

Re-configuring interactivity, agency and pleasure in the education and computer games debate – using Zizek’s concept of interpassivity to analyse educational play

Caroline Pelletier
The Knowledge Lab
Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media
Institute of Education
University of London
23-29 Emerald Street
London WC1 3QS

Tel: +44 (0)20 7763 2182
c.pelletier@ioe.ac.uk

Author details: Caroline Pelletier is a researcher at the London Knowledge Lab, University of London, UK. She manages a research and development project entitled 'Making Games: developing games authoring software for educational and creative use'. Caroline co-teaches 'Gaming, Gaming Cultures and Education' on the MA in Media, Culture and Communication. Her research focuses on how new media technologies shape conceptions of identity construction, knowledge, learning and teaching.

Abstract: Digital or computer games have recently attracted the interest of education researchers and policy-makers for two main reasons: their interactivity, which is said to allow greater agency, and their inherent pleasures, which is linked to increased motivation to learn. However, the relationship between pleasure, agency and motivation in educational technologies is under-theorised. This paper aims to situate these concepts within a framework that might identify more precisely how games can be considered to be educational. The framework is based on Zizek’s theory of subjectivity in cyberspace, and in particular his notion of interpassivity, which is defined in relation to interactivity. The usefulness of this concept is explored firstly by examining three approaches to theorizing cyberspace and their respective manifestations in key texts on educational game play. Zizek’s analysis of cyberspace in terms of socio-symbolic relations is then outlined to suggest how games might be considered educational insofar as they provide opportunities to manipulate and experiment with the rules underpinning our sense of reality and identity. This resembles Brecht’s notion of the educational value of theatre. The conclusion emphasizes that the terms on which games are understood to be educational relates to the social interests which education is understood to serve.

The value of digital technologies in education is often defined in terms of interactivity, which is said to allow learners exercise greater agency and, as a result, sustain more pleasurable forms of learning. The Department for Education and Skills’ (DfES) consultation paper on e-learning, for example, states that interactive technologies “empower learners”, allowing them to take greater responsibility for their own

development (2003, p. 7). Digital technologies are also understood to remove constraints from teachers, who want to be innovative in the way they teach, as well as education institutions beset by financial concerns (p. 8). In this vision of e-learning, interactivity, pleasure and agency are fully aligned, with increases in one seen to lead automatically to increases in the other two, for all parties involved in education.

As interactive media par excellence, digital games have attracted growing interest from education policy-makers and researchers. The e-learning consultation document states that games have set a standard for interactive technologies that learners have now come to expect from educational software and suggests that game-makers should be encouraged to collaborate with education experts to develop tools for schools (DfES 2003). This follows earlier policy advice issued to game and software developers on using game-like interfaces and designs to make educational software more motivating and effective (Dawes & Dumbleton 2001; McFarlane *et al* 2002). Policy bodies have also commissioned literature reviews on the use of computer games in UK schools to inform decision-making (Mitchell & Savill-Smith 2004; Kirriemuir & McFarlane 2004).

In this paper, I will use Zizek's writings on subjectivity in cyberspace (1997, 1999a and b, 2004a and b) to analyse different articulations of educational play and the ways in which they define interactivity, agency and pleasure. As these interrelated concepts have tended to be used somewhat loosely and uncritically in the literature on games and education, the purpose of using Zizek's work is to explore them, and the relations between them, within a theoretical framework that can identify them more precisely. Zizek's work also enables us to address Cuban's (1986) point that the problem with much of the research on educational technology is that it tends to view technology in technical rather than social and cultural terms. To date, much of the debate on games and learning has been framed in terms of effectiveness rather than social interest, neglecting the social nature of learning and knowledge. In reviewing the various articulations of educational play, my intention is to foreground social and political questions and examine how game play might be conceptualized as a social practice involving power relations. Zizek's work does not provide a pedagogical solution, but points the way towards how one might be imagined to attain certain social, cultural or political goals. This paper will not therefore make an argument on the basis of how best to use games in the classroom, but will suggest that the way games are used as learning technologies relates to wider social interests.

My focus will be on Zizek's notion of interpassivity, in particular how it is defined in the 1999 essay, 'Is it possible to traverse the fantasy in cyberspace?'. Interpassivity is defined in reaction to the more common notion of interactivity, and refers to the way digital technologies position people as responders. Zizek's prime example is the *tamagochi*, the virtual pet that captivates its carers by issuing orders: "the satisfaction is provided by our being compelled to care for the object any time it wants – that is, by fulfilling its demands" (1999a, p. 107). In contrast to non-digital toys, such as dolls, which are passive and pliable, the *tamagochi* is thoroughly active: "the whole point of the game is that *it always has the initiative*, that the object controls the game" (p. 108 – author's emphasis). It is the process of delegating our agency to the game's needs that sustains enjoyment.

Interpassivity is not restricted to cyberspace. Its first formulation was given by Lacan on the role of the Chorus in Greek tragedy, which functions as a stand-in for the audience whilst displaying the appropriate emotions in response to the drama (Zizek 1997). The Chorus takes care of the audience's response; even if you are not very moved by the unfolding tragedy, the Chorus will feel in your place, dispensing you of the need to worry about giving the proper emotional commentary. A more recent example is canned laughter on television; even though you may not laugh at the jokes, the canned laughter does this for you so that you can feel relieved having watched the show (if the canned audience enjoyed it, then I must have enjoyed it). The same interpassive logic also applies to the notion of the biblical scapegoat (the goat's sacrifice atones for my own guilt) and Tibetan prayer sheets (they pray so I don't have to). In each case, the activity of one entity (the Chorus, the canned laughter, the goat, the prayer sheet) allows for the passivity of another. Rather than defining activity and passivity in opposition to one another, therefore, they can be seen as mutually constitutive. Interactivity allows me to be passive while being active through another (for example pressing buttons translates into in-game actions); through interpassivity, I am active while being passive through another (I fulfill the game's demands). Zizek's notion of interpassivity applies not only in these particular incidences, but can also be used more generally to describe the process by which we gain a sense of self through relations with others.

Zizek defines interpassivity in cyberspace in relation to three well established positions in the virtual reality literature (1999a). In good psychoanalytic tradition, he analyses these arguments in terms of the Oedipus complex, the phenomenon to which all psychopathological structures can be traced (Evans 1996). The Oedipus complex is the process whereby we come to recognize our place within society as an independent being, marked by lack as no longer at one with the mother, whilst identifying with and also fearing castration from the father. The father here represents symbolic authority, through which we gain access to socio-symbolic signifiers such as language, social status, and gender.

The three versions of the contemporary staging of the Oedipus complex in cyberspace offer alternative ways of configuring pleasure and agency. In political parlance, they can be broadly classified as emancipatory, conservative and postmodern [1]. I will review each of these versions in turn and identify how they manifest themselves in the literature on games and education. Zizek's own fourth version, concerned with interpassivity, is explored last.

Four versions of cyberspace

Version 1: Games as pain relievers

Version 1 is based on the argument that cyberspace brings about the suspension of the Oedipus complex; we no longer recognize external authority (or otherness), which means that there is no fixed point from which to define our own subjectivity as both autonomous and internally coherent, and consequently to recognize the autonomy and difference of others. According to this scenario, cyberspace frees us from the authority of traditional

social structures (such as patriarchy, the capitalist work ethic, the class system, ethnicity, etc.), and allows us to explore multiple and shifting identities. Identity construction becomes a playful activity. It is something we actively define within much looser boundaries and is no longer pre-determined by others, or in Lacanian terms, by the Symbolic order. This is the deconstructive argument put into practice; the 'Big Other' no longer confers on us the identity of 'man' or 'woman' or 'student', with the subject having gained the freedom to construct his or her identity as an aesthetic endeavour. This theme is particularly developed in Turkle's (1995) exploration of identity on the internet.

In the games literature, traces of this perspective can be found in much of the work which concerns itself with the potential of games to change radically the organization of education and training, in particular by taking away from education institutions the power to determine the pace and style of learning and handing it over to students. One of the most vocal exponents of this approach is Marc Prensky (2001), who argues that young people, from school students to young employees, are no longer willing to engage with traditional forms of instruction which position them as subservient receivers of expert tutors. This leads to generational conflict: "The biggest underlying dynamic in training and learning today is the rapid and unexpected confrontation of a corps of trainers and teachers raised in a pre-digital generation and educated in the styles of the past, with a body of learners raised in the digital world of Sesame street, MTV, fast movies and 'twitch speed' videogames" (2001, p. 3). In response, Prensky advocates a 'revolutionary' approach called digital games-based learning, which is said to have two main benefits. Firstly, it offers 'active learning', defined in terms of giving greater agency to learners who should take responsibility for their progression as well as their self-constitution as professionals. Secondly, it makes learning and training fun. For Prensky, the advent of a digital economy mean that work and play can no longer be regarded as separate activities. This does not mean making learning easy or frivolous. The aim is rather to remove the pain of learning and replace it with pleasure: "training and schooling is finally throwing off the shackles of pain and suffering which have accompanied it for so long" (p. 4). Learning becomes pleasurable, and through immersion in pleasure, we are no longer conscious of learning: "at its very best, even the hard part [of digital game-based learning] goes away, and it becomes all fun, a really good time from which, at the end, you have gotten better at something, through a process [...called] 'stealth learning'" (p. 8).

The value of games in education, using Prensky's line of argument, is that they allow learners to retrieve the pleasure of learning, a pleasure they enjoyed as children, which was then stolen from them by the authority of formal education and training systems. This narrative almost perfectly recreates the Lacanian staging of desire, by which *jouissance* is said to emerge. Within the Lacanian framework, pleasure is associated with an original object or state which is then lost or stolen by the Other (Zizek 1989). This moment of loss – what might be termed a Fall – means that everything we have since then is a by-product rather than the real thing; our current education and training systems are poor substitutes for the state of 'natural' learning we supposedly experience as infants. Indeed a common argument for learning through play is that it is learning in its original, natural form, as found in all young mammals, for example in the playful fighting

of lion cubs or young monkeys (Sutton-Smith 1997). Retrieval of the original pleasure is prevented by the rule of Law [2] or symbolic authority – in this case the disciplinary matrix of power that entrenches the authority of education institutions. Desire arises from the urge to retrieve the lost object and return to a state of full incestuous gratification from which all pain is erased.

The paradox, according to Zizek, is that it is at the precise moment when something is experienced as a loss that it becomes pleasurable. So we might say that it is only from the perspective of Prensky as an adult trainer than kindergarten learning retroactively appears pleasurable and ‘natural’. If we use Zizek’s argument on the economy of pleasure (1989), we can also argue that it is only because pleasurable learning is projected as an (unrealized) ideal that Prensky’s beliefs about it can be maintained. The obstacles on the route towards game-based learning do not prevent its realization but rather maintain its desirability as an objective. Far from acting as an oppressive power preventing learners from achieving a pain-free existence, the perceived repressive qualities of the education system allow Prensky to maintain hope in the liberating potential of game-based learning.

If we follow through the argument that pleasure is defined by its association with an inaccessible object, on what basis can game-based learning be pleasurable outside of the confines of existing education and training systems? Here we see Prensky challenging one form of authority in order to replace it with another – the global economy. Digital game-based learning is not only fun, it is necessary, for only those companies who can effectively update their employees’ skills using new methods of training will survive. Rather than undermining the rule of Law, and thereby giving learners greater agency, digital games-based learning, from this perspective, simply re-instates authority elsewhere. This supports Zizek’s argument that transgression of the Law serves as its ultimate support. It is not only that transgression presupposes the Law it transgresses (the wide-ranging benefits of games-based learning presuppose an educational system that does not include them), but that the Law relies on its inherent transgression (Zizek 1997). So it is precisely Prensky’s playful attitude towards learning which instantiates the supremacy of a consumer-oriented and fast-paced brand of capitalism. In freeing learners from the shackles of the older generation, Prensky aims to make them better consumers, identifying the pleasure of learning and playing in terms of economic necessity. The point here is not principally to critique Prensky’s politics but to demonstrate that any argument based on the pleasure of learning is dependent on the figure of the Law, whose pleasure it is. Pleasure, in the Lacanian framework, is always decentred – it is always somewhere else, in another’s possession, with access blocked by some form of authority. In this respect, agency and pleasure can be considered to be at odds with each other rather than straightforwardly synonymous.

Version 2: Games as sensual temptations

Version 2 is the negative impression of Version 1. Rather than emphasize the liberating potential of the post-oedipal libidinal economy, Version 2 is more concerned with its negative effects. Cyberspace offers an immersive experience in which there is only a stream of sensations and no means of making meaning out of them. As a result, we lose the symbolic distance that sustains a minimum of critical and reflective attitude and

regress to an almost infantile state. In being submerged in a sea of simulations, we have no regard for reality or for rooting our identity in stable fixtures, such as those implied by the notion of character, ethics or critique. This theory of cyberspace can be found in Baudrillard (Baudrillard & Glaser 1994) and Virilio (1999), and could also be said to characterize some of the fears regarding the loss of critical distance in online writing and learning, as found, for example, in Birkerts' *Gutenberg Elegies* (1994). Zizek (1999a) argues that the concern of these theorists is not so much that reality is dissolved or lost in some way, but rather that there is no attempt to maintain 'appearance' – cyberspace does not attempt to mimic reality. Hypertext does not for example follow the rules of the realist novel, the *tamagochi* makes no effort to look like a real pet.

These fears about cyberspace can be detected in some of the policy advice issued to teachers and parents on using games for educational purposes. The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta), the UK government agency for policy on technology in learning, suggests that when using games as part of classroom teaching, teachers should interrupt the play process on a regular basis to prevent students immersing themselves in the game and losing sight of the learning objectives: "The games interface can be distracting for pupils working to achieve defined learning outcomes. Careful structuring by the teacher is required to ensure that pupils are not absorbed by game play [...]. Insisting that pupils break off from using the game to concentrate on other aspects of the lesson requires careful negotiation and a shared understanding of the purpose of game use in the classroom" (Dawes & Dumbleton 2001, p. 10). Learning is not seen to take place through play but rather through reflection on the game's contents. So in opposition to Prensky, Becta's position is that it is precisely by renouncing pleasure, by stopping play, that gains can be made. This illustrates the Lacanian 'beautiful soul' argument, in which the very expression of pain gives rise to enjoyment; for example, in love poetry, the symbolic articulation of the loss of the loved one gives rise to a pleasure of its own (Zizek 1997). Here learning is a pleasure that arises through the expression of pain.

Much of the policy interest in games arises from their motivational potential, and from the hope that students could be as absorbed by their homework as they are by video games. In defining the educational potential of games on these terms, Becta's argument is entirely coherent. Unlike Prensky, Becta's position acknowledges that as soon as the Law – in this case, the authority held by the teacher – tells students to enjoy games, much of their appeal will fade. This is because enjoyment is not an immediate spontaneous state, but is sustained by an imperative. Being told to 'enjoy!' is far more effective as a way of hindering access to enjoyment than a direct prohibition from the Law not to enjoy (Zizek 1999b). The pleasure of gaming could be said to derive not so much from its internal structures as from its lack of extraneous purpose (hence the different kinds of pleasures afforded by playing games as an amateur and as a professional). A game is to a large extent defined by its separation from real life, by its suspension of the social rules that govern everyday behaviour. However, if one is told to enjoy a game, it becomes much more difficult to take pleasure in it. Becta's recommendation that teachers insist students stop playing games may therefore be the only way of maintaining their transgressive

qualities and, as a consequence, their motivational attributes; the pleasure of games needs to remain in opposition to the pain of learning.

However, the policy recommendations do not aim simply at providing motivational perks but also delivering learning objectives. In the quote above, Dawes & Dumbleton describe games as an interface, thereby distinguishing between the visual spectacle of games and their 'real' educational content, with the former potentially acting as a distraction to the latter. For this reason, 'realistic simulations' are seen to be most appropriate for classroom use. The same point is made in a report on games and education commissioned by TEEM (Teachers Evaluating Educational Media) (McFarlane *et al* 2001). So games like *The Sims*, *Sim City* or *Railroad Tycoon* are understood to have the greatest potential for teaching budgeting and management skills – whereas the presence of magic spells, for example, makes a game inappropriate (McFarlane *et al* 2001). However, the actions performed by the player in games like *The Sims* are not intrinsically different from, for example, the *Harry Potter* game or any 'unrealistic' shooter or role-playing game; in each case, success is achieved through the management of resources such as weapons, magic beans or skill points. The emphasis put on simulations in the educational games literature may not therefore derive so much from their intrinsic content as from their appearance – their endeavour to look like reality. It is not only important that students learn to manage resources, but that they can be seen to do this. One could go one step further and say that the interest that *The Sims* and other such simulations have generated within education research does not stem primarily from their content as from their appearance. The emphasis on appearance stems from the need for a counterpoint to reality (Zizek 1999a); appearance is necessary to maintain the fiction of something 'real' behind it. So one could argue that the value of realistic simulations lies not so much in their actual simulation of reality as in their ability to sustain a belief in educational content, in a kernel of learning hidden behind the appearance of play.

Version 3: Games as replicas of non-virtual life

The third version represents the continuation of the Oedipal narrative by other means. In cyberspace, there is more flexibility about the kind of identity one can assume, but in the end a choice has to be made – an identity has to be chosen. So for example, in a role-playing game, there are many kinds of ways in which your avatar can evolve, but you will have to choose one of these ways. This points to a certain tension within cyberspace. On the one hand, it offers limitless possibilities (you are free to choose a symbolic avatar), but on the other, you ultimately have to choose one identity - one which will commit you to a certain position, with relations to forms of authority such as patriarchy, ethnicity, etc. In addition, the need to commit means that your avatar can never quite fully realize your desires, which will be mediated, for example, by what the programme can support, how others in the game respond to it, etc. Oedipus online, therefore, is not quite Oedipus proper insofar as it promises that 'everything is possible' whilst deferring gratification and imposing limits on the play of identity – which is clearly why a form of 'online identity' is at all possible (Zizek 1999a).

In *What Games have to Teach us about Learning and Literacy*, Gee (2003) presents games as an instantiation of the best learning principles which the cognitive and social

sciences have so far developed. Whereas Prensky, Becta and TEEM focus on the specificity of games as learning tools, Gee uses them as an illustrative example of how learning should ideally take place in any setting. In this respect, games are just like classrooms, only better. Or rather, schools could be as good as games at enabling learning if only they could free themselves of the drill-and-test regime implemented by current educational policy.

Gee's argument about games is that they encourage 'active learning' by enabling players to develop projective identities through their control of an in-game avatar. These identities are projects in the making; they develop over time and are defined by the player's values, desires and actions. The way my avatar behaves in a game is a projection of my own identity (how I have controlled it) and relates to how I might behave in other domains of life; so for example games encourage players to think of themselves as active problem solvers who persist in overcoming challenges in the face of failure, which is also the sort of identity which schools should call on in developing their students' identities as learners. Learners can engage in active learning because games create a psychological moratorium, a space in which the learner can take risks but where real-world consequences are lowered. In other words, they create spaces where everything is possible and there are no real consequences to playing out one's chosen projected identity. Gee suggests that this is also what schools should achieve. However, if we draw on Žižek's distinction between Oedipus proper and Oedipus online, we might ask about the extent to which the possibilities available to one's online identity can extend to the development of one's offline identity. To phrase it another way, does the fact that we can engage in active learning in a game mean that we are able to be more active in the construction of one's identity in the real world? What happens to one's projected identity when the real world consequences are re-instated? In emphasizing the ability of games to sustain the play of freely constructed projected identities, Gee's argument obfuscates the constraints of social space in which learning is put into practice.

Žižek categorises the three versions of subjectivity in cyberspace discussed so far as perversion [³] psychosis [⁴] and hysteria [⁵] (1999a, p.116). The first version promises that games-based learning offers the liberating perspective of globalised pleasurable perversion; the second that games entail universal psychotic immersion; and the third is based on a model in which game playing divides the subject between the possibility of escape from the Other whilst simultaneously countering this with its real world impossibility. The articulation of a fourth position is intended to find a middle way between seeing cyberspace as radically different from real life (versions 1 and 2) or as pretty much the same (version 3). Žižek argues that his own position comes closest to that of the pervert.

Version 4: Games as dramatic stages for reality construction

One of the kinds of pleasures which cyberspace helps to gratify is the desire to be passive. Playing a game involves following orders; the game sets the objectives, the sequence in which they are to be completed, and usually the winning conditions. In a game like *The Sims*, for example, all that the player does is respond to the needs of the different in-game characters. In a shooter game like *Deus Ex*, the player completes the

pre-determined primary and secondary objectives. He or she has some control over how to do this, but cannot perform any action that has not already been anticipated by the game designer. The pleasure of gaming could therefore be described as being able to 'do what you are told', in other words, fulfilling the desires of another.

In the Lacanian framework, the drive to fulfill the Other's desire is what constitutes the subject. A subject is not a positive being, it is a fundamental lack, an empty space defined not in its own right but in relation to others – or rather in relation to the Symbolic order, which refers to the structures of language and social rules with which we make sense of reality. The original question at the basis of subjectivity is not 'who am I?' but rather 'who do you want me to be', 'what am I to others', 'what do you see in me'? (Zizek 1989). This is how decentrement is to be understood. What constitutes and guarantees the core of my being is located somewhere else than within me. My fundamental fantasies, those which enable subjectification, are deprived from me. In aiming to be fully ourselves, fully active one might say, we are in fact driven to fulfill the desire of the Other (as embodied in social customs and systems of signification). Hence the gratification afforded by gaming, which can therefore be described in terms of interpassivity.

The fantasy to fulfill the Other's desire is not to be understood as merely subjective, a delusion or refusal to see things how they really are. As Marx argued in relation to the commodity and Althusser in relation to interpellation, Zizek (1997) states that fantasy is subjectively objective – it is created through social relations but objectively true in that it structures our identity. So the interpassive fantasy is not so much a question of what we individually believe in, but underpins the material structure of our social relationships, our being and therefore our sense of reality.

Interpassivity in cyberspace is different from other instances insofar as it allows us to stage our fantasy to fulfill the Other's desire explicitly. In playing games, for instance, we perform actions in the full knowledge that we are doing this within the constraints set by someone else. In this respect, cyberspace helps achieve Lacan's definition of the purpose of psychoanalysis. Rather than endeavouring to remove our fantasies and so be 'more fully ourselves', we should over-identify with them and, in this way, achieve some kind of distance from them. Over-identification here refers to the process of following the Other's orders without question or critique, although not without reflexivity. Conscientiously performing our fantasies (to fulfill the Other's desire) disturbs them, brings them to the fore, enabling us to achieve some distance towards them, however minimal. Of course, this is exactly the process on which gaming is based. Because the rules are already set, the goals already decided, we can be playful around them. It is precisely in the act of over-identifying with the game designer's orders, in other words the rules of the game, that we recognize them as a game. What defines a game are rules which, during the process of play, cannot be changed or critiqued; this is what makes play possible, and differentiates games from other activities. Zizek's point here helps to clarify what is distinctive about games as a medium, by challenging the common belief that what characterizes computer games is the way they immerse players in an imaginary world, where the frame between the game and the real world ideally falls away. We might add

that it is this fallacy that has driven the computer games industry to define innovation in terms of ever greater graphical realism at the expense of game play (Salen & Zimmerman 2004). Yet it is precisely the inflexibility of rules which enables the suspension of disbelief necessary to play and which makes the gaming situation different from real life. Play is possible because we agree to play by rules, and it is precisely the intransigence of rules which highlights their artificiality.

So what might be the educational dimension of this understanding of gaming? Zizek's suggestion (2004a) is reminiscent of the work of one of the first academic theorists of video games, Gonzalo Frasca (2001; 2004), who explores the potential of games to put into effect the dramatic theories of Augusto Boal, known as 'theatre of the oppressed'. Boal's aim is to use theatre to represent reality as socially constructed but open, one of several possible outcomes. Theatrical activity should serve as a vehicle to act out alternative developments and raise political awareness of the forces at work in the way society is organized. Audience and actors co-construct the dramatic performance, altering the parameters of the scenario to explore different ways of responding to a given situation. Frasca puts Boal's theories into practice by designing video games intended to represent, and allow the player explore, major political issues, such as the war on terrorism or corporate political power (see www.watercoolergames.org).

Zizek is similarly interested in the opportunities which cyberspace offers for representing the construction of reality, not only from a Marxist perspective but also in the light of the Lacanian notion of the virtual nature of reality: "virtualization makes us aware of how the symbolic universe as such was always already minimally virtual in the sense that a whole set of symbolic presuppositions determine what we experience as reality" (1997, p. 95). He draws on Brechtian dramatic theories to explore how cyberspace can enable us to act out the fantasmic support of our existence, referring in particular to one of Brecht's 'learning plays', *The Measure Taken* (2004a). This is intended for performance by amateurs and without an audience on the principle that the moral and political lessons contained in them can best be taught by participation in an actual production. The actors play all the roles in turn, thereby learning the different subject positions. Brecht's aim was to encourage actors to immerse themselves in the roles without identifying emotionally with them – the parts are to be acted out mechanically, as it were, enabling critical observation of the patterns of behaviour. Zizek's point is that cyberspace enables a similar demystificatory procedure, by enabling us to enact different subject positions mechanically, without identifying with them, and so become aware of the ideological presuppositions that make identity possible.

Games require the over-identification with the rules of the game – they have to be obeyed (cheating is a transgression which reinforces the supremacy of rules, by reaffirming their purpose and status). And it is precisely because we over-identify with the rules that our identification with the avatar remains mechanical, at least during actual game play. When we kill enemies or cast magic spells in a game, our identification is not with the act of killing or using supernatural powers but with gaining extra points. It is not just that we do not identify with the in-game characters, it is that we cannot – if we did, we could no longer be playful with them, for example, by risking their lives in dangerous situations.

What video games enable therefore is the explicit staging of the interpassive fantasy in such a way that demonstrates that our sense of reality, both virtual and real, derives not so much from its representational content (for example, looking like a soldier or a plumber), but from its form (performing the Other's desire). In this respect, the virtuality, or fantasmic basis, of real life is made apparent.

The main difference between Zizek's version of cyberspace and the other three discussed in this paper relates to the notion of identification, or, to borrow Althusser's term, interpellation. Versions 1 to 3 argue for a process of identification that places the player inside the game world – cyberspace is portrayed as a virtual space in which another form of presence is possible and educationally desirable. Version 4 does not define the value of cyberspace in terms of offering players opportunities for self-presence or self-realisation, of filling the fundamental lack of the subject, but precisely to highlight the dynamics of presence and identity construction. The opposition is similar to that between realist and Brecht's epic theatre. Prensky, Becta and Gee broadly agree that the educational value of games lies in the way learners play a virtual role in a virtual environment and that this subsequently makes them better able to project themselves into that social role in real life. Zizek's aim is to avoid, rather than encourage, identification with a social role, and, as a consequence, bring to light the fantasmic, ideological and contradictory structures which sustain our identity and the strategies we deploy to maintain them. Emphasis is therefore placed not on social roles but instead on symbolic relations – such as those between agency and pleasure, or the self and the Other. The virtue of video games lies in their ability to highlight the rules by which reality appears real; the purpose is not just to become aware of such rules or to acknowledge their fabricated nature, but precisely to treat them in a playful way; to play with the mechanics according to which having a consistent and stable identity seems possible and recognize the contingency of the objectives which such mechanics are designed to fulfill. This has nothing to do with dispelling the illusions on which 'reality' is supposedly based or with gaining a critical distance from our immersive sensations, but about recognizing the 'virtual' (i.e. fantasmic) forms of identification which guide our everyday behaviour. In the Lacanian framework, this is the only authentic act available to us, and enables what he terms 'traversing the fantasy'. The purpose, within this model of learning with games, is the same as that of psychoanalysis; to understand how our fantasies structure reality and how these might be changed.

A concrete example of how this educational dimension of video games can be put into practice is in media education. Here, the emphasis is on studying the media for its own sake rather than as a vehicle for curriculum content. In particular, it is the emphasis on media production which is most relevant here; in enabling learners to create their own games, the processes by which virtual reality is constructed are made explicit and become subject to transformation. Rather than positioning students as the objects of the game designers' orders, they themselves become the producers of realities. The ambition here is not to 'lift the veil of ideological illusion', but to examine the processes by which a sense of presence within reality is established and how this motivates different forms of actions. In making games, learners explore the parameters for agency, for both game designers and players, and how this relates to the pleasure of designing and playing. Here the aim is

to study and re-enact the politics of reality construction rather than practice entry into a given reality.

Conclusions

Throughout his work, Zizek's principle interest is in exploring how psychoanalysis can become the basis of political practice. In accordance with this, he argues that the way we constitute our identity in cyberspace is ultimately a political act and is not directly inscribed into its technological properties or some universal psychic state. So playing games will not automatically lead me to recognize my fundamental interpassive fantasies. Similarly, the objections which Zizek has to the first three versions of cyberspace described above are not primarily a result of whatever shortcomings or inconsistencies they may have, but stem from his own political convictions. When I play games, it is not unreasonable for me to say that I am gratifying my desires through sensual immersion with consequent loss of stable identity and ethics; when Turkle made much the same claim, she was not necessarily being mistaken, or rather to critique her for this tends to miss the point. Zizek's fourth version is not intended primarily to contradict Turkle or Baudrillard on the basis of logic but politics. This means that the four ways of interpreting the educational dimension of game playing described above are primarily political positions. It follows that the consequences of each position is open to negotiation rather than understood simply to lead to positive or negative consequences.

The implication of course is that ideological action is ultimately located at the psychic level. This argument is not specific to Lacan, but can be traced back through Althusser's notion of interpellation to Marx. A potential problem with it is that it reduces politics to existentialism, concerned with the constitution of the individual rather than the body politic. Zizek seeks to avoid this pitfall by arguing that we should address the full implications of the way in which our reality is reproduced through fantasies which are essentially dependent on others, which are interpassive. This means that we cannot rely on the notion of self-constitution through individual acts. It also means that we each contribute to the fantasmic construction of social reality (Daly 1999). What Zizek aims to demonstrate is that we are not victims of either unconscious motives or the logic of some pre-psychic reality (or what Lacan terms the Real). By traversing the fantasy, it becomes possible to recognize existing fantasmic structures and potentially undermine the symbolic signifying processes which put them into practice. From this perspective, the way we play video games in education becomes a political project that concerns itself not with individual pleasures or empowerment, but with the way our collective 'virtual' reality is maintained.

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1[] I am grateful to Claudia Lapping for this analogy.

2[] Lacan's discussion of 'the Law' is indebted to the Levi-Strauss' work on kinship relations, gift-giving and social pacts, and refers not to a particular piece of legislation or form of authority, but to the fundamental principles which underlie all social relations. The Law regulates communication as well as sexual and social relations (Evans 1996). There is an analogy between Lacan's notion of the law and Foucault's concept of power matrices.

3[] Perversion is characterised by actions that aim to deviate from norms in order to disavow the authority of those norms. Perversion is associated with fetishism. The fetish is a symbolic substitute for the imaginary object of original desire, which is perceived to have existed prior to the imposition of norms. The fetish in this case is the digital game.

4[] Psychosis results from a malfunction of the Oedipus complex that results in the lack of the paternal function; more specifically, in psychosis the paternal function is reduced to the image of the father (the symbolic is reduced to the imaginary). Authority is therefore reduced to a question of appearances rather than real effects. Psychosis involves immersion in the imaginary (in other words, the visual and the sensual) with no symbolic authority to enable critique and a sense of self separate from one's sensations.

5[] The hysteric is characterized by an obsessive concern with the subject's identity and where they stand in relation to the Other. "The question may be phrased as 'am I a man or a woman?' or more precisely 'what is a woman?'" (Evans 1996: 78). Here, Gee's argument can be characterized as hysteric in that it is concerned with how students create their identity as learners. Game play, and learning more generally, is described in terms of the evolution of identity and social relations – it is these matters which interest Gee.