

Algorithmic Play in Georges Perec's Ludic Narratives

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INTRODUCTION

McKenzie Wark was the first to note the peculiar relevance of Perec to the emerging discipline of Game Studies (2008, 116). In particular, he has suggested that the novel *W, or the memory of childhood* (1988), is of particular significance for scholars of digital games (Wark 2012, 91). This paper argues that in the ludic narratives of both *W, or the Memory of a Childhood* and his later novel *Life A User's Manual* (2008), Perec adopts a position towards play that offers scope for questioning the dominant computational logic of our era. For Game Studies this issue manifests itself in the contentious role that digitally coded algorithms have in shaping player agency.

While Perec wrote at a time prior to widespread domestic ownership of computers and video game consoles, there was also a great deal of interest among intellectuals at the time regarding the social impact of these technologies. Perec is linked to a number of his scholarly contemporaries (Sheringham 2000, 187-190), through a common concern with the rapidly changing French lifestyle in the post-World War II period. Concerns, such as: the reorganization of rural workforces into 'new towns' (Lefebvre 1995), the growth of 'post-industrial' forms of labor (Touraine 1971), and the increasing prevalence of advertising in public and private spaces (Debord 2000), exemplify this thinking. Information technologies were just in the process of being introduced to many industries, and government administration systems. They were in the early stages of being adopted as forms of entertainment, through videogame arcades open to the public and domestic use of videogame consoles and early home computers. In the mid-70s they were still far from becoming genuinely pervasive and ubiquitous.

As contemporary culture moved towards a logic that is variously described as 'algorithmic,' 'computational,' or of 'control,' the core concern with the centrality of information technologies remained, but intensified in response to their increasing ubiquity and pervasiveness. As bodies, space, and time became increasingly coordinated by information technologies, the social practices of play, particularly digital play was seen less and less as something that stood apart from other spheres of life. While play had been considered critical and disruptive in the 20th century (see: Lütticken 2010), information technology effectively recuperated play into the domination logic (Kirkpatrick 2012). Alexander Galloway provides a most persuasive account of this issue in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2006), where through a discussion of *Sid Meier's Civilization III* (Firaxis Games 2001) he argues that digital games illustrate the disjuncture between textual or ideological analysis and a critique of the algorithmic

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processes of the software. While the game can be ‘read’ by the player, each action taken or choice that they make is signaled to the computer as a new piece of data to include in its algorithm. The action might mean something significant to the player, but in the game software it is only recognized mathematically. The bottom line is that all potential meanings and actions are constrained and contained within the algorithm, play is no longer ‘outside,’ and it has potentially lost its potential for critique.

In *W, or the Memory of A Childhood*, Perec gradually traces a connection between play, competition, sadism, control and fascism through a ‘parody of a “ludic” society’ (Gascoigne 2009, 309). This point resonates strongly with contemporary scholarship of digital games that focuses their connection with control. *Life a User’s Manual*, also has play as a central theme, and examines other aspects of the ludic. While *W, or the memory of childhood* could be considered a ‘parable of corrupted play’ (Bohman-Kalaja 2007, 202) an illustration of the creative element of play destroyed by absolute adherence to the rules, in *Life A User’s Manual* play and chance become techniques for operating creatively within rule-based systems. In this novel Perec builds the possibility of variation from the rules through error or glitch into his novel, celebrating failure by recognizing how it can be used creatively to take a project beyond the limits imposed by systemic logic. Accordingly, for Game Studies this relationship suggests that contingency is a reservoir of creativity for game players.

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