# DEATH OF THE GAMER SLAYING GENDERED POWER FANTASIES IN LEGENDARY AXE II (VICTOR MUSICAL INDUSTRIES, 1990)

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"'Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over", claims the title of a Gamasutra feature published in the midst of a particularly disheartening episode for the gaming community (Alexander, 2014). The same market probing tools that have greatly contributed to the hegemony and overrepresentation of the male adolescent "gamer" figure in game production and marketing now show that, beyond this common reference point, many audiences are waiting to be engaged. In spite of the bias for male gamer preferences in mainstream video game production, women now represent approximately 50% of the audience in many age groups (ESA report, 2013). While gender related stereotypes are slow to evolve in mainstream game production, more and more voices in the community are echoing feminist critiques that have emerged from the 1990s onwards (Consalvo, 1997; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). In this paper, we will lend our ears to an early critique that sought to put an end to the tyranny of the gamer. Most surprisingly, this voice emerged from within the gaming community, at a time – the early 1990s – understood

to be the heyday of heteronormative male power fantasies, and in a fictional scene – the final confrontation of a hack ‘n slash game – designed to provide a peak of gratification to the stereotypical gamer. At the end of *Legendary Axe II*, in the throne room, the gamer is put to death.

**Anatomy of a cut-scene**

On the surface, this little known game from a platform whose significance is often dismissed in Americano-centric histories (the PC Engine/Turbografx-16) is anything but original or subversive. The introductory sequence presents a duel between two similar figures: the prince wearing a heavy golden armor dominates the swordfight, which ends abruptly as the lightly covered prince is thrown off a cliff. As a final humiliation, the weak prince’s short sword reaches the ground moments later. But soon the sword rises again, held firmly while the thundering skies echo a vengeful scream. Throughout seven levels, the player takes control of this figure, and gains power and proficiency to confront the evil brother in the throne room. The final fight is especially difficult. Once he has defeated his monstrous other, the player loses control of the good prince and enjoys victory while his score explodes with emphatic sound effects. The next few seconds of this ending sequence break all the rules. The prince proceeds to climb on the throne; once seated, his gaze seems to look beyond the fourth wall, right into the player’s eyes. In one frame of animation, he raises his fists arrogantly in the air, then sits and starts to laugh while holding his victorious pose. As the two frames of animation are repeated to insist on this overly satisfied attitude, six monks approach the throne slowly. The new king isn’t celebrated for long: an unknown heroine unmasks herself and jumps in the air. The king is caught off guard, and as he tries to protect himself from the scimitar coming down to slay him, the screen fades to black (Figure 1). The sinister musical score that lingered throughout the whole segment becomes even darker as the credits start rolling.

*Figure 3: Slaying the player avatar at the end of Legendary Axe II*

In the upcoming sections, we seek to explain the significance and emotional charge held by these peculiar frames of animation. In order to reconstruct the potentially critical experience of *Legendary Axe II*, we will move away from this extremely specific object and perform a historical analysis. In his seminal effort discussing the integration of user reception in art history, Hans Robert Jauss provided useful guidelines on how to reconstruct "horizons of expectations". He suggests that such constructs should account for the generic norms and conventions associated with the work, and the interactions between this object and other cultural productions likely to be part of the user's repertoire (1978:52). In the case of our object, it is necessary to document not only the inner workings of the game, but also the development of hack 'n slash game mechanics, the gratifying structures of these games, and how this gratification is encapsulated in the wider realm of media consumption at the time. Our historical analysis also builds on the theoretical framework proposed in *Digital Play* (2003): in order to understand *Legendary Axe II*'s peculiar ending and its potential

effect on gamers, we need to expose how the dominant male power fantasy it appears to slay was progressively constructed through a complex series of interactions between cultural experiences, technological innovations and industrial imperatives. In “aiming for the gold”, we will explain how the game emerged concurrently with a shift in the industry’s target audience towards adolescent players; the reintroduction of violence and sexuality clashed with a corporate culture of censorship and political rectitude championed by Nintendo in the mid-1980s. In “loaded guns”, we will reflect on the gendered nature of gratification in games and its interactions with major technological developments occurring at the time.

**Aiming for the gold**

From the onset of the video game industry, corporations understood the benefits of targeting a broad demographic. In *Before the Crash*, Erkki Huhtamo discusses the rise of family oriented entertainment in Victorian times; optic toys played a key role to keep bourgeois children at home in an increasingly chaotic urban context (2012:41, 44). Early printed ads for the Magnavox Odyssey prolonged visual marketing strategies that were widely used to sell their television sets: the whole family is portrayed sharing common leisure time in the living room (Burnham, 2003). Under Warner Communications and its massive TV campaign, the Atari VCS was sold with the idea that there was a game for everyone, all the way to odd members of the extended family: Uncle Frank helps his niece take on invaders from space, a young boy plays *Berzerk* with his competitive grandmother, and even the family dogs gives in to the addictive new craze. Outside of the “safe spaces” of the bourgeois homes and of family-oriented marketing, video games made their first breakthrough in arcades that emerged in part to avoid the age restrictions of bars and appeal to teenagers. As Carly Kocurek notes, the presence of women in these venues might have been underestimated (2012:196, 201). Nevertheless, arcades were largely populated by young men, and typical male fantasies /

gender roles proliferated throughout the first major expansion of the video game industry.

Stereotypical gender roles have expanded way beyond the enclave of chivalric literature, diffracted in a variety of media practices and thematic genres. However, the factors that lead a cultural industry such as video games to rely so strongly on these stereotypes are specific and must be understood in their historical context. In this section, we will expose some of the corporate practices that work to reinforce problematic gender biases in game culture, and the attempts to control and regulate the production of content in order to avoid controversy. As we will see, the despotic attitude of Nintendo created a context that effectively discouraged the kind of radical expression seen in *Legendary Axe II*. At the same time, we will explore the specific context of the PC Engine/Turbografx-16 that made it easier to subvert gender stereotypes in mainstream games.

In *Digital Play*, Stephen Kline, Greg de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Whiteford strive to understand the formation and dynamics of video game culture; "militarized masculinity", as they call it, refers to "a young male subculture of digital competence and violent preoccupations" (2003:257). One of their first reference points is the Tech Model Railroad Club at MIT, a group who hacked a PDP-1 to create *Spacewar!* in 1961/1962. Or course, prior experiments such as *OXO* and *Tennis for Two* were not associated so clearly with military scenarios, and the "military entertainment complex" can be traced back to non-digital games (Huntemann & Payne, 2009), but armed violence would soon be at the forefront of the game industry's expansion. Following the 1978 invasion from space critters (*Space Invaders*, Taito) and the 1984 assault from organized crime (*Kung Fu Master*, Irem), the shoot'em up and beat'em up genres proved to be the most prolific in the arcades. As in *Spacewar!*, navigation mechanics were mostly used to align an avatar-weapon and neutralize the enemy. Reading through Stephen Kent's journalistic account of this "golden age", one can sense how pivotal the issue of violence

had become during the creation of many classics. Already in 1976, Exidy's *Death Race* had triggered some concern about violent games in the media (see Arsenault, 2008:277). Tomohiro Noshikado reportedly chose alien antagonists for *Space Invaders* in order to avoid controversy. It is well documented that the frantic shooter was largely responsible for the expansion of the arcade business. According to Kent's research, more than 300 000 *Space Invaders* machines – originals or clones – were exploited worldwide (2001, chapter 9). It led to many spiritual clones such as Nintendo's *Radar Scope* (1979) and Sega's *Space Tactics* (1980), to name a few.

The connection between violent entertainment and teenage boys, long established in other media, cemented quite early in the history of video games. At the same time, these genres inherited traditional gender stereotypes from other forms of popular fiction. In Vladimir Propp's narrative model of traditional Russian folktales, the penultimate function couldn't be defined in more heteronormative terms: the hero is given both land and wife by the king after annulling the misdeeds performed by the antagonist (1965 [1928]). The video game format imposed even more brutal simplification of common figures such as the damsel in distress, the action hero and the vixen (Buchanan and Lipinski, 1999). Surprisingly, the rejection of violence became a creative catalyzer at the height the invasion; Toru Iwatani designed *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980) in response to the onslaught, consciously integrating elements that would appeal to the female demographic. By contrast, *Miss Pac-Man* (1981), the most successful arcade game at the time, was clearly designed to target male audiences: Midway somehow managed to give erotic overtones to a pizza, sculpting the abstract shape with make-up, and adding limbs for the sole purpose of mimicking the classic pin-up pose on the cabinet art. In the flyer, she is presented as "the new femme fatale of the game world".

The marketing of arcade machines in the 1970s is a fascinating indicator of the gender dynamics taking place in arcades and

bars. As opposed to national TV campaigns and magazine ads, arcade flyers were hidden from the public eye; corporations targeted venue owners specifically with high quality full color printouts. In this closed marketing circuit, the figure of the sexy bystander could be disseminated without attracting negative attention and judgement from the community. Even before the well-known *Computer Space* flyer (1971), Nutting Associates adopted this figure for electro-mechanical games such as *Computer Quiz* (1968) and *Astro Computer* (1969). Atari's *Gran Trak 10* (1974) featured a very supportive young woman, fascinated by the exploits of the driver. While the *Jungle King* cabinet marquee highlighted a damsel in distress figure in a suggestive outfit, the flyer was much more risqué: it made good use of the multiple page format to create a somewhat literal and participatory "effeuillage" experience: as he opened the flyer, the venue owner also removed the lush jungle foliage that covered the exotic beauty. The *Gotcha* flyer (Atari, 1973) proposed an elaborate visual rhetoric: the sexy female figure pursued by a man is made translucent as it overlaps the arcade machine, which is presented as a kind of substitute for the real object of desire thanks to its spherical pink controllers (Figure 2). Jaakko Suominen recently documented how such fascinating fetishistic displacements became commonplace in Finnish computer culture from the 1950s onwards (Suominen, 2011).

*Figure 4:The Gotcha arcade flyer. Source: The Arcade Flyer Archive*

On the surface, violence and sex didn't play a major part in the 1983 crash; most accounts focus on the proliferation of lackluster products, and consequently, the loss of consumer / distributor confidence (Kent, 2001; Wolf, 2008; Donovan, 2010). In order to restore faith in the video game industry, Nintendo decided it would need to maintain a tight grip on production and develop a more "inclusive" corporate image. This operation involved a pro-active marketing campaign, along with an invasive expansion of "self-censorship" (Wiemker, 2012). Building on the Famicom's success in Japan, the company negotiated licensing agreements with major third party developers. By the time Nintendo adapted its operation to conquer America, licensees had to comply with a production code that laid out specific restrictions in terms of content: no sex or nudity, no excessive violence, no drugs or alcohol use, no foul language, no politics (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1994). The construction and enforcement of the Nintendo brand image

resulted in the proliferation of innocent child heroes and whimsical protagonists, inviting a younger audience to "play with power" (Kline *et al.*, 2003, chapter 5).

In theory, the American industry was revived in the very safe spaces of Nintendo's fantasy worlds, where nothing terribly wrong ever happens (unless, of course, you belong to a group that would judge the stereotypical Proppian plot to be immensely offensive). In practice, most of the major arcade successes based on violent premises found their way to Nintendo's platform. Along with shoot'em ups, the beat'em up and hack 'n slash generic enclaves – the same design moulds that were used for the creation of *Legendary Axe II* – were major players to foster profitability at the time, and Nintendo couldn't ignore the numbers. Technos Japan adapted the popular *Nekketsu Kōha Kunio-kun* (1986) on Nintendo's platform and went on to create the *Double Dragon* series; the three titles became best sellers on the NES..It might appear impossible to reconcile the production code's regulation of violence with games that generically signal the necessity to beat, hack and/or slash anthropomorphic or downright human figures. In a paradoxical turn of events, these games were allowed as long as they didn't portray the physical consequences of such violence in a realistic way. Thankfully, in a technological economy with so many processing limitations, slayed bodies were instantly wiped out of the screen, or removed from the ground after a few seconds, detaching the mediated violence even further from its real-world referent. In *Legendary Axe II*, as in *Golden Axe* (Sega, 1989) or *Double Dragon* (Technos, 1987), the most convenient way to deal with violence, both technologically and culturally, was to erase its most visible consequences immediately.

In 1988, Namco released *Splatterhouse*, one of the first arcade games marketed with much emphasis on gory elements. In this visceral hack 'n slash, the player neutralizes an army of undead creatures with the help of his trusty 2×4 or golden cleaver. Zombie bodies splatter on the walls and bleed abundantly when

sliced. The game, on such terms, would never have passed Nintendo's approval process. But NEC and Hudson were ready to accommodate this type of content. In fact, sex and violence were more than welcome on the platform, for the duo had envisioned their production environment as a direct response to Nintendo's overly restrictive policies (*La bible PC Engine*, 2009). They were not on a mission to condemn censorship and promote free speech, but simply trying to reach out to the frustrations of game developers. In 1987, Namco publicly criticized Nintendo, and decided to adapt its latest arcade titles on the little console; *Splatterhouse* was ported to the PC Engine/Turbografx-16 in 1990. Technological excellence and the absence of royalty fees were the main incentives for third party developers. Nevertheless, many studios ended up exploring adult themes without having to worry about the wrath of a monopolistic corporation obsessed with its brand reputation.

*Legendary Axe II* would not have been possible in Nintendo's protected enclave. Certainly, the graphical integration of violence is similar to many hack 'n slash games released on the Famicom/NES at the time. In contrast to the saturated visuals of these platforms, the PC Engine's palette certainly allowed the developers to create darker levels and enemies, tapping into the somewhat more mature imaginary realm that had already been developed extensively in literature, visual arts and cinema. The overall audiovisual ambiance of the game is not far removed from *Splatterhouse*, and the fourth level – the insides of an unknown creature – is downright horrific. Of course, it is the seemingly perverse ending that clashes with everything the Nintendo brand stood for. In a player repertoire dominated by child heroes and whimsical creatures, following the company motto – play with power! – in order to slay the forces of evil and rescue damsels in distress, the rise of the evil avatar at the end of *Legendary Axe II* marks a loss of innocence, and a passage to the adult world. Following such a powerful strike at the player's

habitus, any classic Proppian tale and its simple dualistic morality appears positively boring.

Interestingly, *Legendary Axe II* doesn't specify any type of "damsel in distress" scenario in the manual or printed ads. Victor censored part of the original Japanese ending for the American release; in the original ending, the unknown female figure is completely naked, while she is covered in the Turbografx-16 version. The irony of getting a full frontal pixel art naked woman, only to see one's avatar slain and the whole thing fade to black moments later, must have been shocking for Japanese gamers. As we will see in the next section, the console they bought was at the forefront of technological developments that reflect the gender dynamics we have presented in this first section.

**Loaded guns**

Long before Ralph Baer's passing in December 2014, the brilliant mind had been presented as the father of TV games in numerous journalistic accounts and history books (Kent, 2001; Burnham, 2003). Historical accounts of technology often set out to refine our answers to the "paternity question". In his foreword to Roberto Dillon's *The Golden Age of Video Games*, Ted Dabney goes further back in history to uncover other forgotten fathers, while reasserting his own legacy in the industrial exploitation of the technology (2011:ix). Such focus on great fathers and grandfathers constructs a peculiar biological metaphor: the "birth" of gaming technology inevitably appears "immaculate" in historical accounts where women are remarkably absent. While the immaculate conception of computer technology has been complemented by edifying features on Ada Lovelace or Grace Hopper, it is hard to "fix" the founding chapters of video game history when it comes to gender (Nooney, 2013). The following section seeks to explore the consequence of this gender disparity on the modes of engagement with technology.

As the others of *Digital Play* pointed out, *Spacewar!* brought together two very powerful attractions working in synergy: the excitement towards a new type of audiovisual representation,

and the feeling of direct control in navigating the ship through the switches (2003:87). We pointed out how this "real time" navigation was meant to complicate a shooting contest. According to Marie-Laure Ryan, the prevalence of shooting mechanics is motivated in part by the underlying technology itself: the easiest state transition to represent in this binary medium is to wipe out depictions from the screen, and the action most easily evoked by the press of a button is to pull a trigger (2006:118-119). In return, as shoot'em ups and beat'em ups became lucrative forms in the arcades, these popular game designs led to the refinement of technological component, most notably the multiplication / visual grandeur of on-screen enemies; game systems in the 1980s competed in part though the integration of evermore luxurious sprite architectures (Therrien & Picard, 2015).

Mediated violence isn't pleasurable for a specific gender only. Writing about the inherent psychological gratification of games in 1983, Elizabeth and Geoffrey Loftus noted the pleasure of destruction and audiovisual fury as core components. More recently, gratification in video game play has been defined as the pleasure of progressively gaining mastery/control over the gaming apparatus (see Grodal, 2000; Weinbren, 2002). This motivation is often echoed in the fictional scenarios proposed by the games: players are invited to annihilate a threat, rescue loved ones or to save humanity altogether. While the feat of overcoming obstacles and gaining proficiency is pleasurable in itself and for most individuals, the integration of actual rewards in games became a clear indicator of gender biases from the 1980s onward. From this perspective, the "damsel in distress" trope can be interpreted as a promise of something good to come: saving the day is connoted with the idea of sexual gratification – an aspect that was already obvious in Propp's model. In the generic enclave leading up to *Legendary Axe II*, this script is commonplace: Pauline in *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981), the "Jungle Princess" in *Jungle King* (Taito, 1982), Peach

in *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1984), Sylvia in *Kung Fu Master* (Irem, 1984), Princess Guinevere in *Ghosts 'n Goblins* (Capcom, 1985), Marian in *Double Dragon* (Taito, 1987), all the way to the "beautiful red-haired Flare" in the first *Legendary Axe* (Victor Musical Industries, 1988) can all be related to such a motivation. Here again, this cultural bias interacted with the development of video game technology.

In the mid-1980s, many technological refinements – from audiovisual affordances to constantly improving data storage abilities – sought to implement richer depictions and cut-scenes. The integration of data-intensive elements in games shouldn't be seen in contradiction with the interactive nature of the experience, for it plays an essential role in the dynamics of gratification we have presented above. In 2002's *Screenplay*, Tanya Krzywinska and Geoff King noted how the audiovisual mastery exhibited by cut-scenes (in comparison with gameplay) acts as a technological attraction (2002:12). In the same book, Sacha Howells implicitly conveys this observation when he theorizes the main functions of cut-scenes: before they start providing narrative exposition, cinematics function as a "come on" to incite consumption; after competent players have successfully completed portions of the games, cut-scenes act as a form of "reward" (2002:112-13). "Damsel in distress" scenarios have been exposed through cinematics very early on in the history of the medium (Klevjer, 2013). The opening of *Donkey Kong* shows the angry ape taking Pauline to the top of a construction site. While the arcade flyer for the game was much more arousing than anything the game could offer at the time, soon technological innovation implemented these detailed – and arousing – depictions right into the digital object. In the few years that separate this title from *Legendary Axe*, video game systems developed their graphical and storage abilities in a way that made it easier to remediate such arousing images. In doing so, the gendered regime of vision that became prevalent in other

visual forms of entertainment – the "male gaze", as Laura Mulvey named it – was quickly carried over.

Along with the Commodore Amiga and Atari ST, the PC Engine/Turbografx-16 was championing an era where graphical depictions could be more realistic. Speaking of the multimedia ambitions of Cinemaware games on the Amiga, Jimmy Maher highlights the emergence of these detailed depictions as a sign of the "future aesthetic possibilities for the videogame as an artistic medium" (2012:209). He discusses extensively one of the "winning sequences" of *Defender of the Crown* (1986). Following a castle raid, the player character "frees" a noble lady, which eventually falls in love. "Then, late one night…", by the fireplace in the castle, romantic love is animated with cinematic flair (2012:211-13). Towards the end of the 1980s, countless demo disks featuring digitized pictures of women were circulating in the community. While the PC Engine/Turbografx-16 had a more limited color palette (512 colors), digitized pictures of young women were integrated early on (*Kagami No Kuni No Legend*, Victor Musical Industries, 1990), and one can already sense the prevalence of the male gaze in the close-up of the beautiful princess used extensively in the marketing of *Ys Book I & II* (1989). Game makers intentionally nurtured erotic connotations with idol games (*No.Ri.Ko,* Hudson, 1988), beautiful fighting girls (the *Valis* series) and raunchy hypermedia experiments (the *Dragon Knight* and *Cobra* series).

As we have noted above, the development of visual attraction remediated a previous regime of vision with obvious gender implications. Writing about the development of interactivity in artistic practices at the end of the 1980s, Bill Nichols proposed that "a (predominantly masculine) fascination with control of simulated interactions replaces a (predominantly masculine) fascination with the to-be-looked-at-ness of a projected image" (1988:31-32). Using the central concept of Roger Odin's theory of cinema consumption (*mise en phase,* or "synching"), we could say that the desire for mastery over the game as an artefact

echoes the fictional desire oriented towards a female "reward", much like the scopic drive of moviegoers synchs with the desire towards female figures in the diegesis of popular movies (Odin, 2000). In her seminal study of surrealist cinema and the fetish function of moving images, Linda Williams even suggested that "the entire cinematic institution – considered especially in its technical prowess – becomes erotegenic" (1981:218). Both apparatuses can be related to the voyeuristic mode of consumption theorized by Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey and Noël Burch (among others); video games complicate this relationship through the dynamics of player effort and reward systems.

Now that we have exposed some of the prevalent cultural dynamics and their interaction with technology in the 1980s, we can better understand the expectations many players carried along with them all the way to the end of *Legendary Axe II*. The medium was largely built on the paradigm of mastery: the player progressively gains proficiency with the game apparatus, and much of this process is mapped to a fictional scenario which is itself about gaining power. As we have seen, this synching effect is also echoed by the technological mastery of a system that is able to provide richer – and potentially arousing – depictions as a reward for player effort. But in a context where the fictional reward is so gender specific, the actual gratification that is the ultimate goal of this "synching" process can only operate fully in the case of male heterosexual consumption. While *Legendary Axe II* refrains from using the female reward trope, it doesn't seek to create a gender-neutral experience. On the contrary; the final scene that we have described above violently attacks the gendered paradigm of mastery. The player loses control completely, only to realize that he was the pawn of an evil ploy, "manipulated" by the avatar who proves to be another evil prince in the end. The gaze beyond the fourth wall becomes another signal of this 'de-synching' operation. Moreover, the scene doesn't seek to function as a technological attraction; it is

technically trite, reusing assets from the game for the most part. When a lady is finally uncovered, it is in order to restore morality to this world corrupted by fratricide between the wealthy and entitled. The final gesture put forth by the game is, almost undeniably, a castration.

**Reviving the evil avatar**

In this paper, we have exposed how the gender bias in the technological and industrial circuits led to the creation of heteronormative power fantasies, and how many successive phases of commercial success for specific products have cemented the male adolescent gamer as the core audience. Following the arrival of Mikael Katz as CEO in America, Sega decided to put the adolescent male at the center of its brand image and marketing operations for the Genesis, gaining a significant portion of the market along the way (Kent, 2001, chapter 24; Donovan, 2010, chapter 17). Under the regime of 'testosterone marketing', objectification of women proudly came out of the arcade flyer closet, onto the pages of the specialized press and on the packaging of the games. The moral combat over gory bits in 1993 led to content ratings regulated and overviewed by the industry. In the end even Nintendo could target the "core" audience with violent entertainment (Kent, 2001, chapter 25; Donovan, 2010, chapter 18). Since then, whenever the industry faces uncertain profitability, corporations tend to focus on established successful cultural formulas and paradoxically try to distinguish themselves by providing 'more of the same', "multiplying rates of 'fragging' and ever-more vivid splatterings of 'giblets'" (Kline *et al.*, 2003:251).

Nowadays, corporations oscillate manically between their two-faced brand image: a seemingly inclusive call to "everyone" through family-friendly marketing and entertainment, and a more juicy, "we know what gamers really want" form of customer address. We have briefly exposed how Atari was already struggling with the same tension during the first expansion of the medium; Nintendo and Sega refined marketing

strategies that were already in place. Through these recurring bits of history, a damaging association has been cemented: adult entertainment in video games is equated with "hardcore", while mature audiences in other media practices can be engaged through a variety of thematic explorations. Moreover, the overrepresentation of hyperviolence and hypersexualization lead to constant worries and even calls for censorship, which is counter-productive; a severely restricted production environment, such as Nintendo's protected enclave, or even a hypothetical regulation geared towards inclusivity and positive demonstration, would likely prevent the kind of radical expression that we have studied in this paper.

In *Critical Play*, Mary Flanagan explores the fascinating history of critical expression in game design and game play, from dollhouses and board games all the way to contemporary digital art games. The chapter on computer games opens with a few bleak observations that sum up the historical context we have presented in this paper; "as gaming drives the development of new technology, and new technologies are made by a consistently similar demographic, the cycle of technological innovation and games entertainment remains fairly consistent" (2009:251). Brenda Laurel sums up the creative context at the turn of the 1990s in similar terms: "The video game business was totally vertically integrated around a male demographic – from designers and programmers to marketers and distributors to retailers and customers" (quoted in Donovan, 2010:270). Stagnation of the production environment works against the emergence of critical expression, and it is not surprising that Flanagan chose to focus most of her chapter on art games produced outside of the main commercial circuits.

In light of this critique, the evil avatar introduced in *Legendary Axe II* appears as an essential conquest of video game culture. Just like unreliable narrators and problematic anti-hero figures in other media practices, it tests our inclination to gullibly adhere to a fictional proposition, its characters and its values. It can

act as a powerful reflector, making us turn a critical eye back to ourselves, inciting us to question our consumption of power fantasies, and how this consumption alienates other groups of human beings along the way. It proposes a truly adult experience. The ending of the game slices open a virtual body which felt so comfortable, much like the cinematic male gaze was metaphorically cut open on movie screens in 1929. While it would be far-fetched to confer on *Legendary Axe II*'s shocking ending the same significance that Surrealist cinema gained in the history of movies, obvious parallels between our analysis and Linda William's conclusions can be drawn: "when the cinema ruptures the identification between spectator and image, the fetish function of the institution crumbles as well. This crumbling is replaced by a new awareness of the fetish in the mind of the spectator" (1981:218). Of course, video game technology doesn't *have* to reflect violent preoccupations and male fantasies, and has been used to explore many other thematic realms in spite of any *a priori* biases we might perceive in technology. Such a transgressive ending can help us reflect on the "fetish function" that emerged and came to dominate video game culture. In rupturing the fetish, it effectively tries to emasculate technological tools – the movie camera, the game joystick – whose existence in culture could otherwise be crudely equated with male sexual appendages (Williams, 1981:218).

The ending of *Legendary Axe II* proves that, within the right context, critical play is accessible to mainstream game production. Hyperviolence and hypersexualization need not be such an alarming issue, if creators are able to produce expressions that question the human need for these representations. This active exploration of inner representations and desires, and specifically our paradoxical stance towards violence, represents a great potential of the interactive medium according to Janet Murray (1997:146-147).

Since *Legendary Axe II*, the evil avatar found a receptive audience in indie games such as *Braid* (Jonathan Blow, 2009) but

also in purely mainstream ventures such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Bioware, 2003), *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager, 2012). One might wonder if, at the time of *Legendary Axe II*'s release, there was an actual audience for such a bold ending. Few traces of the game's reception are available, save for a few reviews from game journalists who focussed on the typical concerns (graphics and gameplay). One can doubt that anyone in the game community had received the necessary education to interiorize such a critique and get gratification out of this self-referential moment. But it is only fair to assume that even at the turn of the 1990s, 'gamers' were not the uniform mass of entitled phallocratic little monsters we tend to imagine in light of all the sexism and harassment in the community. Such a finale, in the golden age of heteronormative power fantasies, should be revered and given as an example: even under the normative weight of globalized cultural industries, a few discordant voices can still find their way to the public. While the community continues to reflect on the ways to educate itself, lending an ear to these voices might provide enough hope to feed the dedication of all those who strive to bring different images, and different gratifications, to the video games that we already know.

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