Do Game Designers Dream of Electronic Sheep?

Playing God in Videogames and Narrative

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> A man who wants the truth becomes a scientist; a man who wants to give free play to his subjectivity may become a writer; but what should a man do who wants something in between?
> (Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*)

This essay is an exercise in pataphysics, the science of imaginary solutions.[1] The imaginary problem that prompted our quest for a false truth is: what is the relationship between narrative and videogames? More specifically, where does Will Wright, one of the most inventive game designers on the scene, find the ideas that eventually become stunningly original videogames? The imaginary solution that we suggest is: Philip Kindred Dick. In the following pages, we will argue that the non-narratives of such games as *SimCity* (1989)*, The Sims* (2000), and the upcoming *Spore* can be traced back to Dick's sci-fi stories.

To call Will Wright a game designer is an understatement. Wright is one of the most important figures in gaming, technology, and entertainment today. Along with Peter Molyneux, Will Wright's quasi-messianic prominence derives from his accomplishments in the *god game* genre—although he calls his creations "software toys." A *god game* is a computer game that allows the player to create, manage, and control the lives of virtual people, cities or worlds. In these games, the winning/losing conditions are negotiable: the player is challenged to attain and maintain a level of success in a relatively open environment. Here, "The designer must play God, or at least the notion of God in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*—a god that can anticipate the outcome of the player's actions and yet allows the player the feeling of free will," as John Seabrook writes.

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[1] Invented by French writer Alfred Jarry, pataphysics is a philosophy dedicated to studying what lies beyond the realm of metaphysics. It is a parody of the theory and methods of modern science and is often expressed in nonsensical language. It is described as the science of exceptions and imaginary solutions.

Similarly, to call Philip K. Dick a mere science fiction writer is a crass trivialization. In the last twenty years, Dick's reputation has grown in general acclaim and critical respect. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay wrote that "Philip K. Dick is the single writer most responsible for the acceptance of SF as a dominant genre of literature in the second half of the 20th century."[2] His astounding production—thirty-five sci-fi novels, a dozen realist novels and more than one hundred stories—has been acknowledged as groundbreaking both by academia and by the mainstream. As Christopher Palmer noted, "His texts are hospitable to a vast amount of the schlock, dross and fad of popular culture and popular literature, from Barbie Dolls and the folklore of Coca-Cola to psycho kinesis and alien invasion."[3] Moreover, Dick has developed "an anticipation of what has now been defined as postmodernity, although the concept was not available to him: the regime of images and simulacra, the fading of the natural, the possibility that social institutions and ruling conditions are imaginary, fabricated things, and that there is no objective ground of reality." (ETP, p. 7)

Although Wright has stated many times that most of his creations "were inspired by books,"[4] he never mentioned Dick. Not once. Nonetheless, we find many striking similarities between the works of these two authors. The point of departure of this pataphysical escapade is the realization that Dick and Wright use different codes— *narrative* in one case, *computational* in another—to explore contiguous themes. Wright has been able to close the gap between the realm of science and the world of games. Dick, on the other hand, has created a prescient vision where the boundaries between alternative history and science fiction tend to blur. Their works—albeit radically different in function and form—ask us the same questions: What is the nature of reality? Can it be generated, reproduced, modeled, and simulated? Is there a supernatural being? If so, is such entity benign or malevolent? In other words, these authors explore the interstitial spaces between games and philosophy, science and simulation, creating a wild mixture of

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[2] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, "Introduction. Pilgrims in Pandemonium, Philip K. Dick and the Critics", in R.D. Mullenm, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Arthur B. Evans & Veronica Hollinger (Eds.) *On Philip K. Dick: 40 Articles from Science-Fiction Studies*, Terre Haute, IN: United Graphics, 1992, p. v.

[3] Christopher Palmer, *Philip. K. Dick. Exhalation and Terror of the Postmodern*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003, p. ix. (Henceforth, references to this text will be indicated by the initials "ETP", followed by the page number, and placed in paranthesis in the body of the text.)

[4] See John Seabrook, "Game Master", *The New Yorker*, November 6, 2006. Available online: [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/11/06/061106fa_fact].

fiction and function, satire and metaphor. Similarly, this essay lingers in the gray area between game studies and literary analysis, trying to build bridges between non-existing cities. Our pataphysical approach is complemented by Michael Shanks' katachretic method of investigating culture. The term "katachresis" describes the forced juxtaposition of evidences that have no intrinsic connection. According to Shanks, "Katachresis is a 'forcible juxtaposition' of two seemingly disparate accounts designed to create frictions and evoke understanding that would perhaps have not occurred otherwise."[5] By trying to link Dick and Wright, we aim at uncovering the deeper analogies that are obfuscated by their manifest divergences.[6]

Before we begin, I must address a legitimate objection. Juxtaposing novels and computer games is not only ludicrous, but also pointless, since these two media present radically different traits. Computer games are usually regarded as interactive experiences, whereas reading is often considered a more passive activity: a book, in fact, gives the user limited agency upon the text if compared to digital media. However, I would argue that such a crude division belittles the essence of narrative. As Palmer noted, "A novel is not a kind of zoo which the reader observes from outside, strolling, safe from the caged denizens, but an energetic event that involves reader, writing and written." (ETP, p. 10) Moreover, many argued that Dick was the precursor of a new, highly technological, form of narrative. For instance, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay poignantly noted:

> The developments of virtual reality are inextricably bound up with Dick, who might well be considered the prophet (or is it the Ancient Mariner?) of the technology. As VR produces a greater and greater SOMETHING of artificial experiences of reality (EOR), Dick's imaginary VRs will become at once more historically grounded and more philosophically useful for contemplating the effect of artificial EORs on human societies. This criticism will require literary sensitivity, philosophical imagination, and considerable familiarity with the technologies of simulation.[7]

From "Small Town" to *SimCity*

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[5] Michael Shanks, *Art and the Early Greek State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 152.
[6] For more information: http://documents.stanford.edu/Traumwerk/44. Also, for more on the empirical philosophy of 'katachresis' see Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archeology*, London: Routledge, 2001 and Michael Shanks, *Art and the Early Greek State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.
[7] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay ,"Introduction. Pilgrims in Pandemonium, Philip K. Dick and the Critics", p. xvii.

Originally introduced in 1989, *SimCity* is a real-time strategy/simulation city-building computer game created by Will Wright's own company, Maxis, and published by Brøderbund. Originally titled *Micropolis*,[8] *SimCity* is indubitably one of the most influential computer games ever produced. The original was followed by three more iterations, *SimCity 2000* (1993), *SimCity 3000* (1999) and *SimCity 4* (2003), plus several expansions.[9] The game allows the players to build, design and manage a city. The user is both an architect and a mayor, in charge of allocating the available land for commercial, industrial, or residential purposes, adding buildings, increasing or decreasing the tax rate, building a power grid, creating a transportation system and so on, in order to expand the urban environment. Also, the player has to face, and possibly solve, a series of disasters: flooding, tornadoes, fires, riots, earthquakes, lightning strikes, volcanoes, meteors, and even extra-terrestrial incursions. *SimCity* quickly became a new paradigm in computer gaming, a paradox for a product that many do not even consider a computer game, or a game, for that matter. In fact, *SimCity* has no specific goals to achieve in the sense that the game's ultimate outcome does not easily fit in the "success" or "failure" categories. Since a game is conventionally defined by its rules and its outcomes, *SimCity* is often described as a "borderline" game, a hybrid, liminal text.[10]

A well known anecdote—confirmed by the designer himself on many occasions—tells that the *Raid on Bungeling Bay* (1983), Wright's first game, gave him the idea to create *SimCity*. *Raid on Bungeling Bay* was basically a simple war zone shoot-em-up for the Commodore 64. The player controlled a helicopter that launches from an aircraft carrier to bomb six factories scattered across islands on a small planetoid occupied by the fictional Bungeling Empire, while fending off escalating counterattacks by gun turrets, fighter jets, guided missiles, and a battleship. Wright realized that he

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[8] Heather Chaplin and Aaron Ruby, *Smartbomb. The Quest for Art, Entertainment, and Big Bucks in the Videogame Revolution*, New York: Algonquin Books., 2005, p. 131.
[9] A new iteration, titled *SimCity Societies* will be introduced in late 2007, although the game will not be developed by Wright himself.
[10] The liminality of Wright's simulations mirrors the fluidity of the science fiction genre, "a split and unstable literary form as we can see from critical discussions of its affiliations to fantasy and to realism." (ETP, p. 9)

enjoyed creating maps and scenarios more than playing the actual game. Hence, the desire to design a building simulation. Hence *SimCity*.

> What did interest Will about the game, however, was a virtual-world editing tool that he'd built in order to design the islands, factories and bridges that constitute the game's various levels. He found that he had far more fun creating the game world than blowing it up.[11]

Although *Raid on Bungeling Bay* could indeed be one of the (unintended) reasons behind *SimCity*, I would argue instead that the urban simulator was prefigured by Dick. In a forgotten short story titled "Small Town", Dick imagined *SimCity* before Wright was even born. Originally published in *Amazing* in May 1954, "Small Town" centers on Verne Weskel, a "tired", "discouraged", bitter, asocial and un-happily married middle age man whose only reason to live is a miniature recreation of the town of Woodland in Northern California's Central Valley that he has been building in his basement. Dick spends considerable part of the story describing the nature of the miniature city:

> [A] detailed, painfully accurate model of Woodland. Every tree and house, every store and building and street and fireplug. A minute town, each facet in perfect order. Constructed with elaborate care throughout the years. As long as he could remember. Since he was a kid, building and glueing (sic) and working after school […] Weskel bent over the miniature houses and streets his heart glowing with pride. He built it – himself. Every inch. Every perfect inch. The whole town.[12]

The theme of the miniature town can also be found in a previously published story, "The Trouble with Bubbles" first published in 1953 on *If* magazine:

> A city came into view, towers and broad streets, fine ribbons of gold and steel. Above, twin suns beamed down, warming the city. Myriads of inhabitants swarmed about their activities […] She increased the magnification to maximum focus, showing the details of the minute city: "See them? See?" The inhabitants of the city came sharp into view. They hurried about their business, endless

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[11] Heather Chaplin and Aaron Ruby, *Smartbomb. The Quest for Art, Entertainment, and Big Bucks in the Videogame Revolution*, p.130.

[12] Philip K. Dick, "Small Town", in *The Complete Stories of Philip K. Dick Vol. 2: We Can Remember For You Wholesale and Other Classic Stories*, New York: Citadel Press Books, 1987, p. 342.

thousands of them. In cars and on foot. Across spidery spans between buildings, breathtakingly beautiful.[13]

…And we also find it in *The Game Players of Titan*, a grotesque sci-fi novel which centers on Bluff, "a fascinating game that, like poker, combines chance and skill equally"[14], set up by Terran and Titanian authorities. The "bluffing game" has "telepaths participating for stakes that do not exist."[15] Like *The Sims* or *SimCity*, "The Game makes the intricacies of life explicit as it tries to make them manageable." (GPT, p. 33) Consider this passage: "In the center of the table he saw what appeared to be a glass ball, the size of a paperweight. Something complex and shiny and alive flickered within the globe and he bent to scrutinize it. A city, in miniature. Buildings and streets, houses, factories… It was Detroit." (GPT, p. 169) Weskel's "Small Town" is equally realistic. Rather than being a simple background for his model trains, the city is a playground for nurturing solipsistic, megalomaniac fantasies of construction, domination, and control. Weskel finds extreme pleasure in *creating* the simulated urban space itself:

> He had building the town up carefully. Piece by piece. First, when he was in junior high, a model of the Southern Pacific Depot. Then the taxi stand next door. The café where the drivers ate. Broad Street. And so on. More and more. Houses, buildings, stores […] Now it was virtually complete. Almost done. He was forty-three years old and the town was almost done. (GPT, p. 343)

The gameplaying activity allows Weskel to deal with with the unbearable crux of daily life. Dick established a dichotomy between the "real" Woodland and the model: "He had never been happy. The town had always been against him […] He had never meshed with the town." (GPT, p. 344) However, like many characters in Dick's stories— and Wright's intended users of his simulations—Weskel displays conflicting tendencies: on one hand, he is dedicated and inventive—a demiurge-like figure that creates worlds. On the other, he is destructive, vengeful, and resentful. Soon he starts replacing the buildings and businesses that he despises in "real life" with his own versions:

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[13] Philip K. Dick, "The Trouble with Bubbles", in *The Complete Stories of Philip K. Dick Vol. 2: We Can Remember For You Wholesale and Other Classic Stories*, New York: Citadel Press Books, 1987, p. 193-194.
[14] Philip K. Dick, *The Game-Players of Titan*, New York: Ace Books, 1963, p. 25. (Henceforth, references to this text will be indicated by the initials "GPT", followed by the page number, and placed in paranthesis in the body of the text.)
[15] GTP, p. 138. I cannot think of a more pataphysical premise.

> He removed a model of Morris Home Furnishing and disassembled it. He worked feverishly, with frantic haste […] A moment later he was gluing two small buildings in its place. Ritz Shoeshine. Pete's Bowling Alley. Weskel giggled excitedly. Fitting extinction for the luxurious, exclusive furniture store (GPT, p. 348).

Like an avid gamer lost in a virtual world, Weskel shows signs of addiction: "Imagine a grown man playing with trains! It's—it's disgusting! Every night the same thing […] He's always wanted to get away" (GTP, p. 345-346), laments his equally unhappy and unfaithful wife, Madge. Not only Weskel skips dinner in order to play with his toys, but at one point he even resigns from work. "He's losing himself into it," (GPT, p. 346) comments Dr. Paul Tyler, who is having an affair with Madge. His diagnosis is clear: Weskel is withdrawing "into his substitute world. The improved model he controls. Where he can get away" (GPT, p. 350). Weskel's model is indeed "improved". It has become his "ideal" Woodland:

> He had erected a new city hall, police station, and an immense park with fountains and indirect lighting. He had cleared the slum area, the old rundown stores and houses and streets […] The new Woodland looked pretty good. Clean and neat—and simple. The rich district had been toned down. The poor district had been improved. Glaring ads, signs, display, had all been changed or removed (GPT, p. 350-351).

The last step of this delirious pursuit is complete withdrawal. Weskel's escape from reality ends *inside* the simulation—literally. "He got unsteady on his feet. He closed his eyes, held his arms out, and advanced toward the plywood table. Reaching, grasping, fingers extended Weskel headed toward it, a look of radiant exaltation on his seamed, middle-aged face" (GTP, p. 351). Dr. Tyler explains Weskel's inability to face realism and his regression into model-building in Freudian terms. At one point, Weskel literally vanishes…

> …In his own world […] The model. The improved substitute […] All his life he's worked on it. Built it up. Made it real. He brought that world into being—and now he's in it […] He did not merely dream about an escape world. He actually constructed it—every bit and piece. Now he's warped himself right out of our world, into it (GPT, p. 352-352).

Once he has abandoned 'real life', Weskel can start a new 'career' as the mayor of this fictional city. His sudden disappearance is not missed by Madge and Tyler, who are now free to pursue their love affair. Their delight, however, is short-lived. The story ends with another twist: Weskel's simulation has become so powerful, vivid, and convincing that it has actually replaced "reality" *tout court*—"Small Town" ends with the couple trapped in the "improved" version of Woodland.[16]

On a superficial level, the story reads like a morality tale, a warning message: games, both traditional and virtual, have a centripetal and centrifugal effect on people. The can absorb the players into their imaginary realities—something that Edward Castronova calls "toxic immersion": "the threat of losing people to a space that, by any standard of human worth, dignity, and well-being, is not good for them."[17]

But there are further implications. Dick is suggesting that games can influence reality by affecting people's understanding of the world. In this story, Dick establishes a "precession of simulations." The starting point is "reality"—that is, a shared understanding of an apparently stable situation (Woodland, the 'real' town). Subsequently, that situation is replicated—but also modified—as a simulation (Woodland, the model). Gradually, the simulation acquires more and more ontological substance, until it becomes more real than the initial situation. Finally, the simulation replaces the original situation (the 'new' Woodland). This series of permutations is not cyclical, since the new situation differs from the initial state. Moreover, the process is not spontaneous, but planned and executed by a playful—yet sinister—demiurge.

From "The Days of Perky Pat" to *The Sims*

> You can probably get more of an idea directly from the thing;
> I suggest you put a quarter in it and play through a game
> (Philip K. Dick, *Return Match*)

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[16] This idea will be expanded in the novel *Eye in the Sky* (1957). Here, eight characters have the ability to create different realities. "At any given time, the individual with the most awareness controls the gestalt, changing the laws of nature according to his or her point of view." (Douglas A. Mackey, *Philip K. Dick*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1988, p. 22.) The novel, thus, can be read an ontological match between creators and destroyers of realities.

[17] Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds. The Business and Culture of Online Games*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2005, p. 238.

Another game designed by Wright, *The Sims* (2000), sold over 70 million copies worldwide, becoming the best-selling computer game in history. Like *SimCity*, *The Sims* is also described as a god game: here the player creates and manages the lives of synthetic people, the Sims.[18] The user manages a "virtual dollhouse," monitoring and influencing the daily activities of the Sims such as sleeping, eating, cooking and bathing. Instead of trying to attain predetermined objectives, the player is encouraged to make 'free' choices in an interactive environment. As such, the game has successfully attracted a variety of gamers, including adult female players, a traditionally elusive segment for game makers. The only explicit goal of the simulation is to organize the Sims' time to help them reach personal goals. The player must make decisions about time spent in personal development, such as exercise, reading, creativity, and logic, by adding activities to the daily agenda of the virtual characters. Daily maintenance requirements must also be scheduled, such as personal hygiene, eating, and sleeping. If the simulated humans do not perform the proper amount of maintenance, they will sicken and die. Furthermore, Sims need to have fun; if they don't, the fun level bar eventually lowers and they become depressed, but however depressed they become, they are unable to commit suicide (they are not programmed to do so). Financial health is simulated by the need to send the Sims to find jobs, go to work, pay bills, and take advantage of personal development and social contacts to advance in their jobs.

Technically, *The Sims* offers unlimited replay value because, like its predecessor, is open-ended: the game refuses a traditional closure. It should also be noted that, unlike the simulated environments of such games as *SimCity, SimEarth,* or *SimLife*, the Sims, like dolls, are not fully autonomous. They are unable to take certain actions without specific commands from the player, such as paying their bills or going to the toilet. Thus, if left alone, without any player supervision, the Sims will eventually develop overdue bills and their property will be repossessed. Unlike *SimCity*, religion is not simulated in the game: the only venerated deity is consumerism. At the same time, the game is intended as a parody of consumerism, because:

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[18] In *The Game Players of Titan*, where Dick describes the rules of life in ludic terms: "Marriage has always been primarily an economic entity […] Marriage had to do with the transmission of property, of lines of inheritance. And of cooperation in career-lines as well. All this emerged explicitly in The Game and dominated before." (p. 48) The "challenge" is set-up by an exchange on the radio whereas for the actual game the players meet in a 'real' space.

If you sit there and build a big mansion that's all full of stuff, without cheating, you realize that all these objects end up sucking up all your time, when they had been promising to save you time.[19]

According to Maxis, the game was originally designed as an architecture simulation and the Sims's function was simply to judge the player's creations.[20] During development it was decided that the Sims were more interesting than the houses, and the game was therefore changed. However, pataphysically, I would argue that the main inspiration for *SimCity* can be found in Philip K. Dick's short story "The Days of Perky Pat."[21]

First published in *Amazing* magazine in 1963, "The Days of Perky Pat" is a caustic satire of North American consumerism. Set in a post-apocalyptic Northern California, "The Days of Perky Pat" centers on a group of survivors who fill their days playing with miniature dolls, namely Perky Pat and her boyfriend Leonard. The "game" requires the player to build realistic sets called "layouts", so that they can re-enact an idyllic life no longer available to the Earth's real inhabitants ("Norm thought, Playing this game... it's like being back there, back in the world before the war. That's why we play it, I suppose. He felt shame, but only fleetingly; the shame, almost at once, was replaced by the desire to play a little longer."[22]). Humans are so caught up with Perky Pat that they rip apart radios and other equipment sent by aliens ("cephalopodic univalve mollusk-like organisms") (DPP, p. 225) to "enhance" the game:

[19] Will Wright, quoted by John Seabrook in "Game Master."

[20] See Heather Chaplin and Aaron Ruby, *Smartbomb. The Quest for Art, Entertainment, and Big Bucks in the Videogame Revolution*.

[21] As for the short story itself, Dick wrote that the inspiration came from Barbie dolls: "'The Days of Perky Pat' came to me in one lightning-swift flash when I saw my children playing with Barbie dolls. Obviously these anatomically super-developed dolls were not intended for the use of children, or, more accurately, should not have been. Barbie and Ken consisted of two adults in miniature. The idea was that the purchase of countless new clothes for these dolls was necessary if Barbie and Ken were to live in the style to which they were accustomed. I had visions of Barbie coming into my bedroom at night and saying, 'I need a mink coat.' Or, even worse, 'Hey, big fellow... want to take a drive to Vegas in my Jaguar XKE?' I was afraid my wife would find me and Barbie together and my wife would shoot me." (Philip K. Dick, *The Complete Stories of Philip K. Dick Vol. 4: We Can Remember It For You Wholesale and Other Classic Stories*, New York: Citadel Press Books, 1987, p. 366.)

[22] Philip K. Dick, "The Days of Perky Pat", in *The Complete Stories of Philip K. Dick Vol. 4: We Can Remember It For You Wholesale and Other Classic Stories*, New York: Citadel Press Books, 1987, p. 226. (Henceforth, references to this text will be indicated by the initials "DPP", followed by the page number, and placed in paranthesis in the body of the text.)

"Looks like radios in that box," Tod said. "Transistor radios." Thoughtfully stroking his short black beard he said, "Maybe we can use them for something new in our layouts." (DPP, p. 223)

Interestingly, in the post-apocalyptic world described by Dick, Perky Pat—like The Sims—is extremely popular among the adults. The youngsters, on the other hand, cannot understand their parents' obsession for such trivial escapism. Consider the following passages:

> Seated cross-legged with his whetstone, Timothy Schein, ten years old and aware of his many responsibilities, sharpened his knife, slowly and expertly. Meanwhile, disturbing him, his mother and father noisily quarreled with Mr. and Mrs. Morrison, on the far side of the partition. They were playing Perky Pat again. As usual. How many times today they have to play that dumb game? Timothy asked himself. Forever, I guess. He could see nothing in it, but his parents played on anyhow. And they weren't the only ones; he knew from what other kids said, even from other fluke-pits, that their parents, too, played Perky Pat most of the day, and sometimes even on into the night. (DPP, p. 223-224)

> Fred said, "My mom and dad have been gone for a long time, off playing with the Benteleys." He glanced sideways at Timothy, and in an instant they had shared their mute disappointment regarding their parents. Gosh, and maybe the darn game was all over the world, by now; that would not have surprised either of them. (DPP, p. 224)

Many critics have expressed their concerns on *The Sims'* overt ideology; notably, they have condemned the game's seemingly blatant consumerism. In fact, the most efficient way to make the Sims happy is to buy them things. Perky Pat is informed by a similar logic. Here, too, playing and shopping coincide:

> His mother said loudly, "Perky Pat's going to the grocery store and it's got one of those electric eyes that opens the door. Look." A pause. "See, it opened for her, and now she's inside."
> "She pushes a cart," Timothy's dad added, in support.
> "No, she doesn't," Mrs. Morrison contradicted. "That's wrong. She gives her list to the grocer and he fills it."[23] (DPP, p. 224)

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[23] In *The Game Players of Titan*, where Dick describes the rules of life in ludic terms: "Marriage has always been primarily an economic entity […] Marriage had to do with the transmission of property, of lines of inheritance. And of cooperation in career-lines as well. All this emerged explicitly in The Game and dominated before" (GTP, p. 48)

Players of Perky Pat compete with each other in order to create the most luxurious scenarios. The real goal of the game is 'to keep up with the Joneses'. Consider these passages:

> Bending, Norman Schein picked up his Perky Pat doll and said sullenly, "I'm quitting; I don't want to play any more." Distressed, his wife protested, "But we've got Perky Pat all the way downtown in her new Ford hardtop convertible and parked and a dime in the meter and she's shopped and now she's in the analyst's office reading Fortune—we're way ahead of the Morrisons! Why do you want to quit, Norm?" Norman Schein gazed down at their combined layout, the swanky shops, the well-lit streets with the parked new-model cars, all of them shiny, the split-level house itself, where Perky Pat lived and where she entertained Leonard, her boy friend. It was the house that he perpetually yearned for; the house was the real focus of the layout—of all the Perky Pat layouts, however much they might otherwise differ. (DPP, p. 225-226)

> Perky Pat's wardrobe, for instance, there in the closet of the house, the big bedroom closet. Her capri pants, her white cotton short-shorts, her two-piece polka dot swimsuit, her fuzzy sweaters... and there, in her bedroom, her hi-fi set, her collection of long playing records. (DPP, p. 226)

Similarly, players of *The Sims* create and share virtual objects—from furniture to clothes—in order to expand their simulation. "To make it more complete."

In the world described by Dick, game playing is a collective activity, not a solo pursuit. Perky Pat is a massively multiplayer game that features both synchronous and asynchronous interaction.[24] At one point, the two main characters challenge another family that lives in another shelter to a doll 'deathmatch'. The "others" have a new deluxe doll, Connie Companion, that sports "a Standard Station and an airport terminal with jet landing strip and color TV and a French restaurant where they serve escargot" (DPP, p. 228). Perky Pat owners are flabbergasted by Connie Companion's 'realism':

> And now, for the first time, he saw Connie Companion doll. She was being placed in her bedroom by Mr. Foster who evidently was in charge of her. And the sight of her took his breath away. Yes, she was older. A grown woman, not a girl at all... the difference between her and Perky Pat was acute. And so life-like. Carved, not poured; she obviously had been whittled out of wood and then painted—she was not a thermoplastic. And her hair. It appeared to be genuine hair (…) Hooker picked up Connie Companion doll. "She sure is realistic," he said, scrutinizing her.

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[24] The "challenge" is set-up by an exchange on the radio whereas for the actual game the players meet in a 'real' space.

"Clothes aren't as nice as ours generally are; they look machine-made. (DPP, p. 234-235)

Connie Companion is to Perky Pat what *The Sims 2* is to the original *The Sims*. One of the main features of *The Sims 2*, in fact, is a revamped graphic engine that allows for a much more 'realistic' representation. It comes as no surprise that in *The Sims 2,* sexual exchanges between the characters play a significant role. Whereas the first game was deliberately moderate in depicting sexual acts, *The Sims 2*—like the Companion doll—is unquestionably more explicit. Consider these two passages:

> Then Fran said in a choked voice, "And if [Connie Companion and Paul Lathrope] are married—you mean they've been—intimate?"
> Wynn raised an eyebrow, then nodded. "Sure, since they're married. Is there anything wrong with that?"
> "Perky Pat and Leonard have never—" Fran began, and then ceased. (DPP, p. 234)

> "She's married," Fran explained. "To Paul. They're not just going together. She's three months pregnant, Mr. Wynn said. He didn't tell us until after we won; he didn't want to, then, but they felt they had to. I think they were right; it wouldn't have done not to say."
> Norm said, "And in addition there's actually an embryo outfit—"
> "Yes," Fran said. "You have to open Connie up, of course, to see—."
> (DPP, p. 236)

"The Days of Perky Pat" is directly referenced in David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999),[25] itself an extended version of Dick's story and also the most captivating cinematic critique of videogame culture.[26] "The Days of Perky Pat" was itself later expanded in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), a novel set on Mars where human colonists entertain themselves with Perky Pat dolls and the plethora of accessories manufactured by Earth-based P.P. Layouts. The company employs several 'pre-cogs', short for pre-cognitives, to determine if possible new Perky Pat accessories will be popular and also secretly creates illegal but widely available hallucinogens like Chew-Z and Can-D that allows the user to "translate" into Perky Pat (if the user is female) or her

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[25] In the memorable motel scene, the main character Ted Pikul buys food from a fast-food chain called "Perky Pat's", whose logo is imprinted on a bag. It's interesting to note that Chew-Z and Can-D, the drugs used in the simulation games, bear some resemblance to eXistenZ, both in the capitalized letters of their names and the role they perform.
[26] Incidentally, in June 2007, a movie based on *The Sims* was officially announced.

boyfriend Walt (if male). Thanks to dolls playing and drugs, the colonists can experience "an ideal sanitized consumer existence for short periods by entering into the Pat and Walt dolls, and living in the miniature dolls' houses which everyone owns and furnishes." (ETP, p. 16) This issue is crucial. The consciousness of Dick's characters rarely has a fixed location. It continuously migrates into other characters: "consciousness has some qualities of an event that is staged (usually by hostile forces), and some of the qualities of a product that is shaped." (ETP, p. 16) In other words, Dick's narratives describe the very act of videogame playing, a process of shifting consciousness, and an exercise in schizophrenia: the user can act in other worlds by using an avatar, simultaneously inhabiting different planes of reality and assuming different identities.

In addition to spatial displacement, we are also confronted with chronological disorder. In both Wright's games and Dick's stories, time is not a fixed and stable concept. On the contrary, it is malleable, fluid, and can be rearranged freely. In *SimCity* or *The Sims*, the player can accelerate, slow down and even freeze the flow of action.[27] In Dick's narrative, time is equally malleable and fluid, out of joint. In fact:

> Time may regress, rival time schemes may be inserted or may open up; or time may be closed, wholly fixed and predictable (…) The postmodern element in this is the jumbling of different time schemes and enclaves in the same text; we are not dealing with the possibility that, for instance, our accepted notion of time may be invalid and another may be valid, but that several forms of time may coexist. (ETP, p. 16)

From "The Trouble with Bubbles" to *Spore*

> "Damn Game-Players, always taking things so seriously"
> (Philip K. Dick, *The Game-Players of Titan*)

Spore, a computer game designed by Will Wright and currently in development by Maxis, is scheduled be published by Electronic Arts in 2008. *Spore* is often described as a teleological evolution game, or god game. The player moulds and guides a species

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[27] For more information about the use of time in games, see Jesper Juul's essay "Introduction to game time" in *First Person* (2004).

across many generations, growing it from a single-celled organism into a more complex creature. Eventually, the species becomes sapient. At this point the player begins moulding and guiding this species' society, progressing it towards a space-faring civilization. It features several stages that are reminiscent of some of Wright's favorite games, such as *Pac-Man* (tide-pool stage), *Diablo* (evolution stage), *Populous* and *Populous: The Beginning* (tribal stage), *SimCity* (city stage), *Risk* and *Civilization* (civilization stage). Wright calls *Spore* a "massively single player online game", meaning that simultaneous multiplayer gaming will not be part of the experience. However, the creatures, vehicles, and buildings the player can create will be uploaded automatically to a central database (or a peer-to-peer system), catalogued and rated for quality, and then re-distributed to populate other player's games. When the player progresses to a new stage, *Spore* imports the objects as needed. For example, if a flying carnivore is needed to balance the ecosystem, a creature that fits that description will be downloaded. Once again, the player is a demiurge, although his powers are not unlimited. Asked if playing *Spore* means impersonating God, Wright said:

> In some ways. I guess it depends on what your conception of God is. I mean, in *Spore*, for instance, you do have limitations. and so, if you're a god, you're not a terribly powerful, omnipotent god. But yet there is this feeling of creating a world at the end of the day, there is this entire little world that you've had a major hand in creating. So I would say on the creative side probably yes, on the omnipotent side definitely not.[28]

Where does *Spore* come from? Seabrook writes that the main inspiration for the games comes two main sources: Frank Drake's equation that estimates the number of possible worlds in our galaxy that might be populated with beings that could communicate with us; and "The Powers of Ten", a short film by Charles and Ray Eames, made in 1977.

I would argue, instead, that *Spore* pataphysically comes from a Dick's story, "The Trouble with Bubbles." Here Dicks describes a world where people are obsessed by a construction game. With the aid of "special bubbles sold in one of the many Worldcraft

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[28] Steve Morgenstern, "The Wright Stuff", *Popular Science*, February 2007. Available online: [http://www.popsci.com/popsci/technology/f1a18906612a0110vgnvcm1000004eecbccdrcrd.html]

Stores"—whose motto is "Own Your Own World"—the player can build "miniature worlds."[29] This passage summarizes the logic that informs this activity:

> The theory and construction of the Worldcraft product, the sub-atomic universe system, is known to you. An infinite number of sub-atomic worlds exist, microscopic counterparts of our own spatial coordinate. Worldcraft developed, almost a century ago, a method of controlling to thirty decimals the forces and stresses involved on these micro-coordinate planes, and a fairly simplified machine could be manipulated by any adult person. These machines for controlling specific areas of sub-atomic coordinates have been manufactured and sold to the general public with the slogan: 'Own Your Own World'. The idea is that the owner of the machine becomes literally a world owner, since the machine controls forces that govern a sub-atomic universe that is directly analogous to our own. By purchasing one of these Worldcraft machines, or bubbles, the person finds himself in possession of a virtual universe, to do with as he sees fit. Instruction manuals supplied by the company show him how to control these minute worlds so that life forms appear and rapidly evolve, giving rise to the higher and higher forms until at last – assuming the owner is sufficiently skillful – he has in his personal possession a civilization of beings on a cultural par with our own. During the last few years we have seen the sale of these machines grow until now almost everyone possesses one or more sub-atomic worlds, complete with civilizations, and these years have seen many of us take our private universes and grind the inhabitants and planets into dust. There is no law which prevents us from building up elaborate civilizations, evolved at an incredible rate of speed, and then crushing them out of existence […] These minute civilizations are not dreams. They are real. They actually exist [...] Our position in relation to these minute civilizations is godlike. We can, with a wave of the hand, obliterate countless millions. We can send the lightning down, level their cities, squash their tiny buildings like anthills. We can toss them about like toys, playthings, victims of our every whim. (TWB, p. 200)

WorldCraft is a miniature world in a bubble.[30] Similarly, *Spore* promises to deliver an entire universe on a screen. This is not, however, what makes the game so peculiar. After all, as Angela Ndalianis suggests, all computer games are like "little worlds in little boxes. In these games, programmers and players interface with micro-virtual realms that are reminiscent of our own but operate according to their own spatial

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[29] Philip K. Dick, "The Trouble with Bubbles" in *The Complete Stories of Philip K. Dick Vol. 2: We Can Remember It For You Wholesale and Other Classic Stories*, New York: Citadel Press Books, 1987, p. 191. (Henceforth, references to this text will be indicated by the initials "TWB", followed by the page number, and placed in paranthesis in the body of the text.)
[30] As to ratify Dick's almost prophetic capabilities, the inventor of Worldcraft bubbles is called Packman.

and temporal rules"[31] But Wright—who has been obsessing over the idea of replicating the world since he was a kid—has elevated the simulation to a form of art:

> [Wright's] computer allowed him to build models, but unlike those of his childhood, these could be dismantled, evaluated, and rebuilt almost instantly. He could observe how the behavior of his models changed depending on what values he assigned various parameters […] Wright was now able to build models that were also simulations. They changed over time and were able to serve as simplified representations of real-world situations. They were dynamic, rather than static.[32]

Particularly striking in this short story is Dick's portrayal of the bubble user, which mirrors the image—or the stereotype—of the modern videogame player. His words are almost prophetic. The users of the Worldcraft bubbles are described as pathologically disturbed individuals, addicted to the game to the point of being unable to distinguish between play-time and real-time. Their mental state borders on schizophrenia and autism. They take amphetamines to keep on playing, i.e. building tiny worlds.[33] They are malnourished and sleep-deprived because of the game. When a character asks a bubble player when she last ate, the woman answers – in a state of confusion – "Two days [ago]. I don't know." (TWB, p. 192) Well before the emergence of the videogame medium, Dick perfectly understood that the real threats it poses is not to incite violence, but, rather, generate compulsive consumption.[34]

Dick was also prescient of contemporary disputes over videogames. The videogame is a contested art form. The medium is attacked on a weekly basis by mass media. Politicians often invoke a total ban on the production, distribution, and even sale of videogames. This critical attitude towards games permeates the pages of "The Trouble with Bubbles". One of the characters, in fact, demands a crackdown on Worldcraft bubbles: "I propose we should declare Worldcraft Industries a public menace and the real

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[31] Angela Ndanialis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 147.
[32] Heather Chaplin and Aaron Ruby, *Smartbomb. The Quest for Art, Entertainment, and Big Bucks in the Videogame Revolution*, p. 129-130.
[33] After all, as Palmer notes, "The Dickian individual tends to be deranged: in a state of disaffection, panic, restlessness, helplessness" (ETP, p. 24)
[34] As Gerard Jones writes, "Because games are so obviously artificial, they are the medium least capable of inspiring any powerful emotion beyond the thrills of the playing itself. If they condition the children to do anything, it's only to play more—which may be their one real pitfall" (*Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super-Heroes and Make-Believe Violence*, Basic Books, 2003, p. 181).

property the possession of the state. I want to see Worldcraft bubbles outlawed (…) on moral grounds." (TWB, p. 199, 200, 201) But Dick also recognized that gaming is an inherently creative activity and, by doing so, he also foresaw its artistic potential.

> It's certainly a creative pastime. Not a merely passive viewing like television. In fact, world building is the ultimate art form. It takes the place of all entertainments, all passive sports as well as music and painting. (TWB, p. 197)

However, the ludic quickly degenerates into luddism. Creation is followed by destruction: Dick's "precession of simulations" takes a darker turn. At one point, the bubble players hysterically demolish their miniature worlds:

> The bubble smashed, bursting into a thousand pieces. Metal and glass, plastic parts, gears, struts, tubes, the vital machinery of the bubble, splattered in all directions (…) All around the room other owners were smashing their worlds, breaking them and crushing them, stamping on them, grinding the delicate control mechanism underfoot. Men and women in a frenzy of abandon (…) quivering in an orgy of Dionysian lust. Crushing and breaking their carefully constructed worlds one after another. (TWB, p. 194)

Why does simulation leads to total annihilation? Dick provides a fascinating explanation: Man went into space looking for traces of God. He did not find them. He suddenly realized the tragedy of loneliness. He tried to ease the pain by becoming god, that is, to build (miniature) worlds. The simulation, thus, was meant to alleviate an existential pain. It worked, only temporarily.

> When we explored the system and found nothing we were in for trouble. People had counted on new worlds, new lands in the sky. Colonization. Contact with a variety of races (…) [We found] nothing but dead rock and waste. Nothing that could support life – our own or any other kind. A vast disappointment set in on all levels of society. (TWB, p. 196)

In "Small Town", "The Days of Perky Pat" and "The Trouble with Bubbles", simulation is "imaginary irresolution of real contradictions." (ETP, p. 60) In the latter story, men are desperately looking for a solution to their inner and outer solitude. "Without any contact with a transcendent principle like extraterrestrial life, human

existence lacks meaning."[35] To fight desperation and tedium, human beings act like demiurges and play god games.[36] But their creations are "simultaneously being produced and disowned by all those involved." (ETP, p. 60) Dick's story evokes the theories of Ludwig Feuerbach. In *Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach wrote that God is "the false or theological essence of religion", a narrative device that construct the divine as the outward projection of man's inward nature. In the postmodern age of videogames, the humanization of God has reached its completion. Unsurprisingly, Wright—the prolific god game *auteur*—is an atheist.[37] After all, as Ursula LeGuin wrote in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, "To be atheist is to maintain God." The emergence of god games, a genre in which the player becomes the Player, proves that ludology is just another form of theology.[38] This eschatological need drives most of Dick's narrative. Palmer notes that in many stories,

> Humans may decide to merge with a deity (as happens for instance in *Galactic Pot-Heater*) or a doll (as happens in *Palmer Eldritch*). This desire has a metaphorical as well as psychological dimension (…) but it also suggests the way in which bounded consciousness is not only threatened (as happens with the deity, who is also already a robot, an alien, and a human, desires to absorb human in *Palmer Eldricht)* but is also escaped from. Yet the matter is still problematic, because humans are not bestowing soul on a doll or a deity; they are seeking self in this empty or absorbent being. (ETP, p. 14)

Nevertheless, Dick's God is vengeful, brutal, and terrible. He creates in order to destroy. As previously mentioned, in "The Trouble With Bubbles", players wipe out their worlds when they realize their uselessness.[39] "Earth's gods are perhaps as carelessly

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[35] Douglas A. Mackey, *Philip K. Dick*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1988, p. 11.
[36] Or being subjected to god games. This happens, for instance, in a short story titled "Fair Game": here mankind is prey to malevolent super beings.
[37] See Seabrook's "Game Master."
[38] Discussing A Maze of Death (1970), Ian Watson writes: "The godlike figure of the Intercessor, invented as part of the false reality, reaches into the reality of the ship objectively, to offer a salvation of a kind (…) Thus the human generates God." (In Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Arthur B. Evans & Veronica Hollinger (Eds.), *On Philip K. Dick: 40 Articles from Science-Fiction Studies*, p. 67.)
[39] Dick' fascination with destructive playing might also have a psychological explanation. Gregg Rickman notes that " At the age of six, young Philip would line up and destroy his toys, a violent reaction, perhaps, to his early abuse." ("What is This Sickness?" "Schizophrenia" and "We Can Build You" in Samuel J. Umland, *Philip K. Dick: Contemporary Critical Interpretations*, Greenwood Press, 1995, p. 156, n. 13.)

amoral with regard to their creation as we are to ours."[40] At one point, one of the characters explains:

> These world bubbles are substitutes. They take place of something else (…) These worlds are like toy boats in a bath tub. Or model rocketships you see kids playing with. They're surrogates, not the actual thing (…) These people who operate them – why do they want them? Because they can't explore real planets, big planets. They have a lot of energy damned up inside them. Energy they cannot express. And bottled-up energy sours. It becomes aggressive. People work with their little worlds for a time, building them up. But finally they reach a point where their latent hostility, their sense of being deprived [become manifest] (TWB, p. 197).

Simulations provide a temporary, illusory form of gratification. The gameplay activity does not lead to happiness, but to depression. Disillusion, frustration, and anguish are the collateral effects of ludic replication.

Reading the game, playing the story

It could be argued that playing videogames make us less human – as we become mere operators of machines—or post-human—as the symbiosis with the machine transform us in cyborg-like creatures as Katherine Hayles has suggested in the seminal *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Digital play redefines the very notions of absence and presence: the player is simultaneously present/absent in the real world and present/absent in a simulated reality. A consequence is that while the game world acquires some aspects of humanness, the real world becomes more machine-like. As Palmer observed:

> My computer, for instance, has accrued some particles of humanness: it is a kind of idiot savant. Correspondingly, in working at my computer I become a little less than human, a kind of mechanism, though a faulty one that persistently (for instance) enters 'about' as 'aobut'. This is the kind of thing that Dick notices and intensifies. Something very like the condition of postmodernity is dissolving the human – and also disseminating it; yet this is the outcome of an attempt to define and vindicate humanness. (ETP, 41)

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[40] Douglas A. Mackey, *Philip K. Dick*, p. 11.

This idea is further elaborated by Dick in *A Maze of Death,* one of his most pessimistic, nihilistic novels. Here, the crew of a starship experiences deadly games of death by "a computer originally provided as a toy to while away in the long years in space."[41] The computer—which has god-like features—manifests itself in three forms: "The Mentufacturer, who creates and perpetually renews all things; The Intercessor, a Christ-like revealer of ultimate reality; and the Walker-on-Earth, who often manifests as a human being to give aid to individuals. Opposed to the deity is the Form Destroyer, who represents entropy and decay."[42] A game-player would immediately see the parallels with game-playing. The Mentufacturer corresponds to the game engine[43] while The Walker-on-Earth, The Intercessor and The Form Destroyer are various non-player characters (the former possessing super-natural powers).[44] The action takes place on Delmak-O, a desolated, uninhabited planet. The fourteen people assigned to colonize it die one after another, in mysterious and often violent circumstances. The reader's goal is to decipher the riddles that make *A Maze of Death* such an intriguing, puzzling reading experience. In fact, after all the members have succumbed, it is revealed that they dreamed the world of Delmak-O and are still alive inside a starship, which due to an incident is taking them on a lifelong trip.

> The fourteen group members had programmed a computer to create an illusory reality for them while they lay linked up in common, forming a "polycephalic mind." This particular program involved their working out their accumulated hostilities, but to an extreme – it led to their killing each other. It constituted a diversion so they could keep their sanity in their spaceship prison. The space travelers are addicted to living in these dreamworlds – like the Mars colonists with the Perky Pat game in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* – so they quickly plug themselves back into the computer.[45]

Delmak-O can be considered as the equivalent of a 'map' in a first-person shooter. The planet is a "metaphor for consensual reality, the lowest common denominator of

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[41] In Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Arthur B. Evans & Veronica Hollinger (Eds.), *On Philip K. Dick: 40 Articles from Science-Fiction Studies*, p. 67.
[42] Douglas A. Mackey, *Philip K. Dick*, p. 99.
[43] A game engine is the core software component of a computer or video game or other interactive application with real-time graphics. It provides the underlying technologies, simplifies development, and often enables the game to run on multiple platforms such as game consoles and desktop operating systems.
[44] A non-player character (sometimes "non-playable character" or "non-player class"), often shortened to NPC, is a character in a role-playing game or computer game whose actions are not controlled by a human player.
[45] Douglas A. Mackey, *Philip K. Dick*, p. 100.

reality that a group can agree on,"[46] a pataphysical environment shared by the imaginary cosmonauts.

A Maze of Death is not unique in Dick's production. As preposterous as it might sounds, I would argue that many of his stories have an intrinsic game-like structure at their core. As Palmer notes, what shapes Dick's plots is "a succession of confusing puzzles and desperate attempts so solve these puzzles." (ETP, p. 20) Palmer describes the cognitive effort required to read and understand a Dick's stories as follows:

> First you discover that the world in which the story is set is different from your own in ways that make you see your own world as different from itself, that is, from what you thought it was: then you discover that the world in which the story is set is also different from itself, because it is in a state of crisis, possibly disintegration, and is split into opposing, competing units anyway. No one is any longer at home in it. (ETP, p. 25)

How does the protagonist of the story react to this ontological conundrum? He responds with *instrumental thinking*.

> The main character is forced to hypothesize and re-hypothesize the pattern that may – must surely – be behind events. He (always he) does not accumulate knowledge, building on previous hypotheses; he simply discards one theory and elaborates another. A situation of blockage develops. Contrary forces are at work, one proliferating fluidity and uncertainty, the other demanding (with something close to desperate stridency) explanation and closure. (ETP, p. 27)

Drawing on James Paul Gee, Steven Johnson suggests, instrumental thinking is the essential procedural cognitive task when playing videogames. He describes the act of playing as a fourth-step cycle:

1. The player must *probe* the virtual world (which involves looking around the current environment, clicking on something, or engaging in a certain action).
2. Based on reflection while probing and afterward, the player must form a *hypothesis* about what something (a text, object, artifact, event, or action) might mean in a useful situated way).
3. The player *re-probes* the world with that hypothesis in mind, seeing what effect he or she gets.

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[46] Douglas A. Mackey, *Philip K. Dick*, p. 101.

4. The player treats this effect as feedback from the world and accepts or *rethinks* his or her original hypothesis.[47]

Along these lines, Ernest Adams argues that adventure games are built on the so-called "Amnesia Complex". He writes that:

> In a normal, non-interactive story, the characters belong in the world of which they're a part. They understand that world. They know what's in all the drawers in their apartment and what's in all the shops in their town. When they first get up in the morning, they don't start their day by opening up every single closet to see what's in it, nor do they pick up every object they see and stick it in their pockets in case it might come in handy later. But that's not true in adventure games, is it? When you play an adventure game, you have no idea what is going on. You have amnesia. Even if you start the game in your own home, you have to explore it. You don't know what's going to happen to you, so for safety's sake, you pick up everything you see, and you end up carrying around a collection of objects that make you look like a demented bag lady.[48]

This passage contains several interesting points. First, it confirms that Dick's narratives are not "normal" stories: the characters that inhabit Dick's wor(l)ds do not really understand their surroundings. Like the players of adventure games, they often "have no ideas what is going on". It is useful to remember that games are not stories, as many theorists have correctly pointed out.[49] Games are rather tools that take the players somewhere else. Will Wright argues that what they really offer is a "possibility space". Similarly, "A text by Dick is not really a picture, or an analytical diagram; it's more like a vehicle into which you step. You go on a trip. The form [of Dick's writing] is that of a game or an elaborate joke." (ETP, p. 25, 26) We therefore agree with Palmer that "Dick is a gameplayer in fiction." (ETP, p. 7)

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[47] Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You. How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter*, New York, Basic Books, 2005, p. 45.

[48] Ernest Adams, "Three Problems for Interactive Storytellers", *Gamasutra*, December 29, 1999, § 5. Available online: [http://www.gamasutra.com/features/designers_notebook/19991229.htm]

[49] See, for instance, Espen Aarseth,*Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1997; Markku Eskelinen, "Game Studies 0101: Eskelinen: The Gaming Situation", *GameStudies, the international journal of computer game research*, volume 1, issue 1, July 2001. available online at [http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/]; Jesper Juul, "Games telling stories?", *GameStudies, the international journal of computer game research*, volume 1, issue 1, July 2001. available online at [http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/].

The future of games: a pre-cog approach

> He sees in the bubbles more than just a game. It is a passion. A philosophy of life
> (Philip Dick, "The Trouble With Bubbles")

Dick described in detail games that Wright invented several decades later. He also wrote about the dangers of simulations and the importance of dissimulating the 'real'. This theme, superbly articulated by many films, including[50] *Nirvana* (Gabriele Salvatores, 1999), *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998), and *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), is a leitmotiv of Dick's *opus magnus*. Consider, for instance, Ragle Gumm's epiphany in *Time Out of Joint*. Like Truman Burbank, the hero of *Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1999), the protagonist of Dick's novel at one point discovers that he is simply a pawn in a disconcerting simulation. Ragle is living in a simulacrum, set up just for him: he makes a living by figuring out the answers to a newspaper puzzle, which unknown to him correctly predict the targets of nuclear missiles sent from the Moon. He could very much be a tiny figurine in Veskel's "Small Town".

> I am the center of this universe. They're working like crazy to construct a fake world all around me, to keep me quiet and happy. Buildings, cars—an entire city. It all looks real, but it's not.[51]

In another short story titled "Fair Game", a scientist sees a giant eye looking at him through a window. Later in the story, he is observed by a giant face. It turns out that mankind is prey to malevolent super beings, demiurge-like creatures. Although Douglas A. Mackey interpreted this story as a byproduct of the Cold War ("The evil gods clearly represent the destructive implications of nuclear technology, which the scientist has ignored"), I see instead the prefiguration of a "singularity"-like event: the day when the

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[50] For more information, see Matteo Bittanti, "All to Human. To Live and Die in *SimCity*" in Barry Atkins and Tanya Krzywinska (Eds.), *Player/Game/Text*, Routledge, London, 2007; Matteo Bittanti (Ed.), *SimCity. Mappando le città virtuali*, Milano, Edizioni Unicopli, 2004; Matteo Bittanti and Mary Flanagan (Eds.), *The Sims. Similitudini, Simboli & Simulacri*, Milano, Edizioni Unicopli, 2003.

[51] Emmanuel Carrère, I Am Alive And You're Dead. A Journey Into The Mind Of Philip K. Dick, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2004, p. 42.

artificial intelligence of NPCs evolves to the point that they will be able to see the player's eyes gazing at them through a computer screen.

A similar scenario returns in a short story titled "Project: Earth", originally published in *Imagination*. Here, an odd, secretive garage scientist called Edward Billings is working on a mysterious project that requires books and papers, but also "charts, anatomy charts, maps, astronomy charts, signs of the zodiac."[52] We soon discover that Billings is writing omni-comprehensive reports about Planet Earth:

> *California*. Population. Wealth. Activity of the state government. Ports and harbors. Facts, facts, facts - Facts on everything. Everywhere (…) On every part of the world. Every city, every state, every country. Any and all possible information.[53]

Billings has a box where he keeps "little tiny men", miniature creatures that look like humans. "They were not men, but they were very similar to men. Except for the antennae they seemed normal – the antennae and their extreme minuteness."[54] It turns out that Billings is taking part in a secret project, possibly funded by the government, to create a new race of miniature beings (*The Sims*?) that are only partially autonomous, as they require some sort of supervision. At one point, a young neighbor, Tommy, steals the minuscule men, but Billings gets them back by winning a game of marbles (!). However, the simulated beings rebel against their master, and they flee:

> It had happened before – twice before. And it would happen again. Each Project would carry the discontent to the next. It would never end, no matter how many Projects were conceived and put into operation. The rebellion and escape. The evasion of the plan.[55]

Another recurrent, though somehow overlooked, theme in Dick's *oeuvre* is the destructive power of toys and games. This idea appears in many short stories, such as "Second Variety, "The Trouble With Bubbles", "War Game", "The Days of Perky Pat", "Precious Artifact", "Game of Unchance", and "Return Match", as well as in novels,

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[52] Philip K. Dick, "Project: Earth" in *The Complete Stories of Philip K. Dick Vol. 2: We Can Remember For You Wholesale and Other Classic Stories*, New York: Citadel Press Books, 1987, p. 172.
[53] "Project: Earth", p. 172.
[54] "Project: Earth", p. 173.
[55] "Project: Earth", p. 188.

most notably *Solar Lottery*, *Time Out of Joint* or *The Game-Players of Titan*. Discussing his short story "Golden Man", Dick wrote:

> The theme of dangerous toys runs like a tattered thread throughout my writing. The dangerous disguised as the innocent... and what could be more innocent than a toy? This story makes me think of a set of huge speakers I looked at last week; they cost six thousand dollars and were larger than refrigerators. Our joke about them was that if you didn't go to the audio store to see them, they'd come to see you.[56]

"War Game" (originally published in 1959 on *Galaxian*) features a recurring trope—the Ganymedean toys, which are inspected by Terran authorities to assess their potential danger to human beings. These apparently innocuous technologies are indeed unsafe. They are sentient playthings that have the tendency to rebel against their 'masters'. Trojan horses, weapons of mass destruction masquerade as forms of distraction (unsurprisingly, the original title of this story was "Diversion"). Among the toys described are "inner-citadel-storming shock troops [that costs] six dollars a set", activated by voice commands.[57] Here's how Dick describes the miniature army and their target:

> The model soldiers stood approximately six inches high, made from the almost indestructible thermoplastic compounds that the Ganymedean manufacturers were famous for. Their uniforms were synthetic, a hodgepodge of various military costumes from the Moons and nearby planets. The citadel itself, a block of ominous dark metal-like stuff, resembled a legendary fort; peepholes dotted its upper surfaces, a drawbridge had been drawn up out of sight, and from the top turret a gaudy flag waved.[58]

The soldiers attack the citadel until they conquer it. A character called Pinario explains the allure of the game in Freudian terms:

> Psychologically speaking, it symbolizes the external reality. The dozen soldiers,

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[56] Philip K. Dick, *The Complete Stories of Philip K. Dick.*
[57] Stephen King's take on this premise is "Battleground", a short-story included in the now legendary Night Shift (1978) anthology. Here, King expands the notion of the killer toy soldiers: after murdering the owner of a toy company, a killer for hire receives a package of toy soldiers in the mail, but these soldiers aren't just playing around. Clearly, "Battleground" has a moral subtext that was absent in "War Game".
[58] Philip K. Dick, "War Game", in The Minority Report and Other Classic Stories, Citadel Press, Secaucus, New Jersey, 2002, p. 321. (Henceforth, references to this text will be indicated by the initials "WG", followed by the page number, and placed in paranthesis in the body of the text.)

of course, represent to the child his own efforts to cope. By participating in the storming of the citadel, the child undergoes a sense of adequacy in dealing with the harsh world. Eventually he prevails, but only after a painstaking period of effort and patience. (WG, p. 323)

Like Wright's sims, the toy soldiers display forms of emergent behavior. Pinario elucidates: "They can incorporate accidental configurations of terrain […] They're object-tropic; when they see, for example, a dollhouse here for testing, they climb into it like mice." (WG, p. 335) They keep assembling and disassembling each other, as the inspectors discover by watching a recording of the assault.

Another Ganymedean toy prefigures virtual reality HUDs.[59] It looks like a normal cowboy costume from the ancient American West, but when the player puts it on, she is instantly 'translated' into a realistic, simulated environment. Akin to the game-pods of Cronenberg's *eXistenZ*, "To start it into action, you fantasize", (WG, p. 335) as Pinario explains. The immersion effect is so powerful that the man in the costume literally becomes a child. Among the side effects of the toy is a complete withdrawal from reality: "A short period with it on, and the child would be unable to face contemporary reality." (WG, p. 336) Like Weskel's miniature town, the toy has the tendency to incorporate real elements such as walls and objects into the simulation, "to keep the fantasy going as long as possible." (WG, p. 336)

The last one is a variation of Monopoly called 'Syndrome'. "The game consisted of a board, plus play money, dice, pieces to represent the players. And stock certificates." (WG, p. 337) The game is apparently simple, but like other Ganymedean toys, presents some hidden disturbing features: "Each player starts out equal with the others," Pinario explained, "same as all this type, and during the play, their statuses change according to the worth of the stock they acquire in various economic syndromes". The game is described as a "replica of typical interculture economic ventures" that has some pedagogical values ("Children playing this would acquire a healthy attitude toward economic realities. It would prepare them for the adult world."). But even Syndrome is a

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[59] The HUD, short for Head-Up Display, is the method by which information is visually relayed to the player in computer and video games. The HUD can be an important part of a game's user interface. Taking its name from the real-life version, the HUD is frequently used to simultaneously display several pieces of information including the main character's health, items, and an indication of game progression (such as score or level).

"diversion", "To keep our minds involved. So we won't notice something else, (…) While something else takes place" (WG, p. 338) reckons one of the characters. That 'something else' is, predictably, an alien invasion.

Conclusion

> The trouble with being a god is that you've got no one to pray to.
> (Terry Pratchett, *Small Gods*)

This essay aimed at bringing forth the (im)possible analogies between the *narrative code* of Philip Dick and the *computational code* of Will Wright. Pataphysically, we argued that Dick wrote the games that Wright invented, many years later. Both Wright and Dick regard simulations as epistemological, eschatological, and ontological tools. Dick focuses on the darker side of the phenomenon, having establishing a "precession of simulations" that reads like a manifesto: reality is first replicated into a ludic simulation. Subsequently, the simulation acquires ontological consistency until it eventually supplants the "original." The process features three steps: 1) reality, 2) simulation of reality, 3) "real" simulation. This pattern emerges in many short stories that focus on city or world-building.

As a corollary, we find the theme of the replica-town, Dick's narratives often feature the trope of the "replaced-town," where familiar setting are inexplicably altered by superior beings (demiurges) or forces. This happens, for instance, in Dick's first novel, *The Cosmic Puppets*, written in 1953, but published only in 1957. The novel opens with the protagonist returning to his hometown of Millgate, Virginia, for the first time since his childhood. However, he soon realizes that the streets, landmarks, buildings, stores and people have been replaced. The main character has somehow entered an alternate universe in which he is no longer supposed to exist (this also happens in short stories such as "The Commuter," 1953 or "Breakfast at Twilight," 1954). Barton discovers that two gods, the Zoroastrian deities Ormazd and Ahriman are playing a game. The fake Millgate is the result of a spell cast by the evil Ahriman, and the only way for Barton to

break it is to "reconstruct the original town by remembering it back into existence."[60] It is as if our virtual city that we constructed was replaced by the intervention of another player…

Thus, in both Dick and Wright, simulation is above all, a creative act, although according to the former, such activity inevitably ends with destruction or diversion—i.e. delayed destruction. In conclusion, both authors have constructed demiurgic narratives that have redefined the way we process reality. Playing god—in literature and games—can be fun. After all, as T. J. Bass wrote in *The Godwhale* (1974), "Even a deity needs a little recreation."

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[60] Douglas A. Mackey, *Philip K. Dick*, p. 15.