A PERFORMANCE OF RAPTURE

A New Durational Performance Piece

Parts I and II


**Artist Statement: Ethan Fox**


EQUIPMENT USED

1 Playstation 4 console

1 Playstation 4 Dualshock controller

Bioshock game

HDMI cords / cord extensions

1 Projector

1 chair

1 performer (experienced gamer, has played Bioshock previously)

1 performer (experienced gamer, has not played Bioshock previously)


ESTIMATED TIMELINE

Part I

Segment 1      30 minutes

Segment 2      1 hour

Segment 3      1 hour, 45 minutes

Segment 4      2 hours, 15 minutes


Part II

Fort Frolic      1 hour, 30 minutes

Segment 6      1 hour, 15 minutes

Segment 7      11 minutes

Segment 8      1 hour, 30 minutes

Segment 9      1 hour, 15 minutes

Final            15 minutes

STATEMENT

Intro

Since I've known of their existence, I've always been fascinated by video games. The way the animation interacted with the users amused me to no end, for video games are not films. They can be extraordinarily cinematic (Naughty Dog does this particularly well), and heavily scripted; they can be simple arcade shooters; or they can be situation simulators. The vast possibilities of what a video game can be is mind-boggling.

What I hope to accomplish in this performance/art installation, is to bring awareness to what it means to "play" a video game, explore the concept of watching Let's Plays (some person recording themselves playing through a video game) online, expose the brilliancy of video game theory, and also look at a few real-world applications. I hope that this challenges the audience to look beyond the game aspect, and really think/explore what video games are, and their place in our society.

Rituals and Performatives

Back in the early 1950s, philosopher John Langshaw Austin gave a lecture on performatives. Derived from the term "perform," these performative statements, unlike normal true/false statements, are defined by having a felicitous or infelicitous outcome. If the act is professed but hollow, or void, then it is infelicitous, meaning that somehow, the performative has gone wrong. For example, if someone utters that they are buying tea, but have no intention of buying tea, or there is no tea to buy, or they do not have money to buy the tea, or they are a child and have no power on where their parents spend their money, then it is an infelicitous performative. But, if the person does buy the tea, then it is a felicitous performative.

Thus, "to play a video game" becomes a performative. Unlike watching a film, which is much more of a true/false statement (you are either watching a film, or you are not watching a film), video games require user action in order to say "I am playing a video game." There is only one instance of an infelicitous outcome: when someone says "I am playing a video game" when they aren't actually playing and aren't near a video game. However this becomes a bit of a grey area with games such as *The Stanley Parable*, which has an achievement named "Go Outside," in which players must not open the game for 5 or so years in order to get the achievement. In this

case, any player going for this specific achievement would consistently be playing a video game for the duration the achievement requires.

This performative of playing a video game has grown so much that it has become a ritual. Dating to the early arcade games, when friends would all go and gather around video games, lining up quarters for turns, and trying to beat the high score; the social ritual of playing video games has become a kind of replacement to outdoor play, or can even be an additive (mobile games such as *Pokemon Go* are location-based games where users are required to walk around outside). In fact, video game competitions are now professional, and are seen as a new kind of sport (of which are rituals themselves).

Rituals have typically been associated with religious ceremonies, however they can better be described as a restoration of behavior. To perform a morning ritual, one might brush their teeth, take a shower, get dressed, and eat breakfast. Yet where do people learn how to brush their teeth, or that taking a shower is clean and healthy, or what kind of clothes to wear? In his book on Achi Rabinal, Dennis Tedlock describes the Mayan ritual performance as a "matter of impersonating ghosts" (15). Performers within Achi Rabinal would have a character (of which they inherited from their parent, who inherited the role from their parent, and so on) that they performed in the ceremony. These were not exact revival of the role, but an impersonation of the characteristics of that role. Not only this, however the ritual calls for a human sacrifice at the end, where a prisoner of war is executed to finish the performance. In this light, the ritual becomes more than just a religious ceremony, but also a civil ritual (or restored behavior) of execution. It becomes a familial ritual as well, as the roles must be preserved and passed down the generations. Thus, brushing teeth becomes more than a banal action: it is restored behavior of impersonating ancestors in a ritual of cleaning.

In this thinking, video games are a ritual. Some are social rituals (multi-player games), and others are personal rituals (single-player games); for many, single-player games are a ritual of escape, or of calming down after a long day of work. For some, video games are their work. Society can no longer afford to dismiss video games a juvenile entertainment, as to play a video game, is to perform. I will explore concepts of this performance in the video game theory section.

Let's Plays

Recently, a phenomenon has struck the web (of which is also a recent technological development) known as "Let's Plays." These popular videos (mostly on YouTube, and just recently, Switch) have a simple concept behind them: someone records themselves playing a video game (alone or with friends) while capturing real-time reactions and discussions. Let's Plays have been around more-or-less since the first video game was created. The first video game, *Pong,* was on exhibit in 1958 at the Brookhaven National Laboratory in order to create a more exciting lab tour, and capture people's attention with an interactive demonstration. And when video games became commodities for the home, friends/siblings would gather to play games together, as well as watch each other play. The online version of this phenomenon began a bit as a discussion thread, back when videos weren't really uploaded online. A few people would gather together online and play a video game, a literal "let's play video game 'x.'"

From simple screen shots and forum discussion, Let's Plays have evolved into an industry, with content creators making millions of dollars per year. The most popular content creators (on Youtube), by subscriptions, are PewDiePie, ElRubiusOMG, and Fernanfloo (as of February 14, 2018). These people have a vast following of internet users that actively watch the creators' playthroughs.

The question then becomes why people want to watch someone else play a video game. Video games are supposed to offer user choice, and the thrill of being in control of a character; however millions of people watch Let's Plays more than actually playing a game. There are several reasons for this: watching someone play can inform purchasing decisions, or offer just as much of a kick as playing the game (especially if the viewer doesn't want to play the video game). I argue, however, that Let's Plays are primarily popular because of the hosts; the content creators who play the game and upload them for viewers.

When creating a Let's Play channel, content creators are responsible for not just playing the game, but for also giving an entertaining performance of their own: an added layer of content in addition to the gameplay. For example, Jacksepticeye is known for being loud and generally uncensored. His subscribers like how open he is, and his energy. Not only this, but he's created an online community that is highly supportive of its members and of its leader. On the flip side, there are more troll-type creators who exist as commentary satire on video games (Video Game

Dunkey). These two different approaches to Let's Plays offer the same reason to watch: it's entertaining.

In the same way a basketball fan might watch The Golden State Warriors, cheer for James Harden, and connect over basketball stories; so do the online community of video gamers, and Let's Play watchers. Both sets of communities rally around popular figures.

In addition, people gather in physical spaces to host competitions, or friendly campaigns. They compete against each other professionally, with hundreds of spectators in the audience. Watching video games has become a new cathardic release of popular entertainment. Rather than going to the films to see an old, rehashed plot, people are opting to be a part of a community (online or in person).

Thus, I argue that watching Let's Plays are just as performative as playing the actual video game. And there are many levels of participation, such that there is only one infelicitous instance of participating: is by someone uttering that they are, when they are not. This means that they do not watch Let's Plays or online content, and do not contribute anything to the community; for someone who watches Let's Plays habitually still contributes to the community by supporting the content creators through viewership.


A Bit Of Video Game Theory

There is so much video game theory, I would feel hard-pressed to include everything. Thus, I will be speaking on what a video game is, level design, and chance/indeterminancy within gameplay.

The biggest problem when discussing what a video game actually is, is people saying that "it's just a game." Yes, it is a game; however it's more than that. A video game can be a cinematic narrative, or a shooter without any narration. It could be something as simple as *Pac-Man*, or complex and open-world as the *Fallout* series. However what these games offer are puzzles that need solving. The performative of playing a video game then becomes just as much problem solving as playing.

Dictionary.com defines a puzzle as "a toy, problem, or other contrivance designed to amuse by presenting difficulties to be solved by ingenuity or patient effort." Video games present the user with a problem/situation (the difficulty) that one must solve (using ingenuity, patient effort, or often times a mix of both) in order to continue. It's an elaborate, digital escape

room. You cannot progress to the next level in *Pac-Man* without first eating all the dots (while avoiding the ghosts). Each level of *Uncharted* requires the user to solve a puzzle in order to get to the treasure. Even video games that have no narrative, and/or are multi-player, are puzzles. How will a team work together to win the round against the opposing team? What is the optimum set up for a digital village? Each video game requires a set of skills and problem-solving tactics in order to win.

Each level in a video game is like a maze in which the puzzle takes place. In *Bioshock*, one level of Rapture is rendered at a time, and presented as a puzzle. For an example, I will examine the Medical Pavilion level.

The objective of this level is to get Jack (the main protagonist) into the Bathysphere (Rapture's version of an elevator) to join up with Atlas. However in order to do this, the player needs to get an access key from Dr. Steinman. Thus, the player makes their way through the Medical Pavilion, however a splicer's bombs block the path, and the player must find the telekinesis plasmid in order to use a bomb to unblock the path. But in order to gain access to the telekinesis plasmid, the player must find the Incinerate plasmid to melt the ice blocking the door to the telekinesis plasmid. All this while also fighting off enemy splicers. Thus, this level becomes a puzzle, with pieces scattered around a large maze. The exit to this maze requires a key that requires several keys to claim the larger key.

Not only is each level like a maze, but when designed well, levels will allow the user to "level up" as the game goes on. This means that the player becomes more adept at the controls and will develop techniques with which to complete other levels. A good boss fight is a natural culmination of elements from already-played game. *Uncharted 2*'s final fight a more intense version of running/climbing/shooting; *Bioshock'*s final fight allows players to utilize any and all weapons/plasmids in whatever style the player has previously played. So each maze becomes slightly more difficult than the last as players level up, developing techniques and skills necessary for further puzzle-solving.

Like all puzzles, video games offer the users choice of how to solve each puzzle. Different gamers are accustomed to different styles of play. One might run into a room of zombies, guns blazing, while another might use stealth to take the zombies out. The cover-system offers more choice in gameplay as well. For example, in the *Uncharted* series, people who prefer to take cover in a gunfight can increase the difficulty so that bullets deal more

damage; and those who prefer to run around and take more risks and use melee attacks, can decrease the difficulty to have a more fulfilling experience.

It should be noted that most games' final outcome will not be influenced by user choice. Games such as *Fallout 3* may offer a vast land of possibilities and methods of play, however the main storyline will remain the same albeit a few changes in dialogue. Games such as *The Stanley Parable* are slightly different however, as the player has free choice, and those choices affect how the game ends (even though there are only a finite amount of scripted endings).

This variation in game play and choice are what developers must take in mind when designing a game. It's called indeterminacy, which is the factor of uncertainty (in this case) of user choice. Developers cannot control when or how the player will play the video game, and thus must program events and actions to occur in different methods. This becomes particularly difficult when considering a video game's score.

John Cage once wrote a piece called "Music of Changes," which is written such that the pianist performing must decide how to interpret the piece of music. Thus, each performance will sound different from the next. This kind of indeterminant music is also used in musical theatre, where it's known as a vamp. This is the same idea used in video game scores. All of the music is there, and it is up to the user to decide how the score will be played. In this way, one could look at video games as a performance of a video game score. Listening to a game's album will not give the same performance as performing the game itself. There are too many factors that are done without, and small sound bites that are excluded.

Take for example, the Super Mario games. Each action has a specific sound effect that contributes to the game's overall score. Yet the music on a Super Mario album will not include those on the tracks, and even if they did, it wouldn't be the same as having it respond to the user's indeterminate input. The game cannot guess when a player will press the jump button, or when they'll deal a final blow to an enemy, or if they'll even press the start button on the menu screen. Game music must be generated within the game based on what the player is doing, and where they're located.

It's not only music though. Games often have programed events that only take place with certain actions. *Fallout 3* is a completely open-world game consisting of 59 quests, and allows the user to play as a nice good guy, or as a bad guy. Games such as *Doom* will reward players for

different fighting techniques, and trophies/achievements can only be received if certain actions are performed. I will further explore this by examining the Fort Frolic level in *Bioshock*.

One of the most memorable levels of the game, Fort Frolic has a simple premise: the artist Sander Cohen cuts off access to the Bathysphere and will only let the player progress if they first help him create a piece of art. This "masterpiece" is completed by killing four people and taking their pictures to hang up in Fort Frolic's atrium. What's interesting about this level is it doesn't have a natural progression of events like the other levels. The player can kill (excepting Fitzpatrick) the four men in any order, which means that the game won't know which you'll kill first, but can only suggest a certain order. There's also a weapon upgrade station hidden in the level that, when used, triggers an event where plaster splicers will come to life and randomly spawn around the level. In this more-open maze, the game cannot serialize its events, rather it must be prepared to trigger scripted events in whatever order the player chooses to play them in.

When a video gamer sits down to play a video game, they are performing a ritual that seeks to impersonate the abstract concept of playing a game/performing a story. And the brilliancy of this is that each player will have a different approach to solving the puzzle.

Real World Applications (or why games matter)

Some video games are the quick-action shooters that require quick reflexes and a bit of an adrenaline rush from time to time, however at the core, they're all puzzles. There has been some extensive research into how action video games (even the slower-paced ones) improve hand-eye coordination, and how the more problem-based games help the brain on a developmental level (problem solving) and also how it might prolong mental stability (which is increasingly important when looking at dementia).

Video gamers are perfect candidates for the military now, with controlling computerized drones and machinery. Countries have created (basically) a video game out of surveillance and war. It's important to look at how something that was designed to be an entertaining science exhibit has turned into a militarized tool. It should prompt us to question, maybe challenge, these tactics and their consequences in a globalized world. How are games marketing themselves with violence? How are different sexes represented within those games?

And how can one go without looking at the future of technology, specifically that of VR (virtual reality) and how one will act within those virtual worlds. Plays such as *The Nether* question ethics within such a space, looking at murder and child pornography in a virtual world; for while the action has no real-world consequence, the urge is still within the real-world person (even though they may never act upon it). *Uncle Roy All Around You* took the concept of a video game and used its participants in a performance where users gave commands to real-life players. The objective was for the user to direct the player to a certain room, and for the player to reach that room following the commands of the user. The piece questioned how we interact with each other virtually, take care of each other, and how much we trust a complete stranger.

We are in the middle of a technological boon as society moves from real to virtual, and with that should be a question of what that means, and consequences (both positive and negative) of such an action. Thus, what I hope this performance prompts audiences to consider (if nothing else) is "When is a game not a game?"

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4. Video Games Referenced
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    d. Fallout Series
    e. Uncharted Series
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    g. Bioshock
    h. Doom
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**Statistical Performance Data**


FINAL TIMES

Part I

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Segment 1 | 30 minutes | |
| Segment 2 | 45 minutes | 15 minutes FTE (faster than estimated) |
| Segment 3 | 1 hour | 45 minutes FTE |
| Segment 4 | 2 hours | 15 minutes FTE |
| Fort Frolic | 1 hour, 45 minutes | 15 minutes FTE |


Part II

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Segment 6 | 1 hour, 15 minutes | |
| Segment 7 | 15 minutes | 4 minutes STE (slower than estimated) |
| Segment 8 | 1 hour, 45 minutes | 15 minutes STE |
| Segment 9 | 1 hour, 45 minutes | 30 minutes STE |
| Final | 10 minutes | 5 minutes FTE |


Part I playtime – 6 hours

Part II playtime – 5 hours, 10 minutes

Total playtime – 11 hours, 10 minutes


NOTES

Human error: first three levels completed on easy. Switched to medium for the rest of the gameplay. Effect on time.

Fort Frolic segment played on first night due to the faster playthrough.

Experienced player needed to give two hints to unexperienced player in order to move the game along.

Attendance – Part 1: 5 people. Part 2: 6 people. 3 people went both nights, bringing the total audience engagement to 8 people.

**REFLECTION**

**Ethan Fox**

First, I'd like to thank Theatrikos Playhouse in Flagstaff for sponsoring this.

I thought this test went very well. I didn't do too much advertising for it, however I did put up some posters around town. I contacted the Arizona Daily Sun in order to get the piece in the calendar, to no success. The main obstacle (aside from finding a space) was how to market the piece. I like how the poster turned out, and the way it was presented, however I think the way it was presented to an audience such as Flagstaff was not the best way. Flagstaff theatre is geared towards the elderly/middle-aged white folk, who prefer light-hearted material to anything experimental or depth-bearing. Not only this, but both parts happened on Sunday nights, which is not a premium night for staying out late.

However, attendance wasn't a concern as this was merely a test run: looking at how to present the material on stage. I made a lot of discoveries while performing and observing that I would like to develop further.

First, and my co-performer agrees, is how to find a way for the performer to be showcased. The theatre was set up where the game was projected on a screen facing the audience, and the player was in the front row. This meant that the audience was watching the video game, and our silhouettes. But what's so intriguing about YouTube playthroughs is that most often, you can see their reactions. It offers more insightful information as to what's going on in the gamer's head, rather than just watching the game being played. To solve this, I have decided to do a live-feed camera set up in front of the player. It would connect to a second projector which would then project the feed onto a screen right next to the video game. The audience would have a choice of sitting in the audience, or on a side of the stage where a few chairs will have been set up in order to see the performer live, instead of on a screen.

The second is not necessarily a problem, however ties into the larger experiment as a whole. I will set up two or three performers, and give them instructions to follow as they play, much like a *Happenings* performance. For example, the first player might be told to activate a weapons upgrade station in Poseidon's Plaza, while the second player might be told not to activate that specific station. Player two might be told to only use a combination of the shotgun, wrench, and grenade launcher; while player one might be told to only use a combination of the

machine gun, the pistol, and crossbow/chemical thrower. These alterations to gameplay are limitations to gameplay style and the functionality of each gamer. The player who activates the weapons upgrade system in Poseidon's Plaza will have to be constantly on the lookout for plaster enemies that look like statues, but aren't. The player who is only allowed a pistol, machine gun, and crossbow will be forced to fight more at a distance than the player who is only allowed to use the shotgun and wrench.

A third consideration in further developments is the game selection. I have been told by many friends that I should consider such open world games as *Fallout* and *Skyrim*. I would like to explore this notion further, however have hesitations to do so. A few of my concerns are that these games may be too open world to provide for a structural approach in gameplay. Another is the time it takes for players to move from one location to another across the map without fast travel. I have often traveled for ten minutes to get to one location to finish a story, and sometimes I'll die before I get there, thus having to restart at my last save point (often times all the way across the map). This would allow for a display of more variance however, as it adds to the amount of things a player can do, and ways they can play.

I recall the accidental, early discovery of a rose necessary in a later part of the level by Dylan. One of the things that interested me about this was that he had become so lost in the maze of Arcadia, he was jumping the gun on a few discoveries. Not only that but I found out that there are elements of gameplay in Arcadia that allow for a non-linear playthrough. What's interesting about this is that this kind of open-world map disappears in the later levels, where the game forces you to find one objective before sending you on another. This structural approach reflects not just the game's thematic fundamentals, but also showcases the different kinds of mazes available within the video gaming world.

I have also been recommended the idea of first person shooters online. The idea would be that two people would be set up in different rooms and play against each other online. This would be an interesting idea, however would offer no story component. Instead, it would be a look at who wins more games by the end of the session, and possibly open up the idea of audience interaction.

And the fourth consideration for a future production of this performance is the space and location in which the performance is being conducted. My friend and I were bouncing around different locations on where this might be performed: outside in a park, in an observation

room… and how would that change the perception of the piece as a whole? What different message might an audience get from being isolated from the performer vs being able to see and talk with them?

Performing this was rather interesting. I found that I became extremely involved with the game and kinda forgot about the audience. One thing was that I was performing for a virtually empty room, which meant that there wasn't a lot of energy or motive to do/say anything. I was just performing the game, and not giving an additional performance.

Watching was different. I remember wanting to help out Dylan on a few occasions because it wasn't how I would play the video game. I refrained, and just watched, only giving him advice when he was stuck in an area (which happened twice). I was able to pace about and take a break, which was really nice to do. Had I played straight through, I feel it might have been rather taxing. The buddy system provided a way to stay refreshed so I could jump back in the game and be ok playing for the next hour or two.

What was interesting about the experience was it felt much like friends taking turns on a gaming system more than a performance. I connected more with a performance of a ritual, not in a ceremonious and theatrical way, but as the ritual itself. What audience members witnessed was a more authentic version of what it means to perform a video game, and more true to how a few people might play in private.

**REFLECTION**

**Dylan L. Welker**

I was approached by Ethan Fox at the beginning of summer, and he asked if I could take part in a durational performance piece, *A Performance of Rapture*, which involved playing a video game, *Bioshock*, onstage for seven hours on two consecutive Sundays. I do not identify as a gamer and I barely recall the last time I dedicated more than an hour to a video game system, however I have made it a point to always support the artistic endeavors of my close friends and respected colleagues when I have the means. I agreed to take part in the performance without really knowing what to expect, but I trusted that Ethan had something to teach me about the medium that I had never considered in the past.

When the first performance began, I took the first shift and played through the introductory chapter of *Bioshock*. I had never played before, and Ethan wanted me to get a hang of it while the game was still somewhat easy. What I noticed as a performer was that I really wasn't performing at all. The game was engrossing and captured all my attention, and I really didn't have any urge to be impressive or to do anything theatrical. As a player, I simply wanted to get through each level without being massacred or blowing myself to smithereens. The most interesting thing I may have done as a performer was tense up or leap out of my seat when something particularly shocking or anxiety-inducing occurred in the game, but, as far as I was concerned, my role as a performer was to play the game and sit as comfortably as possible.

Video games to me have always been a distraction for privileged populations who happen to enjoy sitting and staring for extended periods of time. I played as a young boy, but I swore off all video game systems when I suspected they had been partially responsible for some immense weight gain in my middle school years. Also, from a personal standpoint, I found that I preferred not to invest too much time or involvement in a virtual reality when I could be doing so much more in my daily life. While that sentiment holds true for me following *A Performance of Rapture*, I was given the opportunity to see a different perspective.

Video games can be a tool for learning. While many games seem to focus on mindless action and inconsequential decision making, I noticed in *Bioshock* an opportunity to make positive or negative moral choices with potentially damaging consequences within the game's story line. There are creatures in the game called "Little Sisters" who, to my limited

understanding, were little girls who had been experimented upon and redesigned to carry out horrifying tasks. Throughout the *Bioshock* gameplay, the player is offered the decision (with great frequency) to either rescue or harvest a valuable resource from these little girls. Should the player choose to rescue the child, they receive *some* benefits with the possibility of future benefits. If the player should choose to harvest the child, they receive *many* benefits while risking a very important relationship with a major character in the game. I, as a self-declared moralistic player, elected to rescue the little girls each time whereas my costar (Ethan) occasionally elected to harvest the children for greater personal gain. Although these decisions hold no real-life consequence, I as a player felt compelled to do the right thing even when faced with the opportunity to perform cruelty against an imaginary shade on a computer screen. I believe video games have the capacity to offer people a chance to make good and bad decisions in a fantasy world in which there are no consequences. The choices are inherently safe seeing as how the characters being acted upon are figments of the imagination, and yet the player still feels compelled to treat these characters with compassion.

The performative element of Ethan's project at first appears to be the game itself. However, the game would only consist of moving pictures if it weren't for the constant generation of thoughtful, practical decisions during gameplay. The player must constantly make decisions to get from one part of the game to the next, and without this decision-making element, there is no performative aspect. When watching the performers at play, they don't seem to do much. I recall watching Ethan play and he mostly sat still and stared. However, when looking at the screen, you could see his brain working. He was constantly thinking, responding, and reacting to stimuli on the screen.

It appears to me that the objective of this project was to prove that video games do indeed have performative potential. The entertainment value that one receives from the game itself is significant, but there is also clear, measurable action taken onstage by the player who must navigate the videogame's narrative. I would argue that the videogame's narrative does become the main event while the player's reactions and behaviors are secondary, and so I think for a future project, I'd love to see a performance that focuses on the player rather than the game, because there is a great deal to observe in the entranced gamer who reacts minutely to virtual stimuli. In addition, I am not quite sure just where this theatrical potential may be put to good use, but I trust that Ethan will find a way to make it work. While I have no intention to

reembrace my old gameplaying habits, I am happy and proud that I had the opportunity to learn something from him about an artistic medium that I had dismissed long ago.