means of supporting "dynamical joy" in the game. "Dynamical joys are based upon a kind of experience that lies somewhere between emotion proper and sensation: the tensions, excitements, thrills and reliefs of acting and resting" (Duncker 1941). Touching the smoldering punk to the fuse is an act with sensory, aesthetic and ultimately playful consequences.

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Simon Niedenthal is an associate professor of interaction design at Malmö University. His articles on simulated illumination, game aesthetics and game design process have been published in journals including *Game Studies, Cyberpsychology and Behavior,* and *Leonardo*. In 2008 he defended his PhD thesis *Complicated Shadows: The Aesthetic Significance of Simulated Illumination in Digital Games*.

4. A Visual Semiotic Perspective on Games Aesthetics
Alessandro Canossa, Denmark's Design School / IO Interactive

Beyond mere embellishment, the aesthetic aspect of computer games, understood as a sensory-perceptual phenomenon, has already been identified as instrumental in fostering affective, narrative and spatial involvement (Calleja 2007).
This paper will attempt to show how game aesthetics can provide a shortcut towards deeper involvement by grounding game mechanics, goals, locations and characters into the emotional fabric of players. According to Bachelard's theory of poetic images, the condition for this anchoring to happen is that the aesthetic elements consistently interplay with each other to create "*resonance-reverberation doublets*" in the mind of players (Bachelard 1969).

Resonance is heard in the connotations that an image awakens, it has no causal relation to the image that elicited them, but it is led by "*the outpourings of the mind*". Resonance suggests the possibility of understanding and making connections with other feelings and echoes. Through resonance, we find confirmation of knowledge we already possess, at least in an embryonic manner: the relation of the aesthetic image to "*an archetype lying dormant in the depths of the unconscious*".

Reverberation is rapture, ecstasy, it "*brings about a change in being*" through a transformation of consciousness and of the deepest aspects of our being. Its effects reach the "*profundities of the soul*". Reverberation challenges our existing knowledge and opens the gate for change.

Resonance and reverberation together can produce identification between the player and the aesthetic image by triggering a subversion of the subject-object duality. This subversion anchors game goals, locations and characters in the personal history of each player.

A visual semiotic approach will be adopted to analyse the devices through which aesthetical elements are used to produce resonant and reverberating meanings. Particular attention will be given to the textual strategies that attempt to close, at least partially, the field of interpretations arising from the aesthetic elements, setting a roof over the problem of unlimited semiosis where the interpretation of a sign becomes a sign for a new interpretation (Eco 1990, 1992). Interpretation of visual clues to create meaning is not natural, nor simple: it relies heavily on a set of rules that change from culture to culture. The sense-making process could chase the evanescent chimera of the "one true interpretation" trying to eviscerate what the author intended (*intentio auctoris*) or it could open completely the process and let users freely look for their own interpretation (*intentio lectoris*) potentially leading to overinterpretations. Eco proposes a position in between: keeping the intention of the work (*intentio operis*) in mind and limiting the endless series of interpretations by the means of a simple principle: inner textual coherence. If an interpretation cannot be denied by the literal meaning of any part of the text or the cultural frame from which it was produced, then it is considered to be valid.

This article will analyse how the visual elements of the game *Hitman: Blood Money* can carry the *intentio ludi*, partly closing the field of interpretation and guiding the implied player towards a set of assumptions that will eventually result in resonant and reverberating meanings. Due to the intrinsic nature of interactive entertainment, designers deliberately leave room for textual openness (Compagno 2006). It is in the gap of this openness that the *model player*'s competence, actualising more or less explicit narrative structures (Eco 1962), reveals the iconic nature of game aesthetics, providing anchors to affective, narrative and spatial elements. And it is still in this balance between textual openness and closeness that players can find resonance and reverberation within the elements of the game world: a completely open text would give birth to unlimited semiosis, a text too close would not permit personal interpretation, trivializing any effort towards sense-making.

The method utilised consists of applying a standard semiotic grid to the aesthetic elements (game locations and characters), asking questions about hypo-icons, cognitive types, traits and attributes, connotation/denotation, anchoring, rhetoric mechanisms, deep and superficial semio-narrative structures, diegetic and non-diegetic elements, etc. (Polidoro 2008). The results will attempt to show how visual elements help anchoring game goals, locations and characters into the emotional fabric of players.

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Alessandro Canossa has a humanistic background (MA in Science of Communication), quickly appears on the decadent stage of advertisement in the late nineties, and finally finds his vocation-obsession in game development (ITE, NDS, LEGO, Tabula Rasa Games). In September 2006 he starts a Ph.D. project about game worlds in cooperation with IO Interactive and Denmark's School of Design.