Dead or Alive

Title	Dead or Alive
Subtitle	Not provided.
Lead-in / Abstract	The perception of self, identity and a critical view on one's own person has to be reviewed in the context of computer games. Beyond "first person view" and "third person view" there is a schizophrenic "different views at the same time" which enhances the gaming experience.
Participants and speakers	Fuchs, Mathias (AT / GB)
Short biography of participants	Mathias Fuchs, 20/10/1956 Game Artist, Composer, Researcher and Lecturer in sound art, multimedia and creative games

1989 – 2001 Lecturer at University of Applied Arts in Vienna
2001 – 2002 Guest Professor at Sibelius Akatemia Helsinki
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Numerous installations, sound art pieces, creative games (coll. Sylvia Eckermann)

Full text

"I'm dead now!" is obviously a statement, that contravenes the laws of classical logics. Either one is dead or one speaks of death: to do both simultaneously, as **Epicurus** once pointed out, is nonsense. Game addicts, in other words dyed-in-the-wool gamblers with symptoms of obsession, are usually unable to distinguish between the representation of their game figures on the screen and themselves. Consequently, they are no longer in a position to separate life from death. Game freaks and their fellow players find nothing odd about the claim to be dead when the game comes to a close. This is not the result of a lack of linguistic sensitivity, nor a lack of logic, but the result of the highly serviceable form of identity augmentation. The player's biological persona merges with the electronic stimulation of the active person. This construction is serviceable because it increases the intensity of the linguistic experience, and because it allows one to be both dead and alive at the same time. However, this augmentation of identity is problematical with respect to classical percepts of identity.

Certainty could emerge from identity at the latest with **Descartes'** attempt to see things "clare et distincte". Descartes' intellectual experiment was to conceive sensuous experience as the deception of a being (where "I" is merely conjured before me) that dissolves the moment that Descartes construed himself as a thinking being. It is only with the aid of this construct that Descartes could dispel the doubts that he was being deceived by a god. In this way Descartes eliminated possible intermediaries (media) between himself and the world and creates the basis for the continuity of a personal "I", that everyone possesses and that everyone makes answerable for their deeds and thoughts. It was through Descartes' trick that ethics and a system of law related to individual people become imaginable. Clear guidelines to identity, however, are the price paid for the those rights, which bars the schizophrenics, the dreamers, the intellectually weak, the gamblers and the procrastinators. Some of these possess too much identity, the others too little - a luxury in one case, a defect in another. But one way or another an anomaly, that destroys the concept of a single identity. The non-identical threathens to undermine the enlightened, reasonable, non-Cartesian world and the gamblers – the game presents the concept of identity with a dangerous challenge. In the game the borders between the person and its environment dissolve. Roles, history, gender, ethnical identity and geograpy also blur in the game. This begins with "Cowboys and Indians" and ends with the Unreal Tournament, Quake or Final Fantasy.

Bombproof Identity

It seems to be that play and a bombproof certainty of identity are incompatible principles. The spoilsport is of course the one who rather mundanely points out "but you're not a Red Indian" (which is true in the majority of cases), or the fellow player that pronounces "you're not dead, you're just pretending!". Of course the player is dead in the sense of an electro-biological personal union constituted by the act of playing. Thus, the course of the game, especially the narration of the game, becomes the spring of a construction process of an extended identity, that should not be seen an act of consciousness, but the result of a game set-up. **Richard Rorty** refers to the mediating instruments that create mental representations from a reflection of reality as a vocabulary. In the "Mirror of Nature" and subsequently in "Contingency, Irony and Solidarity", Rorty attempts to rehabilitate the narration as opposed to the explanation and claims: "this new vocabulary makes a formulation of the objective possible. It is the tool for a job that one could not have imagined before the development of a special range of descriptions – descriptions that it helps even in producing." Rorty draws the inference that someone who argues on the basis of another vocabulary could not be persuaded with reasons. One could at the most persuade them to accept one's own vocabulary. Just as **Rüdiger Zill** rightly pointed out in "Broken Rays, Shattered Mirror" this task of persuasion cannot be assigned to philosophy. Zill regards "other agencies … literature, cinema, television" as being suitable. For a number of reasons one should also add computer games to the list of instruments of persuasion: one of these being the high degree of popularity of computer games enjoy in the presentday entertainment industry; another is that computer games seem to be emerging as a leading technology that the previously dominant sectors of film and music will now have to follow: finally, computer games are still - but not for much longer - the first technology to be used by teenagers and also one that is being adopted by the over twenty year olds. The persuasiveness of game narrations can be seen to be based

on the factor that helps to construct mental representations. One cannot blame Rorty as a writer that his terminology consistently aims at linguistic mechanisms, it appears to me with reference to computer games to be more fruitful to aim at the most suggestive elements of the game: the texture and sound libraries, the effects, the game play. Let us replace Rorty's "vocabulary" with the texture library, "linguistic" with audiovisual and the narration with the story.

Are there any visual elements that differentiate games from films or television and simultaneously act as catalysts for new forms of consciousness? I would like to submit the suggestion that the game mirror should be examined as an element that could be effective in constructing identity. Naturally, mirrors play an important role in cinematic history, but the mirror in the cinema remains constantly in the medium and does not divert the gaze to the viewer of the film. Computer games are more innovative in so far as the viewpoint of the viewer must not necessarily be predetermined by the medium. A game mirror is not identical to a film mirror.

In early computer games one was tied to a third person view (Pacman, Super Mario) or first person view (Doom). More recent games on the other hand allow a choice of either of these two forms of presentation. Players report that they tend to identify more strongly with the game figures in third person shooters. The gaze from the eyes of the game figures prompts one's consciousness to a degree of identification and an intensity of identification that is different to a perspective that views the game terrain god-like from above. I maintain that the installation of feedback views, as can be found in mirrors and closed-circuit cameras in games, can introduce a further increase in complexity. Important steps in this direction were already implemented by video art and early computer art. However, I will try to prove later that video art was bound to reach a limit that computer games are now in a position to overcome.

Self-Celebration

Computer work involving feedback setups such as those where **Myron Krueger** showed the viewer in the monitor and added reactive agencies. Works like these characterized what **Mario Perniola** referred to as "self-celebration" with video art in mind. Computer and video art do not intend to be television and separated themselves from the latter through a different geometry of viewing. Instead of gazing into the distance, proximity and what is hidden were to be made visible, freed of idealization, phoney authenticity and banal reference to the seemingly factual. Video and computer art were seen as egalitarian, immediate communication with respect to a social utopia, that always retained a moment of feedback and critical gaze in the mirror. Perniola called video culture a culture of the mirror and in adaption of a well-known aphorism of **McLuhan**, one could characterize the media work of the period quite well by saying that: "the medium was the mirror".

In his study of the functions of interactive artworks the Canadian **David Rokeby** finally arrived by way of metaphors of navigation and discovery to the mirror. Media that - in contrast to the mirror of glass - do not reflect anything in their path in indentical form, would have to be called "transforming mirrors" in David Rokeby's terminology. In contrast to proverbial wisdom of "just as you shout into the forest, so will it echo back", the transforming mirror changes the form and figure of the mirrored. Rockeby found transforming mirrors in interactive technical processes and in interactive art. Rockeby differentiated between the usage of transforming mirrors from that of flat ones, by the fact that in the first case the "interactor" does not recognise his movements as being purely distorted, displaced or compacted but medially. Thus, the active recipient experiences himself as the subject experiences itself during dream work, the media assume the role that Freud assigned to the dream. "The interactor sees some representation of himself or herself like a mirror image or shadow, transformed by the potential with which the artist has endowed the space.."

Rokeby cites his own work "Very Nervous System" as an example of a transforming mirror. In "Very Nervous System" a camera digitalizes the image of the interactors and transforms this pictorial information in a matrix of grey tones and then transfers the data to pattern recognition algorithm that produces sounds from the movements of the interactor. The transforming operation of the "mirror" in this case of this installation lies in the quantification of the image, its translation into grey tones and the medial translation into the area of sound.

Rokeby describes the objective and function of interactive art as follows: By providing us with mirrors, artificial media, points of view and automata, interactive artworks offer us tools for constructing identities - our sense of ourselves in relation to the artworks and, by implication, in relation to the world". While Rokeby wants to

present us in his installation with a (even if transforming) mirror, other artists are less willing to supply us with the mirror as a functionally efficient tool.

Autonomous Mirror

"Tumbling Man" by **Chico MacMurtrie** and **Rick W. Sayre** represents a robot that uses the elbow and knee movements of the interactor and transfers these to the shaky motoricity of the machine. The robot may mirror here the intent of movement but fails with respect to the movement itself. The robot trips, trys to get up again, and cramps up continually. The active user can recognise himself in the robot, but his mirror image remains distorted. Movement guided by intention becomes a caricature of failed implementation. While one can use the mirror for reassurance in everyday life, the medial mirror represented by the robot serves on the contrary for insecurity. Similarly, **Christian Möller's** installation "Autonomous Mirror" is designed to present a programmed non-conformity contrasting with real-time mirroring. For a time the figure generated by the computer behaves like the viewer of this figure. It imitates arm and leg movements, and assumes the same posture as the viewer. But the algorithm that guides the movements presupposes that the figure can also break the routine of reproduction and can surprise the viewer with seemingly autonomous movements. If **Lichtenberg** remarked "a book is a mirror: when an ape looks into it - well, an apostle cannot look out!" , so, too, one must reformulate this for the autonomous mirror of interactive art: "where apes look in, apostles can look out - and the other way round". Interactive installations are characterised by the fact that they not only distort formally and change, but that they can reinterprete contextually and reevaluate: an elegant movement can be turned into an awkward one, leisure can be turned into haste and obedience into rebellion. The Canadian pioneer of robotics **Norman White** is an artist who is especially interested in the dislocations caused by robot ensembles.

Deception and Trick Mirror

Norman White's "Helpless Robot" or the installation "Facing Out, Laying Low" reveal behavioural patterns of dictatorial presumption and bored rejection of the demand for mirroring. What the mirror image reflects back to the recipient in the form of the robot is less an image than an attitude. In his most recent work "Monster", White constructed a cybernetic object, that reacts as a submarine or robotic Nessie to the visitors of the reservoir, but also according to circumstance avoids and hides from them. The artificial intelligence that is behind this project should be seen as artificial emotional intelligence that might understand and be able to communicate this, but the objective of whose activity lies more in the development of autonomous gestures.

Mirror Things

In computer games of the most recent generation, we met a renewal and renaissance of the mirror, the surveillance camera and the distorting mirror that produces the impression that the now rather lame dynamics of the game culture of video and computer installations has been resurrected from a deep slumber in the garb of a new medium. But computer games present us not just with a remake, a nostalgic reminder of the media of the '80s. Armed with the cutting edge of the newest game engines, mirror games are turning up in the new computer games. In Max Payne, a new Finnish cult game, the player is continually egotistically and narcissistically concerned with himself, if he can jump, stumble or died particularly well. This self-infatuation with one's own death is celebrated through the fact that Max Payne can reincarnate himself as a pistol bullet that flies to the detriment of his second self, the figure of Max Payne. Just as the heart's blood of the dying Narcissus dyed red the floor and the petals of the flower of the same name, so too is Max Payne surrounded by the colours of death. The Dooms, Unreals and Quakes do not spare any expense to serve the player with the grandiosity of post-mortal colour- and blood-letting. Mirroring and self-observation are intergrated into the game as an interactive operation. Analagous to first and third person games, one speaks of a bullet view as the unification of the player with the weapon that is about to kill him. The fact that this weapon does not actually kill him but merely a game figure is a formalist old-fashioned injunction that I have already attempted to invalidate. What sense would it make, after all, to identify with the pains of a figure,

if this figure was not that of the player himself?

Mirrors also surface as decoration, spatial elements and architectural features. The warp zones in Unreal, in which I can met myself as a player and the Camera Clients from UT2003 structure space as a manneristic self-referential mirror space that is turned in on itself and in which I can implosively fall in on myself. It seems to be that the interior spaces of the psyche and the indentities and to be, that seem to have a greater attractiveness for the games world at the moment than the extraterrestial colonies of the '80s.

The mirror spaces of the games are the visible gameplay articulation of an idea. The French author **Jaques Rigaut** (1899-1929) called that type of object whose single objective is to mirror, mirror things:
"Mirror things are models of a type of beauty, that we refer to as elegance. Mirror things are suitable for a perfection fully independent of the individual. Mirror things are not to be found in nature but are rather a product of the disciples of superficiality - that is, in that which appears before the mirror. The compliance to these uncomprimising adherents of the superficial transforms external reality into an essentially different and elegant something, in a bright and unique beauty".

Ultra-Dandyism

Perniola suggests that this point of view should be called "ultra-dandyism" and that it characterized Rigaut's attitude as a challenge to the world, to transform every object and every event into a thing of beauty, a perfect beauty that emerges from an inner mimesis.

One can call the spatial objects of these new games mirror things and contrast their mimetic perfection with the cold stimulation of architecture, bodies and physics that had so enthralled us in past decades. It could be that one reason for the search for mirror images might lie in a dissillusionment with the unmirrored, constructed reality. It could be that we see self-fabricated reality as being not elegant and beautiful enough, and for this reason look for mirror reflections and the view inwards - even in games.

One could even cynically claim that an industry that is continually avidly seeking innovation is presenting us with the mirror as a topical and trendy form of binoculars. Hence, with reference to this technology one would have to concur with **Hegel** when he stated: "Technology appears on the scene, when necessity arises".

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