Article

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Plays of Destruction

David Myers

There are two basic theories of play.

One of these says play is a good thing because it helps us learn. This claim justifies the study of play as a mechanism moving us from inept to skilled, from youth to adult, and, even upon occasion, from foolish to wise. A large number of education-based theories of play take this position; it is a basic assumption underlying the work of Piaget, Montessori, Papert[1], and, more recently in the field of game studies, Gee.[2] "Video games externalize the search for affordances, for a match between character (actor) and world, but this is just the heart and soul of effective human thinking and learning in any situation. They are, thus, a natural tool for teaching and learning."[3]

Many cultural theories of play also take this position. Play, say the cultural theorists, is an interpretive practice and, therein, a communicative mechanism for displaying, adapting, adopting, and assimilating novel behaviors and ideas within a preexisting social/cultural system. Vygotsky[4] has helped advance such a cultural-oriented position, as has, more recently in the field of game studies, Jenkins:

1. See Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World*, trans. Joan and Andrew Tomlinson, Totowa, New Jersey, Littlefield, Adams, 1979 [1929]; Maria Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, trans. Joseph Costelloe, New York, Ballantine Books, 1967 [1948]; Seymour Papert, *Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas*, New York, Basic Books, 1980.

2. See especially James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

3. James Paul Gee, "Why Are Video Games Good for Learning?", http://www.academiccolab.org/resources/documents/MacArthur.pdf, p. 10.

4. Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Psychological Processes*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1978.

> Across a series of essays, I have made the case that game consoles should be regarded as machines for generating compelling spaces, that their virtual playspaces have helped to compensate for the declining place of the traditional backyard in contemporary boy culture.[5]

These and other theoretical variations of play as a good and necessary thing, a species-wide learning process, have conceptual ties with observations of animal play and evolutionary biology, wherein play is most frequently assigned the role of variation in a natural variation-and-selection process. Sutton-Smith neatly capsules this view with the conceptual category of "adaptive potentiation."[6]

However, there are some difficulties with this position. I'll mention two. The first is a tendency for play theorists of this sort to regard learning during play (particularly human learning) as a form of directed (and directable) evolution. That is, play can be contained, controlled, and directed toward specific ends—usually within a particular game design. Play is a beast to be tamed, perhaps, but all difficulties lie in the taming and not in the beast. From this perspective, play is not a random but a purposeful and predictable sort of variation, which, in its non-randomness, deviates significantly from less culturally oriented and more biologically derived conceptualizations.

The second difficulty with this position is that observations of play—particularly play among animals—show that play is not always a good thing. That is, not all play is a learning process and all that is learned during play is not useful, purposeful, or, in any manageable sense, directed. Some early play theorists, for instance, puzzled by a seeming lack of beneficial outcomes, dubbed play simply a means of dispensing "surplus energy."

> Spencer, writing from an evolutionary perspective, also subscribed to the surplus energy theory that he took to be left over energy from the struggle for survival. "Play is equally an artificial exercise of the powers which in default of their natural exercise become so ready to discharge that they relieve themselves by simulated actions." This is clearly an early expression of the notion of "vacuum activity" popularized by the classical ethologists in the 1950's. On this view, sometimes referred to as a "hydraulic model," energy spontaneously produced by the organism is stored,

5. Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," 2004, http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/henry3/games&narrative.html. Also found in Pat Harrington and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2004, p. 22.

6. This concept, along with that of "potentiation of adaptive variability," is found in the conclusions of Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1997.

building up sufficient pressure, if not discharged or released, to eventually discharge spontaneously.[7]

While this surplus energy theory is today considered somewhat naïve, it nevertheless acknowledges many characteristics of play that education theorists shunt aside. For instance, the most common features of animal play, as recorded in Fagen,[8] are more similar in form than in purposeful content or outcome. These formal characteristics include fragmented, repetitive, and recursive behaviors that influence learning only in vague, indirect, and motivational (e.g. "stealth learning") ways. Indeed, in most conventional educational settings, play and learning have long been segregated, regardless of any theoretical recommendations otherwise. If we examine the most common and accepted practices of educational institutions—including athletic clubs and the military—we find much more discipline, order, and purpose than in observed instances of free play. Learning is an often difficult task and many things are learned poorly, slowly, or not at all through unfettered play; these include some of the more vital components of modern society—e.g., literacy, which almost surely would not be learned without a dedicated (and largely non-playful) effort to do so.

These problems with the notion of play as an educational tool then lead us to a second basic theory of play, one of which I am more fond than the first: play as destruction. Here, play is not necessarily a good thing, but then it is not necessarily a bad thing either. Play simply is what it is, a force of nature that resists, contradicts, denies, and, during that process, destroys.

This theory advocates a Dionysian characterization of play as chaotic and irrepressible. One of the more articulate proponents of such a position is Mihai Sparisou, a culturalist and literature scholar, who argues for play as a natural dialectic, displaying fundamentals similar to those guiding social conflict theory: "The play concept […] appears […] as an incommensurable, discontinuous series of interpretations engaged in a supremacy contest."[9]

While this theoretical position most often appears in social/cultural analysis, it also draws considerable inspiration from evolutionary biology (or from what Spariosu calls a "historical-hermeneutical" model). In fact, while theories of play as a learning mechanism must somehow dance around a targeted and purposeful

7. This is well summarized and accessible in J. Allan Cheyne, "Serious Play from Peregrination to Cultural Change: A Bateson-Gadamer-Harris Hypothesis," 1989, http://watarts.uwaterloo.ca/~acheyne/Misc/ SeriousPlay.html.

8. Robert Fagen, *Animal Play Behavior*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1981.

9. Mihai Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1989, p. xi.

evolution, the more chaotic and destructive versions of play theory are likely to regard play, like natural evolution, as difficult to predict and unlikely to serve at either the immediate whim or conscious will of culture.

A brief summary of this second sort of play theory—in contrast to the first—goes something like this: play is a formal process that operates on material objects without regard to their cultural context. This process is self-motivated, instinctive, and irrepressible. Cultural controls and restrictions on play—including educational goals and the rules of games—are superficial, temporary, and unsuccessful in any attempt to manage play. Play will and does break free from the rules of its immediate context, bringing with it what appears to be chaos, destruction, and, upon occasion, novelty. Play is, in essence, a *virtualizer*, transforming material objects (such as our bodies) into representational forms (such as our selves). Play can then be a builder of self, but only insofar as it resists, contradicts, denies, and destroys everything else. That is, play chips away at everything that is not-self and, eventually, the self pops out. For this reason, and in this sense, play is *selfish*.[10]

So: some say play builds things. Some say play destroys things. In the rest of this essay, I would like to offer some examples of how play and the pleasures associated with it destroy things.

Before I do that, however, I would like to address the compromise position. The compromise position would say that play can both build things and destroy things, as appropriate and necessary, and make all theorists happy. Unfortunately, however, there are several critical issues that turn quite definitively on whether play is a fundamental builder or a fundamental destroyer. Prominent among these is the issue of the function of those things that play supposedly builds. If play is a good and necessary thing, then those things built by play should be, by and large, good and necessary as well. An example of such a play-built thing frequently cited by games studies theorists is *narrative*.

Generally speaking, after all, narratives are built. That is, narratives connect otherwise isolated human experiences within pseudo-logical and at least partially distorted chronological relationships. These narrative-imposed relationships are then interpreted as a series of *cause-and-effect* relationships, possessing, among other formal properties, a beginning, middle, and end. My favorite definition of narrative along these lines comes from Labov,[11] a linguist, who describes the narrative as a "folk theory of causes."

10. Thus, even "rules-free" play (e.g., Caillois's *paidia*) must remain structured according to those embedded cognitive mechanisms that (yet mysteriously) bootstrap the human self.

11. See William Labov, "Some Further Steps in Narrative Analysis," 1997, http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/ sfs.html.

Having been built, the narrative is then assumed to be purposeful and directed; and, not only do we consider its creation/building purposeful and directed, but we also consider its experience (i.e., the reading of the narrative) purposeful and directed. And then we translate this belief and all its related assumptions from reading and interpreting the narrative to playing and experiencing the game. That is, since games are purposeful and directed (i.e., since they are *designed*), then playing the game is likewise purposeful and directed. And, by extension, *play* is purposeful and directed. But then here are the problems—because while the game may have been purposefully designed and is often, as a result, in a recognizable narrative form, the *play* of the game is almost always not.

Narratives in digital games are very often an imposition on play and much of the play experience takes place in disregard of narrative. But I have already made that particular argument, with specific reference to the irrelevancies of video game backstories[12]. I'd like to make a related but different argument here.

Instead of demonstrating narrative impotencies, I would like instead to demonstrate narrative mutabilities. That is, instead of examining the inability of narrative (a built thing) to affect play, I would like to examine the ability of play to affect (*e.g.*, to destroy) such built things as narratives. In fact, I would like to examine the ability of play to destroy ALL built things—and most particularly *aesthetic* objects and forms. This assumes that play is a peculiarly *anti-aesthetic* form.

> An aesthetics of *anti*-aesthetics does not imply a negation of aesthetics. Rather, it is intended to refer to negation itself and an accompanying aesthetics of negation, or, alternatively, an aesthetics of opposition, or, alternatively, an aesthetics of the *anti*.[13]

This anti-aesthetic is a pleasure of formal process and experiential mode rather than a pleasure of imbedded design and corresponding structure. Such an anti-aesthetic would assume that the pleasures of play are qualitatively different from the pleasures associated with structuring, designing, building, and

12. David Myers, "The Attack of the Backstories (and Why They Won't Win)," in Marinka Copier and Joost Raessens (eds.), *Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference Proceedings*, Utrecht, University of Utrecht, 2006, http://www.digra.org/dl/copy_of_db/05150.39290. This article examines the impact of backstories on action, role-playing, and strategy games and concludes that backstories work "to determine rather than exemplify play"—and that this determination restricts free play.

13. David Myers, "The Aesthetics of the Anti-Aesthetics," in Rune Klevjer (ed.), *Aesthetics of Play Conference Online Proceedings*, Bergen, Norway, University of Bergen, 2006, http://www.aestheticsofplay.org/myers.php.

learning. Yet, paradoxically, in order to access these basic pleasures of play—the pleasures of the *anti*—structures must be in place. The most important of these, of course, is the structure of play itself, immutable and untouchable by its own transformations, hidden within our most basic and fundamental cognition.[14] Yet, beyond the function of play itself, there must be also something else, something to play *with*.

Therefore, in order to generalize an argument for play as destruction and promote an anti-aesthetic, I would here like to look at play with and within media other than merely digital games. What, for instance, constitutes the form and experience of a "playful" film?

My expectation is that where there is more play, there are fewer structures being built and more structures being destroyed. I would even extend this expectation to include structures that aren't so obviously built, written, and/or designed as is, for instance, the narrative. I would include among these the structure of *time*.

DESTROYING TIME

The study of the subjective experience of time is not extensive but is broad, involving, at various levels, cognitive science, philosophy of mind, and humanistic psychology.[15] A common Cartesian model would hold that time occurs in linear, discrete steps, which are ordered and structured similar to the ordering and structuring of spatial coordinates. The experience of time in play, however, is somewhat different from the expectations of this model.

We are all familiar with the distorted and subjective experience of time within digital game play (and, actually within many other aesthetic experiences as well), where time seems to pass quickly during our engagement and much more slowly during our boredom. Digital games reproduce these phenomena

14. This assumption distinguishes an anti-aesthetic here from other common uses of the term in post-modern criticism (See Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Port Townsend, WA, Bay Press, 1983). An "anti-aesthetic" in other contexts may imply some (advanced) level of dissatisfaction with (most, if not all) pre-existing interpretative structures. My intent here is not to undermine structural analysis *per se* but to redirect it towards recurring cognitive structures of play (Cf. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy In the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York, Basic Books, 1999).

15. Carl S. Hale, "Time Dimensions and the Subjective Experience of Time," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 1993, p. 88-105.

widely, and I have noted its implications elsewhere.[16] Earlier, my conclusions were that our awareness of time passing during play is the result of specific sorts of cognitive functions (symbol transformations), and that the subjective transformation of time does not occur if these functions are not present or if these functions are somehow delayed or interrupted. If we assume that symbol transformations occur during computer game play, then the subjective experience of time during play can be fully explained by the sequencing of oppositions and contextualizations, without reference to a common and objective time existing beyond the subjective experience of play.[17]

If this is true of digital games, then is it true of other aesthetic forms as well? That is, are specific sorts of symbol transformations—and related distortions of subjective time—indicative of playful destructions[18] and all assumed accompanying pleasures of an (so-called) anti-aesthetic?

PLAYFUL FILM

Movies, particularly commercial movies are, in many respects, very close aesthetic analogs to popular digital games. This is more obvious and revealing during game design than during game play. Both aesthetic forms—games and movies—follow similar designing, storyboarding, production, and building processes; and both share (and, in fact, require) similar artists, skills, and aesthetic values[19]. As a result, both sets of designs as built—movies and games—display similar narrative forms and structures.

16. David Myers, "Time, Symbol Manipulation, and Computer Games," *Play & Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1992, 441-457.

17. David Myers, "Time, Symbol Manipulation, and Computer Games," p. 452.

18. "Playful" destructions imply some intermediate position between convention and chaos. To examine destruction alone would force us to peer into darkness and spin our words off page and sense. Naturally occurring play may attempt to eat its own tail, yet cannot and remains confined by necessities (sustenance and preservation) of the organism. For this reason, it may be more revealing to look at a gradation of those aesthetic forms that "playfully destroy" rather than those novels and films and art (which certainly exist, e.g., *L'année dernière à Marienbad*, Alain Resnais, 1961; *Koyaanisqatsi*, Godfrey Reggio, 1983) that more consciously, purposefully, and definitively destroy the forms in which they reside.

19. See, for instance, Bo Kampmann Walther, "Cinematography and Ludology: In Search of a Lucidography," 2004, http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2004/1-Walther.htm.

Of the two, however, the movie is certainly much more narrowly confined regarding both narrative in general and narrative in *time*.[20] For instance, the average length of a commercial Hollywood movie has varied over its history, but is decidedly under three hours. The average play of a digital game, on the other hand, despite a great deal of variation, is far, far beyond three hours. Therefore, within the limited amount of time movies engage their viewers, there is simply less time available for free play and any related destructions. Yet, nevertheless, some films and filmmakers display a playfully destructive intent, and the makeup of these displays is telling.

Groundhog Day (Sam Ramis, 1993), for instance, is a well-known and popular movie that, in a sense, "destroys" conventional time by looping its characters through the same twenty-four hours of a single Groundhog Day. Time travel, repetition, and recursion are, of course, frequent themes in otherwise conventional narratives—particularly within the science fiction and fantasy genre. These subjective distortions of "normal" time are commonly dealt with, as they are in *Groundhog Day*, through the lens of a single character who experiences those distortions within a conventional chronological sequence—i.e., within the context of a conventional narrative and its narrator. In *Groundhog Day*, Phil Conner's (and our) point of view is quite straightforward and linear, despite all the fragmentation, repetition, recursion, and multiple destructions going on in and about the movies' fictional locale of Punxsutawney.

More obviously game-like in form, and, correspondingly, more playful in its destruction of conventional structures is *Lola rennt* (*Run Lola Run*, Tom Tykwer, 1998). The visual context of *Run Lola Run*, marked as much by its style as its substance, is clearly *anti*-real. The movie is played to a virtually continuous techno-beat; the cast is distinguished more by their 3D, rotating, graphic-cardish, cartoon-inspired profiles than by their dialog; and bits of self-conscious animation and other digitized embellishments dot the rendering of Lola's hometown. And, of course and most significantly, there is the triple repetition of Lola's run through town, which substitutes for a conventional plot and offers the movie's most blatant destruction of time and space.

Run Lola Run repeats the same sequence of events—with minor alterations that give these repeated scenes increasingly recursive value—until Lola and her boyfriend reach a happy ending. The first two sequences end, first, with the death of Lola, and, second, with the death of her boyfriend. Finally, the movie reloads a third time and, from Lola's point of view, starts anew. For the audience's

20. Most recently, see David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006.

point of view, of course, this third time is not truly the new but rather the charm; for, suddenly, we are left at movie's end with the pop quiz of a narrative.

The narrative of *Run Lola Run*—its "folk theory of causes"—would seem to be that persistence (or perhaps true love) alters the otherwise inevitable narrative of history. The movie's keynote sequence comes during its third and final repetition, when Lola enters a casino and, through sheer force of will, overcomes chance and chaos, reasserts order, and walks out with her "happy ending." This denouement strongly recalls a similar resolution within *Groundhog Day*: love conquers all, including destructions of play. However, in *Run Lola Run*, without the helpful overlay of *Groundhog Day*'s more conventional narrative, the lesson learned requires a bit more effort on the part of the viewer.

Run Lola Run is, in this sense, more "ergodic"[21] than *Groundhog Day*. Yet *Run Lola Run* culminates in little more than Fifty-Two Pickup: a game-like form with the accoutrements but not the essence of play. The movie's narrative is then a sort of inside joke about game-play, a sleight of hand and eye that erases both the death of its protagonists and the seriousness of its experience. If *Groundhog Day* is a movie of false time, then *Run Lola Run* is likewise a movie of false play. For, in both movies, the final scenes break all spells, dispel all magic, and end all plays.

Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000) is a third example of cinematic playfulness that stretches a bit further into a realm of destruction. *Memento* tells the story of Leonard Shelby, who is afflicted with short-term memory loss. Leonard can't remember anything that happens much beyond thirty seconds ago, and so his life is a series of continuously novel thirty-second sequences.

Leonard manages this condition by leaving his newly regenerated thirty-second self notes written and Polaroids taken by his previously generated thirty-second selves. If Leonard has something really important to say to his future, he tattoos it on his chest. The movie communicates Leonard's state by showing Leonard's actions in reverse order so that, like Leonard, the audience doesn't know what or which came first—until the end of the movie, when, unlike Leonard, the audience finally gets to remember the whole thing.

Memento, in comparison to our first two examples, is unique in that the viewer's experience of structures—and structuring—is itself distorted. Our experience of Leonard's situation is, as a result, more immediate and in parallel with his own. In *Groundhog Day*, our knowledge of Phil Connor's narrative perspective serves as interpretive guide. In *Run Lola Run*, our knowledge of movies and movie forms—and games and game forms—serves as interpretive map. In

21. Espen Aarseth discusses ergodics at length in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Memento, our interpretations are thwarted. In order to view the movie normally we must view it abnormally: we must inspect our own knowledge—our mind, our memory, and our expectations—which, like Leonard's, are made suspect.

> And what cinematic form, exactly, brings us to these playful moments of self-doubt?
>
> Once you see *Memento* a couple of times, you figure out the devilish scheme Nolan has constructed […]. If we give letters to the backward color scenes and numbers to the monochrome scenes, then what Nolan presents us with is this: Credits, 1, V, 2, U, 3, T, 4, S, 5, R, 6, Q... all the way to 20, C, 21, B, and, finally, a scene I'm going to call 22/A […].
>
> So, if you want to look at the story as it would actually transpire chronologically, rather than in the disjointed way Nolan presents it […], you would watch the black-and-white scenes in the same order (1 to 21), followed by the black-and-white/color transition scene (22/A). You would then have to watch the remaining color scenes in reverse order, from B up to V, finishing with the opening credit sequence, in which we see Teddy meet his maker at Leonard's hands: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22/A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V.[22]

This scheme may be "devilish," but it is otherwise quite patterned and not, in fact, overly difficult to achieve or decode. And yet, such a seemingly mechanical presentation of events—a mere reversal of order—has a significant impact on our viewing experience. For *Memento* is designed not to create but to destroy. And its destruction is quite pointed at preexisting structures of mind, memory, cognition, and self.

Playful art—and *Memento*, much more than our two previous examples, falls into this category—is *self*-reflective, in both senses of "self." That is, play is self-reflective in that it refers to and represents its own form, its own play; our experience in viewing *Memento*, for instance, is as much about our own mental structures as it is about the movie's culminate structure. Further, play is self-reflective in that, in referring to and representing its own form, it simultaneously and analogously refers to and represents the cognitive processes that build and structure the human condition we characterize as "self."

This latter sense of "self" is a difficult form to recognize because it conflates playful context with playful process. However, just as a simulation of a simulation is both a representation of that thing it represents (a simulation *of*) and, simultaneously, the thing itself (a *simulation* of), those cognitive processes that refer to themselves are both references to play and play itself.

22. As explained by film critic Andy Klein, "Everything You Wanted to Know about 'Memento'," 2001, http://archive.salon.com/ent/movies/feature/2001/06/28/memento_analysis/.

Or, put more simply, play is fundamentally *selfish*—and so is *Memento*. And Leonard's peculiar mental state is a formal characteristic of all similarly anti-aesthetic (or selfishly playful) forms.

Virtually all digital adventure games, for instance, are designed around problems associated with a Leonard-like memory deprivation. Indeed, in such games there always seems to be a Leonard-like character who doesn't know who (or what) he is, or a robot that has had its memory wiped, or something similar. And then the whole purpose (or theme, or narrative) of these games is to recover missing information. This particular formal structure—often realized as a detective/mystery story, or, more generally, as a traversing of the labyrinth[23]—appears again and again as a common digital game narrative template (the *Zork* series, *Myst*, *Knights of the Old Republic*, etc.). But this template is not limited to adventure games *per se*. It reappears during all applications of narrative within digital media that are increasingly interactive and increasingly susceptible to free play.

> We could say that the three classic hypertexts, Michael Joyce's *Afternoon*, Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*, and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* all did what they could to make the reader more receptive to the marvels of their labyrinths: by using hidden and conditional links to highlight and parallel the defences and self-denials of the protagonist in *Afternoon*, his general unwillingness to know; evoking and concretising the familiar literary tradition of forking paths of Borges, Coover and Pynchon in *Victory Garden*; and foregrounding Frankensteinian bodily metaphors to ease the postmodernist butchery work of connecting parts and wholes in *Patchwork Girl*.[24]

When game-play is structured by narrative (or by *time*), that play is forced to adopt a traversing-the-labyrinth path. There is something missing, the player has to find it, recover it, and use it to make sense of whatever the player is doing, and then—well, and then the game ends. That is, the value of whatever the player is playing with has already been valued by the narrative, and further play does not—cannot—change that value. The player, caught within these *other* values, can only walk through a series of paint-by-number, dance-hall steps prepared and structured by a pre-existing and forever invulnerable *other*.

Just as Lola runs through her town.

Just as Leonard stumbles through his movie.

Inside *Memento*, Leonard is living inside a digital adventure game. But, unlike when Lola or you or I play our games, Leonard isn't limited to recovering missing information lost; he—and he alone—gets to make meanings new.

23. See Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext*, especially chapter 1.

24. Markku Eskelinen, "Six Problems in Search of a Solution: The Challenge of Cybertext Theory and Ludology to Literary Theory," 2004, http://www.brown.edu/Research/dichtung-digital/2004/3/Eskelinen/index.htm.

The notes and Polaroids Leonard sends himself form scattered and broken narratives (some false, some true), which, as much in their absence as their presence, drive Leonard to solve the puzzles of his narrative-imposed memory loss. By the end of the movie, Leonard manages to thwart those non-memory-impaired folk—including all narrators and their narrations—who are using his condition for their own ends. The will and purpose of the Self, Leonard's actions show us, are more fundamental than those otherwise arbitrary narratives that deny the will and purpose of the Self.

And how does Leonard show us this?

It's a difficult demonstration, to be sure—an almost self-contradictory and paradoxical demonstration in that Leonard finds himself irrevocably caught, as is the viewer, within the larger context of movie and narrative.

Yet Leonard denies. He resists; he destroys; he murders. He kills. In *Memento*, there is a carefully plotted structure to Leonard's predicament, but none to his redemption. Leonard has no denouement. He has no beginning, no middle, no end. No satisfaction. No realization. No self-awareness. Yet Leonard is resolutely *selfish* in opposition to *other*.

And so we too are selfish during our experience of *Memento*. We have only what Leonard has: the immediacy of the moment, the engagement of desire, and a deeply imbedded—and flawed—sense of self. Like Leonard, we must both endure and deny the narrative. Our final pleasure in viewing *Memento* is not in finding the solution to its puzzles of logic, a solution that comes only belatedly, remains arbitrary, and resists scrutiny. The pleasures in *Memento* are in its denials, frustrations, and resonance with self.

If film is an illusion[25] of the sort Tan[26] and Anderson[27] speak, then *Memento* presents an illusion of an illusion. The movie finds its truth in self-reflections and re-representations, which become the only available path through an otherwise impenetrable labyrinth of false time, false play, and false narrative. In the revelation of truth through denial, the destructurings of play—in *Memento*, in the drama of Ionesco, in the fiction of Borges, in the compositions of Schönberg, in

25. There are several varieties of the "film as illusion" argument; all are distinguished by the assumption that human responses to filmed images are determined by the mechanics of human perception (and cognition). These "mechanics" may be supplemented and transformed by subsequent interpretations, but these Johnny-come-lately interpretations are then neither fundamental nor particularly informative regarding the basic aesthetic properties of film.

26. Ed S. Tan, *Emotions and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine*, Mahwah, New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996.

27. Joseph D. Anderson, *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1996.

the fragile and fleeting art of the Dadaists—accomplish aesthetically what early Russian formalists referred to as *ostranenie*.

> At the core of both Russian and American formalism is the notion that literature serves a particular aesthetic function apart from that of everyday or conventional or common language. In *Art as Technique*, Sjklovsky describes the purpose of art (including "artistic" or poetic language) as reestablishing the "process of perception." In this function, art "defamiliarizes" those objects to which it refers, creating a sense of strangeness (*ostranenie*). *Ostranenie* then *re*-engages the process of perception as that process exists prior to its mediation by language. During this re-engagement, literature functions in a manner somewhat akin to phenomenological "bracketing;" that is, literature defamiliarizes language through a self-referential process with consistent and measurable formal properties.[28]

Similarly, *Memento* defamiliarizes the movie experience through a recursive formal process: film as illusion as illusion. This same phenomenon of defamiliarization can be observed commonly and ubiquitously in many other characteristics of contemporary popular media. The car chase, the horror scene, the sexually explicit, the graphically obscene—each is an instance of some sudden and immediate spectacle[29] that does not advance or contribute to plot or narrative so much as each takes place outside these false structures in order to appeal more directly appeal to an otherwise inarticulate self. The disjointed narratives of commercial television, the capsulated and repetitive formulas of pop music, and the mutable and expandable genres of advertisements and movie trailers and machinima demand much more from and depend much more on viewer play—selfish play—than designer structure.[30]

28. David Myers, "The Anti-Poetic: Interactivity, Immersion, and Other Semiotic Functions of Digital Play," 2004, http://www.loyno.edu/%7Edmyers/F99%20classes/Myers_Antipoetic_ARCHIVE1.rtf. Also found in Andy Clarke (ed.), COSIGN 2004 *Conference Proceedings*, Split, Croatia, University of Split, 2004, p. 106.

29. This is similar to Tom Gunning's notion of "cinema of attractions" (Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions, Early Film, Its Spectators and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle*, Vol. 8, No. 3-4, 1986, p. 63-70). However, Gunning's analysis focuses on the impact of specific (and fleeting) historical contexts. The notion here is that the appeal of spectacle originates within common discriminative functions of perception (and cognition).

30. Critics may rightfully point to order and structure in, for instance, commercial television—in sitcoms, dramas, and narratives. Yet the popular media audience is engaged with the *whole* of media—a kaleidoscope of sensations, a "blooming, buzzing confusion"—that is simultaneously similar and different, ordered and disordered. Our media viewing (and playing) experience is then bound only by when and by what we are engaged and by when and by what we are disengaged. This engagement remains a disjointed experience until, selfishly, we impose some structure upon it.

Digital games and related media refer us to experience through the physical distortions of joystick, thumb-pad, keyboard, and mouse. This is not really running and jumping, *Mario's Adventures* shows us—yet it is. This is not really fear, *Silent Hill* shows us—yet it is. And this is not really narrative, *Memento* shows us—yet it is. And so too is all running and jumping, all fear, all narrative: not really. The physical interface between our self and our world, so vital to the shared assumptions of conventional beliefs and values, is precisely the interface that digital media and play engage most actively and destroy most regularly.

An anti-aesthetic of play does not build human experience so much as it thwarts human experience and therein reveals otherwise hidden and binding processes guiding the building of human experience. Because of the peculiar nature of these processes and their intimate relation to self, it is impossible to reveal them through representational form. All structures, narratives, and languages—all representational forms—are false images of human experience and therein its antithesis. Play, on the other hand, is the embodiment of representational form, and, therein, its revelation.

Non-digital, less interactive—less "ergodic"—media have traditionally pointed not to the pleasures but the consequences of the senses. These media —relying on learned languages and their resulting texts—require detachment: the passive solitude of the reader, the dark isolation of the movie theater, the impenetrable fourth wall of the proscenium. Digital games and play, on the other hand, require engagement, noise, and, ultimately, a mixed and tossed society of competition and conflict, the rough and the tumble.

Currently, the field of game studies attempts to contextualize play within games. This contextualization assumes that play is capable of contextualization, and, within that contextualization, that play is capable of direction, purpose, and design. Yet the most basic aesthetic properties of play—its *pleasures*—seem counter to this assumption. If play is self-motivated, if it is *selfish*, then, regardless of designer intent, games and game studies lie in dialectical opposition to the broader and proto-symbolic functions of human play.