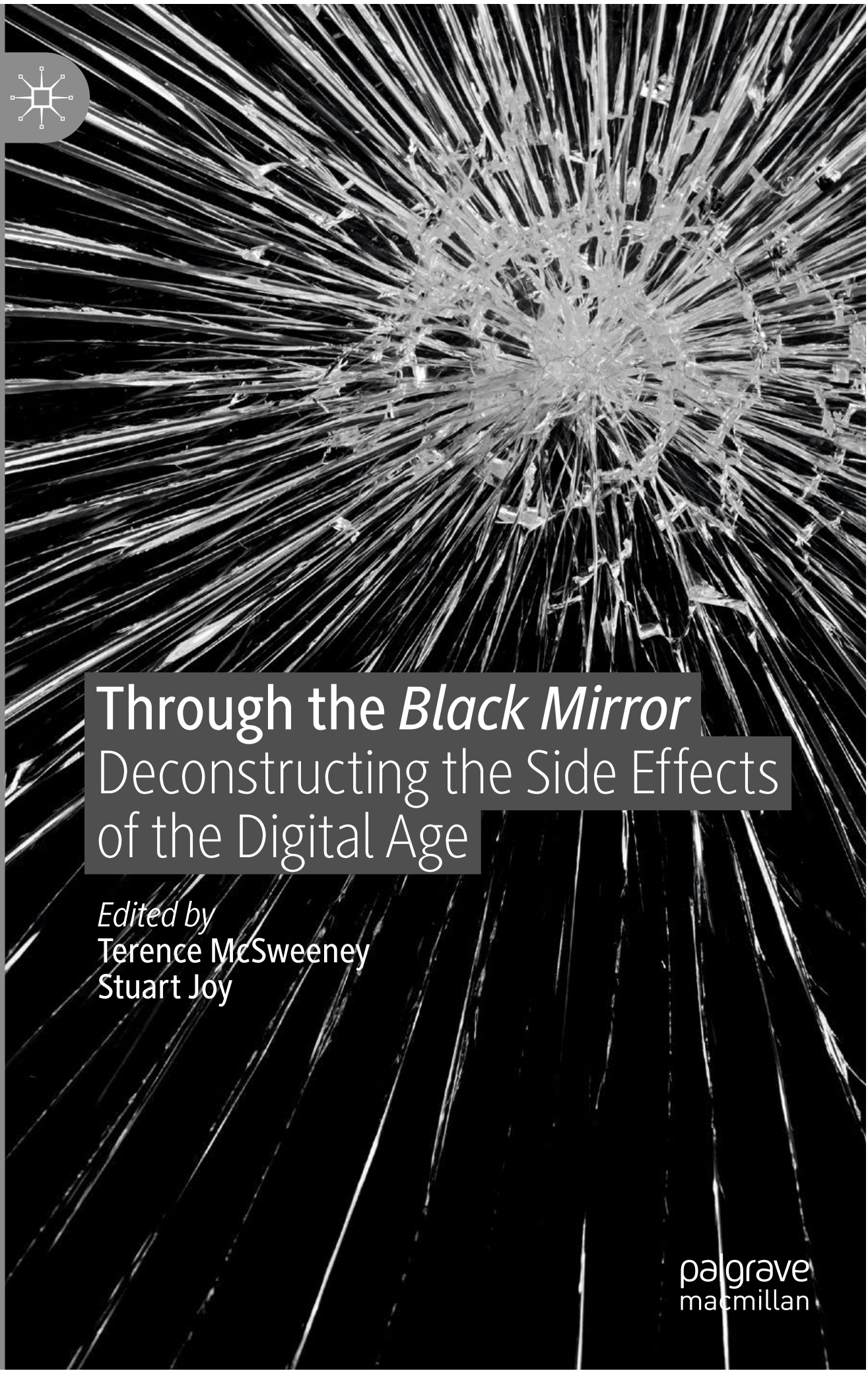
Through the *Black Mirror*
Deconstructing the Side Effects of the Digital Age
Edited by
Terence McSweeney
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Augmented Reality Bites: "Playtest" and the Unstable Now

Soraya Murray

Introduction

Do augmented and virtual reality technologies dislodge us from a grounded sense of space and time—or even a stable notion of self? Often packaged as tools for entertainment or play, do these simulations work us over, deeply disrupting our ability to distinguish what is real? These dystopian fears of total technological immersion are explored in the *Black Mirror* (2011–), episode entitled "Playtest" (03.02). In it, we meet Cooper (Wyatt Russell), an American traveler in London. Short of cash, Cooper agrees to playtest a cutting-edge augmented reality video game. Submitting to having a tiny brain stimulator implanted at the base of his skull, he experiences a series of impressive simulations that leaves him wanting more. Before long, the unwitting Cooper is in deep, experiencing visualizations of an increasingly profound, horrific and ultimately lethal order.

Originally airing on 21 October 2016, director Dan Trachtenberg's episode was well-timed to coincide with the October release of Sony's PlayStation VR headset. "Playtest" pointedly cast virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies as horror scenarios with no outside, in a moment when VR was being advertised with a great deal of techno-utopianism around its immersive potentials. Therefore, the episode's consideration of VR/AR technologies specifically in relation to their implementation for video games makes sense, given the time in which audiences would first view it. Writer Charlie Brooker has claimed that the episode is "not about anything particularly. I just wanted

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to do a haunted house movie" (qtd. in Stolworthy, 2016). And it is true that a portion of the episode unfolds in a fictive Saito Gemu game design studio horror house, which conforms to a typical survival horror game genre scenario. An avid fan of video games, Brooker certainly inserts a few knowing winks to fellow gamers within the story. But it is clear that "Playtest" also constitutes a provocation regarding a set of anxieties present within game culture (Brooker, 2009).

At the time, both the games industry and its ancillary cultures had undergone several years of unpleasant public scrutiny. On the one hand, a divisive harassment campaign within game culture called GamerGate had become so vitriolic as to spill over from its insular communities, attracting mainstream attention for its toxic male culture of protecting "fun" against the incursion of feminism, progressivism and identity politics (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Mortensen, 2016; Campbell, 2018). These complaints were often euphemisms for the increasing presence of women, trans/non-binary individuals and people of color, the constituencies largely targeted. This was compounded by growing criticality—also driven by women and people of color—toward the representations within video games, specifically, the pervasive white male hero and relative lack of any other kind of protagonist. On the other hand, Silicon Valley itself faced ongoing criticism on several fronts, the most significant of which were its shoddy statistics on gender parity and racial inclusion in the tech industry (Zarya, 2016), its disreputable "bro" culture (Hicks, 2017; Chang, 2018) and its brash approach to innovation exemplified in Facebook's old motto: "move fast and break things" (qtd. in Murphy, 2014; Ganesh, 2018). In terms of its story, the episode suggests the seductiveness and annihilative potential of VR and AR technologies to the body and mind. But on another level, the casting of key characters of color within the scenario operates as subtext, pointing back to this troubled period and smartly poking at a fresh wound within game culture.

Before probing the deeper more implicit cultural and social commentary embedded in the episode, there is the technological anxiety itself to consider, which is satirized in "Playtest". The most superficial, obvious game-oriented anxiety featured is that of progressively more invasive virtual/augmented reality which, within the world of this near-future narrative, dangerously threatens to dislodge players from their grounding in the real. This has been explored in several technological thrillers; namely, David Cronenberg's film *Existenz* (1999), the Wachowski siblings' iconic *The Matrix* (1999) and, more recently, Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010). *Existenz* features more invasive forms of technology that seem to organically integrate with characters' bodies in horrifying ways, then refuse to separate, and whose characters increasingly lose their grip on whether they are in a simulation or the so-called real. In the imaginings of *The Matrix*, the real and the simulated are clearly aesthetically marked (the former is grungy and worn, the latter slick and clean) and even the steampunk tech used to make the connection is decidedly invasive and violent to the body. The real and the simulated, in this case, are not easily confused. *Inception*, a

film invoked by Wyatt Russell himself during an interview about "Playtest", is not technically about pure simulation, but about hacking into the dream-life of a subject, and changing it for purposes of manipulation and control (qtd. in Strause, 2016). Targets are unwittingly subjected to infiltration of their subconscious through an experimental technology, which can be used to extract secrets, shape perception and, most radically, plant an idea that feels utterly authentic (called "inception").

"Playtest" specifically references *Inception* in several ways. The Japanese businessman at the center of the film is named "Mr. Saito", and Shou Saito (Ken Yamamura) is the head of Saito Gemu, the fictitious game studio featured in the *Black Mirror* episode. More significantly, the relation of time-within-time between the onion-like subconscious layers, in relation to the real, as illustrated in *Inception*, forms an important element of the "Playtest" narrative. And, questions about the very nature of memory as building blocks of a stable self drive the plot. While the episode outwardly expresses a paranoia or moral panic tied to video games and the people who engage with them, in many ways, it is less explicitly about games per se, and more focused on technology's ability to blur the barriers between the simulated and the actual, the body and technology. Or as Brooker, colorfully put it: "Hey, I'll tell you what would be mental: if you could inject a video game augmented reality system into your fucking eyes" (qtd. in Stolworthy, 2016). This chapter proposes that beneath its moral tale, "Playtest" is a techno-horror which images societal anxieties about the disorienting pace and fluidity of advanced technological life. This is metaphorized in both the main character's inability to assimilate himself smoothly into virtual space and the erosion of the barrier between his body and computational technologies, leading to his increasing inability to discern the simulated from the real. Three critical instabilities emerge from this episode regarding (1) the body in technology, (2) memory and forgetting and (3) time dilation. This chapter addresses itself to how the anxiety narratives around these three elements of the unstable "now" unfold and unveils how "Playtest" is far more than a simple indictment of video games and VR/AR technologies.

In the episode's beginning sequence, a burdened Cooper is quietly leaving his parents' home. His mother calls him on his mobile phone, but Cooper doesn't answer. Throughout, there's a strong sense that the episode is as much about this blond, blue-eyed, likable character himself—as a cipher for something—as it is 'about the technology narrative. Given the topic and plot, Cooper seems a bit older than the image likely conjured in the minds of viewers when the term "gamer" is used. However, at the time of the episode's first airing in 2016, statistics identified the average male player at 35 years old (Entertainment Software Association, 2016)—so Cooper actually fits the bill. He comes across as good-natured and oriented toward and fun, a guy who doesn't have a mean bone in his body; the human equivalent of a Golden Retriever.

After a long trek through Asia and Europe, Cooper seeks the companionship (via a dating-app) of a young London journalist named Sonja (Hannah John-Kamen, who is British of Nigerian and Norwegian descent). He admits

he is traveling "to get away from family at home"—his father has recently died of early-onset Alzheimer's. Cooper has left his bereaved mother behind, who calls him incessantly throughout his travels; but he never answers, wanting to, as he put it, "make all the memories that I can, while I can". These themes of making memories, memory impairment and mortality loom throughout. But Cooper has immediate problems: he's broke. To fund the trip home, he answers an ad for playtesters from Saito Gemu, a cutting-edge game design studio. Sonja urges him to photograph anything he can so she can have the scoop on their secret project. Cooper agrees.

Synched

"Playtest" takes a turn toward themes of advanced technology and the body, when the story moves to the remote Saito Gemu design studio. There, Katie (Nigerian-born British actress Wunmi Mosaku) welcomes Cooper and requests that he surrenders his phone for confidentiality purposes. She powers it down, before ushering him into an antiseptic white room with two gray chairs arranged around a table. Katie leaves and Cooper turns on his phone, photographs the device and texts it to Sonja. Unaware of what's transpired, Katie returns, and explains that he will be participating in a test of a prototype "Interactive Augmented Reality System" that requires a minor medical procedure. She implants a small node (a "Mushroom") in the back of Cooper's neck, and notes the beginning of the playtest as 5:38pm. This ongoing marking of the time will become significant. Cooper's phone rings, and Katie is perplexed, grabs the phone, mutters that she already turned it off, then powers it down again and proceeds synching the first simulation to his node. After a preliminary test that verifies Cooper's high compatibility with their tech, Katie introduces him to genius designer Shou Saito, a youngish, scruffy, hoodie-clad innovator who pitches his revolutionary gaming system as the "most personal survival horror game in history". Shou explains that the game accesses the individual fears of its players using the node, and then integrates those personal phobias into the game. Cooper eagerly agrees to participate.

Once Cooper's Mushroom is synched, Katie notes the begin time as 6:17pm. Cooper is deposited at a creepy mansion, and told that there's nothing for him to do except wait for the augmented reality experience to begin. Katie guides him remotely by way of an earpiece. There are a few increasingly disturbing simulations that impress Cooper: first a small spider, and later, fanciful manifestations of a feared high-school bully. Then Sonja unexpectedly knocks at the door, accosts him and morphs into a skull-headed monster that he kills. Shrieking, he opens his eyes to realize that the audiovisual simulation is gone, and with it the monstrous Sonja as well as his injuries. Hysterical and wanting out, Katie reassures him that none of it can actually hurt him and that the deactivation access point can be found upstairs. At the top of the stairs, he bristles at the notion of what personal fear will be manifested at the other side of the

door. Katie persuades him to move forward entreating, "Would you kindly open the door?"

The phrase "Would you kindly" would be instantly recognizable to game aficionados as the critical hypnotic suggestion trigger from *BioShock* (2K Games, 2007)—widely considered one of the most iconic video games—in which deception, moral ambiguity and mind control play a major part. Within the dystopian narrative, Jack, the playable character, is brainwashed and it is the phrase "Would you kindly" that comes to signify the manipulation of his will, even while he feels he is in control. In "Playtest", this phrase is uttered to Cooper by Katie, whose disembodied, soothing voice compels him into a room of his deepest fear—and he complies. This can simply be regarded as a kind of intentional inside joke or "Easter egg" for the video game savvy audience. But it also functions to add a layer of possible meanings. Cooper is the sort of character who would have played *BioShock*. Likely, the dominating narrative within the game of not being in full mental command of one's actions would tap into Cooper's deep-seated fear of losing his mind to external forces controlling or tampering with him, or to a disease that would rob him of his memory. Once inside the room, Katie verbally torments Cooper about his mother, his guilt and his memory—what does she look like? Can he remember? His memory is being overwritten, she explains. A hysterical Cooper shrieks "Get it out of my head!" and he attempts to cut the Mushroom from his neck with the shard of a broken mirror. Shou and Katie rush into the room, but it's too late. The damage is done; Cooper can no longer remember who he is, or why he is there.

Game Time

Time dilation and the notion of simulations within simulations are abruptly introduced at this critical point in the narrative. As the memory-deprived Cooper is dragged off, he screams again "Stop!" and the simulation dissolves. Suddenly, he's back in Shou's office, and both the designer and Katie are apologizing for the unintended intensity of the augmented reality experience, to which he seems overly susceptible—and which Katie notes has occurred in a duration of one second. That is, it is still only 6:17pm. Cooper calms himself and returns to America, to his home in Seattle, to his mother (Elizabeth Moynihan), whom he finds at the top of the stairs in her bedroom, distraught and wanting to know where "Cooper" is. She seems disoriented, confused, perhaps suffering from dementia. "I have to call him", she says. "Where did Cooper go? I have to Call Cooper. I have to call and make sure he's safe". Cooper becomes upset and screams for his "Mom". Then suddenly, we are back in the white room again, and Cooper is seizing in his chair and shouting "Mom" while his phone rings with an incoming call from "Mom". The time is 5:38. Katie and Shou debrief about what could have gone wrong, while Cooper's lifeless corpse is zipped into a body bag. Katie notes the interference caused by his phone, and the duration of the playtest as 0.04 seconds.

These notions of time within time and nested simulations invoke *Inception*. In the film, time moves with increasing speed at each deeper layer entered into within the subconscious. What feels like a lifetime at a deep layer simulation may occur at a much shorter span of time in a shallow layer. Time dilation in "Playtest" operates similarly; by the time the episode reaches its conclusion, the viewer realizes they have been presented with at least two layers of time in addition to the apparent duration elapsed in the actual time of the "player", Cooper. The innermost layer of the story presents Cooper's playtest time as lasting from roughly 5:38pm on the day he visits Saito Gemu, until he purportedly returns from London to Seattle. The middle layer suggests that his experience of the aforementioned occurred within one second. And the outermost layer that corresponds to the diegetic time of the story for the characters involved is revealed at the end of the episode to have occurred in 0.04 seconds, or four one hundredths of one second.

The time dilation presented in "Playtest" also evokes constructions of time within video games. In-game time is often discontinuous with the "lived" time spent interacting with the game. For example, sports games often truncate time, abbreviating minutes in "realtime" for seconds in the game. In a more extreme example, Jason Rohrer's art game *Passage* presents a lifespan of its playable character within a duration of five minutes (Rohrer, 2016, p. 27). A core mechanic of Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (Number None, 2008) is the ability to rewind time. The in-game clock in *Grand Theft Auto III* and its sequels (Rockstar, 2001–) exchanges every minute of "lived" time for 1 hour within the game, so that a "day" within the game occurs in 24 minutes of "realtime". Game scholar Jesper Juul describes this in terms of a difference between "fictional time" or diegetic game time, and "play time" or the time spent actually playing the game (Juul, 2005, pp. 141–162).

Additionally, video games often borrow structures of time from cinema in other ways; for example, the innovation of "bullet time" as imaged in *The Matrix*—in which time slows to follow the trajectory of bullets and action heroes moving through space. Mainstream titles like the *Max Payne* series (Remedy Entertainment, 2001–), and *Remember Me* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2013), utilize time and memory in compelling ways, slowing time in key moments of intensity and focus, or suspending characters within memories, flashbacks or atemporal non-spaces. Repetition is core to mastery in video games; anyone who has played a video game knows this. Players often repeat particular actions in order to perfect their skill set, and for their bodies to learn the twitch control reflexes required of the system with which they are engaging. It is a rare exception that a game does not allow for repetition, replay and endless chances to refine and perfect maneuvers. Repetitions in "Playtest" come in the form of refining and revisiting Cooper's fears within the stacking chronologies (spider, bully, monstrous woman, memory loss), until the most perfect fear is achieved: loss of the self. The implication is that the program is too powerful and efficient, and Cooper's traumatic memories are too intense, so that their conjuring and repetition have dislodged his sense that he is experiencing a simulation.

Video games often use time, memory and repetition in central ways that are unique to the medium, but also borne of the advanced technological and globalized ethos into which they came into being. I have elsewhere described (Murray, 2018) that this metaphorizes the condition of postmodernity, in which the increased pace of the market (and by extension, life), the increased economic dependencies, the flow of bodies, information and goods (Castells, 2000), and increasingly flexible modes of accumulation have resulted in the compression of space-time (Harvey, 1989). Manuel Castells, a venerated sociologist of the information society, globalization and communications, describes this paradigm shift as resulting in a dispersion of conventional anchors of self-definition. This in turn elicits an anxious, destabilized sense of the self; in short, it engenders a profound identity crisis. Castells writes: "Our societies are increasingly structured around a bipolar opposition between the Net and the self" (Castells, 2000, p. 2). In his book entitled *Game Time*, Christopher Hanson proposes that "games offer new modes of temporal control that fundamentally alter our experience and understanding of time in contemporary culture" (Hanson, 2018, p. 2). This all seems to bear down own Cooper, who has flung himself into the world, and into a profound distortion of his own reality and sense of self, without giving much thought to how destabilizing the experience would be.

The phenomenological experience of gameplay is one with a relatively small but important body of scholarship. Among others, Brendan Keogh has discussed video game time in consideration of the embodied experience of game play (Keogh, 2018, pp. 141–165). Keogh describes time in video games as "intricate and malleable" (Keogh, 2018, p. 141) and that "through repetition and failure multiple pasts and lost futures converge on the present play experience to intermediate each other through muscle memory, genre conventions, retries, 'Game Overs', seriality and wasted time. To play a videogame", according to Keogh, "is to overwrite invalidated pasts and to peek at alternative futures" (Keogh, 2018, p. 140). In Cooper's case, the final reveal of time dilation unveils layers of increasingly disturbing overwritten pasts, failures of memory and repetitions that collapse into a permadeath—a character's permanent "game over" caused by a critical interference into the self by communications technologies and AR augmentation.

Losing the Real

"Playtest" is as much about mobile devices as technological extensions, as it is about video games. Within the narrative, part of the strange slippage that occurs between the so-called real (or authentic) experience and the virtual is a direct result of the implant on Cooper's neck, and the way it immediately becomes entangled with him. Sherry Turkle, esteemed psychologist and professor, has studied people's intimate connections with their computational media since the 1980s (Turkle, 1984, 1995). In more recent work, Turkle has addressed wearable media and cellular technologies, describing how these "always-on/always-on-us" devices reshape us into "tethered selves".

In particular she sees that the "self, attached to its devices, occupies a liminal space between the physical real and its digital lives on multiple screens" (Turkle, 2008, p. 122). In her formulation, the body now exists in a mixed reality that combines the world around us with our simultaneous co-presence within the spaces of people and things made ready to hand by our devices. Cooper mediates his relations through his mobile phone: he defers his connection to his mother, establishes his connection to strangers in foreign spaces with dating apps, mediatizes his travel experience, generates funds through work apps, and ultimately the device ends him.

One's incapacity to divide the virtual experience from the real, the simulation from the actual, applies a pressure on the body—it invokes a duress around maintaining the autonomy of the body as whole, separate and under control. This is not so subtly conveyed in the Mushroom implant which is described as having tendrils that integrate with Cooper's brain, becoming permanent and violating his sanity with the very fears it has searched from within. This reverses the sci-fi utopian vision of increasingly transparent, tool-free, haptic media that extends the body but remains under command of the user. Of course, in reality, VR and AR technology has always been awkward, clunky and comparatively unwieldy—not to mention that wearable technology like VR goggles or AR systems technologies tend to impair the user's access to the lived-world around them, inducing a sense of vulnerability. It is common to find the VR/AR experience disturbing or to have drastic corporeal responses like motion-sickness.

Circling back now to the specters of memory, experience and forgetting, it is important to consider the central importance of these notions for the main character. Cooper craves authentic experiences, and collecting them before it is all too late. This is motivated by having observed his father's death from Alzheimer's disease, a progressive brain disorder which robs its victims of memory, skills and eventually the ability to conduct basic daily functions. Making memories, the fear of forgetting them, and losing the self, drives him. To "make all the memories that I can, while I can" is Cooper's goal. However, within one iteration of his horror experience, he is left incoherent and confused as a result of his melding with technology. Within another layer, it is in fact his mother who exhibits signs of dementia, upon his fictive return home. Interestingly, the horror house stairway leading up to the room in which he faces his greatest fear (losing his mind) echoes the exact shape and cinematic framing of the stairs leading up to his mother's room, where he finds her calling out for "Cooper", unable to recognize him. Cooper's mind has mapped the horror house onto his family home, where real fears, not AR manifestations, lie in wait.

More than fanning a moral panic around games and violence, "Playtest" seems to capture a public anxiety around video games and the violent reorientations they demand of body and mind. Certainly, the episode images the seductiveness and annihilative potential of virtual and augmented reality technologies to wreak havoc on the self. While the episode superficially seems to express a paranoia or moral position tied to immersive video games and the

people who engage with them, in many ways, it is less explicitly about games per se, and more focused on technology's ability to blur the simulated and the actual. If, in keeping with Hanson, "games afford players new ways to experience and understand time", then I would argue that this episode images anxieties about what new forms of time are cracked open with advanced computational technology and global capitalism (Hanson, 2018, p. 12).

Under Pressure in the Unstable Now

Ultimately, the episode highlights a few core modern techno-anxieties. First, it stages a societal fear around the ability of our bodies to keep up with our technologies, and furthermore, how to negotiate those technologies which seem to challenge the autonomy of the body. Second, it suggests that one of the key building blocks to our notion of the self—memory—may be uniquely imperiled when invasive technologies tamper with a user's ability to access the real, or discern the actual from the simulated. Third, new understandings of time initiated by hypercapitalistic global markets, combined with simulation technologies, profoundly alter our sense of space and time in contemporary culture. All of these elements swirl around the figure of Cooper, who stands in for a normative "average" user, and who is ill-prepared to assimilate the unstable new into himself.

There is, in addition, a deeper critique of the tech industry which is implicit in the subtext of "Playtest". Consider the centrality of Katie and Shou Saito, who embody the "move fast and break things" ethos of the games industry, and the tech world more generally. In the innermost layers of the AR experience, Katie is nefarious and sadistic in her manipulation of Cooper. She has lured him into something that will destroy his mind, and does so as a representative of a company willing to test human subjects under potentially lethal conditions. She is an emissary of Shou Saito, who is, within that same reality, cold and instrumentalizing of his playtesters, apparently far more concerned with his invention than the damage caused. In the horror house, Shou apologizes to the demented Cooper, and tells his henchmen to "put him with the others"—indicating that there have been numerous previous playtest casualties. Within the intermediate reality of the game designer's office, Shou again apologizes to Cooper (who has in this scenario survived) for the intense experience. In the outermost level, Cooper has suffered profound brain overstimulation and death within a fraction of a second. His eyes are rolled up into his head, and there's blood coming from his nose. Shou Saito is debriefing with Katie, asking her what happened. He reprimands her for not taking the phone from him, and she assures him it is an "oversight" which "won't happen again". Katie is consumed with keeping her job, and Shou is preoccupied with the technical failure of the experiment; neither seem bothered by Cooper's brain synapses having been fatally overstimulated. This displays a ruthless utilitarianism and goal-orientation toward technological progress, one that is morally disconnected from ethical concerns.

This, along with the racialized configuration of characters surrounding Cooper, conjures a disturbing set of relations in which he is besieged by women and people of color, all of them connected to the tech and all of them trying to kill him. Cooper is framed as the noncritical, normative or "average" user looking for the next thrill. Within his fantasy, the biracial Sonja potentially lured him to his death, and attacked him within his horror fantasy. Katie, who is black, presents a deceptively warm "face" of (or interface to) the industry, but ultimately leads him to the digital gallows. The Japanese mad tech genius, Shou Saito, is rapaciously goal oriented. It is a smart provocation that illustrates an awareness of identity-based tensions within the game community.

"Playtest" enters into a public conversation in which the games industry and its ancillary cultures are in a period of reconciling notions of "fun" and "entertainment" with their social, political and moral responsibilities. "We make our technologies", Sherry Turkle wrote, "and they, in turn, shape us. So, of every technology we must ask, Does it serve our human purposes?—a question that causes us to reconsider what these purposes are" (Turkle, 2011, p. 19). Within the logic of "Playtest", the powerfully disruptive capacities of mobile and immersive entertainment technologies threaten our cohesive selves, in the unstable now. Not to worry—it isn't real; it's all a game.

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