

(Re)Mark(s) of the Ninja: Replaying the Remnants

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ABSTRACT

The author makes an appraisal of the videogame *Mark of the Ninja* (Klei 2012) through the analysis of its construction of temporality. Appropriating the framework of literature scholar Éric Méchoulan, time is described as the anachronistic folding of the past upon the present. The theme of time and memory in the game is paralleled with Méchoulan's media-archeological approach to western metaphysics, insisting on the material processes and ethics of thought, mediation and transmission. As the game applies such treatment of the mythical past of the fictional world, it is also aesthetically molding the experience of gameplay through *marks* as objects for an archeology of gamespace. It leads to critical approaches to cultural legitimacy and violence that nonetheless leaves the pleasures of narrative and play intact. Finally, the author uses David Bohm's concept of *suspension*, showing how the articulation of contemplation and gameplay performances makes time for critical play.

Keywords

Temporality, Intertextuality, Violence, Reflexivity, Interface

The nostalgia felt for video games is not nostalgia for a state before the trauma of the games disrupted us, but a desire to recapture that mind-altering experience of being in a game for the first time. It is a yearning for liminality itself – for the moment of transition

- Sean Fenty, *Playing the Past*

INTRODUCTION: SNEAKING THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP

As Felan Parker convincingly demonstrated in his study of the rise of Jason Rohrer's game *Passage* (2007) to art-house status, cultural and artistic legitimization "are not benign, natural processes" (2013, p.56). As they are increasingly being observed from various analytical frameworks, videogames of the 21st century are more sensible than ever to the presence of an *observer*. Some of them seem to (re)act accordingly by ostensibly seeking inspiration from aesthetic lineages rich in "cultural capital"¹ (Parker 2013, p.43).

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In contemporary culture, awareness of such phenomena led to some artists challenging the recuperation of surface-level discourses on artistic value by the art market and mass media, as in Orson Welles' *F for Fake* (1973) and (famous street artist) Banksy's *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010) mischievous winks towards the "material capital" that is pursued by some practitioners and promoters of a certain artfulness. They seem to ask: who's printing the legend?

Not the least of the pleasures of playing Klei Entertainment's *Mark of the Ninja* (2012) is the way in which it enables to rethink the recent prestige gains of video game culture through the prisms of the stealth-action genre and the innovative aesthetics of "indie" games. Through artistically valued features such as a complex intertextual fabric, the motif of the *memento mori* (a reminder of the inevitability of death) and a sustained rhetorical ambiguity, the game can give way to a reframing of the word "legitimation", revisiting the decades-old controversy about violence in games. It is fair to suggest that the overall effect is similar to David Cronenberg's *A History of Violence* (2005): an ambiguously fetishistic and revisionist look at the violent archetypes of specific genre practices².

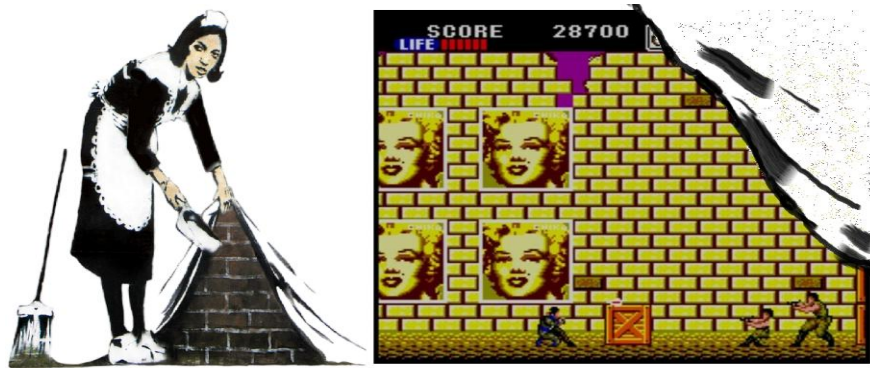


Figure 1: Left: *Hoxton Maid* (Banksy [2006]). Right: *Shinobi* (Sega 1988).

As much as it is a self-conscious exercise in style, I will argue that *Mark of the Ninja* is also a powerful tool for aesthetic archeology and critical reflexivity, not unlike the way street art remediates pop art into social commentaries. I will scrutinize how temporality, as a condition for consciousness, is constructed in the game as a cultural, materialistic and media induced phenomenon by borrowing the framework of media and literature scholar Éric Méchoulan. Drawing upon Christian Keathly's study of cinephilia, I will also consider the intertextual fabric of the game as a field of potential metonymic triggers for 'ludophilic' memories (2006, p.141). Finally, I will tie the temporality and gameplay to physicist and thinker David Bohm's theory of reflexivity, showing how the effect of the game's aesthetics can be appreciated as a form of *suspension* of intentions and assumptions behind (the highly aesthetic) violence.

PACING THE DREAM: 2D SPACE AS A PLANE OF RÉMANENCE

Time and *Rémanence*

Perhaps the more rewarding avenue to tackle the tension I see in the game, between its artful reflexivity and the intertextual fetishism, is through the construction of temporality. Let us first glance at the general aesthetic proposition of *Mark of the Ninja*. I will first suggest that, as a stealth game, the choice of 2D here is as sweet a surprise as the “groundbreaking” retro-aesthetics of *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (Konami 1997) (especially since both games’ level design is very similar). Indeed, in those times of transitions towards an increasingly dominant polygonal 3D paradigm within the game industry, the first born of the *metroid-vania* genre was hailed by some as a form of resistance. In *Mark of the Ninja*, the intertextual matrix operates through the (re)performance of actions that our gaming memory situates in 3D spaces. But before we consider the nostalgic power of 2D, we should always appreciate the fact that novelty always leans upon tradition³. As Éric Méchoulan expressed it, “the sense of astonishment [in a discovered future] comes precisely from the fact that my past did not seem to lead in a linear fashion to it [...] This is why in the present, both the contingency of what happens and the interpretation that connects it to my past, cohabit” (2003, p.41). This goes hand in hand with this particular reception of the game: “Going forward as the line between retail and downloadable games fade, and we embrace this [flawless] game via download future, it's funny how much the future looks like the past” (Granrojo 2012).

If we think of the past as a vaster time span folded upon the discrete instant of the *now*, as some sort of helpful database wealthy with various principles and experiences, we might as well call it a user interface. This is not an argument to reduce the workings of memory to a videogame experience, but to show the powerful “family resemblance” between the retentiveness (or *rémanence*) of memory and the way 2D interfaces are being used as an abstract plane of interpretation, ripe with maps and cognitive cues. It is true for the imagery of *Mark of the Ninja*, full of informative clues drawn directly upon gamespace itself. “[...]every 2D perspective conveys a metaphor when in connection to other one (2D or 3D) [...] dioramas are pictures of the world I habit that show different possibilities of action, in other words creative ways to build meanings with consequences in main gaming space” (Gandolfi 2013). As the past is implicated into the present, the territory is always already a map, or at least they cohabit as equals without a clear hierarchy. This construction of temporality through mapping, interfacing and mediation started ages ago with epic narratives: “The mythical spaces in *The Gilgamesh* seem to adjoin or overlay the real spaces. ‘Heaven’, for exemple [...] is an overlayed space with access points (including dreams)” (Smith 2013, p.44). This is the ‘past-tense’ presence of the *kairos*, the melancholic power to recognize opportunities as our finite time relentlessly unfolds.

With this conventional literacy in mind, I will suggest that the 2D spaces of *Mark of the Ninja* can be increasingly felt as *the interface of a bygone main gaming space*, thus folding past upon present. As I sneak behind a guard to kill him, a very simple quick time event appears. If I do this right, a murderous choreography unfolds, leaving me for some seconds to contemplate the ninja’s minute techniques of assassination: *Tenchu* (Acquire 1998) immediately comes to mind for me, as if it was the main gaming space where my action should be actualized. In other instances, it is micro-mechanics of *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady 2009) or *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami, 1998) that my actions seem to perform as a ritual and litany of infiltration, intrusion and espionage; as if I was rehearsing for a replay of those games. The gameplay references are many, but they all have in common the stealth-action genre and 3D representation. I insist: for the

ludophilic gamer (close to the “classics”), most performed actions and their elegant audiovisual feedbacks are potential triggers for the remembrance of games past.

It is useful to consider Christian Keathly’s description of the cinephilic anecdote here: “filmic details have been described as possessing a metonymic potential [...] We don’t write about these things, it is not a metaphorical representation that the sensory pretext summons but rather something related by affinity, that prolongs the content of the object in another, more tenuous form, *as though to prolong a last touch with the very fingertip*” (2006, p.141, *italics mine*). Following Roland Barthes and Fredric Jameson, Keathly suggests that visual details are especially potent in triggering memory on a tactile level, thus making certain sentences, descriptions or images especially stimulating for an imaginative (re)creation: the urge to write with/from them. I would suggest that the fetishization of classical visual feedbacks and the unfolding of familiar tactical schemes combine into very powerful metonymic portals for memory *during gameplay*. For experienced gamers, there is a form of ongoing aesthetic archeology in *Mark of the Ninja*, suggested by the story’s movements (from east to west and back east through catacombs and middle-eastern ruins) but also by the aesthetics and design of the game, such as the rewarded collection of mythical ancient scrolls.

The best way to come full circle on this metaphor of an *archeological gamespace* is through the work of Méchoulan and the idea of “taking a step aside”, that also coincides with the choice of 2D to evoke 3D games. Drawing upon Henri Bergson’s method of inquiry to build a framework for a media-archeological analysis of western metaphysics, Méchoulan stresses the importance of thinking the past by reproducing, so to speak, its own rhythm into our present intuitions. Rethinking the hermetic boundaries of the texts of History, he tries to craft a model of historically situated modes of mediation and transmission in order to reconstruct the material and technical conditions of a given era’s textual works. Here, the creation of concepts is not a transparent transmission of ethereal Ideas fallen from heavenly planes: it’s a socio-historically situated bodily act of speech and thought, working through specific rhythms and institutions. After he resituates the cultural and material conditions, he considers discursive possibilities and strategies, but not entirely in a subjectively situated point of view merging with a sole author’s words (taken as ultimate origin): “Beyond the interpretation that requires an intelligence of symbols, thought must *take a step aside*, giving attention to what is around the concept, to look at the point of creation, the particular *modulations of time within which an experience suddenly flourishes*” (2010, p.67; *italics mine*). The present section’s keyword, *rémanence*, must be understood as a remnant within memory, but such as it was made possible by material mediums in a specific culture of memory [*i.e.* a practice of *mnemotechnics*, socially transmitted techniques of memorization]⁴. Méchoulan fleshes out a uniquely rhythmic, robust and intuitive (in an effort requiring sense) perspective building method: “Anachronisms are not only this heresy of historiography by which we lay the past over the reflexes of the present (a matter of quantities), but in fact it is the very constitution of time itself (a problem of quality) through which the past becomes increasingly astonishing [...] Intermediality is giving *attention to remnants*” (*ibid.*, p.73).

As this might appear a far-fetched framework for our present purpose, we will see that the unfolding of the narrative and the game’s thematic ecosystem is in accordance with a media-archeological approach to videogame’s past; not as a theoretical work (games are not theoretical *per se*), but as a suggestion made through aesthetic choices, a room-making for the player’s potential desire for retrospection.

Marks as Archeological Remnants

The opening cinematic first shows a beautifully 2D animated tattoo tool being dipped in red ink, immediately preceding the apparition of the brushed game title. A short sequence, where the drawing traits are remarkably rougher, depicts a medley of typical tactical stealth actions performed by a ninja. When the ninja kills the last guard, he wakes up beside the tattoo artist, in the more carefully drawn “actual” world of the narrative. The logic of reality layering is already at work and the remediation of hand drawn traits on paper (and flesh!) is the visual rule. When the ninja accepts the “mark” [tattoo], he is granted superpowers to save his archaic clan from a modern corporate mercenary force. We soon learn that this tattoo, made with an ink produced by a secret toxic plant, eventually generates hallucinations and madness. As a ritual, the bearer of the mark is due to commit suicide after he fulfills his fateful mission. During the tutorial level, aptly titled “Ink and Dream”, the player’s avatar is awakened by a bell to find a ninja woman. At first, her primary function is to give tactical advices: “The ink of your tattoo has honed your senses, focus your thoughts and you can freeze time in your mind”. For all this promise of time manipulation, she soon starts reminding us again and again that death is at the end of the road. She also ends up giving occasional hermeneutical hints about the clan’s past and eventually nurtures rebellious thoughts against the clan’s leader and other members. She transmits the melancholic *kairos* through her sweet voice: time is finite, all opportunities are now or never, and History is our only wealth.

There are many kinds of *ink* in the game. As we find one of the many hidden collectible scrolls, we raise our “honor” score (a currency for power-ups), we trigger a voice acting that reads out loud and we watch the ninja reading in a scripted sequence, similar to the presentation of the act of killing (which also raises score). If the 2D space is a step on the side relative to past 3D actions, the visualized act of reading is *step on the side* for the avatar: the *side-scrolling* gamespace (and interface) now serves to show our avatar staring at the side of an unfolded scroll. In this context, it is tremendously appealing to accept Henry Jenkin’s suggestion that “when we refer such influential early works as Miyamoto’s *Super Mario Bros.* as ‘scroll games’, we situate them alongside a much older tradition of spatial storytelling: many Japanese scroll paintings map, for example, the passing of the seasons onto an unfolding space” (2004, p.122). This also suggests an empirical relationship between the observer and the observed: we are watching a fictional instance evoking our own activity. We will come back to this issue in the last section.



Figure 2: “The Story of the Ink”

This meta-narrative logic culminates during the finale, when we are told the eerie “story of the ink” (a short retelling of the entire chain of events), slowly walking rightward on a white surface explicitly remediating the material medium of ancient scrolls. This narrative retrospection was prepared by a preceding walk in a corridor decorated with iconic figures of the clan’s mythology, the movement of which is contiguous to the one through the white scroll. It is indeed a specific institution of cultural memory. Now the player/reader is truly lost in endless layers of scrolls, but there is also this sense of a *passage*, analogous to the melancholic march forward that Jason Rohrer’s game offered. Indeed, not unlike *Passage*’s famous death of the avatar’s companion, we just discovered that the ninja woman guide, the only character seemingly keeping us from a fully opaque alienation, was just a hallucination of our avatar all along. After the synthetic retelling of the story, we are given a choice to kill the clan leader (who took possession of the dishonoring mercenary technologies) or our game-long imaginary companion (turned murderous and revenge hungry) which voice-acted presence was at times very soothing and helpful. There is no boss fight against the leader, there is not even the possibility to run and be quick about it: just a plain slow murder that turns the image into the rough-traits dream world. Of course, killing the woman reveals to be the ninja’s suicide in the main fine traits cinematic world. But who’s to say what drawing technique is more real than the other? Perhaps the rough traits of the dreams are more mimetic in terms of the act of the tracer, but less in terms of an immersive fiction. This nauseous and unsatisfying moral experience is thus radically different then the mass killing of evil fascists in Klei’s previous *Shank* titles. Remembering Jean-Luc Godard’s comment on John Ford’s westerns, there is no *satisfaction of ordinary justice* here, leaving the moral issue to loop in the player’s mind. This is also what I mean when I say that the game creates a tension between the culturally legitimate and the pleasurable mediation of violence.

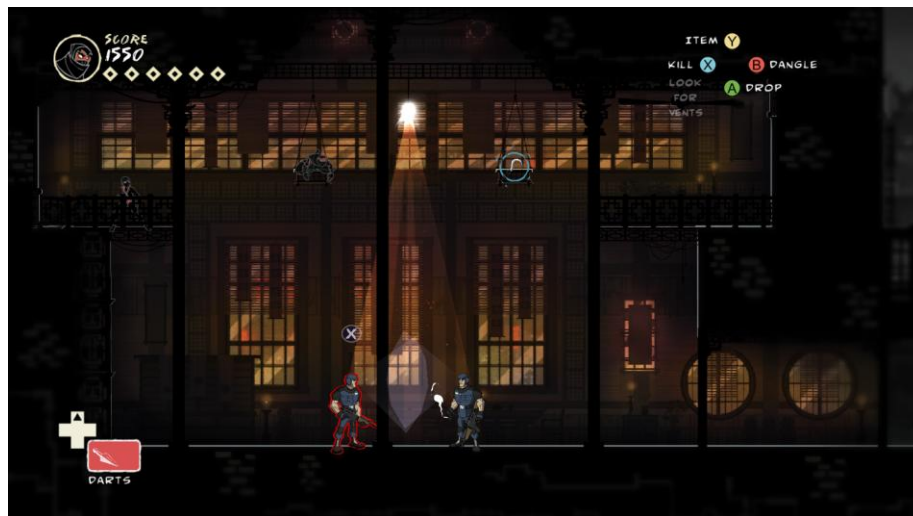


Figure 3: Marks within/upon gamespace.

As with the above mentioned *A History of Violence*, a title can bear a powerful programmatic quality. In *Mark of the Ninja*, it is hard not to see *marks* everywhere, since the game’s imagery is full those: halos left by footsteps slowly expand and disappear, the avatar’s silhouette is outlined in a contrasting white when hidden in darkness, our last seen position leaves a pale drawn silhouette that determines where guards will

investigate, the score display and health status are drawn in the rough ‘dream’ traits, etc. But as our hallucinated friend tells the avatar: “Azai [the clan leader] refers to you as ‘The Champion’, but do you know how they used to call the one who bore the mark? ... ‘The Severed’”. Throughout the game, it is obvious that everything that is mediated by ink – and, really, everything seems to be – is a potentially damaging and doubt inducing alienation: an entrenchment within a borgesian maze. Consider two of the early haiku poems found on hidden scrolls: 1) “We snap off a branch / to make a weapon, but the / tree must bear the wound”, 2) “Tomorrow we bite / the hand that feeds us today / either way, we eat...” Some scrolls sound like ironic warnings, some like tormented confessions and others like a Zen acceptance of death. In their effects, some are strikingly akin to artist Jenny Holzer’s “truisms”. Perhaps one of her most famous could even be used here to sum up their overall effect: “It takes a while before you can / walk over inert bodies and go ahead / with what you were trying to do” (Flanagan 2009, p.143). The most interesting feature of this continuous internalization of enigmatic and paradoxical formulas is the way it is equated with spatial puzzles. In every level, to collect one of the three scrolls, the player must successfully navigate a *gamespace within the gamespace*, an abysmal heterotopias more simply called “challenge room”. The trap systems and navigational logic of those hidden areas are always a concentrated form of the specific types of obstacles and spatial challenges of the level design in which they are found. When we reach the scroll of such a chamber, the screen flashes white and we are teleported back to the main level. Our ninja avatar is holding his head as if struck by a terrible headache as the content of the scroll is heard. To paraphrase Holzer’s work again: “you are a victim of the rules you [play] by” (Flanagan 2009, p.144). Players are also “marked”.

The Ninja as Origin, or the Imaginary Ontological Marker

The mark, here, can be understood as an *inner remnant* related to the mental activity demanded by the puzzle design, mirroring the way problem-solving processes are materially modifying our minds. Such a challenge room is in some way the mark of a specific level design. But such marks are never the index of an objective reality that would be separate from the perceiving subject. If there is something to be investigated in this backtracking maze of signatures, it is not the intricate conspiracy of an external evil, but the rhythms of our own internal processes as they are in good part influenced by experiences in time and media related habits. The game becomes an occasion for a *reevaluation* of cognitive paradigms of *evaluation*. As Giorgio Agamben suggested, “signatures marks things on the level of their very being”, but “existence has no real predicate”, which means that “ontology [the study of the being as being] is not a determined knowledge, but the archeology of all knowledge” (2008 p.75). Consider this example of an ontologically-minded archeology: a contemporary gamer may recognize in the game’s meta-narrative project a wink to the *Assassin’s Creed* (Ubisoft) franchise’s self-reflexive apparatus that frames and justifies the navigation of historical events. But, instead of using the historiographically fact-poor figure of the mid-eastern assassin as a vessel for an apparently immediate access to History, *Mark of the Ninja* uses the figure of the fact-rich ninja taken as a repeated figure in videogame iconography.

Hypermediacy is the rule here, but it does not insist directly on the ontological materiality of computer architecture and code programming, akin to the iconic downpour of algorithms in *The Matrix* franchise (Wachowski Bros.). As Alexander Galloway recently stated it, “the computer instantiates a practice not a presence, an effect not an object [...] *if cinema is, in general, an ontology, the computer is, in general, an ethic*” (2012, p.22). Perhaps there is a kind of ontology in the game. If so it takes a historical approach to

surfaces, interfaces, figures, interactive rhythms and patterns *as mediated by audiovisual feedback*. The player is the implied archeologist of gamespace⁵. No mark (or signature) can be considered as an ontological trace without a human translating it onto a temporal interface (memory, rhythms) upon which marks can become *remarks*. What I am trying to suggest here is that mark constellations are always puzzles through which epistemology and ontology needs to be rearticulated, not simply vessels for discourses. As Méchoulan puts it, Aristotelian ontology is the retrospective study of “what it was to be” [*To ti ên enai*], but since being is always *to be with*, in a relationship to others, the structure of the problem becomes: *what it was to be with* (2010, p.163; p.41). The mark is the result of a momentary relationship.

That said, and since – apart from the stealth genre – the ninja is our main ontological and historical agent here, it affords us this question about the ninja’s figural presence as an imaginary marker: *what was it to be a ninja with other figures?* If we stick to the surfaces and visuals, the metonymic 2D ninja leads right back to the 1980s and such (trade)marks as *Ninja Gaiden* (Tecmo 1988) and *Shinobi* (Sega 1987). For instance, there are common traps and guard types in the *Shinobi* titles and *Mark of the Ninja*. Let’s remember *The Revenge of Shinobi* (Sega 1989) and its relentless onslaught of intertextual plagiarisms of other media. In this classical side-scrolling action game, our ninja gets to fight ersatz of Spiderman, Batman or Terminator, among others. As for relationships, in such a decade of technophobic “Japan panic” (Kline *et.al.* 2003, p.122), the producer of *Shinobi* ledgedly declared that he wanted the game to mirror the image that Americans entertained of Japan (Blanchet 2010, p.228). This is even more fascinating when we consider - through the lenses of Alexis Blanchet – that by 1989 such disregard for copyrights was more than a decade old practice for the videogame industry, starting with Atari’s *Shark Jaws* (1975). “Like *Shark Jaws*, writes Blanchet, *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981) borrows to the surface of things” (*Ibid.*, p.162, *italics mine*).

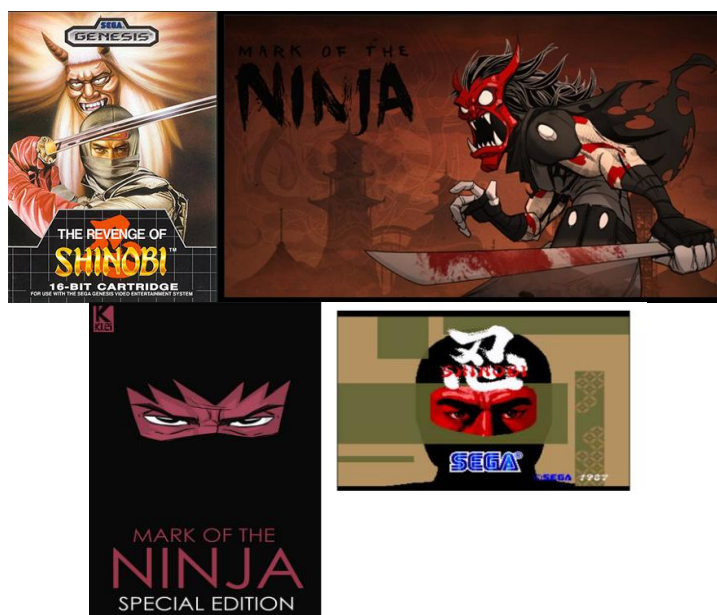


Figure 4: The surface of things: covers and title screens of *Mark of the Ninja*, *The Revenge of Shinobi* and *Shinobi*.

These borrowings were not only a desire to suck in some cultural legitimacy from cinema, but also a functionalistic recycling of imaginary common grounds easing the apprehension of the game's situation (*Ibid.*). It was intended to trigger the player's memory as an interface for interpretation. There is an interesting rhythmic historicism at work here, since Klei's 2012 title have a similar historical distance – to both 'indie' game's contemplative aesthetics and 'mainstream' gaming's stealth-action violence – that *The Revenge of Shinobi* had on the early videogame industry's explicit iconographic piracy. Before each level in *Mark of the Ninja*, the player is invited to choose between different un-lockable iconic eastern masks connoting a different expertise (*i.e.* a spiritual and technical *Way*, an *ethos* and method). We soon associate each set with a particular style of gameplay ranging from the sword-less sneaking type to the aggressive open-field warrior (which is deprived of the power to freeze time). Here, the borrowed archetype is not from film or comic, but from famous past game's play choreographies. As such, it's also related to resemblance for functionalistic purposes. The game reiterates the same vampiric appropriation to its own medium that 1980s' games like Activision's *Pitfall!* (1982) applied to films like *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg 1981). Coincidentally, it highlights how much spying and assassinating are made easy (and way too fun) to repeat, not only because of the high readability of the 2D gamespace, but also given videogame's history of violence.

As for their potential use as a cliché to convey a narrative context, the iconic 1980s ninjas were agents of a timely resistance and anachronistic heirs of a rarified wisdom. I want to suggest that it is also to reflect upon this ongoing logic that this archetypal figure is summoned from the medium's past in *Mark of the Ninja*. The ninja is thus the tired old protagonist in a relentlessly repeated – enough to leave a mark – mythical battle between east and west, archaic and modern, and perhaps more interestingly human and post-human. One of the most powerful enemies of the game, the *stalker*, is a very feminine cyber-ninja analogous to our own hallucinated guide, leading to an interesting comparative exemplarity. This equation between futuristic technological prostheses (the uncannily familiar outer Other) and the prosthetic quality of language (the interiorized Other through ink, scrolls and voices) questions the absolute *casus belli* of the conflict. It dissolves their motive into a paradox unwittingly shared by the two adversaries. The logical implication of this unrecognized historical redundancy is that neither traditional cultures nor modern practices have full monopoly over the trappings of alienation by a seemingly transparent - yet always opaque - set of mediations. They differ only in terms of *rhythms*, momentarily valuing one state of their historical transformative process over another. Winning such conflict does not mean to be critical of the enemies' view of the world, but to embrace their tools of interpretation (by stealing their ancient knowledge or their technological apparatuses), which ironically implies to merge with their historical identity instead of resisting it. Why not talk then? We could then say that *Mark of the Ninja* replays the open ethical explorations of another stealth-action game, namely *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm 2000) and its global post-human conspiracy theory.

I have so far given very little attention to gameplay itself, for I wanted the temporal implications of gamespace to fold upon an analysis of specific actions. I will thus complete the analysis by focusing on my own experience of a decisive sequence and the way it relates to its context as we have understood it: as a plane of *rémanence*. By that I mean a space and surface designed to accommodate a performance of memory, where “‘interpretation’ designates hermeneutic activity as much as it might the performance of an actor or a musician” (Méchoulán 2003, p.42).

AS WE INK THE LEGEND: REFLEXES AND REFLEXIVITY

The major issue for critical reflexivity through play is to know if one can thoughtfully *dig into the ongoing process of performing an action*. As Méchoulan suggests, Henri Bergson gives good cues about this issue through the relationship of thought and *intuition*, once the latter can freely contemplate the movements of thought after having been dismissed as a necessary instrument of survival (2010, p.69). But to fully convey this, I want to turn to David Bohm's theory of dialogue and consciousness. First, I will say that as a stealth game, *Mark of the Ninja* demands that we plan our actions, thus simulating temporality in our minds before we trigger an intended tactical sequence: *Thief* (Looking Glass 1998) was certainly more reflexive than *Doom* (id Software 1993). As I have suggested, planning is made very intuitive through intertextuality, 2D spaces and "immediate" interfacing of crucial information upon gamespace. But, especially because the learning curve is accelerated by this configuration, the commands are so intuitive we can actually wander our minds right out of them into contemplative *flâneries* and still perform good enough to progress, at least at times. And when we do wander, the aesthetic elements we find are often very rewarding. One of those times is the last stealth puzzle of the game, the last part of the level just before the grand finale where *Passage* is alluded to. It takes place in the Dojo where, the guide says, we received our ninja training. That said, as an ultimate challenge, it is a lot easier than the last three levels, filled with complex traps and blinding sandstorms. Instead, it really feels like we are returning to basic stealth 101.

But there is a subtle frustration in the level, aimed at the achievers. As the reward system values extremes (kill none or kill them all), there is a forced middle ground here. Because we begin the level with no sword, we can't quite kill them all, but an intricate trap system related to a door makes for a hardly avoidable indirect kill in a specific room. Plus, on the narrative side, our guide hints at the fact that some guards may be hallucinations. So I got lazy, I rushed through the level, killed stalkers with the trap but sneaked by guards. When I entered the Dojo puzzle, I thought I'd just kill the guards and get it over with. Presently, "I" jump in the air close to a balcony where a guard stands and *freeze time* with the trigger button. I consider some ninja tools, looking for something suited, but I want to keep the heavy stuff for the sniper I spotted, so I simply break the light (without spending scarce resource) on the guard's right side to divert his attention. This game can be fast, but also very slow: I have to crawl up on the balcony and then walk beside the enemy without a sound. I have plenty of time to remind myself that I am planning to kill him, but at this point of the game it is such a habit I don't even think about it. Plus, even if my rebellious guide sounds a bit too aggressive, the fact that there are armed hi-tech guards in the Dojo really doesn't seem right: isn't something sacred being violated here? Ah...conservatism.

David Bohm teaches two interesting things about my thought process here. Our nervous system throughout our body have *proprioception*, the capacity to perceive its own activity with great precision and without delay in time: this is crucial for survival. Thought has no such proprioceptive efficiency (Bohm 2008, p.86). I should add that, as I play a game with a strong sensation of direct control like *Mark of the Ninja*, there is a slight displacement of my bodily proprioception unto the image of my avatar: his are really my movements. Bohm also reminds us that only thought really generates justification for actions through emotions and assumptions, including for aggressive and violent actions (*Ibid.*, p.84): this is the ancestral Dojo, how dare they? If I choose stealth, not for the perfect score, but because I think this is not right according to my interpretation of events, I might then suddenly obey to the taboo against murder: "that suppress the action, says

Bohm, which means that you are still aggressive, *against yourself*” (*Ibid.*). Suppressing creates a mythical authoritative *self* as the observer within, the old Cartesian illusion...

I finally kill the guard, triggering the choreography borrowed from *Tenchu*, my own first gaming ‘Dojo’ where I learned how to play as a ninja assassin. It takes as long as usual and I still stare at the lush animations. When the body hits the ground, a second ticks away, and an explosion of thin blue petals appears over the dead guard. I know this visual effect: it is associated with a luminous diverting tool I often used to fool guards away into useless investigation. Who’s being fooled here? The petals fall back down and the body is not a mercenary’s anymore, but one of my (former) clan’s ninja! Did I set out to kill them, too? Not just the leader? This is an interesting surprise from my past, and it’s also very revealing of the problematic state of mind of the avatar (and mine, perhaps). Bohm says: “There is another action, which is neither to carry out the aggression nor to turn it against yourself by suppressing it. Rather, you may *suspend* the activity, allowing it to reveal itself, to flower, to unfold, and you see the aggression and its actual structure inside you” (*Ibid.*). This is precisely what happened here: *suspension*. The game is filled with what Bohm calls *tacit* knowledge, what is accepted as the building blocks of a perceived coherence: knowledge of stealth tactics, primarily, but also for the justification of our mission. But in *Mark of the Ninja*, we are never fully assured (cognitively) nor reassured (affectively) as to the point of origin of tacit knowledge.

Opportunities for suspension are legions in this game, and they are insisted upon by the narrative’s temporality and dream-like atmosphere. Everything seems to happen within our minds, or on the anachronistic interactive scroll. It’s all just “ink and dream”, we might say. Perhaps, but it is never innocent: “Suppose we ask ourselves, ‘Do we have it as an insight that thought is a material process, or that thought always participates in perception?’ If we have that insight, then that may remove some of the barriers. But our whole set of reflexes, our tacit knowledge, is against that” (*Ibid.*, p.95). When we feel the need to forget that “the past is now” (Méchoulán 2003), we tend to dismiss memory and to ink the legend, but perhaps games like *Mark of the Ninja* can help us reflect upon such reflexes with greater acuity. To engage in critical play, here, is like racing the dream⁶ of the interface and wake up to its anachronistic fabric. It is not to ask ‘where is this image from’, but ‘when is it from’? Is this map up to date? And according to who’s calendar?

CONCLUSION

I have suggested, through this analysis of temporality in *Mark of the Ninja*, that the game is genuinely stimulating for critical play. As the stealth genre is certainly more subtle than outright violent action games, it can still fall into hypocritical justifications of murder and thievery. As for the innovative aesthetics of indie games, they bear a cultural responsibility in the cognitive practices they promote and the value systems they reinforce through their growing legitimacy. By associating a melancholic sense of *kairos* reminiscent of the art-game *Passage* with the mnemonic toolbox of past stealth games, *Mark of the Ninja* successfully dramatizes violence and raises problems about mediation and legitimation without losing the specific joys of playing videogames.

As we repeat familiar actions unto its lush, highly readable 2D gamespace that directly acts as an interface for tactical information, it can be felt as a step on the side of the action, an occasion to observe its process as an uncannily familiar and refreshingly astonishing performance. In their lively and fascinating relationship to the past of the medium, we could synthesize the effect of some key game moments as “archeological events” (borrowing from Michel Foucault (Méchoulán 2010, p.24)). As such, this game

contributes to a defragging process in the history of videogame aesthetics through the implied player's memory. Perhaps one of its artistic lineages is that of modern narratives and their circular temporality, but *Mark of the Ninja* doesn't seem to fall in the trap of celebrating form for itself. It makes room, and especially time, for raising stimulating problems about the medium we love and the history we share with it. It feels just like sneaking through a souvenir gift shop: well played indeed.

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ENDNOTES

1 For example, consider the remediation of Escher's paradoxical projected spaces in *Echochrome* (SCE Japan 2008) or the borgesian treatment of time and in Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (2008).

2 Other films can come to mind, from *Point Blank* (Boorman 1967) to *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (Jarmusch 1999), also filled with figures of (re)mediation.

3 For a theoretical articulation of innovation in the videogame industry and its relationship to reiteration, I will dare to suggest an article I co-authored with Dominic Arsenault: 2013. "Reverse-engineering graphical innovation: an introduction to graphical regimes". *G/A/M/E italian journal of game studies*, n°2, vol.1 (Journal) <<http://www.gamejournal.it/>>

4 As Méchoulan puts it, beyond the academic ancestors of other 'inter' (e.g. intertextuality), even the idea of intermediality has a favorable socio-historical nest in contemporary consciousness. For him, one of those practices is precisely the so-called "de-materialization of work" and the economic predominance of "relationships of service" (2010, p.52-53). I would parallel that with the way in which others have pointed out the blurring of boundaries between *work* and *play*. Consider the almost anarcho-syndicalist practices of Valve Corporation, which exceptional management policies and "autotellic" workplace are probably due to their quasi-monopoly on PC, Mac and Linux downloadable games through Steam. See Bellevue, Wash, 2012, « Game Maker without a Rulebook », *NY Times*, en ligne, 8 septembre, consulté le 28 avril, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/09/technology/valve-a-video-game-maker-with-few-rules>>.

5 See McKenzie Wark's *Gamer Theory* for this notion of the archeology of gamespace: "Like an archeologist, the gamer theorist treats these ruins of the future with obsessive care and attention to their preservation, not their destruction" (2007, Harvard University Press, [022]).

6 I am somewhat shamelessly appropriating Nick Monfort and Ian Bogost's book title *Racing the Beam* (about the Atari VCS platform). The title refers to the way VCS programmers were required to measure graphics rendering in temporal units, giving special attention to the pacing of programming code in tune with the TV beam (for lack

of an automated frame buffer). Hinting at anachronistic features of cathode ray tubes, they quote one of Marshall McLuhan's typically ironic statements: "The scanning finger of the TV screen is at once a transcending of mechanism and a throwback to the world of the scribe" (2009, *Racing the Beam*, Cambridge & London, MIT Press, p.27).

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