



A BLACK ELIXIR; The Forever Game of War

In open world gaming—a seriously underplayed paradigm shift in image making—the linear topography of classical gaming is blown out for enormous sandboxes, worlds rendered without sign-posts or diegetic hand-holding. In such borderless playpens intuition becomes a factor. Bourdieu's habitus comes to mind; the idea a person is the sum of internalized structures assimilated through the skin from their environment. In that vein open world games could only exist as of this particular moment in cultural history, now that we're beyond a saturation point of gamifying principles. The modern world is a competitive virtuality and we are homo economicus, in mimetic tension with military-industrialism that fills every pore like quicksilver. Like oil. Game designers no longer need lay the path because the instruction manual lives in players as common sense; the rapacious givens of neoliberal logic. A thick quantity of fictions has become non-fiction through sheer force of repetition, through obnoxious omnipotent messaging (eat/fuck/kill). And so worlds are diminished not by shrinking borders but by persuading us to see less of them.

Take Grand Theft Auto for example, which revivifies biblical Babylon as a site of polymorphous enjoyment outside the paternal repressions of civility and law. An urban sandbox in the likeness of Los Angeles, GTA synthesizes myriad incubated fictions—like cities being epicenters of organized crime, extraordinary vice, theaters of sex and cruelty. So, when someone such as myself plays the game and instantly knows to mow down pedestrians for sport in a stolen car (I live for it), it's unsurprising that developers lovingly render these actions. We know, after decades of cartoonishly violent entertainments, that this is a world where excellence is directly proportionate to brutality. If GTA is a meritocracy then the only merit is the stylistic ingenuity of the kill. I am merely picking up on in-situ cues and acting to order. Surprisingly, the spiritual arbiters of GTA's bloodlusts are not action-movie heroes or hyper-masculine rappers but Pasolini and Kafka. This is the worst of humanity assembled in a noir tableau, pornified, and made pleasingly absurd via artful exaggeration. Not so much degeneracy as exhilarating whimsy courting the shadow-self. If he'd lived into the twenty-first century Carl Jung would've been an avid player one.

Like GTA, The Sims pretends verisimilitude but swaps racialized urban survivalism for consumer conditioning, a matriculation for those without the competitive lifestyle urge (kids). The game requires players to set up human avatars in a suburb, to start humbly and work towards greater material wealth. There's nothing quite so American as showy self-deifying upward-mobility and the game is an American sandbox, a superficial diorama of what it means to flourish (or not) when the individual is defined by market forces. It starts benignly. But before long the god-gene awakens and most adults with nostalgia for the game would testify to killing their hapless avatars in new and exciting ways, usually out of childhood boredom with a stultifying glimpse into the hollowness of adult life. The crushing weight of repetition, a horizonless expanse of sameness. The single relief is abjection, suffering, murder. How many times did I trap my sims in rooms without doors so I could watch them shit themselves and eventually starve to death? How many times did I let a house fire start and remove the exits? How many times did I put a sim in the pool and delete the step ladder? Enough times to grow bored of even these mortal diversions, until I resorted to the game's intended material pursuits—back and forth, oscillating between murder and wealth. Until the two were conflated. Avaricious malice is arguably the game's penultimate truth, camouflaged in ambient muzaks and kindergarden palette. Novel take or consumerism's implicit directive?

A precursor to open world games is Age of Empires and its numerous fantasy imitators. I personally played an Empires knock-off (nostalgia for my low-income childhood is littered with off-brand commodities). Like the standard version my Empires-like consisted of building armies and expanding territory, a primer for colonial history as most of these games were set during specific eras (with surprising period accuracy). The only difference being my iteration had mages and dragons instead of industrialists and gunpowder, taking some of the orientalism out—and then folding it back in with a pantheon of magical creatures (ugly dark-skinned orcs Bad, sexualized Caucasian elves Good). Just like in The Sims avatar health was concomitant with material accumulation, only real estate and interior decor were subbed out for the imperial highs of nation building. Usually on stolen land which is then defended by the peoples you subjugate. A better lesson on the origins of western prosperity than I ever experienced in a classroom, and undeniably more engaging for its simple but satisfying mechanics of invade and conquer. With Age of Empires as a tenuous example I'd venture a society's true character resides in its superfluities, its trivial pursuits, its candy-wrapped larks. Pure entertainment is perfidious learning.

Every game is a negotiation of territory, a schematic of war. A contest for divvying out spoils. Whether the spoils be an abstract glory or stockpile of material goods (or a hypothetical right to these) this is the basic shape of games. Exceptions only prove the rule. If a game is afoot, a subtext of antagonism simmers. Under the superlatives of fellowship and sportsmanship masculinist mythos fumes, an erotic play between victim and victor, a jousting of livid and desperate phalluses. This is true whether the game is rugby, snakes and ladders, or the amateur sleuthing of Guess Who. The mark of Cain is starkest under stadium lights but can show up anywhere (and is definitely not machine washable). In a history of western imperialism that mark is more of a seeping stain with a fount in the Middle East—a black elixir with properties of daemonic combustion. Every RPG needs a foil. Or a Mordor.

In the book Cyclonopedia Reza Negarestani's fictional seeker discovers the thesis of a fictional academic riffing on the Middle East as a nexus of chthonian evil. In this thesis (which makes up most of the book) we find not just the Lovecraftian framing of the conflict as demonism, but also the quasi-Hegelian notion of negatives cancelling each other out, becoming positive; two lies forming a truth. A truth that describes the nature of oil as narrative lubricant for western tendencies, tendencies that curve toward annihilation no matter who or what is driving. It's something epigenetic, inevitable. The carbon liberation of fossil fuels and its catastrophic knock-ons are only circumstantial features of a thanatological xeno-intelligence predating civilization, existing underneath the staid causalities of secular striving like a toxic demiurge. Like oil itself—the treacly residue of stacked death and deep time. An adhesive when in the earth holding the plates of the Holocene together, slick and flammable above ground where it blackens everything it touches. The shadow of Cain remains cast.

Samuel Te Kani, December 2024