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# Performing the Self

## Subverting the Binary in Combat Games

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This article analyzes the quick-response binary combat game genre, suggesting that so-called "finger-twitch" games, often maligned by academics, are both complex and significant for cultural studies. While the game structure of binary combat is most often seen in terms of simple entertainment, lacking narrative power and encouraging an apathetic and passive attitude to violence, the author argues that games such as *Mortal Kombat*, *Street Fighter*, and *Soul Calibur* are complex in terms of their construction of stereotyped identity and in the binary structure of combative play. Further, the significance of the genre lies in the performative aspects of gameplay, which problematize accepted models of identification and immersion. Once the player is introduced into the superficial binary structure of combat, then that player's choice and agency become the primary factors in gameplay, ultimately creating space for the inversion of stereotype, the subversion of gender roles and the possible transcendence of the binary system.

**Keywords:** *stereotype; Soul Calibur II; violence; identity; performance; agency*

This article uses *Soul Calibur II* as a case study to analyze the quick-response binary combat game genre. So-called finger-twitch games, although much maligned by academics, are not as simple as has often been assumed. On the contrary, such games are complicated by the performative aspects of gameplay that have not adequately been taken into account. In particular, the game structure of binary combat, in which one player's character faces off against another character on the screen using a variety of weapons and fighting techniques, is most often seen in terms of simple entertainment, lacking narrative power and encouraging an apathetic and passive attitude to violence. Although games such as *Mortal Kombat*, *Street Fighter*, and *Soul Calibur* seem simple on the surface, I would suggest that these games are complex in terms of their construction of stereotyped identity and the binary structure of combative play. I argue that binary combat games are important for critical cultural studies, because they problematize accepted models of identity formation, identification, and immersion. Once the player is introduced into the superficial binary structure of

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combat, then that player's choice and agency become the primary factors in gameplay, ultimately creating space for the inversion of stereotype, the subversion of gender roles, and the possible transcendence of the binary system.

A finger-twitch game may be defined as any game that requires a great deal of instant response through hand-eye coordination, as opposed to real-time strategy games that involve complex planned action, or the more involved first-person role-playing games (FPRPG) with a large exploration element. The finger-twitch game involves rapid action, often in response to visual stimuli on screen, split-second timing in manipulating the controls, a high degree of excitement and adrenalin in the player, instant loss or success on certain tasks, and visible points or other signifiers of victory. Very often, such games include an aggressive element of fighting an opponent, either generated by the game, such as the zombies in *Doom*, or represented by the avatar of a co-player, as in boxing, wrestling, or martial arts games. As this last set of games is configured in a binary structure of two opposing characters locked in combat for a set length of time, I refer to them as "binary combat games." In all these games, it is the element of rapid response and adrenalin rush on the part of the player that makes the game fun, immersive, and physically engaging. Not all rapid-response games are aggressive, and we may widen our definition to include car-racing games and others based on rapid movement such as *Katamari Damacy*, where success depends on the player's dexterous manipulation of an object such as a vehicle or ball. One could even argue that the player achieves a similar adrenalin boost in real-time strategy war games and explorative role-playing games (RPGs) when brief moments of heavy action are interspersed with the wider narrative. Of all these games, however, it is the aggressive games based on player-versus-computer or player-versus-player combat that have attracted the most critical attention.

Janet Murray (1997) criticizes the finger-twitch game in general and combat games in particular for their lack of narrative, arguing that much of the financial and creative effort of the industry has instead been devoted to developing more realistically rendered characters and environments, along with more rapid responses required from the player. When rapid-response games do feature a narrative, she complains of the tendency for such narratives to draw heavily from other media (such as literature and film) and their reliance on "sketchy and stereotypical characters" (p. 51). Barry Atkins (2003) is the most disparaging in his criticism of nonnarrative combat games, differentiating between "'shoot-'em-ups' that develop the story seriously and those 'beat-'em-ups' that seem to go nowhere else other than towards 'let's-beat-'em-up-some-more'" (p. 23). King and Borland (2003) criticize finger-twitch games from a different angle, focusing on their relative lack of community compared to multiple-user, online role-playing games, and criticizing the combative and aggressive aspect of player-versus-player configurations. The aggressive element of computer games has been widely studied in terms of negative cultural and social effect,<sup>1</sup> with Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and DePeuter (2003) singling out the first-person shooter (FPS) and martial arts genres as most extreme in their depiction of war and combat, as well as in their subject-positioning

of aggressive male characters with whom the player must identify.<sup>2</sup> Following examination, the game genre in which all of these criticisms come together is that of the binary combat game, based on aggressive, rapid-response combat between stereotyped characters on the screen.

If, as critics argue, the rapid-response binary combat game lacks story and community, and if it is indeed based on “sketchy and stereotypical characters,” then I would argue that these very characteristics make it a significant and interesting cultural product worthy of critical attention. Stereotype implies the construction of a particular image for a particular reason or to produce a particular effect. When stereotype is added to the combative and aggressive player experience, we have a situation where the player may choose to fight either as or against a stereotyped image. The player is thus interacting with the stereotypical construction through two different game processes: identification with a constructed self, or opposition against a constructed enemy. Fighting in the role of the stereotyped image, the player undergoes a process of identification, with the avatar becoming a projection or imagination of the self. On the other hand, fighting against a stereotyped opponent, the player actively engages with the constructed image of an enemy who must be defeated. On the surface, the binary structure of the combat game thus mirrors the most basic structure of identity formation, distinguishing between self and other, or “me” and “them.” This binary structure also appears in the digital systems of cybernetic calculation. Although Peter Lunenfeld (1999) argues persuasively that conflating such different systems of duality is a mistake, as the fixed, unchanging positions of *1* and *0*, *off* and *on* can never lead to the kind of synthesis required for true dialectical argument (p. xviii), I would suggest that the binary structure of combat games does lead us into interesting possibilities regarding the dual systems of dialectical definition, particularly in the case of player identification and oppositional gameplay. What happens in the binary combat game when two stereotypes are constructed in opposition to each other? Furthermore, what significance does the binary structure hold when that opposition takes the form of violent combat? How does a player’s choice of character and opponent affect the way they play the game? What narrative meanings can be constructed from different combinations of player–opponent choices? These are some of the questions suggested by the player-versus-player format that have not been explored in any depth, obscured by the surface fascination with violence.

Binary combat games can take the form of boxing, wrestling, martial arts, street fighting, or indeed any type of one-on-one combat. Although all these games are similar in terms of their binary structure of oppositional gameplay, however, it is the martial arts and street fighter games that provide the widest variety of stereotypical images, constructed in terms of racial, national, and gender characteristics. It is therefore the martial arts or streetfighter game that provides a particularly suitable case study of stereotype construction in the binary structure. Tekken, Mortal Kombat, Street Fighter, and their many sequels, as well as Soul Edge and its sequels Soul Calibur, Soul Calibur II, and Soul Calibur III are representative of this genre. Their

endurance in the market points to a strong cultural presence and lasting consumer popularity.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I focus on *Soul Calibur II* in particular, as it is the game with which I am most familiar and the game that demonstrates the representative elements of longevity, popularity, martial arts combat, and stereotypes based on national, racial, and gender characteristics.<sup>4</sup> As I hope to demonstrate through the course of this study, *Soul Calibur II* also has liminal elements built into its binary configuration and narrative structure that become significant in considering the performative aspects of combative play.

### **Combat Games and Stereotype: Structures of Binary Opposition**

Most work on stereotype and computer games to date has looked at stereotypes of players rather than examining the stereotype as a construction within the game text.<sup>5</sup> Critics who do examine stereotyping of characters tend to do so in terms of gender bias (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Kline et al., 2003). In contrast to this approach, I wish to examine how stereotypes are constructed within the game product and how such stereotypes affect gameplay, specifically in the combat scenario. It is first necessary to point out that I do not take *stereotype* to necessarily mean a negative caricature or discriminatory representation but as a representative image of a particular group of people or type of person based on simplified and exaggerated characteristics. Although binary combat games are criticized for their dependence on stereotyped characters, there are good reasons for the use of such characters in this style of game. First, in terms of game production and financial concerns, stereotypical characters are much easier to write and create than complex realistic characters. If characters always look, speak, act, and fight in a consistent way, they will take less time to develop and will need fewer programs to control them, speeding up the initial production time. A second related reason is that simple characters are more adaptable in the localization process—a major consideration for Japanese games such as *Soul Calibur II* with a large export market. If there are too many different configurations of the character's speech, for example, it would take a long time to translate the entirety of the in-game text assets, adding to localization costs.<sup>6</sup> Third, there is a distinct need in fighting games for the player to be able to quickly and easily distinguish characters from one another, so players can recognize their opponent and adjust their fighting style appropriately. Given the importance of assigning simple, consistent distinguishing features to each character, the production of an essentialized image is inevitable.

Taking *Soul Calibur II* as a case study, we may see an array of stereotyped images of fighting figures. We have a number of clearly Japanese figures from myth or history: Taki the female ninja, Mitsurugi the samurai swordsman, and Heihachi, an elderly karate expert. Other Asian countries are well represented, with Xianghua from ancient China, Maxi from the Ryukyu Kingdom, Yunsung and Seung Mina from Korea, and

Talim from Southeast Asia. Caucasian characters include Raphael, master of the French rapier, Cassandra and her sister Sophitia, both short-sword fighters after the manner of ancient Athens, Cervantes, a pirate from Spain, and his daughter Ivy, raised in the English aristocracy. The stereotype is constructed by means of costume, facial and bodily characteristics, weapon usage, movement, and voice. Although most of these constructions may be described in terms of stereotype, it is apparent that archetypal figures are also present. In particular, the samurai and ninja figures have a high cultural resonance in the Japanese arts, the presence of such figures adding mythic depth to the narrative (Barrett, 1989). The ad hoc mixture of images from different historical periods gives the game a timeless air, inclusive of all periods and all nations, evident in the game's tagline: "Transcending history and the world, a tale of swords and souls eternally retold." Such mythic timelessness is a hallmark of essentialization, in which the core features of a particular culture are presented to the exclusion of other features, gradually coming to stand in for the culture as a whole. Thus, Japan is boiled down to images of ninja and samurai, whereas ancient Europe can be represented by pirates and courtiers. The stereotypical and archetypal figures from *Soul Calibur* are repeated in *Tekken* and, to a lesser extent, in *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat*, both of which feature a larger number of Caucasian characters along similar stereotyped lines: the male leather-clad biker, the ponytailed blonde girl, and so on. Over time, these essentialized images become stronger and more pervasive in the consuming culture, through the process of repetition, reinforcement, and naturalization.

There are two sides to this process that affect the player. First, video games and arcade games are meant for entertainment. Watching obviously stereotyped martial arts figures from different nations, races, and sexes battle each other is highly entertaining, much of the amusement coming from the disjunctive clash between different kinds of stereotype: pitting a pirate against a samurai, for example, would never happen in real life and is fun to see on the screen. Part of the entertainment also comes from sheer spectacle, enhanced by the inclusion of strange and carnivalesque creatures such as Voldo (a blind, deaf-mute acrobat wrapped in bandages and displaying a sizable codpiece). The inflated breasts of females such as Taki and Ivy, as well as the muscular chests of male characters Nightmare and Kilik, are engineered to enhance the erotic element of spectacle, while the desire to see and consume the sexual or exotic Other is further satisfied by the export of Japanese martial arts games to the Western audience. Linguistic exoticism stems from the translation component of the localization process, as Japanese syntax and grammatical structures may mistakenly remain in the characters' English speech as an entertaining taste of the foreign for the target audience.<sup>7</sup> The entertainment value of stereotype in such games has a flip side, however, in that stereotypes based on racial, gender, or national characteristics may be interpreted in sexist or racist terms. A stereotype that is interpreted as offensive or jarring can disrupt a player's enjoyment of the game, or at the very least interfere with that player's identification process. The question of how a player identifies with a character of same or different race to themselves has gained recent attention

with respect to the FPS genre (Shiu, 2006). In both the FPS and the binary combat game, however, it is important to remember that the consumer of such images is not a passive spectator but an active player of the game. Because these stereotyped images appear in the context of combat, it is both useful and necessary to consider how the playing experience affects the reception of the image.

Once the stereotyped image is constructed, players interact with that image through gameplay, in terms of either opposition or identification. Taking the oppositional aspect of gameplay first, the binary configuration of the combat game means that the player must fight against and beat an opponent to proceed to the next level of the game, whether that opponent be a friend, in the case of two-player mode, or the computer itself in one-player mode. In other words, the player's chosen avatar must fight against an opposing on-screen image. Both the player's avatar and the opponent's avatar will take the form of stereotyped images, so progress in the game necessitates defeating the stereotyped image manipulated by one's opponent. In short, a feeling of victory in the game is associated with vanquishing a stereotypical image. Play-acting the conquest of stereotyped enemies is an age-old pastime, seen in "cowboys and Indians," "cops and robbers" and other such children's games. However, the trouble with such games based on binary opposition is that the structure's inherent problems of subjectivity, hierarchy, naturalization, and value judgment are reproduced.<sup>8</sup> The cops and cowboys are designated "good"; the robbers and Indians "bad." The expected outcome of gameplay is that the good will vanquish the bad, and thus the cops and the cowboys should win. If the cops win, this may be boring but expected, safe, and normal, whereas the robbers winning would be deviant, subversive, and therefore interesting, although perhaps unsettling.

In *Soul Calibur II*, we may draw similar lines of good and bad along the divisions between human and monster: the samurai, ninja, and other human fighters should vanquish Astaroth and Necrid, because the latter represent mutated or damned creatures deviant from the human norm. Another sociocultural expectation is that males should be stronger than females. There are a great number of diminutive female characters in the game, from the innocent and apologetic Talim to the acrobatic Taki and dynamic Cassandra. The size difference between the small females and larger males reinforces the expectation that male characters should win. Seeing a diminutive woman such as Talim (4'8") unleash her powerful elbow blade skills on Raphael (5'10") inverts stereotypical gender expectations and provides entertainment through deviation from the norm. Highlighting deviance in this manner, however, may be seen as another way of reinforcing expectation and strengthening the norm that is challenged. The game does not deviate from gender norms to an uncomfortable extent, providing reasons for perceived deviance beyond the expected gender roles. The tallest woman in the game is Ivy, who at 5'10" seems to tower over many of the male characters. However, Ivy's physical divergence is warranted by her sadistic personality, thigh boots, and whip-like weapon, pointing to a sexual deviance that places her outside accepted norms of heterosexual characteristics. The fact that female height and strength need



such justifications in the game points to the endurance of social and cultural expectation regarding the female form. Other expectations may arise based on nationality or race rather than humanity or gender. Like children who elect to modify “cowboys and Indians” to “Americans and Al-Qaeda” during wartime, players of *Soul Calibur II* may elect to pit characters of different nationalities against one another. If one player always chooses Japanese characters and another always chooses Chinese characters, for example, the battle will take on nationalistic aspects in which victory is gained by Japan or China. Similar choices may take on racial overtones if Caucasian characters are always pitted against Asian characters. In this way, the choice made by the player affects the on-screen narrative of combat.

The expectation of particular outcomes from binary combat stems from the most fundamental properties of the game genre: stereotyped characters and binary opposition. But this is not to say that such expectations will be fulfilled. The reasons lie in the coded rules and structures of the game configuration as well as player agency. In terms of the game rules, *Soul Calibur II* and other binary martial arts games are set up in such a way that every single character has the same probability of winning, so the “good vanquishes bad” equation does not come into effect. The probability of winning depends on the player’s skills rather than any inherent ranking of a character’s skills. Over time, the player learns new skills, practices those skills, and applies them to defeat the opponent. The outcome of combat therefore depends more on player performance than on the developer’s ready-made narrative. In the examples above, we see problems arising where players choose to play characters based on particular sets of binary oppositions—if the players consistently choose their characters and opponents in terms of a division along human and monster, female and male, deviant and normal, or national or racial differences, then the conquest will also be consistently narrated in terms of species, gender, sexuality, nationality, or race. Some binaries are naturally more problematic than others. As all players of the game are obviously human, the human and monster binary produces an unthreatening narrative outcome. Binaries that depend on characteristics of individual humans, however, such as race or gender, affect the identification process for the individual player. It is on this point that the player’s choice of character becomes significant. Consistent narrative based on only one set of binary divisions is rare, as players may choose any number of possible permutations of characters to pit against one another. The element of character choice thus becomes crucial in the possible subversion of expectation in regard to stereotyped images.

### **Subverting Stereotype: Choice and Player Agency**

There are a number of factors that complicate the simple model of stereotyped characters in binary configuration, each of which give different results. The player’s choices may affect their character, their opponent, or both. Through character choice,



it is possible for the player to overturn the constructed norms of established stereotypes. A simple example of the female and male binary should illustrate the point briefly. If a female player consistently chooses the female character Taki, for example, she will gain skill in manipulating Taki. If she consistently chooses male characters as opponents in the practice mode, she will gain skill in defeating those male characters. Thus, when using Taki as her avatar, the player will be able to defeat more male opponents on screen, overturning social expectations of male–female roles. Using similar strategies, a player could choose to consistently fight against all the Caucasian characters or all the Asian characters. This strategy could thus be used in a counter-discursive manner against the stereotypical imagery of the game.<sup>9</sup> However, such strategies of inversion can be both powerful and dangerous. By always choosing Taki against male opponents, our first player ends up reinforcing the binary structure of male and female and reconfiguring the binary in hierarchical terms—this time with female constructed over and above the male. Victory over an opponent is necessarily based on a principle of inequality: There must always be a winner and a loser, and nobody in the game is ever equal. Every battle in Arcade Mode in *Soul Calibur II* ends by listing player rankings. By its very nature, the combative game makes social, gender, and racial equality impossible.

In terms of the opponent, the player of *Soul Calibur II* may set the mode as single-player arcade mode against the computer, giving a randomly generated AI opponent; single-player practice mode against a player-chosen AI opponent; or two-player VS Battle Mode in which the opponent will be controlled by a second player and chosen either by the player or randomly generated (if that player selects the random feature). The opponent may thus be consistent if the first player so chooses in practice mode or if the second player tends to choose the same character over and over again, whereas the opponent becomes inconsistent if characters are randomly chosen or if the players are just having fun testing out various combinations of characters. The ability of the players to choose which character to fight against and which character to manipulate themselves demonstrates that the binary opposition is not fixed along racial, national, or gender lines, but fluid and flexible in the context of gameplay. It is this flexibility that allows for a high degree of player agency and the possibility of inverting or even subverting expectations of stereotype.

Although inversion of stereotype merely recreates the binary structure, true subversion may be possible through the ways in which players choose to identify with their character. The player can, for example, always elect to play the same character. This is common, as the game rewards skill, which is only acquired through practice with one character. Over time, the player may come to identify more closely with that character, which may be any one of the 25 characters available.<sup>10</sup> Each character in the *Soul Calibur* series has a strong individual personality and particular background, details of which are revealed slowly in reward for progress in the game. Each character also has a particular way of speaking, addressing their opponent, and celebrating or apologizing for their victory. The personalities are so well developed as to have

inspired the fan quiz titled “Which Soul Calibur Character Are You?” implying that one may play a character in the game very similar to one’s own personality or similar to the personality one wishes to project in real life.<sup>11</sup> This quiz shows the joy of identification and character choice, finding out “which character you are” through play, much as we develop and define our own personality or character through life. The process of identification can be quite meaningful for players, as they may choose to develop particular aspects of their personalities through their choice of particular characters in the game.

As Schleiner (2001) has shown with respect to the first-person game, a player may also enjoy many different modes of gender identification while using one single character. In *Soul Calibur II*, a female player using the male character Kilik may do so for many different reasons: for the enjoyment of erotic spectacle through the heterosexual gaze or for the sense of identification with the male—either through performing a masculine role or exploring her own masculinity. Similarly, a male player using Kilik may do so for purposes of the homosexual erotic gaze or the performance of exaggerated male strength, whereas any player using Ivy may do so for the enjoyment of sadomasochism from a safe distance or to indulge their own sadomasochistic fantasies. It is well established that a player’s choice of character raises possibilities of subverting expectations of gender roles and stereotypes, and one player may identify with the same character in many different ways, in “a multiplicity of sometimes quite contrary positions and subjectivities” (Schleiner, 2001). If the use of one single character in the first-person game leads to so many possibilities of player–character identification, then, how many more possibilities must arise when the player may choose from a greater number of different characters? Unlike the mere inversion of existing binary structures, the process of player identification and character choice has a greater possibility of subverting stereotype and transcending the binary structure, as the player may perform many different aspects of the self.

Given the possibilities of inversion and subversion through character choice and player identification, it is clear that the binary combative structure is not the same as a fixed binary system of representation based on a dialectical definition. It is tempting to analyze the stereotypical images of *Soul Calibur II* in terms of the “defining Other,” where one entity is constructed in contrast to some other entity to come to some kind of definition of its true nature. Because combat necessarily entails two characters fighting each other on screen, a binary analysis of *Soul Calibur II* is in one sense possible, but one would have to analyze every single permutation of two characters as well as take into account the choices made by single-player, two-player, and random modes, and then analyze each and every possible permutation on its own merits. But this kind of analysis does not make sense in the context of the fast-paced, adrenalin-fuelled playing experience. Furthermore, the composition of *Soul Calibur II* and similar combat games is based on a different model to that of the “defining Other,” because the only time that the binary is in effect is in the combat mode. At all other times, the characters appear in a large table of options from which the player must

choose. It is clearly apparent to the player that there are a large number of characters to choose from, each of whom are meant to be somehow representative of a particular fighting style, nationality, or mythos.

It may be useful at this point to consider some contrasting examples to the binary configuration of combat games to show the specificities of the binary combat genre and see how choice and performance in binary combat differs from other games. The most obvious comparison would be a structural one, based on the numerical configuration of characters in the game. In the case of the FPS or FPRPG, there is one main character on screen. In the binary structures of combat games, there are two characters on screen fighting against each other. Multiplayer role-playing games, often found online, feature the player's avatar as merely one member of a larger group of people playing in the same game environment. In defining game genres, Carr and Burn (2006) use the degree of choice available to the player in developing their character as one method of differentiating between the first-person action adventure and the first-person role-play (pp. 20-22). I would take this point further and argue that the type and degree of choice available to the player changes greatly between different numerical structures, affecting the player's relationship with their character in terms of identification, role-play, and performance of the self.

### **Performing the Self: Identification, Role-play, and Character Choice**

In the FPS, the player manipulates one individual character. This character may be unchanging throughout the game, as in the case of Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* or the nameless male soldier in *Doom*. The only way to change the appearance of such a character would be through the use of player-created modifications (mods) or patches, as indeed happened with the notorious *Nuderaider* patch for *Lara Croft*, or *Otakon's* patch for *Doom*, which provided a female avatar named *Priss* (Schleiner, 2001). Although Schleiner discusses such developments in terms of "subversion" of the game, the average player will be limited by what is available in the game as it stands. Many first-person games now feature a character that is customizable to some extent (e.g., Carl "CJ" Johnson from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*). The player may change the appearance of CJ by visiting the barber for a new hairstyle, adding or removing body art, changing clothes in his wardrobe or purchasing new clothes from shops, or gaining or losing weight through varying food intake and physical exercise. Despite the wide range of options offered by such a configuration, however, it is essential to the narrative that CJ remains a young, African American, heterosexual male. His skin color, sexuality, and gender cannot change through the game. Other first-person role-playing games offer the player a more customizable appearance for their character to enhance the player-character identification. In *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, for example, one may change the character's race to produce a more accurate

portrayal of one's own features, or indeed to role-play in a different appearance to one's own. In all first-person games, the player's choice of character is limited to a single individual. Although players may identify with the character in many different ways, performance of the self can only be enacted through identification with that individual character.

At the opposite end of the numerical spectrum from the single character configuration of the first-person game, we find the massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as *Everquest*, *Diablo*, and *World of Warcraft*. In these games, the player designs his or her own character by choosing from a number of options. *World of Warcraft* allows the player to choose their race, gender, skin and hair color, hairstyle, facial characteristics, and special traits such as piercings or other markings. Depending on the race the player has chosen, one then fights on the designated side of the Alliance (humans, elves, dwarves, and gnomes) or the Horde (Tauren, orc, undead, and trolls), teaming up with other players of the same side to fight battles, hunt animals, seek treasure, pick up armor and other useful items, barter at shops, and so on. As in traditional theatre, historical reenactments, or the fanciful *kosupure* (costume play) of fans attending anime and manga conventions, one uses clothing or other outward forms of identification to play a role and act in character. The performative function of such games is apparent in the genre's title: *Role-Play*.<sup>12</sup> The player has the opportunity to develop their character over time, gaining skills in 1 of 12 professions such as alchemy, mining, or tailoring, and developing up to 7 attributes such as strength, agility, and intellect. In a system not unlike traditional tabletop RPGs such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, once that character is decided on, it remains fixed, and the player-character relationship is once again that of identification with one individual character. Even though the distinguishing feature of multiplayer role-playing games is its cooperative and social function, with many different characters appearing on screen at once,<sup>13</sup> the player's performance of his or her own character in the course of gameplay is thus quite similar to that of the first-person configurations.

The player's performance of the self on screen in FPS and MMORPG structures thus hinges on identifying with one individual character—either through a varied subject-positioning, identification with the given character in a number of different ways, or character customization followed by role-play identification. In both configurations, a sense of agency comes largely from freedom of movement (Carr, 2003), although there is certainly more choice of social life available to the MMORPG player (McBirney, 2004; Turkle, 1995). The freedom of movement in both structures is reflected in the performative possibilities of machinima, the most successful, complex, and long-running of which have been set in the worlds of loosely structured multiplayer games or explorative FPSs rather than in the tighter structures of the binary combat genre.<sup>14</sup> Although the binary combat configuration is not suited to dramatic performance in the same way as the multiplayer configurations of *Halo* or *Neverwinter Nights* (which served as the locations for *Red vs. Blue* and *Bloodspell*, respectively), it has lent itself successfully to performance genres that focus on two people, such

as dance.<sup>15</sup> Performance in the binary combat genre must come not from dramatic scripts or freedom of movement but from other choices available within the limitations of a strict game configuration. The player of *Soul Calibur II* can elect to move in certain ways in the gamespace—fight, don't fight, run around, or stand still—but every battle will end within the time limit, no matter what action is taken. There are a limited number of outcomes to each fight: win, lose, or fight a tiebreaker. Furthermore, each character's special attack moves can only be enacted by pressing the controls in the exact sequence specified by the programmer. This lack of creative freedom in regard to movement has been criticized as overly deterministic (Poole, 2000, p. 33). But the degree of choice available to the player in the binary combat game lies not in freedom of movement or changeable surface appearance but in which character one plays in the first place. In contrast to the FPS and MMORPG, freedom and agency in the binary combat game occurs at a different stage of the gameplay process altogether, lying in the choice of game, choice of game mode (Arcade, VS Battle, etc.), and choice of character.

Before playing any games, players choose that game from a wide range of options. Those players who choose to play the binary combat game do so based on some kind of individual preference: One chooses boxing or wrestling because one is a sports fan or enjoys shows of masculine strength, for example. However, the degree of choice regarding the character one plays is far higher in the martial arts genre of binary combat games than in others. Players who choose *Soul Calibur II* over the boxing game may well do so because the boxing game offers only a narrow choice of male, uncustomizable characters, whereas one of the main attractions of martial arts games is the extensive range of characters available to players (Poole, 2000, p. 31). The many versions of *Soul Calibur*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Tekken*, and *Street Fighter* offer a large number of characters across a wide range of ethnic, racial, national, and historical backgrounds. In *Soul Calibur II*, players preface every new battle by choosing their character, that character's health and costume, and the fight venue. As the game progresses, players are rewarded with more choices, as they may elect to use other costumes and weapons they may have collected in the weapons master mode. Even without using Weapons Master Mode to collect items, however, new characters and venues appear in Arcade Mode just as a result of persevering with the game. The main difference between martial arts binary combat games and other games surely lies in the fact that one can change character often, providing a different playing experience for every fight if the player so desires. Performance of the self comes not only through player-character identification but also through the ability to choose between characters at will, offering limitless opportunity for experimentation with multiple selves.

If character choice is a defining feature of the martial arts binary combat game, what is the effect of having a greater amount of choice in the characters one plays? If games are performances of the self, then what is the difference between always performing in the same outward appearance every time one turns on the computer or walks into a tabletop role-playing meeting (where one must stay in character all the

time), and change one's character afresh for each new round of combat? In the binary combat game, there is no need to stay in character, because the character can change so frequently. The game is therefore based on something other than role-playing. In the arcade mode of *Soul Calibur II*, we may say that the player is puppeteering or manipulating their character to win. It is the player's skill, not Taki's skill, that counts. The performance of the player is as much about technical skill as it is about character identification. Furthermore, a large table of available characters appears on screen before every new fight, reminding the player of his or her ability to choose. The player is constantly positioned at the forefront of the game action, through the act of choosing the character to manipulate. Through repeated choice, over and over again, the player is reminded that he or she is the one making the decisions and the choices. The sustained focus on that person who makes the choices is a constant reminder that the player is playing a game. The distance between the player and the character is thus obvious and constantly reinforced, foregrounding the player as performer and competitor. Although some critics may fault the binary combat genre on this point, citing a lack of immersion or disjunctive interruption to the narrative, I would argue it is both significant and worthy of more attention. With its constantly reinforced separation of player and character, the binary combat genre may provide us with some alternatives to using character immersion as a standard for measuring successful gameplay. Gary Fine's (1983) model of multiple frames of consciousness, adapted by McBirney (2004) as "nested selves," may be more applicable, as the player certainly remains aware of his or her own ability to choose the characters and direct the narrative as well as perform and practice their game skills through the use of different characters. It is this element of self-awareness (literally, awareness of the self) that makes the binary combat genre so rich in possibility for the player's construction of the self and experimentation with identity.

A final consideration in the performative aspect of computer games is that all gameplay consists of a doubled performance, enacted in the two different spaces of gameworld and real world.<sup>16</sup> Although the gameworld appears on screen, the player remains within the space designated for playing the game, which may be one's own bedroom, family room, arcade, LAN network, or wider sponsored competition arena. One performs both one's in-game character in the gameworld and one's player persona in the play space. The difference between public and private performance here is significant. One will act differently and express different aspects of the self when alone in one's own bedroom, with a sibling in the family room, with a friend of the same or opposite sex in the family room, with or without an audience of a number of friends, at home or in the arcade, alone in the arcade or with an audience of strangers, and so on. An audience is not necessary for the performance of the self, as one can be one's own audience, enjoying the freedom and liberation of trying on a different personality in the gameworld. But the presence or absence of audience may make the player feel vulnerable or overconfident, as may the difference in venue. In competition, one needs to dominate the opposition, displaying many of the same tactics as sporting

athletes to intimidate or confuse rival players. Playing in front of a member of the opposite sex, one may show off or act coy to produce romantic interest. Online gaming environments, which ensure anonymity if so desired, provide the most documented instances of performance in a persona, as the audience for the performance of the self is distant, blind, and ignorant of the player's real-world identity. However, the same considerations of audience and performance apply for the binary combat game as for the FPS and RPG, and may even be more significant for the gameplay, as combat games are more likely to be played in arcades. One could argue that the binary combat game is fundamentally constructed as a game to be played in competition, in front of an audience. The question of who provides the audience for the performance of the self in different game genres suggests many further avenues of research.

## Conclusion

Although critics who look to the storytelling potential of role-playing computer games tend to be the most vocal against combat games such as *Tekken* and *Soul Calibur*, a consideration missing from the literature is that narrative in the martial arts binary combat game is to a large extent constructed by the player through character choice. At any time, the player may choose to play a different character and try out his or her skills against different opponents. With each choice of a character and an opponent comes a new narrative construct and a new mode of player identification. Through specific character choice, the player may reenact the social expectations of particular binary oppositions or invert those expectations. Through choosing different modes of gender identification, it is also possible to subvert expected gender roles. A player may invert or subvert the binary opposition, even within an existing binary structure. It seems clear from this case study that the binary structure of the combat game does not equal the binary opposition of dialectical definition. It may even be possible to transcend the binary altogether, through the performance of many, multiple selves depending on the choice of character. Although combat games have been criticized in terms of lacking narrative possibility and immersive power, I believe such criticism misses the mark. The power of this kind of game lies in the power of the player to make choices and create the kind of battle narrative that he or she desires. Performance of the self may be enhanced or broadened without the single-character limitations of the FPS, FPRPG or MMORPG. Players can take advantage of the distance between the player embodied in the real world and the character on screen for creating new character performances and experimenting with multiple selves, with or without an audience. The power of the binary combat game thus lies not in the singular narrative of the developer but in the multiple narratives constructed by the player as he or she goes along, reflecting the ongoing performance of the complex and flexible self.



## Notes

1. There is a long and impressive debate on computer games with respect to violence and the negative effect of that violence on players, whether moral, physical, or social: see Hamby and Ballard (2006) for a recent example, and Poole (2000, pp. 207-11) for a counterargument.

2. Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and DePeuter's (2003) argument for "militarized masculinity" is further developed on pp. 246-268.

3. Tekken first appeared in arcades in 1995, Mortal Kombat in 1992, and Street Fighter in 1987. All have appeared in several incarnations for different platforms—Tekken 6 is now in development for the Playstation 3—whereas Mortal Kombat and Street Fighter gained wider appeal with their feature film releases in 1995 and 1994, respectively.

4. Namco released Soul Edge as an arcade game in 1995 and console game in 1996. Soul Edge was retitled Soul Blade for consoles in North America and Europe, released in 1997. Namco's arcade sequel, Soul Calibur, appeared in 1998, released for Dreamcast in 1999. Soul Calibur II appeared in 2003 for the Xbox, Nintendo GameCube, and Playstation 2 consoles, whereas Soul Calibur III was released in 2005 for Playstation 2. Soul Calibur II broke Namco's record for the most copies sold on day of U.S. release and won the Best Fighting Game award at the 2003 Electronic Entertainment Expo, Los Angeles.

5. Griffiths, Davies, and Chappell (2003) use sociodemographic data on Internet gamers to argue against the stereotype of online players as socially isolated young men; Roe and Muijs (1998) concluded that players who engage heavily in computer games suffer low self-esteem as well as more limited success in academic and social spheres. Both articles follow convention by referencing the research of Winkel, Novak, and Hopson (1987) on the effects of aggressive video games in young players.

6. Chandler (2005) gives an excellent overview of the importance of translation to the localization process and how best to organize in-game assets to simplify the process (pp. 137-157).

7. Chandler (2005) laments such products as "bugs" to be fixed during linguistic testing (pp. 214-224), but Kohler (2005) points out the appeal of such lapses to the Western audience (p. 210).

8. For a more detailed discussion of the problems inherent in binary structures, particularly in dialectical definitions of self and Other, see Hutchinson and Williams (2006, pp. 3-5).

9. Players could also fight consistently against all the humans or all the demons. However, as the normative discourse of human-monster interaction is a closed system (there being no monsters to oppose the discourse), such narratives do not carry the same counterdiscursive opportunities as those based on racial, gender, or national characteristics.

10. The exact number of characters depends on the platform: For the PS2, there are 25 characters total, including the unlockables such as Assassin, Berserker, and Lizardman.

11. That this quiz was written and uploaded by a 16-year-old Korean-American student in Seoul (David Park, *Which Soul Calibur Character Are You?* Retrieved August 15, 2006, from <http://www.geocities.com/krapdivad/quiz.htm>) demonstrates the ongoing appeal of Soul Calibur to young fans.

12. An interesting account of role-players and their abilities to step in and out of character is found in Fine (1983). On the performance of roles in the multiplayer online role-playing game and role-playing game, see also McBirney (2004) and Mackay (2001).

13. The social function of such games is well documented: Studies of role-playing games in terms of constructing Internet communities include King and Borland (2003), Turkle (1995), Markham (1998), and Pargman (2000).

14. Lowood (2005) makes the distinction between storyline machinima and gameplay demo movies, but Kelland, Morris, and Lloyd (2005) use *machinima* to refer to all films created in the game environment. The most popular locations depend to a large extent on the modding and demo capabilities of the game engine—Kelland et al. (2005) consider Unreal Tournament 2004 as one of the most modified games ever (p. 16), leading to a wealth of machinima adaptations.

15. Lowood (2005) cites Bain Street Productions' "Dance Voldo Dance" (1992), set in Soul Calibur, as an early example of machinima's music video genre.

16. Nitsche with Thomas (2003) emphatically point out that the player is not embodied in the gameworld but remains firmly in the play space, although the distance between the player and the avatar can be used to produce different player positions in gameplay.

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