

Nietzsche and pixel walking - on Splitgate, from 1047 Games

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Abstract

Splitgate, a video game published in 2019 by 1047 Games, embeds teleportation mechanics within the massively multiplayer First-Person Shooter model and thus renews the codes of the FPS genre. We argue that *Splitgate* is a particularly good illustration of the way video games use recursion as a principle, understood as a particular version of *mise en abyme* operating under the modality of interaction. In this respect, *Splitgate* allows us to summon the Nietzschean figure of the “return” as the ontological content of becoming, according to the interpretation of Gilles Deleuze, and to propose a non-Euclidean reading of the trivialized theme of the Eternal Return. This paper recontextualizes the relationships between puzzle games, recursion and video game violence in the context of the political interpretation of the meaning of video games as a social fact at large.

Keywords

Video game, Philosophy, Splitgate, Recursion, Friedrich Nietzsche, Alt-Right, Leftist Nietzscheism

Introduction

For Nietzsche, a reader of Darwin, existence is understood naturally tending towards inequality: it is therefore impossible to interpret the works of Nietzsche, the gravedigger of underworlds, as a preach for equal opportunities or to make him respect the norms of political correctness. It so happens that his philosophy is regularly called upon to analyze video games, anachronistic cultural objects which he could not know of. In parallel, a broad line of questioning has emerged within the video game industry, regarding gender inequalities and post-colonial heritage.

Indeed, the American radical right is implementing new strategies to spread its ideology through games such as *Fortnite*¹, used as a recruiting ground by white supremacists. The video game sphere is not a neutral zone: it is an ideological battlefield. Concerning the gamer use of references to Nietzsche, one can for example listen to a conference by Stéphane Natkin², emeritus professor at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, read Benjamin Lavigne's thesis when it is published³ on the superhumanity at the helm, of which a fragment is presented in a preparatory article⁴ – unless we prefer the explanation of the eternal return to the light of the video games of the 1980s⁵.

¹ CONDIS M. 2019

² NATKIN S. 2017

³ LAVIGNE B. 2020

⁴ LAVIGNE B. 2017

⁵ JONES J. 2015

Simultaneously, and unrelated to the above-mentioned research, neo-conservative readings of Nietzsche are multiplying: youtubers, artists and authors nowadays claim to be inspired by him, and use this reference to commodify contemporary sociopolitical issues, and in doing so they tend to decrease the resolution of the global conversation. One can think in particular of the American far-right activist Richard Spencer⁶, zealot of white suprematism, to whom we owe the term alt-right. These right-wing exegetes of Nietzsche have set themselves the goal of combating a certain feminist and post-colonial doxa, a line of thought that they consider to be a dead end. They interpret Nietzsche's work in this perspective and claim to extract a form of validation of their political and media commitment from Nietzsche's texts, which they interpret as self-fulfilling prophecies meeting their agenda. In short, they assimilate all progressive discourses to the strategy of the "weak" to overthrow the "strong", a theme indeed recurrent in Nietzsche's works identified as an outstandingly hazardous area of interpretation early on in the history of philosophy. Pierre-André Taguieff's⁷ and Jacques Bouveresse's⁸ recent publications on Nietzsche remind us of the highly flexible character of Nietzsche's philosophy. An ambiguous, even ambidextrous philosophy, in which all types of ideologies can find nourishment – criticism of nationalism and racism, or praise of aristocratic values. The challenge for all Nietzschean ideologists is to reappropriate Nietzsche's apparently simple and yet widely misunderstood concepts such as "resentment", the "will to power", the "superman", and the "eternal return".

1-The Splitgate phenomenon

The example of Splitgate, a multiplayer shooter whose download count exceeded the 600,000 mark at the end of July 2021⁹ and the 13 million at the end of September of the same year¹⁰, can serve as an example to sketch a new Nietzschean reading of video games. Indeed, if we do observe the primacy of an ethnocentric masculinism in video game representations, would it not be too obvious to assimilate it to Nietzsche's superman? Should we necessarily equate the repetitive component of the game activity with the eternal return?



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⁶ BAR-ON T. 2019

⁷ TAGUIEFF P.A. 2021

⁸ BOUVERESSE J. 2021

⁹ PRESCOTT D. 2021

¹⁰ TAKAHASHI D. 2021

Splitgate provides a widely unexplored avenue for proposing other ways to combine video games and Nietzsche's work. Developed by the American company 1047 Games since 2017, Splitgate is a first-person shooter (FPS), massively online multiplayer game: the computer mouse becomes an automatic weapon, and battles are most often fought in teams. It is generally considered that the FPS genre was born in the early 1990s, with Wolfenstein 3D (1992) and Doom (1993), both developed by id Software. The narrative framework of Wolfenstein 3D is the attempt of an American spy to escape from a Nazi castle during the Second World War, and Doom depicts the fight of a Space Marine to regain control of his spaceship against his demonic *and* alien opponents. The developers quickly released their game engine, colloquially called the Doom Engine, allowing players to create custom levels. Practically, from customizing levels to modifying the source code base of a game, there is only one step: the release of the Doom Engine marks the advent of mods, games with an undefined legal status that have famously allowed developers to save on their market research and reappropriate strong concepts proposed by modders and make franchise games with them – such is the story of League of Legends, Fortnite, and other extremely popular massively multiplayer video games. A distant relative of hacking, modding also involves getting one's hands dirty and diving into the source code of a given template. Constrained by the representations implicitly circulating within the game engine, mods can enter the fictional space of the game in reverse, through banal, surprising or shocking detours.

Shooting games are, like team sports, competitive systems: the slightest mistake can be punished both by the game (defeat of the player, defeat of the team) and by the players of the same team (verbal aggression, exclusion). In voice chat conversations, it is not uncommon to feel the limits of communication devoid of non-verbal cues. In some cases, *ad hominem* attacks are characterized by a mixture of racism, misogyny and homophobia under the guise of irony and of a dubious understanding of the cult of merit. Although women have been reported to have a more difficult time when they don't conceal their gender, the experience of this type of psychological and verbal violence is not reserved to a particular sociological category. The FPS genre thus carries a difficult reputation in the media space, as it has often been identified as an ideal environment for conservative ideologies to grow and prosper in. In many cases, FPS narratives are based on a cinematic and media imaginary where geopolitical conflicts are presented under the guise of historical factuality: legions of games depict conflicts involving the American army (terrorists in the Middle East, Nazis in Europe). While the invisibilization of women, homophobia and racism are relatively rarely and superficially questioned within gamer and developer communities, studios compete in realism to render the details of weapons, settings or gruesome violence.

The supremacist discourse (in the literal sense rather than the political) that proliferates within the gamer community can be associated with a certain type of user, whose hegemony is reinforced by the diegetic norms at work in a large body of video games through a relatively short history: an English speaking male of Western culture, preferably white. Both literate (*he* masters the references of American counter-culture as well as Japanese pop culture) and agile at the keyboard, this "ideal" gamer, aware of his "power", is empowered to think *he* deserves *his* social status in real life. Masking the immense variety of users' cultural and social profiles, this ethnocentric, masculine and heteronormative profile weighs heavily in the video game industry's market studies.

Online multiplayer game servers sometimes provide an opportunity for this gamer to get to know his or her Chinese, Arabic or Russian-speaking counterparts - however, although unexpected social bonds are tied via video games, these language-based communities, despite their in-game affinities, find it difficult to mix on a sociological level. While many female gamers enjoy shooting games, the exposure to aggressive personalities and misogynistic rhetoric can discourage many of them from getting involved in online multiplayer platforms. Not to mention the sexist vexations that punctuate its narrative, Splitgate is no exception to the rule: even if it appeals to a diverse audience, its creators are men, as are the majority of players. On the forums, it is clear that Splitgate is not one of those games that relies on any kind of fundamental aggiornamento: from 2017 to 2021, there were no female avatars, and the game chat features uncensored salvos of insults between players, as well as reported incitations to suicide. In 2022, an update of the game's splash screen features a female-faced character in the foreground, armed with a BFB (a "Big F***ing Bat") about to strike, an image that contradicts the basic gameplay, since avatars usually wear protective masks, a technically practical feature enabling the developers to save up on the issues related to depicting face expression and head wounds.



In 2022, an update of the introduction screen of the game shows, in the foreground, a female-faced character armed with a BFB

Nevertheless, the originality of Splitgate is formal, but it is very real: the teleportation mechanics deeply question the logic of the FPS genre. As opposed to other mass media, video games as a device involve individual experience through direct interaction. As such, they have the power to bring out new ways of questioning such as normality and power. They are an object of choice for those who wish to address issues related to the function of antagonism, the reversal of cultural values, the acquisition of self-control and a constantly evolving ideological landscape. Rather than serving as a justification for the will to dominate other players, can Nietzsche's philosophy enlighten us on the path towards rethinking the norms that construct reality, in-game as well as in real life?

2-Splitgate and world-systems

What makes Splitgate unique and gives it its name is the integration of teleportation within high-speed multiplayer FPS gameplay. In addition to being able to kill each other, players can open portals (“split gates”) allowing them to travel great distances in the blink of an eye. The game’s originality lies precisely in the need to master the art of quickly thinking about the arrangement of the teleportation points. When placed intelligently, they allow players to quickly escape from their opponents, to trap them or to mislead them.



In addition to being able to kill each other, players can split gates allowing them to cover great distances in the blink of an eye.

Splitgate is thus a shooting game with a state-of-the-art reflexive component. While portals do not open up to other worlds, they greatly complicate the Theseus-like experience of the labyrinth as a combat arena, a favored motif in the FPS genre, particularly in Doom-like games. Splitgate borrows its take on teleportation portals from the Portal game series (2007), and more broadly from science fiction literature and cinema. Teleporting gates were also used in the Doom, but they were not a parameter which players could play with in real time. However, the teleportation device, understood as a transmedia trope, has a blind spot: the transition from one world to the other is nothing obvious. Traditionally, such gates often conceal the destination point, making the transition a leap of faith. It is also the case in Splitgate : one can only see through one’s own portals, and identify other portals as blue (belonging to one’s own team) or red (belonging to the enemy).

In video games, pixel walking occurs when a player exploits a glitch in the game and moves on invisible lines or platforms, or through seemingly non-existent spaces; the phenomenon is typically understood as a form of cheating. In Splitgate, pixel walking is practiced assiduously, for example, when one locates oneself on the very edge of a portal located high above the ground. It can simultaneously provide a bird's eye view of one's opponents or an easy escape, and such a potent device calls for relatively elaborate tactics and strategies. It so happens that one of Nietzsche's favorite themes is risk-taking, stepping back from the perspective of commoners: Nietzsche likes to present himself as an inhabitant of cold regions and frozen peaks, who gazes directly into the abyss. Adept of mountain walks, Nietzsche is also well accustomed to the general theme of transgression, understood as overturning of established values and redefining social rules and the abandonment of traditional standards.

3-Nietzsche vs. *Splitgate*

As a non-systematic thinker, one can imagine that Nietzsche would have seen

Splitgate's capacity to put to work the limits of world-systems in a rather good light. On a metaphorical level, his philosophy bears more than a superficial relationship with pixel walking, as an interactive experience of living on the edge of the abyss. First Person Shooters honor what Mathieu Triclot¹¹, having the works of Roger Caillois¹² in mind, calls the agonistic dimension of the playful fact: certain forms of games intrinsically summon up the notions of power and inequality. Putting video games in perspective with Nietzsche's work involves situating them within the history of Western civilization, at the end of an ever-expanding moral genealogy. For Nietzsche, what characterizes the Judeo-Christian West is the importance of guilt and self-hatred, which according to him are the root causes of the values of the ancient world. Unlike other FPS, Splitgate does not explicitly call for a scenario, and therefore does not engage players in the representation of a moral conflict. The dizzying aspect of the game takes over, amplified by the exhilarating aspect of teleportation : in Caillois' terms, this refers to the concept of *ilinx*, a dynamically expanding form of vertigo. In Splitgate, the breathtaking flow of reflexive actions which is common in FPS is momentarily interrupted when one sees oneself through a portal, when a third-person view finds itself embedded within the genre-defining subjective field of vision of the FPS, via a *mise en abyme*. Splitgate has the merit of proposing thought-provoking experiences bordering on the limitations of what a normal human mind can compute: there, intuition meets geometric calculation; there, psychedelia and logical rigor are but contiguous mental phenomena.

After each game, the mind is bombarded with visual and audio reward signals, and losing or winning becomes secondary. Like social network notifications, these Pavlovian signals are there to reward users with their multitude, or to punish with their scarcity. The rewards obtained at the end of the game are intended to condition players to yearn for avatar customization, which they can do at will through micro-payments or in time via well-deserved "earnings". These earnings provide "drops", mysterious rewards which will yield random products, perhaps demonstrating that, just like in real life, merit has its limits which money can outbuy. Splitgate can be downloaded and played for free with little constraint: it is free-to-play. Unlike other games created on this business model, it is not what is known as pay-to-win: players can buy cosmetic items and subscribe to certain game modes, but investing does not provide any decisive advantage for winning. The company encourages users to purchase cosmetics (avatars, flags, weapons, etc.) and thus reap profits.

It is in this interstice - specific to any video game - between coercion, injunction and invention that Nietzsche, like other thinkers of power, can help us navigate. We can also think of the character of the butcher, whose maxim is recorded in a fragment attributed to Tchouang-Tseu: A good butcher wears out one knife a year because he only cuts the flesh. An ordinary butcher wears out one knife a month because he breaks it on the bones. I have used the same knife for nineteen years. In fact, the joints of the bones contain gaps and the edge of the knife has no thickness". Some will recognize in this conception of the knife edge, understood as an object virtually devoid of thickness, the notion of "inframince"¹³ developed by Marcel Duchamp.

¹¹ TRICLOT M. 2011

¹² CAILLOIS R. 1958

¹³ ZÉHENNE C. 2010

The art of pixel walking illustrates in its own way a focus on interstitial spaces: it fosters a subversive practice that, when instituted as a value, has the capacity to produce new practices, new representations and, in turn, new value systems. The good player only shoots for good reasons and doesn't stop to think about the location of their portal. As it has been pointed out by many, the experience of incessant death and rebirth constitutive of many video games, and particularly of Splitgate, seems to be similar to what Nietzsche calls the will to power. But in what sense shall we take this term, which multiple apocryphal interpretative grids make so to speak unusable? In contrast to contemporary neo-conservative recuperations, Gilles Deleuze¹⁴ proposed in his Nietzsche (1965) a minimal interpretation, which rigorously encapsulates the complexity of the issue : "As long as one interprets the will to power in the sense of "desire to dominate", one necessarily makes it depend on established values, the only ones capable of determining who must be recognized as the most powerful in this or that case, in this or that conflict. In this way, we ignore the nature of the will to power as the plastic principle of all our evaluations, as the hidden principle for the creation of new, unrecognized values". And indeed, the codes of the FPS genre, established during the 1990s, condition both the mental space and the behavioral patterns of players through coercive community consensus – this involves practices which may be openly discussed and advised among gamers, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the very conditions of possibility of the gaming experience, which get determined via the market studies, trade secrets, and unconscious biases of the developers themselves. But the ideological potential of the signature components of the FPS genre is no less "plastic" than the brains of their users: it can be transformed, in time, through the implementation of new representations and new practices, which, alone, can generate and promote the emergence of new value systems.

Conclusion

While the type of thinking required in Splitgate is not commonly associated with the exhilarating immediacy of FPSs, it can provide an interesting training ground for creating innovative practices. In Splitgate, pixel walking is an integral part of the rules: it is only natural that a player can walk along the virtually non-existent edge that separates the two spaces connected by portals. This makes it virtually impossible to stand still for long periods of time, at the risk of an enemy teleporting in behind static players. Splitgate thus challenges a behavior that is hated by FPS players: the invincible sniper, untouchable because they are too well hidden: the camper. Depending on the architecture of the arena, the instant, the context and the turn of the game, the ability to open a portal at the right time and place can be a game changer, as can be the simple fact of shooting down a static enemy through their own portal, or to cross it to pursue and slaughter them. As in board games such as chess or go, it becomes possible – and actually necessary for experienced players – to think one or two moves ahead, in order to better fathom the opponent's strategy and to mislead them. On the scale of the moment, it is a question of reflexes; on the scale of a game, it is undeniably a question of reflection. Like many other games and sports, Splitgate may seem monotonous to the uninitiated: the game appears to be about repeating the same activity over and over. But should this repetition be understood as an eternal return of the same?

¹⁴ DELEUZE G. 1965

Here again, the Deleuzian interpretation of Nietzsche can enlighten us: "To return is precisely the being of becoming, the one of the many, the necessity of chance. Also *it is necessary to avoid making the Eternal Return a return of the Same* [...]. The Same does not return; the returning itself, alone, is the Same of what becomes ". What Deleuze brings to light here is a common misunderstanding concerning the eternal return, imagined as a simple two-dimensional loop. However, what the concept of recursion helps to clarify is precisely the fact that the eternal return integrates at minimum a temporal dimension in the repetition. The fact of returning thus unfolds by successive embeddings of a phenomenon within itself, responding to a non-Euclidean geometrical model rather than to the idea of a point that would rotate around another according to a circular axis.

Indeed, the game mechanics in *Splitgate* put the players' ability to represent a given space to a test, which openly defies Euclidean geometry. They also engage the player's ability to instinctively understand the intricate relationships of a given configuration, its very own embedded structure: it is thus an interactive and dynamic use case of *mise en abyme*, which recursion, a concept associated with computer science and video game culture, expresses in its simplest form. Transposed into a video game, the abyssal nature of recursion undermines the oppositional relationship between the local and global dimensions, shifting the boundary between tactics and strategy. In the context of metaverses as a global commercial trend, recursion can be understood as a new paradigm, as opposed to the sequential nature of post-modern aesthetics. By saying this, we propose understanding postmodernism as the extraction of cultural references from different backgrounds and their appending into a new whole ; an example of this process can be found in the world of contemporary art, where archaeological artifacts are presented next to cutting-edge installations on a regular basis. While it features in the history of philosophy at least since the times of Aristotle, the prefix "meta" is currently being abusively overused in the context of marketing campaigns for digital platforms; meanwhile, the specificities of recursive thinking still remain blurry to the public at large. What is at stake is both the actual renewal of the contemporary aesthetic paradigm in general, and the capture, appropriation, commodification and intrinsic loss of resolution which occurs when such a massive paradigm shift is trivialized and overused in the eyes of the public. While for individuals from the X, Y, Z and alpha generations, "thinking recursive" requires education and training, it may well be that later generations, if nurtured properly, would be able to understand the intricacies of this paradigm more intuitively. Games like *Splitgate* and Patrick's *Parabox* may well serve as educational highways making this paradigm shift easier for many non-scientifically inclined minds.

In video games, as in real life, it would be illusory to imagine that a repetitive activity consists of a strict repetition of the same process. The videogame experience has often been understood as an eternal return of the same: an interpretation that echoes Freudian psychoanalysis, rooted in the idea that the pleasure derived from the game comes precisely from the repetition of a task, in a tautological and fruitless loop. However, in the act of playing, the renewal of practices and values are at work, stemming from the very experience which can be deceptively identified as repetition. This experience of a state of perpetual refinement of playing as an activity produces a set of concrete changes: first in the understanding of the process itself, which is refined and perfected through repetition, but also in its execution.

Where the novice player hesitates, tries empirically, the expert player knows, performs, in a gesture that is both intentional and instinctive. What is at stake here is the heuristic value of play as experience, a type of activity which is valid for itself – through the game, one carries out a creative research – but also outside itself. As an experience, the act of playing informs players about existential processes; it is a place of discovery and of construction of knowledge in its own right. It is not a question here of acquiring knowledge in the sense of capitalizing on information, an area of expertise primarily useful in the context of the education of obedient citizens, but rather of the gradual development of the powers of reflection, in the form of motor reflexes to which reflection becomes as if simultaneous. In this sense, as it manifests itself in the game space, repetition is really a recursive process: any playful experience is the object of a deepening, of a fractal repetition of a phenomenon embedded within itself. Through such a heuristic process, a concrete understanding develops, ever clearer and more distinct, of the processes at play in the repeated experience. It is, in short, the voluntary repetition of a task that entertains, and which can thus eventually produce a transformation - for good or for ill.

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