

Jack Bauer, The Modern Avatar: Fiction, Rules, and Gameplay in Contemporary Lucidography

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1 Introduction

This article presents ongoing reflections on the interconnection of computer games, cinema, and fiction. I have elsewhere coined the term '*lucidography*' in an attempt to describe the layered marriage between ludology (the theory of computer games) and cinematography (Walther 2004). It seems almost commonplace today to postulate a deep remediation of ludic elements in movies – and vice versa; however, we should be careful to differentiate our level of inquires. One can assume a relation between games and cinema because the latter has the *look and feel* of a game, be that a stylish first person shooter (as in *300*) or a complex strategy game. Predominant relations would further include moving pictures that somehow *behave* like computer games due to their structural or functional setting. Lastly, claims could be made about the *complete merger* of the two cultural media forms, in which case we would need an 'ontological' proof of some sort. This article investigates all three levels, first by thinking about vital, although surprisingly fluffy, concepts like 'fictionality' and 'gameplay', and second by zooming in on the contemporary TV series *24*. I argue that *24* is essentially a *gameplay*, a refined *vectorization of speed*, and that the constant *territorialization* that occurs throughout several media, from season to season, and from one digital second to the next, is the real 'persona' or main character of the show. My point is that by analyzing the abstract complexities of *24* we will, at the same time, be able to glimpse some of the intriguing new trends of connecting the young world of games with the well-established realm of cinema.

2 Fiction

Literary theory, media studies, and, most recently, computer game theory (today known as “ludology”) have long struggled with obnoxious terms such as “fiction” and “fictionality”.

In its purest form, however, we could say that fiction involves an experiential framing. We do it all the time, make up worlds. In order for a fiction to be trustworthy, we need to set up boundaries – and believe in them. Some have perfected this enterprise of world making and boundary installment and raised it to a professional level that is usually unattainable by the rest of us. If one is a creative mind and wants to write a novel or direct a movie, the key is to decide what to put inside the edges of the frame and what to leave out. For a long time, at least since Immanuel Kant’s infamous accent on ‘de-interestedness’, in his third *Critique*, scholars of literary theory have highlighted de-personalization, that is, the generalization of intimate affairs, as a pivotal factor in the triumphant transformation of the mind, especially those of geniuses. The morale of New Criticism is that readers should enjoy the complexity of T.S. Eliot’s *Wasteland* without scrutinizing the poet’s literal life using it as a lens with which to spot the truth of the artwork. Rephrased in a formalistic vocabulary this means that the art of making art in the guise of fiction becomes a matter of differentiation – inclusion and exclusion – and subsequently to master the cover-up mechanism so that the whimsicalities of a sole creator is instead crafted a mirror for the many. Images of fiction arrive in a multiplicity of forms, although they all demand that we venture into alien spaces, ranging from crystal clear realism to distorted atrocities, from the codes and norms of literature, to the projected worlds of cinema, and on to the interactive motor skills of the computer game.

According to the literary scholar Thomas Pavel, the frontiers of fiction separate it on the one side from myths, on the other from actual history. Accordingly, he claims, “fiction is surrounded by *sacred* borders, by *actuality* and by *representational* borders” (Pavel 1986: 87). Inside these flexible borders, the confine of fiction is variously organized. For instance, in the ludic experiments of modernist literature the fictional arrangements are often such as to maximize the distance between the real and the imagined world. Think about Borges or the openly playful inventions of the seventeenth-century French novel; the purpose of “establishing these fictional spaces is not to increase the trade in conventional wisdom, but to expand our perception of fictional possibilities” (ibid, 88).

Much has been said about “plot” (a well known theorem tells us that we “read for the plot”), but suffice to say here that it is a trajectory through projected time and space. Borrowing a visual metaphor from modern physics, one might think of a plot as a journey through valleys and mountain peaks, basins of unsolved business (whilst the protagonist tries to unveil the conspiracy, solve the murder case, or redeem a fragile romance) followed by densely knitted regions where it all falls into place.

Therefore, world making consists of *differentiation*, *depersonalization*, and *trajectory*. Something is differentiated from something else; it is encircled; and depersonalized. These three modes count as rules to be obeyed, played with, read, or

enacted, whether the world one is dealing with is or seems made up or not. Fiction and cinema establish, and necessitate, a contract between the virtual representation and the real and tangible reality of viewers and readers. Similarly, games require a magic circle. Otherwise, they would not come into existence. Without the magic circle, no one would play games.

What about rules? Do they apply to “fiction”? Recently, the so-called ‘narratology versus ludology’ debate has arrived at the – perhaps more ideologically biased rather than theoretically informed – conclusion that narratives are about world manufacturing and temporality, whereas the ludic realm, computer games, are grounded in imperative rules set in vast game worlds and secured by discrete mechanics (Frasca 2003). Games take place within a spatial, mostly three-dimensional environment in which interactivity and decision-making performs on a much more physical, hands-on level than the passive, hermeneutic universe of literature that reside inside the head. I think at least part of this polarization of codex fiction and games is naïve: First, the ludologists adopts an understanding of ‘fictionality’ mostly reserved for pre-modernist literature that seldom toys with time, space, and composition, or simply did not have the mental or cultural tools to ‘hypertextualise’ the literary form. Second, the ludologists’ critique of narratological formalization turns into a peculiar counter argument against their own methods: hardcore ludology typically ravel in formalist thinking. Third, embedded within the dichotomy of narration versus gameplay a transcendental or pre-reflexive notion of ‘story’, or some otherwise minimal reminiscence of ‘configurable space’ or ‘structured chain of events’, must prevail simply in order to ground the dichotomy in the first place. Convinced ludologists know exactly what they are *not* looking for.

Nevertheless, one could argue that there is a vital difference between stating what rules *are* and how they *manifest* themselves. As for the latter, one might suggest that rules necessitate a certain mode of ‘fictionality’, a transgression of the non-game domain to the magic circle of play and, consequently, entering the ordered structure of the game (Walther 2003; Kirkpatrick 2004). A ‘joker’ that resides on the threshold between reality and non-reality personifies ‘Fiction’. The joker looks both ways and yet is impossible to pinpoint without disrupting our observation of what counts as in-game and out-of-game, or fictional versus non-fictional, features. Hence, the joker performs a very important and delicate task. He (or ‘it’) must implicitly convince us that the fiction is ‘real’ (meaning that it *really* is to be trusted), and at the same time he reminds us that there’s no such thing, really, as an un-real real world. In fact, this double delicacy of the joker is the only *certain reality* of a fiction or a game. It is there because it is not there.

In the tradition of sociologists like Gregory Bateson and Niklas Luhmann the central mark of ‘play’ (and ‘gameplay’) is the participants’ ability to invest in something that is both ‘real’ and, at the same time, ‘not real’. Bateson’s own prime example is monkeys fooling around (Bateson 1979). They bite, and they do not bite. In fact, monkeys are good at ‘not-biting’, producing that particular bite which is simultaneously a bite and not a bite. Monkeys take fun very seriously: they bite the not-real bite for real. The distinctive cognition here, *pace* Bateson, is not the predicative nor transformative quality of the bite (the bite ‘is’; the bite ‘stands for’ ...) but rather the word ‘not’ – as in ‘this is *not* a bite’ *and* ‘this is *not* a non-bite’, at the same time. Empirically speaking, a monkey’s playful bite should not be hard,

but not too soft; not soft, but not too hard.

The monkey illustration is analogous to the whereabouts of human players. One *really* puts an effort into killing foes in *Counter-Strike*; and yet one is closely aware, since this is part of playing's tacit knowledge, that *in reality* those teams are merely pixels and virtual trickery. Once players lift the illusion of gameplay out into reality and violently transgress the confines of the magic circle, two things happen: Either the game turns into a 'serious' game, a meta-game, a game about what it means to play a game, or it vaporizes into no game at all. The same can be said about the joker and fiction. Once he is exposed, fiction turns into (speculative) meta-fiction, or fiction becomes untrustworthy and therefore loses fictionality (Walther 2007b). When contestants fervently argue over a referee's decision in a game of soccer, then their quarrel is definitely part of the game and a way of keeping track of the rule system. But to insist that the absolute goal of soccer is *not* to win would be a poisonous abortion of the very reality of the magic circle's ontology.

In play, the deep fascination therefore lies in the oscillation between play and nonplay, which is the 'other' of play usually considered to be 'reality'. In the playing of games, we are more fixated on progressing in the prior structure that is the game (Kirkpatrick 2004: 74). Gaming presupposes the tension or the initial transgression in which we constantly resist falling out of the fantasy context of play. Furthermore, gaming also presupposes focus on a second, higher transgression in which success and failure is measured against our achievement of defined objectives. Thus, in playing a computer game, we work in a second simulacrum, an 'as if structure' overlain on top of the first initial transgression that makes play possible in the first place.

We can paraphrase this from a gamer's point of view, stating that as long as any communication on teleological concerns (the purpose, rights and wrongs of this and that) is enacted within the ontology of the game, it's acceptable. If the communication takes place outside of this 'sacred' being, it immediately becomes obscure, dangerous and, exactly, beside the point.

As one commentator on an Internet war game forum puts it: 'A game where peace is the ultimate objective would not be fun at all. What would be the thrill of sitting in a room full of the world's leaders and negotiating a treaty? What would motivate people to bring more peace? People want action and adventure, not to pore over volumes of text and watch people NOT die'.

Fiction is a framing technique that projects instances and utterances over time and in which one can place – and has to play in accordance with – rules. The existence of the 'joker', for one, is an all-necessary, transcendental rule of fictionality. The fact that, when the joker is caught in the act, so to say, and made visible the subtle threads of fiction disintegrate is a further evidence of the 'Kantian' nature of the joker. Besides being the transcendental base of the production and reception of other worlds, the joker also marks the unintelligible, *transcendent* realm of reason. And yet, there are what could be called *binding rules* and *mission rules*. Binding rules exist in order to keep the fictional world together, to unify it, to locate the alien world within our familiar world while also claiming the same world to be entirely different, thus requiring a simultaneous agenda of transgression and familiarity and of differentiation and unification. Mission rules demand the player to act,

to perform, and, ultimately, to reach a more or less clearly defined goal. Thus, mission rules go hand in hand with the socio-semantic aspects of competition.

It is the joker's job to be aware of dangerous assertions such as 'is this fiction?', or 'why do I play this?'. The joker installs these implicit utterances as the part and parcel of the ontology of 'other worlds'. The very anxiety of a negative affirmation of these questions is, simultaneously, the fabric of our repeating attempts to transgress the domain of non-play and non-fiction. This means, essentially, that we should acknowledge these questions while also trying to prevent them from grasping too much of our attention amidst the alien space. We know that the joker is there; but we do not want him to be part of the story. We know that the referee is present in a game of soccer; but we resent him if he decides to kick the ball himself and score goals.

Before we make room for the relentless fieldwork of Jack Bauer in the American action series *24* – and in it witness the comfortable interchangeability of rules and fiction in game world – we will dwell on the concept of *gameplay*.

3 Gameplay: Two Versions

Presently there are a number of gameplay definitions, ranging from Sid Meier's famous assertion of 'interesting choices' to Richard Rouse's concept in which the vibrant iterations of user input and machine output is the decisive factor (Rouse 2005). Further, 'gameplay' seem to drift indefinably between psychological categories, as in the emphasis on the concept of 'flow', and more formal conceptualisations often derived from computer science.

Here, I will however suggest a slightly different gameplay terminology. One level of gameplay is the actualization of a specific stratification of rules, strategies, and interactions as well as the realization of a certain amalgamation of commands, plans, and paths. A second level, which is equally important since it is an inherent part of the fascination of playing games, is the interconnection of playing in an open environment and focusing on presence *and* gaming within a fixed, discrete framework (the 'board') and paying strict attention to progression.

3.1 First version: striate lines and discrete boundaries

In line with economic game theory we can define games as complex, rule based interaction systems consisting of these three key mechanisms: absolute rules, contingent strategies, and possible interaction patterns. Game rules are absolute in the sense that while the players may question the rationality of the rules at hand; they are nevertheless obliged to obey, to 'play by the rules'. Rules are therefore absolute commands (Neumann & Morgenstern 1953) and unquestionable imperatives. They transcend semantic issues, cultural signification, moral agendas, etc. This does not, incidentally, preclude the fact that game rules are discussed in a cultural or ethical milieu.

In contrast to rules, strategies are contingent, nonabsolute entities since they count as the more or less detailed plans for the execution of turns, choices, and actions in the game. Other strategies than the ones actually carried out could have been outlined and performed. Both in the shape of short-term tactics and as long-term schemes, strategies are contingent. In economic game theory, a strategy is an overall plan for how to act in the assembly of different states that the game may be in (Juul 2006). Game theory studies the affiliations of the rules and the strategic behaviour in competitive situations (Smith 2006). Finally, interaction patterns are the moves and choices, which become part of the game being played thus interfering with the restrictions and options of the game. As the implementation of game strategies tend to cluster in selected regions of the possibility space of the game (in approximation of what is known as the ‘dominant strategy’ in game theory) forming a path through the game space, we may even insinuate that the interaction patterns, taken as a whole, *are* the game itself – especially if we view it from the perspective of the player (Holland 1998). Interaction patterns are the possible as opposed to necessary combinations or the emergent outcome of rules and strategies. This differentiation can be listed even more briefly:

- Rules are commands.
- Strategies are plans for game executions.
- Interactions patterns define the actual path through the game and specify the topography of human-computer (or player vs. rule) dynamics.

Clearly, the interaction patterns work as ‘middle ground’ as they occupy a domain located between the machine that upholds the rules (the computer) and the human player who has to find and optimize the best way to accomplish the goal of the strategy.

The notion of game play, which we shall pursue also as regards the relation between free play and confined gaming, involves all three levels of a game, which also explains the difficulty in defining the concept properly. We can refer to the following definition as the *ontological* or formal definition.

[Gameplay: Definition 1] *Game play is the actualization of a specific stratification of rules, strategies, and interactions as well as the realization of a certain amalgamation of commands, plans, and paths.*

For a player, a successful game play means a delicate balance between knowing the rules and mapping one’s strategy in accordance with both rules and the possible actions of opponents. Games should be equally challenging and rewarding, hovering between boredom and anxiety hereby assuring a space of flow through the network of choices. For a computerized game system, a successful game play implies a balance between fixed rules and the control of player input in variable settings.

What defines a rule? A rule, being algorithmic in its core design, consists of a simple, unequivocal sentence, e.g., “you are not allowed to use hands while the ball is on the pitch”. Hereby, a rule constitutes the possibility space of a game by clearly stating limitations (not use hands) as well as opportunities (the ball is on the pitch).

It is always possible to define a game both in negative and positive terms: rules limit actions; they determine the range of choices in the possibility space; they encircle the arenas to be played in; yet they also frame what can be done.

At this point, I am speaking of all games, i.e., both traditional games, including sports, and computer games. *Heroes of Might and Magic* rests on rules stored in and processed by a computer. Chess or *Monopoly*, by contrast, relies on rules not accumulated in the database and algorithms of a computer but written down on paper and stored in the players' mind during the play. In a game of soccer, for example, a referee administers such rules ultimately by reference to the *FIFA Handbook*. Implicit rules that are normally considered exterior to the 'real' rules (e.g., clock in chess matches) must be engaged explicitly in digital games. These rules have to be programmed as well. Weather conditions or the general physics of a soccer game are usually taken as 'out-of-game' features in the real world. When we simulate a soccer game in a computer, however, the rules of soccer and the general physics (including random variables such as surface granularity, crowds, time of day, etc.) must be built into the rule algorithms and the input-output control of the computer.

Rules specify the constitution of the playing 'deck' or, more broadly, the playing 'field'. In games, behavioural patterns inside this field are limited, constrained, and highly codified (Huizinga 1994; Caillois 2001; Walther 2003). Rules are guidelines that direct, restrict, and channel behaviour in a formalized, closed environment so that artificial and clear conditions inside the 'magic circle' of play are created (Salen & Zimmerman 2004). The outside of this circle, reality or nonplay, is essentially irrelevant to game play. Confronted with unambiguous rules, strategies (or tactics) might entail best practice solutions variable to the given rule constraints. Hereafter, interaction patterns map the various player interventions and can hence be viewed as a texture of moves and choices overlain on top of the possibility space of the game. Furthermore, interaction patterns can refer to the social and competitive intermingling of players during the fulfilment of the game. In that respect, the patterns correspond to the outcome of absolute rules and social dynamics.

The formal organization of games can be regarded as a *parameter space*. In this space, the current state of the game counts as a point and ultimately a dimension in the parameter space. A played game has therefore n possible state dimensions. In Tic-Tac-Toe, for instance, the nine squares constitute the parameter space of the game and thus the possibility domain for the arrangement of the board pieces. The rules of the game define the possible edges in the space connecting states. Rules define the possible game (or the initial framing of the game), whereas a particular game is a path through the state space. This latter particularity rests, consequently, on a *variability space*. The crucial factor is that there can be no variability or multiple paths through the possibility space of a game without the compulsory parameters of the game. Hence, the parameter space constitutes the transcendental level of the game, whereas the particular game path expresses the contingent realization of the space.

This dialectic between parameter space and actual game path (or variability space) also sheds some light on why games are complex; basically it is because there is an uneven relation between the unchanging set of rules and the actual and changing realization of a particular game. This asymmetrical tie between rules and

realization (or rules and strategies) can be termed game emergence. Most often it is impossible to predetermine the actual moves and outcome of a game only by knowing the set of rules. Also, most games are games of imperfect information (Nash 1997). At the outset, the rules of chess are simple, and yet the wealth of distinct chess playing tactics is quite enormous. A child can memorize chess rules, but to master all grand openings in the actual game is probably a lifetime achievement.

3.2 Second version: open lines and reterritorializing spaces

It is however a characteristic feature of many types of fiction (in the widest possible sense, and notwithstanding if this feature counts as an impossible Utopia) that they wish to expand the gaming space, often by reconfiguring the social landscape of 'worlds' into a dense grid of game objects, game goals, and game worlds, thus obscuring the demarcations between the real and the virtual. Very often, stories, movies, and other narratives play with these demarcations.

What, then, is most important? Is it the game itself, or is it rather the social and geographical infrastructure that supports it? Who (or what) has the upper hand? Is it the relational complexities of the characters or perhaps the fluent vectors of the game world? In the following we will explore this tension between the telic game orientation and the presence of a world surrounding the former by drawing upon the recent paradigm of pervasive computing (Walther 2007a).

There is a fine line between being there, somewhere, and being there with a purpose. The mundane space that a human subject inhabits is not by nature geometrical; rather, it is structured in accordance with matter-of-fact actions. In such a spatial environment, the various orientations are related to directions (practical vectors), places, ranges of space, and things, in contrast to dimensions, points, lines, and absolute objects. The space for action is a praxis-architecture – a phenomenological space, we might call it – that is not defined by length, height, and width, but rather by territory, proximity, and distance (Nielsen 1996). A personal space zeroes in on the required equipment and relations to institute meaning, whereas a geometrical space is continuous and unbounded.

Territorial exploration, whether in the real, physical world or in the flowing realm of one's fantasy, involves the incessant modification of intentions. It is an advanced procedure of trial-and-error set in a socio-semantic circumstance. You go right. Not interesting. You move to the left. Wait, here's something. You rush straight forward, and the result is immediate and loads of action. However, the elusive co-existence of presence – being there – and intentionality – moving around for a reason – is also known as *rules*. Mapping a place through adventurous discovery in order to figure out the story underneath the space, and possibly inventing new ones in the same process, is all about *playing*. Learning to move and advance in a space filled with discrete norms of orientation, meaning that you can do this but not that, is the art of *gaming*.

Thus, there are two firmly interwoven modes of game epistemology: there is *play-space* and there is *game-space*. Accordingly, there is *play-mode* and *game-mode*. Together they form the much hyped and commonly misunderstood term "game-play". We call those games that mix up the tangibility of every day spaces

with the closed information spaces found in digital computers *pervasive games*. Such games may be the next generation in computer games. Make people move around. Don't tie them in front of the screen. Moreover, these games are particularly captivating because they deliberately place the relation between rules and world voyaging, gaming and playing, at the nucleus of the very rule system itself. In other words: you learn how to master the rules of the game by playing them out in the real world. Pervasive gaming is game-play out in the open.

In the play mode, one does not want to fall back into reality (although there is always the risk of doing so). In the game mode, it is usually a matter of climbing upwards to the next level and not losing sight of structure. Play is about presence, while game is about progression (Walther 2003). Play-space could be a city, and game-space could be the rules and informational network dictating what can and cannot be done during game-play. Or, more to the point, play-space could be a fictitious world, with its binding rules, and game-space the rules and missions within this world: the teleology of the protagonist, the endpoint of his trajectory.

Look at people playing. One notices that there is always the inherent but beguiling hazard of being "caught" in reality. Nothing is more distressing for play than the aggressive intermission of reality which at all times jeopardizes play *as* play or simply threatens to terminate the privileges of play. Then it's back to normal life – which may be, incidentally, a giant gamespace in its own right, as McKenzie Wark suggests (Wark 2007; cf. also Galloway 2006). This is, of course, a structural feature of all play and, hence, of all game-play. This is true of chess and soccer. It is also apparent in *Doom* and *Myst*. Interruption and termination must be avoided at all costs – in the continuous pursuit of having fun – but, since they are inescapable, they must be built in to the very "being" or ontology of playing games.

Now, consider pervasive gaming, game-play out in the open. As a player I rush down a street in order to amass my next item to be uploaded via my PDA so that my game-buddy at home can keep track of my doings and goal-seeking so far. It's 4 pm, there is heavy traffic, and I am momentarily barred from reaching the corner with the alacrity I wished for.

In chess, there are no strident interruptions between two or more discrete fields. I move my queen independently of physics, be it weather, traffic jams, or the occasionally bad habits of my fellow citizens. In a game of soccer, you block your opponent, and he tries to tackle you. However, a nice set of training principles that look for ways to avoid the physicality of blocking is always an option. That is what the refinements of dribble are all about. In pervasive game-play, mixing play-space and game-space, "real" problems, as the ones described above, remain, well, real problems. If not, the aesthetics of producing eloquent game mechanics turns into a matter of ethic. I do not, in the quest of fulfilling the game's teleology, knock down the old – real – lady on the sidewalk only because she is refraining me from targeting the "pac man" further down the road a little bit faster.

Therefore, we must be careful in judging the fun factor of game-play. It is not only the city, the social context, in itself, that is the locus of enjoyment in the pervasive game-play. Yes, I can go explore, and yes, I meet people, and yes, the site of navigation has become much wider than a trivial board. Nevertheless, the promise of space might indeed become the constraints of the game. Serious gamers do not want to waste their time looking for "interesting" places to explore. They much

rather want to understand the structure so as to move forward revealing new game areas or climb upwards in the hierarchy of levels.

Why? Because play is centred in a discovery of open spaces that invite observation through the duration of temporality. Gradually, one learns how to pilot inside play, and since the completion of more and more successful tasks takes time, it corresponds to the distinctive forms that keep differentiating the play system into finer grades of subsystems. One inhabits spaces like these via certain as-if-structures; one assumes a role and lives out characters whether in the form of other players or agents that one can adapt as a player. The gamut of play equalises a measurement of its geometry – how big is the playing field, and where are its borders? And these lengths and widths become in turn the source of gaming's internalisation of both geometrical space and discrete progression.

In contrast, play seems to focus on investigations of semantics, since the task is, not only to measure its space, but furthermore to elaborate upon its modes of interpretation and means for re-interpretation. Not only do we explore a world while playing. Its potential meaning and the stories we can invent in that respect also drive us. Play spaces tend to expand, either in structural complexity or in physical extent. This expansion is further reflected in the praxis of play, for instance when players argue over the exact thresholds of a play domain. Another feature that distinguishes playing from gaming is the notion of presence, as I pointed out earlier. Obviously, the sensation of presence is tightly interwoven with phenomenological concepts like “immersion” and “flow”. Play commands presence. We have to be there – not only *be* there, but also be *there*. This is the double meaning of Heidegger's '*Dasein*': *dasein* (being *there*) and *dasein* (*being* there). We go with the flow; or, rather, while swallowed by the presence of playing we are *in* the flow, as Mihály Csíkszentmihályi claims (Csíkszentmihályi 1990). A game's success is intimately tied to the organisation of space and time. Gamers need to trust this organisation. Since a game hinges on a certain finite structure in order to promote infinite realisations of it – the correlation of rules and tactics – the very articulating of presence so important for play must already be presupposed in a game. One already knows in a game that the mission is to *keep on gaming*, which really means, in my vocabulary, to *keep on playing*, that is, to prolong the sensation of presence. The energy can then instead be directed towards elucidation of the game's structure. "How do I get to the next level?" and not "Why do I play?"

Although one should indisputably respect the ethical boundaries of pervasive games that transport game-play out in the open – just as one should bear in mind that the metaphysics of fictional worlds often goes beyond the natural laws and moral confines of everyday life; one does not want to hang on too long for the old lady to cross the street. While waiting, the question above might turn up thus threatening to disintegrate the exquisitely balanced halves of gaming (to progress) and playing (to be present).

Thus, we can put forward the second definition of gameplay. In continuance of the first one, we can refer to the following definition as the *epistemological* or player-oriented definition:

[Gameplay: Definition 2] *Gameplay is that kind of player activity that intentionally involves the asymmetrical relation between world exploration and level progression.*

gression.

This is exactly the drama in *24*, to which we will now turn. The tension between exploration and progression is cast, in the famous TV show, as one between *territorialisation* and *vectorization*.

4 The Musings of a Dromological Gamer: Jack Bauer in *24*

At some point in the future, Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran may be looked upon as the inventors of a wholly new brand of television and new media, pawing the way for success series such as *Lost* and *Prison Break*. They are the creators of *24*, the TV series that first aired on the American Fox Channel in November 2001, and which, in the time of writing, is halfway through its seventh season in the US. Although this section deals primarily with some rather abstract claims about the inherent ‘game’ character of *24*, it will be helpful to quickly provide the highlights of the plot and scope of the series limiting ourselves to the first three seasons or ‘Days’.

The first twenty-four episodes take place on the day of the Presidential primary in Los Angeles, where Jack Bauer, chief field agent at the Los Angeles-based CTU (Counter Terrorist Unit), and his distinguished team of men and women uncover a plot to gun down Presidential contender David Palmer. With only 24 hours to detect the killer and save Palmer’s life, Jack must also deal with his stressful marriage and the unexpected disappearance of this troubled teenage daughter. This juxtaposition of big-time political conflicts and micro-sociological issues becomes an enduring theme of the *24* universe from this point on. In Season Two, now-President David Palmer reaches out to Jack, who is called upon to stop another terrorist plot with global implications. A nuclear bomb is set to go off sometime that day in Los Angeles. Of course, Jack is the only one who can stop it. Three years later (in fiction time), in Season Three, Jack has just captured and detained a powerful drug lord named Ramon Salazar. Salazar’s brother arranges to blackmail the US Government with the threat of releasing a virus that will kill millions if they do not set him free. Palmer seeks re-election for a second term, together with a crooked chief of staff, and a girlfriend who may not be telling him all he needs to know.

24 masterfully deploys *transmedialization* by letting new media speak to each other, constantly pushing and blurring the demarcations that used to define the specificity of media and their contents, hence offering a rich platform for the user’s cut-paste-and-consume approach to media. What is more interesting to us here, however, is the series’ use of *dromology*, or speed. It’s tricky. On one level, ‘speed’ signifies the up-beat tempo that is personified by Jack Bauer and laid out in the series’ swift succession of images and contemporary styles. On another level, speed works as an underlying ‘code’ – a play-space of fiction – that produces the game-like qualities of the various media of *24* (the weekly TV shows themselves; the accompanying website and Play Station game; the short episodes for mobile phones, etc.). There is a racing game embedded in the *24* website (or used to be, anyway); Jack is a fictional character in a game world where he has to act and think

fast; and speed is further essential to the recognition of us – the viewer-surfers and gamers – as fast consumers of the media circularity of *24*. Thus, speed is not just something that the series is ‘about’; speed is also, and more decisively, the code necessary for the production of meaning in *24* as a whole. In sum, echoing the article’s initial remarks, *24* looks and *feel* like a game; it *behaves* like one; and perhaps it even *is* one.

By placing speed at the front of the narrative *24* purifies two of the central traits of (all) fiction: depersonalization and trajectory. Like all fiction, including games, novels, and movies, *24* is a framed difference that makes a difference and in which the ‘joker’ not only asks us to identify with the teleology of the story, as it unfolds in real-time, but, moreover, to *be* that very teleology – or, at the very least, to allow the personifying modality of this teleological orientation to happen.

Crucial to *24* is the *vectorization of speed* (Virilio) as well as the constant and deliberately stressful *reterritorialization of space* (Deleuze). One might hypothesize that the ‘real’ main character of *24* is not, as it were, Jack Bauer, but speed. One might further claim that the series is evidence of a new mode of fictional worldmaking in which the art of speed – dromology, as it has been coined by Paul Virilio – in combination with path finding and cognitive mapping, as known from computer games, is scrutinized. In fewer words: what we have in *24* is not an epic, Aristotelian world, but a game world, a *Grand Theft Auto* indeed deprived of iconic citations from latter day criminology yet hardened by a frenetic juxtaposition with the moral agenda of unipolar world power. This is how entertaining the Bush Doctrine can possibly be – without the *gangsta rap* (cf. Sample 2008).

An enduring trademark of the *24* brand is the porous network of screens and sub-screens, and the effectiveness of this technological stamp is verified in the beginning and finale of an episode. When the plot thickens, and the digital watch approaches full hour, we are reminded each week that Jack has more than a few calamities to take care of. Compared to the computer game interface the split-screen mode locates between first person shooters and real-time strategy games. Repeatedly the camera is placed extremely close to the ‘body’ of Jack’s point of view so that we experience the events from his position in space. This is an example of *internal focalisation*, i.e. a spatial *modus operandi* that enables the viewer/player to perceive space ‘from within’ analogous to computer games like *Quake*, *Doom*, and *Unreal Tournament*.

However, the screen is also designed so that we may concurrently access different layers of information and embark upon story trajectories similar to strategy and role playing games (e.g. *Baldur’s Gate*, *Starcraft*, and *World of Warcraft*). This spatial technique is called *external focalisation* and propels forward a logic further epitomized in *24*’s frequent shots of computer screen as props and gadgets within the story. CTU headquarters has of course lots of them, but Jack himself also employs a choice of palmtops, PDA’s, GPS systems, and much more. All these devices including the allusion to shooters and strategy games are part and parcel of the intrinsic tension between logistics and structure on one side and chaotic density on the other. And since the audience cannot rise above the visual representation of real-time – that would acquire flash backs, switching time sections, etc. – the characters of *24* do the job for us. They provide overviews, get hold of status reports, sneak up reliable intelligences, and download intelligible crime topographies.

Noy Thrupkaew, a TV addict with an attitude, in a comment March 22, 2002, on *The American Prospect* website, quotes a 'fellow viewer' for stating that the show is incessantly 'predicated on stupidity'. In line with this browbeat assertion, the columnist recommends a two-pronged amendment to *24* creators Surnow and Cochran: '1) Work on characterization, please. Let Kim [Jack's daughter] have a brain [...] Give the characters more nuance [...] 2) Don't put in a plot twist if it means that a character has to act exceptionally stupid to make it happen.'" (<http://www.prospect.org/webfeatures/2002/03/thrupkaew-n-03-22.html>; accessed January 19, 2009).

To me, Thrupkaew's suggestion fails to notice at least one vital aspect of the postmodern make-up of *24*. A characterization of the show should not necessarily concern itself exclusively with the living beings in it. The speed and beat that constitute the brand of the series – which owes its cinematic effects to the stark pressures of its real-time plot – in themselves serve to 'characterize' the bleak matter-of-fact atmosphere that has so exhilarated common viewers. Speed is what matters. This many sound exaggerated; however, speed is the real 'I' of *24*. Perhaps, speed is even the 'private eye' of the series. The plot is one of *dromos*, which means that the manufacturing of speed takes precedence over the unfolding of the show as narrative; at least if we read 'narrative' in the traditional sense with its keen combination of logos, ethos, and pathos.

In *24*, dromology operates through territorialization and vectorization. Both relate to the spaces that the characters inhabit and pass through, for instance, the urban space or military facilities. What do these dromological phenomena stand for in *24*?

- 1) *Territorialization* refers to the fact that Jack Bauer is always defending a certain region of the world. For this reason, his actions are constrained similar to a game with fixed rules, quantifiable outcome, and a semantics of winning or losing. Moreover, the structuring of this area and its topographical nodes dog his measures. From a political and military perspective, territory is a space to be defended and secured, and to be invaded and colonized. Within modern societies, such territory was defined (and occasionally defied) by the nation-state. In the contemporary world that *24* depicts – the site of Hardt and Negri's *Empire* – the city in which Bauer operates has been displaced by a machinery of speed and power. 'Los Angeles' comes in handy, with its massive, apocalyptic allusions and disorientation: the city is, simultaneously, the desert, and the desert can easily be mistaken for the city. Clearly, 'LA' is merely a synonym for game-space. At any range, instantaneous military violence can be launched from hidden spaces, such as airplanes, nuclear submarines, missiles, and biochemical sources. Thus, the territorially defined space is a threatened and highly determined or overcoded space.
- 2) *Vectorization* signifies, in *24*, that vector quantities are equally – or perhaps more – important than speed itself. While speed (50 miles per hour) is a scalar, and the same goes for distance, velocity (60 miles per hour south) is a vector. Vectorization, then, implies both the magnitude and the direction of an object, such as driving Jack's car swiftly from point A to point B. Vectorization transforms an open territorial space (a play-space) into a

closed, structured, and networked space (a game-space). The vectorization of speed through territorialization is a matter of controlling the borders of a (region of) space by structuring the possibilities of movements within this (region of) space.

Paul Virilio argues that the role of speed has previously been overlooked in accounts of the organization of civilizations and their politics, and that speed is crucial to the production of wealth and power (Virilio & Lotringer 1998). According to Virilio, speed is a measure of a triumphant dominance over, and control of, space. Speed, moreover, is a variable of how information is carried over distances. Resolutely rejecting the forms of economic determinism that have been associated with Marxism, Virilio's dromology focuses on those instruments that accelerate and intensify speed, and which augment the wealth and power of those groups who control them. In his vision, the military comes to control speed, thus becoming a governing power in society that affects all layers of a differentiated society.

The vectorization of speed within a constrained territory is a matter of momentum plus direction, or speed in conjunction with movement with a mission. It thus embodies the oldest mode of story telling – *questing* – with an in-built drive towards (a constantly shifting) real-time *raison d'être* (cf. Aarseth 2003). The invariable tasks that Jack Bauer must undertake throughout the seasons do not merely follow from the abiding narrative and the unyielding plot. Rather, they should be seen as the multifarious amalgamation of activities which, taken as a whole, delineate the errands and whereabouts of Bauer. These can be grouped into three descriptions: 1) The task of 24's protagonist is to locate nodes within a network – in which case Jack is a 'surfer'. 2) The mission is to map a semantic space – so that Jack is further a skilled 'interpreter' (the fact that he is able to do exactly this, as time rushes by, explains his enduring professionalism). 3) Finally, Jack must pursue focal points within a topographical space. This latter activity involves Jack as a 'gamer' who is constantly on the lookout for new levels, access points, and passages leading from one region of space to another. At times, the frenzied pace of unlocking new levels and running through the 'wormholes' that link local sites to each other in 24's grand geography appears cynical: He has already been there, he has already done that. At other times, however, there is a sense of novelty and fresh panic invested in the many hidden, disorienting, and vulnerable areas of LA and its vicinity. The vectorization of speed suggests that the unfolding of space is important, not only in the obvious sense that it participates in the conventional extrication of the plot and its structures, but also because the unfolding is set here within a networked, abstract space in which qualities of surfing, interpreting, and gaming are vital.

Jack's mission, accordingly, is closely related to a *gameplay*: the formalized interaction that occurs when a player follows the rules of a game and experiences its system through play. Also, the subtle arrangement of discrete (or 'digital') pieces of a potentially liberating, and therefore threatening, play-space seems to dictate continuous and entertaining transformations of the open to the closed, or from deterritorialization to reterritorialization, as Deleuze would say. During the nomadic flux of motion and rest, hovering from plateau to plateau, Deleuze and Guattari insist, deterritorialization uproots vectors amidst the rhizomatic landscape.

This leads in turn to a reterritorialization, in which the thing is reimplanted and reincoded in a new circumstance (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 158). In the words of computer game philosopher Ian Bogost, this recoding is also an ‘overcoding’; ‘it creates a new insertion of the object with a different level or assemblage, from which it can again uproot and reconstitute itself through a rupture in its center’ (Bogost 2006: 141). In the midst of Jack’s incessant running and torturing, the binding rules of *24*’s fictional world very often get confused with its mission rules. Sometimes, Jack pauses and tries to understand the rules of the world (its ‘board’) that demands a certain outcome of him (a specific position on the ‘board’). And yet, due to the real-time scheme of things, there rarely seems time enough to question neither the nature of the underlying frame of fiction or the superficial game missions.

24’s ‘game’ consists of a game world, game rules, and game mechanics. The fictional *world* (or territory) in *24* is commonly the city of Los Angeles; the *rules* usually address the attempt to secure a territory (as in *Counter-Strike*), disentangle a conspiracy (as in *Deus Ex*), and prevent a catastrophe from happening; and the *mechanics* apply to the adjustable ‘objects’ within the game world, whether characters, locations, or events. To put this in Virilio’s terms, game mechanics involves those instruments that accelerate and intensify speed (Virilio & Lotringer 1998). Movements in urban space, thus, bring out an order that, in *24*, is depicted in terms of a contingency of actions and an intention to control such movements by locating those military and political technologies that will be able to master them. The show does not retain characterization for the sake of Aristotelian ethos. Rather, depth is added so as to mount the kind of suspense-driven permissiveness that *24* still needs to act out its complex twists and polycentric plotlines. These are the vectors of the military, political, and game-infected territory that Bauer (and we as audience) inhabit.

So, Jack is basically a gameplayer in an abstract game territory where the vectorization of speed – swiftness plus direction – is imperative. It is worth noting that the purest form of the vectorization of speed might be found in *24: Conspiracy*. This spin-off of the TV show by Fox Entertainment Group Inc. is a series of 24 one-minute episodes, intended for cell phones, that portray different characters running in a similar world, and which focus on a CIA counter terrorist unit devoted to preventing attacks on US soil.

Such stripping of typical narrative features in favor of abstract, depersonalized trajectories throughout a game territory, in which vectors are more vital than any ‘deep’ implementation of human subjects, can be viewed as a new trend in the production of television (and cinematic) drama. New media, such as games and cell phones, or the embedded and wearable technology of pervasive computing, are the platforms upon which this ‘play’ between worlds and with speed and territorialization is most likely to occur – and occur successfully. This is so because these platforms, in their very technological construction, seem to facilitate and necessitate *simplicity*; there is no need for subtle narratives, as long as the pace is wild and the vectors or places to go are interesting enough. In addition, the new vectorization of speed ties in with all the infomercials and transmedial phenomena of the *24* media assemblage. Both the TV show and the website operate within the same ludic logic and the same game world. This further means that the *24* television series as well as

the accompanying site are really subsets of a larger game facility or game network. The game, which is a virtual concept more than a material object, is prior to everything else. Only *then* we get the TV series (and afterwards the partial console game, and so on). Cynically speaking, this is perfect franchise: the grounding game world can easily be reinstated elsewhere or be made to fit within other media frameworks.

As the theoretician of modern networks *par excellence*, Manuel Castells, says in the first volume of his monumental work on *The Information Age*, the ‘topology defined by networks determines that the distance (or intensity and frequency of interaction) between two points (or social positions) is shorter (or more frequent, or more intense) if both points are nodes in a network than if they do not belong to the same network’ (Castells 1996: 470). The point is that the different media of *24* are part of or nodes within the same network, and that the transmedial configuration of this network owes much to a gaming universe. Mastering or merely interacting with the connections of nodes on the web becomes a way of experiencing the plot of the show – which, in turn, narrates the idea of moving rapidly through networked space, using game rules and game mechanics to ensure the orientation (and enjoy the disorientation as part of the ride) of this enterprise toward its goal. It comes as no surprise, then, that Fox has – finally – incorporated an archetypal game, the ‘drive like Bauer’ feature, into the wealth of textual and visual information on the web. Equally, it is no wonder, if one takes the increasing focus on gameplay rather than narrative ethos seriously, that Fox is spreading its commercial interests to the fields of mobile entertainment and game consoles.

5 Concluding Remarks

In Danny Boyle’s movie *The Beach* (2000), adapted from the novel by Alex Garland, we follow Far East backpacker Richard who stumbles across a paradisiacal choral island. Here he encounters a modern hippie society whose patriarchs and matriarchs are eager to protect their secret from the sinister world outside. As in *Lord of the Flies* and with loads of intertextual links to *Apocalypse Now* (“there is nothing like the smell of napalm in the morning”), *The Marathon Man* (“is it safe?”), Peter Weir’s *The Mosquito Coast*, as well as a future reference to the TV series *Lost*, the island community collapses into rival factions, and thus the catastrophe seems unavoidable. In the midst of this conspiratorial process Richard is excommunicated from the idyll and cast away into the woods where he quickly dissolves into youthful madness. *The Beach* is still ideological old school in that it carefully resurrects the idea of the common good, opposes any exalted individualism, exposes the inevitable shortcomings of the self-conscious rebels, and believes in the communitarian urge for societal striving. By contrast, its later successor, *Lost*, can be said to offer a cultural critique of video games in the implicit argument that popular culture increasingly casts life itself as a kind of game — where one is only truly a survivor if one can avoid being voted off the island.

The Beach humorously cites from a young generation’s preferred media and entertainment culture. Even so, in the woods with Richard, the film cannot help but

showing the remediation and the intertextual 'machine'. Boyle depicts lurking paranoia and the dissemination of the human self by recreating the cinematic screen as a Nintendo interface. Richard runs through the tropical forest, and in a cycle of shots he is malformed into something that resembles a game character in a 3D shooter – complete with GameBoy Advance point scores, inventory list, and menu bar at the bottom of the screen. In a short glimpse Richard is not a lively human being but a figure made of pixels, an avatar that gathers points and game objects, crosses obstacles, and eventually becomes a mediated centre within a post-ludic framework. In Boyle's vision the ongoing import of gadgets and objects of a broad leisure culture is elevated from a theme in society to explicit and visible features on a screen. The world that Richard takes shelter in as a shield against the outer world, and the reality with which he secures a pedestal of references, is exactly that of computer games (especially the portable ones), the animations, and the 'neo-mythological' film classics. Therefore, it is totally natural that his intrapsychic condition is represented as a gamer's interface, and, similarly, that the gaze of the film colonizes the internal world of Richard in the shape of a concrete image of the cited pop culture.

Ludology is quite right in postulating a genuine, and unsurpassable, difference between the fixed causalities of books and movies as opposed to the interactive user friendliness of computer games. Codex literature and cinema are for the mind; computer games are for the fingers. This insight should not, however, block investigations into the rich intercrossing of rules of fiction and rules of gamespace. How else should we explain the artistic beauty of *Memento* or *The Matrix* if not through the style and history of videogames? Rather than to continue to polarize methodologies focusing on either 'fiction' or 'interactivity', claiming an unbridgeable gap between narratology and ludology, it would be much more rewarding to consider a number of media forms – the ones we have, and the ones we will see in the future – as more or less reflected derivations of differentiated framings. Between a stifflingly traditionalist and a wildly expansionist approach 'narrative' can be scrutinized as 'avatars of story', i.e. cognitive constructs with an invariant nucleus of meaning that can however mold into a variety of shapes (Ryan 2006: xviii). There are many similarities between undertaking a mission and thrusting a narrative; and there are many ways in which the binding rules of a fiction may be transformed into the exact edges of a discrete game-space. As an ancient mode of culture, 'to tell a story' might share distinct features with the invention of the game board as well as with the myths and phantasmagoria of quests and their narrated/playable travels from A to B to C. The telling freedom of *Grand Theft Auto* is not, as it would seem, the vast splendor of graphical richness and million bit racing animations. Liberation occurs when the gamer – I am thinking specifically of Jim Munroe's short documentation *My Trip to Liberty City* – creates a *machinima* drawn from a counter-ludic, silent rebellion opposite the grim back-story of *GTA*. A new game, one that is cinematic and still playful, rather than ludic and predetermined, is thus born out of the entire play-space of the Rockstar blockbuster.

'Playability', hence, signifies the ontology of framed experiences at its most basic, or indeed naïve, level; it merely states that the material at hand (a book, a movie, or a game) demands a linear journey along its paths, a confirmation of its binding forces (so that one is not bored or alienated into asking the 'why do I

play?’ question), and a desire to continuously reterritorialize the open ‘play’ into the more rigid and striated ‘game’. In fact, this is an anti-Deleuzian claim; rather than the call for a ‘Body without Organs’ that thrives, in playspace, like a madman amidst the open-ended, smoothed autonomy of nomadic anarchy (Deleuze 1987: 149ff.), the underlying thesis here is one of an inevitable return to a ‘striated’, grid-fixed game universe. Ultimately, ‘flight lines’ becomes telic lines; not necessarily unmovable guidelines, but guidelines nonetheless. Such is the task of Jack Bauer, in *24*, that echoes the productive Utopia of the media conglomerate and the allegorical game plan of the open-minded ludologists: He turns the world, as we know it, into a game.

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