"The unreality of games gives notice that reality is not yet real. Unconsciously they rehearse the right life."

TheoDor Adorno

"There is an absolute in the moment of the game; and this absolute, like every reality or moment taken to the absolute, represents a specific form of alienation."

Henri Lefebvre

AGONY
(on *The Cave*)

E VER GET THE FEELING you're playing some vast and useless game whose goal you don't know and whose rules you can't remember? Ever get the fierce desire to quit, to resign, to forfeit, only to discover there's no umpire, no referee, no regulator to whom you can announce your capitulation? Ever get the vague dread that while you have no choice but to play the game, you can't win it, can't know the score, or who keeps it? Ever suspect that you don't even know who your real opponent might be? Ever get mad over the obvious fact that the dice are loaded, the deck stacked, the table rigged and the fix—in? Welcome to gamespace. It's everywhere, this atopian arena, this speculation sport. *No pain no gain. No guts no glory. Give it your best shot. There's no second place. Winner take all.* Here's a heads up: In gamespace, even if you *know the deal,* are a *player,* have *got game,* you will no-

tice, all the same, that the game has got you. Welcome to the thunderdome. Welcome to the terrordome. Welcome to *the greatest game of all*. Welcome to *the playoffs, the big league, the masters, the only game in town*. You are a gamer whether you like it or not, now that we all live in a game-space that is everywhere and nowhere. As Microsoft says: *Where do you want to go today?* You can go anywhere you want in gamespace but you can never leave it.

[0002] **SUPPOSE** there is a business in your neighborhood called The Cave™. It offers, for an hourly fee, access to game consoles in a darkened room. Suppose it is part of a chain. The consoles form a local area network, and also link to other such networks elsewhere in the chain. Suppose you are a gamer in The Cave. You test your skills against other gamers. You have played in The Cave since childhood.* Your eyes see only the monitor before you. Your ears hear only through the headphones that encase them. Your hands clutch only the controller with which you blast away at the digital figures who shoot back at you on the screen. Here gamers see the images and hear the sounds and say to each other: "Why, these images are just shadows! These sounds are just echoes! The real world is out there some-where." The existence of another, more real world of which The Cave provides mere copies is assumed, but nobody thinks much of it. Here reigns the wisdom of PlayStation: *Live in your world, play in ours.*

[0003] **PERHAPS** you are not just any gamer. Perhaps you want to break with the stereotype.* You are the one who decides

to investigate the assumption of a real world beyond the game. You turn away from the screen and unplug the headphones. You get up and stagger out of the darkened room, toward the light outside. You are so dazzled by the light that the people and things out there in the bright world seem less real than the images and sounds of The Cave. You turn away from this blinding new world, which seems, strangely, unreal. You return to the screen and the headphones and the darkness of being a gamer in The Cave.

[0004] **SUPPOSE** someone, a parent maybe, a teacher or some other guardian, drags you back out into the light and makes you stay there. It would still be blinding.* You could not look directly at things. Maybe the guardian prints out some pics of your family or maybe a map of the neighbor-hood, to acclimatize you, before you can look at things. Gradually you see the people around you and what it is that they do. Then perhaps you remember the immense, immersive games of The Cave, and what passes for wis-dom amongst those still stuck there. And so you return to The Cave, to talk or text to the other gamers about this world outside.

[0005] **YOU COMMUNICATE** to fellow gamers in The Cave about the outside world of which The Cave is just a shadow. Or try to. Plato: "And if the cave-dwellers had established, down there in the cave, certain prizes and distinctions for those who were most keen-sighted in seeing the passing shad-ows, and who were best able to remember what came be-

fore, and after, and simultaneously with what, thus best able to predict future appearances in the shadow-world, will our released prisoner hanker after these prizes or envy this power or honor?"[*] You bet! The Cave is a world of pure agon, of competitive striving after distinction. But suppose you are that rare, stray, thoughtful gamer who decides to try this new game of getting beyond the game one more time? Suppose you emerge from The Cave and decide to take stock of the world beyond? You find that this other world is in some curious ways rather like The Cave. The pics of family, the map of the 'hood, seem made of the same digital stuff as your favorite games inside The Cave. If there is a difference, it may not be quite what it seems.

[005] **HERE IS** what you observe about the world outside The Cave: The whole of life appears as a vast accumulation of commodities and spectacles, of things wrapped in images and images sold as things.[*] But how are these images and things organized, and what role do they call for anyone and everyone to adopt toward them? Images appeal as prizes, and call us to play the game in which they are all that is at stake. You observe that world after world, cave after cave, what prevails is the same agon, the same digital logic of one versus the other, ending in victory or defeat. Agony rules! Everything has value only when ranked against something else; everyone has value only when ranked against someone else. Every situation is win-lose, unless it is win-win—a situation where players are free to collaborate only because they seek prizes in different games. The real world appears as a video arcadia divided into many and varied games. Work is a rat race. Politics is a horse

race. The economy is a casino. Even the utopian justice to come in the afterlife is foreclosed: *He who dies with the most toys wins.* Games are no longer a pastime, outside or alongside of life. They are now the very form of life, and death, and time itself. These games are no joke. When the screen flashes the legend *Game over,* you are either dead, or defeated, or at best out of quarters.

THE GAME has colonized its rivals within the cultural realm, [007] from the spectacle of cinema to the simulations of television. Stories no longer opiate us with imaginary reconciliations of real problems. The story just recounts the steps by which someone beat someone else—a real victory for imaginary stakes. The only original screen genre of the early twenty-first century is not called "reality TV" for nothing. Brenton and Cohen: "By signing their release forms, contestants agree to end up as statistics, each player's feelings and actions manipulated . . . leading to infidelity, tears, perhaps heartbreak." Sure, reality TV doesn't look like reality, but then neither does reality. Both look like games. Both become a seamless space in which gamers test their abilities within contrived scenarios. The situations may be artificial, the dialogue less than spontaneous, and the gamers may merely be doing what the producers tell them. All this is perfectly of a piece with a reality, which is itself an artificial arena, where everyone is born a gamer, waiting for their turn.[*]

THE GAME has not just colonized reality, it is also the sole [008] remaining ideal.[*] Gamespace proclaims its legitimacy through victory over all rivals. The reigning ideology imag-

ines the world as a *level playing field,* upon which all folks are equal before God, the great game designer. History, politics, culture—gamespace dynamites everything that is not in the game, like an outdated Vegas casino. Everything is evacuated from an empty space and time which now appears natural, neutral, and without qualities—a gamespace. The lines are clearly marked. Every action is just a means to an end. All that counts is the score. As for who owns the teams and who runs the show, best not to ask. As for who is excluded from the big leagues, best not to ask. As for who keeps the score and who makes the rules, best not to ask. As for what ruling body does the handicapping and on what basis, best not to ask. All is for the best in the best—and only—possible world. There is—to give it a name—a military entertainment complex, and it *rules.* Its triumphs affirm not just the rules of the game but the rule of the game.

EVERYTHING the military entertainment complex touches with its gold-plated output jacks turns to digits. Everything is digital and yet the digital is as nothing. No human can touch it, smell it, taste it. It just beeps and blinks and reports itself in glowing alphanumerics, spouting stock quotes on your cell phone. Sure, there may be vivid 3D graphics. There may be pie charts and bar graphs. There may be swirls and whorls of brightly colored polygons blazing from screen to screen. But these are just decoration. The jitter of your thumb on the button or the flicker of your wrist on the mouse connect directly to an invisible, intangible gamespace of pure contest, pure agon. It doesn't

matter if your cave comes equipped with a PlayStation or Bloomberg terminal. It doesn't matter whether you think you are playing the bond market or *Grand Theft Auto.* It is all just an algorithm with enough unknowns to make a game of it.

ONCE GAMES required an actual place to play them, whether on the chess board or the tennis court. Even wars had battle *fields.* Now global positioning satellites grid the whole earth and put all of space and time in play. Warfare, they say, now looks like video games. Well don't kid yourself. War *is* a video game—for the military entertainment complex. To them it doesn't matter what happens *on the ground.* The ground—the old-fashioned battlefield itself— is just a necessary externality to the game. Slavoj Žižek: "It is thus not the fantasy of a purely aseptic war run as a video game behind computer screens that protects us from the reality of the face to face killing of another person; on the contrary it is this fantasy of face to face encounter with an enemy killed bloodily that we construct in order to escape the Real of the depersonalized war turned into an anonymous technological operation."* Even the soldier whose inadequate armor failed him, shot dead in an alley by a sniper, has his death, like his life, managed by a computer in a blip of logistics.

THE OLD class antagonisms have not gone away but are hidden beneath levels of rank, where each agonizes over their worth against others as measured by the size of their house and the price of their vehicle and where, perversely,

working longer and longer hours is a sign of victory. Work becomes play. Work demands not just one's mind and body but also one's soul. You have to be a *team player.* Your work has to be creative, inventive, playful—ludic, but not ludicrous. Work becomes a gamespace, but no games are freely chosen any more. Not least for children, who if they are to be the winsome offspring of win-all parents, find themselves drafted into endless evening shifts of team sport. The purpose of which is to *build character.* Which character? The character of the *good sport.* Character for what? For the workplace, with its team camaraderie and peer-enforced discipline. For others, work is still just dull, repetitive work, but they dream of escaping into the commerce of play—making it into the major leagues, or competing for record deals as a *diva* or a *playa* in the *rap game.* And for still others, there is only the game of survival. Biggie: "Either you're slingin' crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot."* Play becomes everything to which it was once opposed. It is work, it is serious; it is morality, it is necessity.

[012] **THE OLD** identities fade away. Nobody has the time. The gamer is not interested in playing the citizen.* The law is fine as a spectator sport on *Court TV,* but being a citizen just involves endless attempts to get out of jury duty. Got a problem? Tell it to *Judge Judy.* The gamer elects to choose sides only for the purpose of the game. This week it might be as the Alliance vs. the Horde. Next week it might be as the Earth vs. the Covenant. If the gamer chooses to be a soldier and play with real weapons, it is as an *Army of One,*

testing and refining personal skill points. The shrill and constant patriotic noise you hear through the speakers masks the slow erosion of any coherent fellow feeling within the remnants of national borders. This gamespace escapes all checkpoints. It is an America without qualities, for everybody and nobody. All that is left of the nation is an everywhere that is nowhere, an atopia of noisy, righteous victories and quiet, sinister failures. Manifest destiny—the right to rule through virtue—gives way to its latent destiny—the virtue of right through rule. Civic spirit drowns in a hurricane of mere survivalism.

THE GAMER is not really interested in faith, although a [013] heightened rhetoric of faith may fill the void carved out of the soul by the insinuations of gamespace. The gamer's God is a game designer. He implants in everything a hidden algorithm. Faith is having the intelligence to intuit the parameters of this geek design and score accordingly. All that is righteous wins; all that wins is righteous. To be a *loser* or a *lamer* is the mark of damnation. When you are a gamer, you are left with nothing to believe in but your own God-given abilities. Gamers confront one another in contests of skill that reveal who has been *chosen*—chosen by the game as the one who has most fully internalized its algorithm. For those who despair of their abilities, there are games of chance, where grace reveals itself in the roll of the dice. Roger Caillois: "Chance is courted because hard work and personal qualifications are powerless to bring such success about."* The gambler may know what the gamer's faith refuses to countenance.

OUTSIDE each cave is another cave; beyond the game is another game. Each has its particular rules; each has its ranks of high scores. Is that all there is? The gamer who lifts an eye from the target risks a paralyzing boredom. Paolo Virno: "At the base of contemporary cynicism is the fact that men and women learn by experiencing rules rather than 'facts' . . . Learning the rules, however, also means recognizing their unfoundedness and conventionality . . . We now face several different 'games,' each devoid of all obviousness and seriousness, only the site of an immediate self-affirmation—an affirmation that is much more brutal and arrogant, much more cynical, the more we employ, with no illusions but with perfect momentary adherence, those very rules whose conventionality and mutability we have perceived."* Each game ends in a summary decision: *That's Hot!* Or if not, *You're Fired!* Got questions about qualities of Being? *Whatever.*

SO THIS is the world as it appears to the gamer: a matrix of endlessly varying games—a gamespace—all reducible to the same principles, all producing the same kind of subject who belongs to this gamespace in the same way, as a gamer to a game. What would it mean to lift one's eye from the target, to pause on the trigger, to unclench one's ever-clicking finger? Is it even possible to think outside The Cave? Perhaps with the triumph of gamespace, what the gamer as theorist needs is to reconstruct the deleted files on those who thought pure play could be a radical option, who opposed gamespace with their revolutionary playdates. The Situationists, for example. Raoul Vaneigem:

"Subversion . . . is an all embracing reinsertion of things into play. It is the act whereby play grasps and reunites beings and things hitherto frozen solid in a hierarchy of fragments." Play, yes, but the game—no. Guy Debord: "I have scarcely begun to make you understand that I don't intend to play the game." Now *there* was a player unconcerned with an exit strategy.*

"PLAY" WAS once a great slogan of liberation. Richard Neville: "The new beautiful freaks will teach us all how to play again (and they'll suffer society's penalty)."* Play was once the battering ram to break down the Chinese walls of alienated work, of divided labor. Only look at what has become of play. Play is no longer a counter to work. Play becomes work; work becomes play. Play outside of work found itself captured by the rise of the digital game, which responds to the boredom of the player with endless rounds of repetition, level after level of difference as more of the same. Play no longer functions as a foil for a critical theory. The utopian dream of liberating play from the game, of a pure play beyond the game, merely opened the way for the extension of gamespace into every aspect of everyday life. While the counter-culture wanted worlds of play outside the game, the military entertainment complex countered in turn by expanding the game to the whole world, containing play forever within it.

EVEN CRITICAL theory, which once took its distance from damaged life, becomes another game. Apply to top-ranked schools. Find a good coach. Pick a rising subfield. Prove

your abilities. Get yourself published. Get some grants. Get a job. Get another job offer to establish your level in bargaining with your boss. Keep your nose clean and get tenure. You won! Now you can play! Now you can do what you secretly wanted to do all those years ago . . . Only now you can't remember. You became a win-win Situationist. Your critical theory became hypocritical theory. It is against everything in the whole wide world except the gamespace that made itself possible. But gamespace is now the very form of the world, and this world eluded your thought even as it brought home the glittering prizes. It is gamespace that won. The hypocritical theorist, in an agony of fitful sleep, dreams of meeting the ghost of Guy Debord and proudly citing a list of achievements: Ivy League job, book deals, grants, promotion, tenure, recognition within the highest ranks of the disciplinary guild. The ghost of Debord sighs: "So little ambition in one so young."

[018] **WHAT THEN** has the gamer seen in that bright world, that gamespace, beyond The Cave? You see people hunched over screens, their hands compulsively jerking controllers. Each sits alone, and talks or texts to unseen others, dazzled by images that seem to come from nowhere, awash in pulsing and beeping sounds. No oné out here in the "real world" really looks all that different to the stereotypical gamer, thumb mashing the controller. Now you are an enlightened gamer, you see how the world beyond the games of The Cave seems like an array of more or less similar caves, all digital, each an agon with its own rules, some ar-

bitrary blend of chance and competition. And beyond that? Not much. The real has become mere detritus without which gamespace cannot exist but which is losing, bit by bit, any form or substance or spirit or history that is not sucked into and transformed by gamespace. Beyond gamespace appear only the spent fragments of nameless forms.

GAMER THEORY starts with a suspension of the assump- [019] tions of The Cave: that there is a more real world beyond it, somewhere, and that someone—some priest or professor—knows where it is. The gamer arrives at the beginnings of a reflective life, a gamer theory, by stepping out of The Cave—and returning to it (see Fig. A). If the gamer is to hold gamespace to account in terms of something other than itself, it might not be that mere shadow of a shadow of the real, murky, formless that lurks like a residue in the corners. It might instead be the game proper, as it is played in The Cave. *Grand Theft Auto*, maybe, or *Deus Ex*. Here at least the game shadows the ideal form of the algorithm. Here at least the digital logic to which gamespace merely aspires is actually realized. The challenge is—ah, but even to phrase it thus is to acknowledge the game—to play at play itself, but from within the game. The gamer as theorist has to choose between two strategies for playing against gamespace. One is to play for the real (Take the red pill). But the real seems nothing but a heap of broken images. The other is to play for the game (Take the blue pill). Play within the game, but against gamespace. Be ludic, but also lucid.
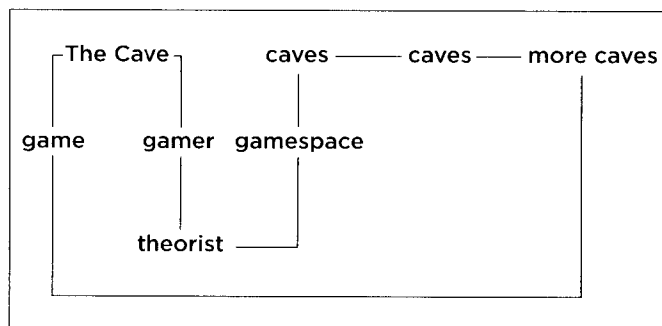
Fig. A

[020] FOR A gamer to be a theorist might not require the ability to play any particular game especially well. The prizes have nothing to do with thinking the game. Nor might gamer theory be the ability to dismiss the game as unreal in the name of some supposedly more solidly grounded outside. What? These luminous pixels are not real, you say? Then neither is *your* world. If anything, The Cave seems to be where the forms, the ideas, the abstractions behind the mere appearance of things in the outside world can be found. Whether gamespace is more real or not than some other world is not the question; that even in its unreality it may have real effects on other worlds *is*. Games are not representations of this world. They are more like allegories of a world made over as gamespace. They encode the abstract principles upon which decisions about the realness of this or that world are now decided.

[021] HERE IS the guiding principle of a future utopia, now long past: "To each according to his needs; from each according to his abilities."* In gamespace, what do we have? An atopia, a placeless, senseless realm where quite a different maxim rules: "From each according to their abilities—to each a rank and score." Needs no longer enter into it. Not even desire matters. Uncritical gamers do not win what they desire; they desire what they win. The score is the thing. The rest is agony. The gamer as theorist at first sight seems to have acquired an ability that counts for nothing in gamespace. The gamer as theorist might begin with an indifference to distinction, to all that the gamespace prizes. You do not play the game to win (or not just to win). You trifle with it—playing with style to understand the game as a form. You trifle with the game to understand the nature of gamespace as a world—as *the* world. You trifle with the game to discover in what way gamespace falls short of its self-proclaimed perfection. The digital game plays up everything that gamespace merely pretends to be: *a fair fight, a level playing field, unfettered competition.*

[022] NO WONDER digital games are the emergent cultural form of our time. The times have themselves become just a series of less and less perfect games. The Cave presents games in a pure state, as a realm where justice—of a sort—reigns. The beginnings of a critical theory of games—a gamer theory—might lie not in holding games accountable as failed representations of the world, but quite the reverse. The world outside is a gamespace that appears as an imperfect form of the computer game. The gamer is an archeologist of The Cave. The computer games that the gamer finds there are the ruins not of a lost

past but of an impossible future. Gamespace is built on the ruins of a future it proclaims in theory yet disavows in practice. The gamer theorist is not out to break the game. To the extent that the gamer theorist wants to hack or "mod" the game, it is to play even more intimately within it.* The point is not to reduce the game to the level of the imperfect world outside it. Like any archeologist, the gamer theorist treats these ruins of the future with obsessive care and attention to their preservation, not their destruction.

[023] **GAMESPACE** needs theorists—but also a new kind of practice. One that can break down the line that divides gamer from designer, to redeploy the digital so that it makes this very distinction arbitrary. It is a characteristic of games to render digital decisions on all shades of difference. One either wins or loses. One either hits or misses. The practice of the gamer as theorist might be to reinstall what is undecidable back into the gamespace whose primary violence has nothing to do with brightly colored explosions or mounting death counts but with the decision by digital fiat on where everything belongs and how it is ranked. Lars Svendsen: "How boring life would be without violence!" The real violence of gamespace is its dicing of everything analog into the digital, cutting continuums into bits. That games present the digital in its most pure form are reason enough to embrace them, for here violence is at its most extreme—and its most harmless.*

[024] **OF ALL** the kinds of belonging that contend for allegiance—as workers against the boss, as citizens against the enemy, as believers against the infidel—all now have to compete with one which makes agon its first and only principle. Gamespace wants us to believe we are all nothing but gamers now, competing not against enemies of class or faith or nation but only against other gamers. A new historical persona slouches toward the ergonomic chair to be born. All of the previous such persona had many breviaries and manuals, and so this little book in your hands seeks to offer guidance for thinking within this new persona. An ABC of theory for gamers. Not a strategy guide, a cheat sheet, or a walk-through for how to improve your score or hone your trigger finger. A primer, rather, in thinking about a world made over as a gamespace, made over as an imperfect copy of the game. The game might not be utopia, but it might be the only thing left with which to play against gamespace.

[025] **NO WONDER** gamers choose to spend their time holed up in The Cave. Here at least the targets really are only polygons and the prizes really are worthless, mere colors and numbers. These are not the least of its merits. And yet The Cave is a world you can neither own nor control. Even this dub for utopia is in someone else's possession. The digital game is both an almost utopian alternative to gamespace and its most pure product. Or was. Perhaps the game is collapsing back into business as usual. Perhaps the single-player game will become an anachronism, superseded by multiplayer worlds as venal and benighted as the rest of gamespace.* Perhaps, like silent cinema, the stand-alone game will be an orphaned form. Perhaps game designers

such as Will Wright and Tetsuya Mizugushi will be the Sergei Eisensteins and Dziga Vertovs of a lost art. Perhaps, in this moment of eclipse, the classic games have something to show us. So by all means necessary, be a gamer, but be a gamer who thinks—and acts—with a view to realizing the real potentials of the game, in and against this world made over as a gamespace. You might start with the curious gap between the games you love and an everyday life which, by the light of the game, seems curiously similar, and yet somehow lacking.

ALLEGORY

(on *The Sims*)

BENJAMIN GETS UP in the morning. He [026] goes to the toilet. He leaves the seat up. He showers and fixes breakfast. He reads the paper. He finds a job—as a Test Subject—starting tomorrow. It's not much, but times are hard. He reads a book, and then another. He fixes lunch, naps, reads again. He goes to bed. He gets up. Toilet, shower, breakfast again. He does not make his bed. He goes to work. He comes home, prepares another meal. He talks to his roommate Bert a bit. Hannah drops by. He flirts with her some. He goes to bed, gets up, does the whole thing all over again.

DAYS go by. Not much changes. His cooking improves. He [027] makes new friends—Ted, Gersholm, Asja. They drop by sometimes; sometimes he visits them. There is new furniture. That makes him a bit happier, but not much. He gets