The Unbearable Lightness of Games

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I have been publishing long enough now to look back on much of what I have written and feel the sudden, pressing need to throw myself off the nearest bridge. Every person lucky enough to turn a creative pursuit into a career has these moments, and at least, I sometimes tell myself, I do not often look back on my writing with shame.

I am ashamed of one thing, however, and that is an essay I contributed to a nonfiction anthology of "young writing." I was encouraged to write about anything I pleased, so long as it addressed what being a young writer today felt like. I wrote about video games and whether they were a distraction from the calling of literature. Even as I was writing it, I was aware that the essay did not accurately reflect my feelings. Recently I wondered if the essay was maybe somewhat better than I remembered. I then reread it and spent much of the following afternoon driving around, idly looking for bridges.

"As for video games," I wrote, "very few people over the age of forty would recognize them as even a lower form of art. I am always wavering as to where I would locate video games along art's fairly forgiving sliding scale." Video games are obviously and manifestly a form of popular art, and every form of art, popular or otherwise, has its ghettos, from the crack houses along Michael Bay Avenue to the tubercular prostitutes coughing at the corner of Steele and Patterson. The video game is the youngest and, increasingly, most dominant popular art form of our time. To study the origins of any popular new medium is to become an archaeologist of skeptical opprobrium. It seems to me that anyone passionate about video games has better things to do than walk chin-first into sucker-punch arguments about whether they qualify as art. Those who do not believe video games are or ever will be art deserve nothing more goading or indulgent than a smile.

I think that was what I was trying to say. But I was then and am now routinely torn about whether video games are a worthy way to spend my time and often ask myself why I like them as much as I do, especially when, very often, I hate them. Sometimes I think I hate them because of how purely they bring me back to childhood, when I could only imagine what I would do if I were single-handedly fighting off an alien army or driving down the street in a very fast car while the police try to shoot out

my tires or told that I was the ancestral inheritor of some primeval sword and my destiny was to rid the realm of evil. These are very intriguing scenarios if you are twelve years old. They are far less intriguing if you are thirty-five and have a career, friends, a relationship, or children. The problem, however, at least for me, is that they are no less *fun*. I like fighting aliens and I like driving fast cars. Tell me the secret sword is just over the mountain and I will light off into goblin-haunted territory to claim it. For me, video games often restore an unearned, vaguely loathsome form of innocence—an innocence derived of *not knowing anything*. For this and all sorts of other complicated historical reasons—starting with the fact that they began as toys directly marketed to children—video games crash any cocktail-party rationale you attempt to formulate as to why, exactly, you love them. More than any other form of entertainment, video games tend to divide rooms into Us and Them. We are, in effect, admitting that we like to spend our time shooting monsters, and They are, not unreasonably, failing to find the value in that.

I wrote in my essay that art is "obligated to address questions allergic to mere entertainment. ... In my humble estimation, no video game has yet crossed the Rubicon from entertainment to true art." Here I was trying to say that what distinguishes one work of art from another is primarily intelligence, which is as multivalent as art itself. Artistic or creative intelligence can express itself formally, stylistically, emotionally, thematically, morally, or any number of ways. Works of art we call masterpieces typically run the table on the many forms artistic intelligence can take: They are comprehensively intelligent. This kind of intelligence is most frequently apparent in great works of art created by individuals. Unity of artistic effect is something human beings have learned to respond to, and for obvious reasons this is best achieved by individual artists. Many games—which are, to be sure, corporate entertainments created by dozens of people with a strong expectation of making a lot of money—have more formal and stylistic intelligence than they know what to do with and not even trace amounts of thematic, emotional, or moral intelligence. One could argue that these games succeed as works of art in some ways and either fail or do not attempt to succeed in others. "True" art makes the attempt to succeed in every way available to it. At least, I think so.

My ambivalence goes much deeper, though. A few years ago I was asked by a magazine for my year-end roundup of interesting aesthetic experiences, among which I included 2K Boston's peerless first-person shooter *BioShock*, which, I wrote, "I would hesitate to call ... a legitimate work of art," even though "its engrossing and intelligent story line made it the first game to absorb me without also embarrassing me for being so absorbed." Seeing that halfhearted encomium in print, with my name attached to it, about a game I adored, obsessed over, and thought about for weeks drove home the plunger of a fresh syringe of shame. Was I apologizing to some imaginary cultural arbiter for finding value in a form of creative expression whose considerable deficits I recognize but which I nevertheless believe is important? Or is this evidence of an authentic scruple? On one hand, I love *BioShock*, which is frequently saluted as one of the first games to tackle what might be considered intellectual subject matter—namely, a game world exploration of the social consequences inherent within Ayn Rand's Objectivism (long story). On the other hand, what passes for intellectual subject matter in a video game is still far from intellectually compelling, at least to me, and I know I was not imagining the feeling of slipping, hourglass loss I experienced when I played *BioShock* ten hours a day for three days

straight. If I really wanted to explore the implications and consequences of Objectivism, there were better, more sophisticated places to look, even if few of them would be as much fun (though getting shot in the knee would be more fun than rereading *Atlas Shrugged*). When I think about games, here is where I bottom out. Is it okay that they are *mostly* fun? Am I a philistine or simply a coward? Are games the problem, or am I?

I came to this once-embarrassed, formerly furtive love of games honestly. Because the majority of the games I have enjoyed most as an adult tell stories, I was always comparing those stories with the novels and films I admire. Naturally, I found (and find) most video-game stories wanting. But this may be a flagrant category mistake. For one thing, no one is sure what purpose "story" actually serves in video games. Games with any kind of narrative structure usually employ two kinds of storytelling. One is the framed narrative of the game itself, set in the fictional "present" and traditionally doled out in what are called cut scenes or cinematics, which in most cases take control away from the gamer, who is forced to watch the scene unfold. The other, which some game designers and theoreticians refer to as the "ludonarrative," is unscripted and gamer-determined—the "fun" portions of the "played" game—and usually amounts to some frenetic reconception of getting from point A to point B. The differences between the framed narrative and the ludonarrative are what make story in games so unmanageable: One is fixed, the other is fluid, and yet they are intended, however notionally, to work together. Their historical inability to do so may be best described as congressional.

An example of such narrative cross-purpose can be found in Infinity Ward's first-person shooter *Call of Duty 4*. In one memorable sequence, moving forward the framed narrative requires you and a computer-controlled partner to crawl and sneak your way through the irradiated farmlands of Chernobyl in order to assassinate an arms dealer. The ludonarrative, meanwhile, is the actual (and, as it happens, pretty thrilling) process of getting there. If you choose to be a dick and frag your partner, it has only ludonarrative consequences. At worst, you have to start the mission over. No matter what you do, the framed narrative does not change: You and he need to get there together. *Call of Duty 4* is a game with little to no ambition to change the emotional outlook of anyone who plays it. It is a war-porn story of good and evil. All the same, the chasm between its framed narrative and ludonarrative calls attention to the artificiality of both. While the former attempts to be narratively meaningful, the latter is concerned only with being exciting. The former grants the player no agency and thus has no emotional resonance because the latter, with its illusion of agency, does nothing to reinforce what that resonance might be, other than that shooting your friend in the head is bad news. Believing in the game's fiction often becomes as difficult as obeying orders issued by a world-class hypocrite. For a game of *Call of Duty 4*'s simplistic themes, this is a problem of glancing consequence. For games of greater ambition, however, the problem becomes exponentially larger. (*Call of Duty 4* does offer a couple of formally compelling experiences. One is that it kills off the character you assume you will control for the duration in a mid-game helicopter crash, but not before allowing you to take a few disoriented steps from the wreckage—altogether an eerie sequence. Another is the game's opening, which grants the gamer the helpless first-person POV of a man being driven, it becomes increasingly evident, to his execution. This sequence ends with the gamer being shot, jarringly, in the face.)

Several games have lately been experimenting with allowing decisions made during the ludonarrative to alter the framed narrative, most notably in *Fallout 3* and Lionhead's *Fable II*, but this is mainly expressed in how you are perceived by other characters. Once a game comes along that figures out a way around the technical challenges of allowing a large number of ludonarrative decisions to have framed-narrative-altering consequences—none of which challenges I understand but whose existence several game designers sighingly confirmed for me—an altogether new form of storytelling might be born: stories that, with your help, create themselves. There is, of course, another word for stories that, with your help, create themselves. That word is *life*. So would this even be a good thing?

I am not so sure. When I am being entertained, I am also being manipulated. I am *allowing* myself to be manipulated. I am, in other words, surrendering. When I watch television, one of our less exalted forms of popular entertainment, I am surrendering to the inevitability of commercials amid bite-sized narrative blocks.

When I watch a film, the most imperial form of popular entertainment—particularly when experienced in a proper movie theater—I am surrendering most humiliatingly, for the film begins at a time I cannot control, has nothing to sell me that I have not already purchased, and goes on whether or not I happen to be in my seat. When I read a novel I am not only surrendering; I am allowing my mind to be occupied by a colonizer of uncertain intent. Entertainment takes it as a given that I cannot affect it other than in brutish, exterior ways: turning it off, leaving the theater, pausing the disc, stuffing in a bookmark, underlining a phrase. But for those television programs, films, and novels febrile with self-consciousness, entertainment pretends it is unaware of me, and I allow it to.

Playing video games is not quite like this. The surrender is always partial. You get control and are controlled. Games are patently aware of you and have a physical dimension unlike any other form of popular entertainment. On top of that, many require a marathon runner's stamina: Certain console games can take as many as forty hours to complete, and, unlike books, you cannot bring them along for enjoyment during mass-transit dead time. (Rarely has wide-ranging familiarity with a medium so transparently privileged the un- and underemployed.) Even though you may be granted lunar influence over a game's narrative tides, the fact that there is any narrative at all reminds you that a presiding intelligence exists within the game along with you, and it is this sensation that invites the otherwise unworkable comparisons between games and other forms of narrative art.

Yes, as difficult as it sometimes is to believe, games have authors, however diminutive an aura he or she (or, frequently, they) might exude. What often strikes me whenever I am playing a game is how glad I am of that hovering authorial presence. Although I enjoy the freedom of games, I also appreciate the remindful crack of the narrative whip—to seek entertainment is to seek that whip—and the mixture of the two is what makes games such a seductive, appealingly dyadic form of entertainment. A video game whose outcomeless narrative is wholly determined by my actions—as in, say, *World of Warcraft*, which is less a video game than a digital board game, and which game I very much dislike—would elevate me into a position of accidental authorship I do not covet and render the game itself a chilly collation of behavior trees and algorithms. I *want* to be told a story—albeit one I happen to be part of and can affect, even if in small ways. If I wanted to tell a story, I would not be playing video games.

A noisy group of video-game critics and theoreticians laments the rise of story in games. Games, in one version of this view, are best exemplified as total play, wherein the player is an immaterial demiurge and the only "narrative" is what is anecdotally generated during play. (*Tetris* would be the best example of this sort of game.) My suspicion is that this lament comes less from frustration with story qua story than it does from the narrative butterfingers on outstanding display in the vast majority of contemporary video games. I share that frustration. I also love being the agent of chaos in the video-game world. What I want from games—a control as certain and seamless as the means by which I am being controlled—may be impossible, and I am back to where I began. Reload.

The purpose story serves in video games is complicated, then. Less complicated is how many gamers view story For many gamers (and, by all evidence, game designers), story is largely a matter of accumulation. The more *explanation* there is, the thought appears to go, the more *story* has been generated. This would be a profound misunderstanding of story for any form of narrative art, but it has hobbled the otherwise high creative achievement of any number of games. Frequently in work with any degree of genre loyalty—this would include the vast majority of video games—the more explicit the story becomes, the more silly it will suddenly seem. (Let us call this the Midi-chlorian Error.) The best science fiction is usually densely realistic in quotidian detail but evocatively vague about the bigger questions. Tolkien is all but ruined for me whenever I make the mistake of perusing the Anglo-Saxon Talmudisms of his various appendices: "Among the Eldar the Alphabet of Daeron did not develop true cursive forms"—kill me, please, now—"since for writing the Elves adopted the Fēanorian letters." As for horror films, the moment I learned Freddy Krueger was "the bastard son of a thousand maniacs" was also the final moment I could envision him without spontaneously laughing. The impulse to *explain* is the Achilles' heel of all genre work, and the most sophisticated artists within every genre know better than to expose their worlds to the sharp knife of intellection.

A good example of a game that does not make that mistake is Valve's cooperative first-person shooter *Left 4 Dead*, which offers yet another vision of zombie apocalypse. Unlike the *Resident Evil* series, which goes to great narrative pains to explain what is happening and why (culminating in one of the most ridiculous moments in video-game history, when the hero of *Resident Evil 4* discovers an enemy document helpfully titled OUR PLAN), *Left 4 Dead* abandons every rational pretext and drops you and three other characters into the middle of undead anarchy. Almost nothing is explained; the little characterization there is comes in tantalizing dribs; and all that is expected is survival, which is possible only by constantly working together with your fellow gamers: covering them while they reload, helping them up when they are knocked down, and saving them when they are trapped in the eye of a zombie hurricane. *Left 4 Dead* is one of the most well-designed and explosively entertaining games ever made. While its purpose is incontinent terror, its point is that teamwork is, by definition, a matter of compulsion, not choice. *Left 4 Dead*'s designer, Michael Booth, had the maturity to grasp the power that narrative minimalism would provide his game. The speedy and acrobatic zombies of *Left 4 Dead* have no plan more refined than kicking you to death and sucking the marrow from your femur. As a scenario, it is as ridiculous as any forged by the Vulcans of video-game conceit, and yet, from start

to finish, *Left 4 Dead* is as freefallingly unfamiliar and viscerally convincing as the worst dream you have ever had.

Capturing what playing *Left 4 Dead* feels like is not easy But set *Left 4 Dead* to its highest difficulty level, recruit three of its best players you can find, push your way through one of the game's four scenarios, and make no mistake: What will go down will be so emotionally grueling, it will feel as though you have spent an hour playing something like full-contact psychic football. The end of the game, however it turns out, will feel epic to no one who did not take part in it, but those who did take part will feel as though they have marched, together, through a gauntlet of the damned.

The game's refusal to explore the who, what, why or how of its zombie citizenry is emblematic of the unusually austere approach to narrative in many Valve games, which the company may not have invented but has certainly come close to perfecting. The four controllable characters in *Left 4 Dead* are all common video-game types: the girl, the black guy, the biker, the elderly Vietnam vet. They are not, however, blank canvases. (I play as—in order of preference—the girl, the black guy, and the biker. I absolutely refuse to play as the Vietnam vet. For some reason I absolutely hate the guy. Tactics that failed in the jungles and swamps of the Mekong Delta have no place against an army of the undead.) The object of the game is to fight your way through scenarios that are themselves divided into five stages, all of which, but for the scenarios' finales, conclude with the players' slamming shut a safe house's thick red metal door. The problem, of course, is that between these safe houses are devastated locales (a high-rise hospital, a train yard, an airport, a traffic tunnel, among others) filled with literally thousands of zombies looking to attack you—and even, sometimes, one another. (You want a weird video-game experience? Creep around a corner in the sewers adjacent to the hospital, say, and you might find, to your fascinated horror, a couple of unawares zombies casually *beating each other up*.) These zombies attack singly or in groups or in what the game calls "the horde." Standing in the middle of a darkened city street while a horde of zombies pours up out of a subway station and clamors over and around parked cars to get to you is about as unnerving as video games get. And these are just the rank-and-file zombies. The far more perilous "special infected" is where *Left 4 Dead* begins to glitter.

These special infected come in five nightmare flavors: the Hunter (a hoodied zombie who pounces upon and then tears into his prey, rendering the pouncee helpless until a friend comes along to shoot or push the Hunter off); the Smoker (a coughing, shambolic, elastically tongued zombie who operates much like a sniper, extending his tongue to pluck survivors from the pack); the Boomer (an obese and suppurating slob zombie who is as fragile and explosive as a Pinto but whose vomit and bile attract the dreaded horde, and whose vomit, on top of that, is *blinding*, so that during a well-coordinated, attack you cannot see the Hunter tearing to pieces your screaming friend right in front of you); the Tank (as advertised, a steroidally distended zombie as tough as an armored car, but who mercifully appears only a few times a game); and, finally, the Witch (a crying lost-soul zombie who seems the very picture of helplessness, until she is startled by a flashlight or loud noise, upon which she uses her razored manicure to instantly kill the survivor who startled her, and whom you must try to sneak past, and who is as upsetting and inspired a video-game nemesis as any). What is so brilliant about these special infected is the way they tap into distinct types of emotional unease. For the Hunter it is shock and for the Smoker helplessness. For the Boomer it is panic and for the Tank flight. For the Witch it is a strange

combination of alarm and paranoia and blame. These emotions, aroused as they are alongside other, living gamers, are part of what makes a game with no traditional narrative to speak of such a dynamically fertile experience to look back on. *Left 4 Dead* creates, within a structure that is formally storyless but highly controlled, a game that feels to those playing it as harrowingly and expertly designed as a first-rate horror film.

Credit here is due to the so-called AI Director that Valve designed specifically for *Left 4 Dead*. It is, most basically, a piece of in-game computation that monitors the gamers, judges their performance, and complicates things as it deems advisable. If things are going really swimmingly for the survivors, why not inflict upon them a Tank? If the survivors are hurting, why not drop in an extra health pack? The AI Director, which could not work in a game with an inflexible narrative structure, also ensures that the survivors are never attacked in the same place by the same number of enemies. The revelatory quality of this innovation cannot be overstated. Gamers often learn how to master a game by memorization, but *Left 4 Dead* is impossible to master in this way All one can do is hone strategies, which, especially on the highest difficulty level, have a toothpick-house fragility.

You do not get a delivered narrative in *Left 4 Dead*. What you get is a series of found narratives. How do these found narratives in *Left 4 Dead* work, and what gives them their resonance? Well, as it happens, I have a *Left 4 Dead* story and it occurred while playing the game's versus mode, in which two human teams (one survivor, one zombie) have at each other. Playing against human-controlled infected takes the robotically inflicted havoc of the AI and turns it into something far more wonderful and vicious. In versus mode, the object is to reach the safe house with as many living survivors as possible. The more survivors that make it, the more points your team receives. One night, at the end of the first stage of the "Dead Air" campaign, I and three fellow survivors (two of whom were friends, one of had just jumped in) had come to realize that we were up a vilely gifted and absolutely devastating team of *Left 4 Dead* tacticians—the Hannibal, Napoleon, Crazy Horse, and Patton of zombies. They attacked with insurgent coordination and to maximum damage, and it was only our own skill that had managed to hold them off as long as we had. By the time the first-stage safe house came into view, we—four extraordinarily good Left 4 veterans—were limping, hobbled, and completely freaked out. Then, another coordinated attack, led by the Boomer puking on us, blinding us, and summoning the horde. While we staggered around, the Smoker took hold of one friend while a Hunter pounced on another. The other remaining survivor and I decided to break for the safe house door. Before getting there my remaining friend was pounced on by yet another Hunter. Although I freed him, I was still mostly blind, and my friend, despite having been released, was under assault by at least a dozen rapacious normal zombies. Deciding that one of us making it was better than none of us making it, I stepped inside the safe house and closed the door. Outside, the friend I had left behind managed to fight his way out of the horde and kill the Smoker and Hunter ripping apart the other survivors, who were now incapacitated, incapable of getting up without help, and quickly bleeding out, which is to say, dying. Unfortunately, the heroic friend was himself incapacitated while doing this. While my three downed friends could shoot their sidearms, they could not rise. They needed me for that. In a minute or so, they would be dead, and from the shelter of the safe house I watched their health bars steadily drain away while, the opposing team had begun to respawn. A lone survivor even against even two

special infected opponents would stand no chance, as all it would take to end the round would be a Hunter or Smoker incapacitating me. So I stayed put. Better one of us than none of us.

My downed friends failed to see it this way. Over my headphones they vigorously questioned my courage, my manhood, the ability of my lone female survivor to repopulate the world on her own, and my understanding of deontological ethics. On the other side of the safe house door, I could hear the Boomer belching, farting, and waiting for me to come out. "You dick!" one of my friends called out. He had just finished bleeding out, a skull appearing beside his onscreen name. My remaining friends were now seconds away from the same fate. I looked within, did not like what I saw, steeled myself, and fired several shotgun rounds through the door, safely killing the Boomer (who it must be said behaved with uncharacteristic carelessness). When I opened the door I saw a Hunter a few feet away, in the corner, waiting to pounce, but I killed him before moving out of the safe room and into the street. The second Hunter was better prepared, but with miraculous good luck I managed to blast him out of the air in mid-pounce. I quickly helped up the first survivor and together we made it out to the final remaining survivor, who was down to his last droplets of virtual existence. While I helped up the final survivor, my friend, covering me, eliminated the lurking Smoker, and with glad cries the three of us made it back into the safe house. At great personal risk, and out of real shame, I had rescued two of my three friends and in the process outfaced against all odds one of the best *Left 4 Dead* teams I had and have ever played against. I realized, then, vividly, that *Left 4 Dead* offered a rare experience in which a game's theme (cooperation) was also what was encouraged within the actual flow of gameplay.

The people I saved that night still talk about my heroic action—and, yes, it *was*, it did *feel*, heroic—whenever we play together, and, after the round, two of the opposing team's members requested my online friendship, which with great satisfaction I declined. All the emotions I felt during those few moments—fear, doubt, resolve, and finally courage—were as intensely vivid as any I have felt while reading a novel or watching a film or listening to a piece of music. For what more can one ask? What more could one *want*?

I once raved about *Left 4 Dead* in a video-game emporium within earshot of the manager, a man I had previously heard angrily defend the position that lightsaber wounds are not necessarily cauterized. (His evidence: The tauntaun Han Solo disembowels in *The Empire Strikes Back* does, in fact, bleed.) "*Left 4 Dead?*' he asked me. "You liked it?" I admitted that I did. Very, very much. And him? "I liked it," he said, grudgingly. "I just wished there was more story." A few pimply malingerers, piqued by our exchange, nodded in assent. The overly caloric narrative content of so many games had caused these gentlemen to feel undernourished by the different narrative experience offered by *Left 4 Dead*. They, like the games they presumably loved, had become aesthetically obese. I then realized I was contrasting my sensitivity to that of some teenagers about a game that concerns itself with shooting as many zombies as possible. It is moments like this that can make it so dispiritingly difficult to care about video games.